

The Shack
 An Evening of Theological Exploration
6 August 2009

Saint Louis parish
 Clarksville, Maryland

As your presence here this evening testifies,
 Paul Young's "The Shack" is a touching story.
 It is a touching story that poses many challenging theological questions
 and, in many ways, quite cleverly answers a good number of them.
 I propose that we make use of the book to probe.
 I propose that we make use of
 the Christian perspective, the theological statements
 articulated in the context of these warm conversations,
 as a springboard to our own exploration.
 It is not my purpose to evaluate the quality of the prose of this work
 —which by the way, with all due respect, I find average.
 To be honest, it was not the prose that moved me
 across the pages of "The Shack".
 I was initially moved across the pages of "The Shack"
 quite simply by a desire to see what all the fuss was about.
 I was then moved by the interesting, crucial questions
 that Mack dares to pose to **Papa, Jesus, or Sarayu**—or this Trinity.
 I was then moved by the responses to these questions,
 some very clever, some somewhat imprecise, some very moving.

I suppose that we can approach the book differently
 or, rather, we can make use of the book theologically in different ways.
 I propose that we approach the book quite simply.
 I propose that we simply probe some of the questions that are raised,
 more or less as they appear in the unfolding of the story.
 We will not and can not consider them all
 —for lack of time, and for lack of wisdom!!!
 [By the way: I am not asking anyone to agree with me;
 I am asking everyone to think with me.]

Please know that, in my critique,
 I am not seeking to criticize the author personally.

To my knowledge,
 Paul Young has never claimed to be a writer,
 or, even though he went to Bible school and seminary, a theologian.
 His intention, from what I have understood,
 was to write a book for his children,
 to create and leave them an heirloom of sorts.
 His work is actually a testimony to what we call *sensus fidei*.
 Each of us, thanks to the gift of faith,
 which conforms our minds to the mystery of God,
 can have intuitions about God.

We can have *faith intuitions*.

In fact, this is how doctrines (or dogmas) start.
 They originate in the hearts of believers, in the heart of the community.
 If we have faith intuitions, then we know why
 we probably felt different things, had inklings as we read “The Shack”.
 Our faith intuitions, of course, need to be rubbed
 against the greater Christian Tradition, so that they be refined.
 Paul Young has many interesting intuitions about God.
 Let us rub them against the greater Christian Tradition,
 so that they be refined...

We all know the story line: initially tragic.
 A family is devastated by the disappearance of one of its members,
 its most vulnerable member; the youngest daughter: Missy (age 6).
 The story begins with an unexpected strange note
 from someone who claims to be God.

Mackenzie,

**It’s been a while. I’ve missed you.
 I’ll be at the shack next weekend if you want to get
 together.**

--Papa

The invitation, of course, necessitates telling the occurrences
 that precede and include the murder of little Missy.
 Chapters 2 and 3 lead us on the family vacation,
 recount her disappearance and the struggle to find her,

and end with the discovery of her blood-soaked dress in the infamous *shack*. We are then brought three and a half years later to Mack's broken world, from which Missy is painfully absent.

"The Great Sadness" he wears like a cloak
and there is now a rift in his relationship with God.

We find him considering the infamous note.
His response to the note will change the course of his life,
the course of his *heart*.

We read,

"Does God ever write notes? And why the shack—the icon of his deepest pain...maybe it was all just a cruel hoax. But then why was it signed 'Papa'?"

As we know, Mack accepts the invitation
—thanks be to God, in so many ways...

It is in Mack's encounter with the three characters who claim divinity, who claim to be the Trinity, that the real questions surface and are asked. There are a few statements, however, made prior to his going to the shack that are worth mentioning, some of which are later answered in his encounter. Keep them in the back of your mind. We will try to address them later.

Why is God so mean?

On page 31, as the family (without Nan) journeys to their vacation spot, Missy asks an amazingly difficult question.

There is the story of the Multnomah princess
—a story which Missy loves, a story that serves as a metaphor for Jesus. The princess, pure and innocent, must die in order to save her people from wide-spread illness.

Missy, who makes the connection with Jesus, asks why God is so mean.

"Well the Great Spirit makes the princess jump off the cliff and makes Jesus die on a cross. That seems pretty mean to me."

Mack, in his own way, poses the same question to Papa.

...What would *you* respond?

On pages 65 and 66, where we find Mack considering the note, considering the invitation from "God",

we are told some of what is affecting his discernment
—a few things he was taught in seminary.

We read

“In seminary he had been taught that God had completely stopped any overt communication with moderns, preferring to have them only listen to and follow sacred scripture, properly interpreted, of course. God’s voice had been reduced paper, and even that paper had to be moderated and deciphered by the proper authorities and intellects.”

The word of God

Allow me to seize the opportunity,
and at least begin to address two issues here.

The *first* issue is that of the word of God.

We read, **“God’s voice has been reduced to paper.”**

It seems to me that Young makes mention of the limits
of a fundamentalist, literal approach to the Scriptures
—which, practically speaking, reduces God’s voice to paper.

Indeed, we must distinguish between God’s voice and the paper,
the book we call the Scriptures.

The Scriptures *per se* are not God’s voice.

The Scriptures are not God *having spoken*.

There was no tape recorder for the prophets or for Jesus or for the apostles.

The writers of the Scriptures were not robots.

The Scriptures are special writings through which God speaks *today*,
in a special way, when they are read in and with faith.

It is only in this way that they are Revelation.

Thus, without faith—whereby we can “hear” God
—they are simply interesting texts.

There is a well-intended temptation in fundamentalist circles
—so to respect the Scriptures and not distort them—
to stop at the letter of the text,

as though the writings themselves have power.

In literalist fundamentalism, the Scriptures need not,
the Scriptures *must* not be interpreted.

The transformative power of the word of God, however,
is found *in God*, not in any texts—not even the Christian Scriptures.

In other words, a literal approach to the Scriptures
“freezes” revelation in the book (as though it can be “frozen”),
and reduces it to a simple “holy message” from the past.

But the Scriptures are then no longer Revelation.
The Scriptures are only Revelation, i.e. the *living* word of God,
if, through them, God is speaking in the present.

Moreover, it is important to note another limit of this “textual” approach,
of reducing the word of God to words on a page
—against which Young rightly seems to caution.

In and for Revelation, God (presently) makes use of the *realities*
to which the words refer, more than the words themselves.

For example, “God is love.”

God makes use of the *reality* of love and our *notion* thereof
to reveal something of Himself.

The word “love” does not directly refer to God.

This, as you can imagine, obliges a very mysterious cooperation
between God revealing Himself and our minds illumined by faith.
Such is theology. This evening, we are all theologians!

Church authority

It is precisely because God speaks in such a way that we must think
—and thus that the Scriptures require interpretation—

that Catholics believe Jesus gives teaching authority to the Apostles.

This brings us to the *second* issue:

the place of church mediation or guidance in the reading of the Scriptures.

As many of you have sensed in reading “The Shack”,

Young is rather cynical of church structure,

of any sort of teaching authority that might belong to church leadership.

He touches upon the question in at least three different places in the book.

He is so allergic to authority that he even dismisses patriotism

which is a perfectly natural, very healthy sentiment of attachment
to the national community.

At any rate, Catholics, of course, believe in a church structure,
believe in a teaching authority that belongs to leadership.

This belief is based on what we read in the Scriptures

regarding the Apostles, and on the experience of the early church.

Though no better than anyone else, the Apostles

(and, slightly differently, the larger group of seventy-two disciples)
are entrusted with particular responsibilities.

Jesus says in Luke 10:16, to the “seventy-two”,

“Whoever listens to you, listens to me”.

And, of course, the entrusting of the keys of the kingdom to Peter (Matthew 16:19), is paramount in understanding the special place of shepherds for the Christian community.

Regarding these issues, Young, in fact, seems to contradict himself. He underscores the limits of the literal approach to the Scriptures—which, in my book, means appealing to some reference *outside* the Scriptures for interpretation.

Young, however, eliminates any teaching/interpretative references outside of the Scriptures which leaves us with only the Scriptures, which are not self-explanatory. And so we are trapped: “dead end”.

The limitations in Young’s perspective here are fairly easy to see. His statement on page 123 summarizes his thoughts well.

“Once you have a hierarchy, you need rules to protect and administer it, and then you need law and the enforcement of the rules, and you end up with some kind of chain of command or a system of order that destroys relationship rather than promotes it. You rarely see or experience relationship apart from power. Hierarchy imposes laws and rules and you end up missing the wonder of relationship that we intended for you.”

Young confuses authority with power.

Power consists in lording it over people.

Jesus says that no one is to lord it over another, but to serve.

Authority is a service.

Parents, for example, have authority over their children.

They also have power.

They exercise their authority in serving the growth of their children.

They must at times (wisely!) use power to do so (you may have noticed!).

Authority in the Church is a *service* to believers.

Young also suggests that hierarchy impedes intimacy with God.

This perspective falls by the wayside when we discover and realize that God can and does make use of instruments for His purposes, which do *not* get in the way of intimacy.

Hierarchy normally does not hinder the “face-to-face relationship and the circle of love” (p. 124) of which Young speaks.

Young also points out that, in the Trinity, there is no hierarchy, and he uses this to argue against hierarchy in the Christian community.

It is true that there is no hierarchy in the Trinity,
but this does not mean that Jesus does not want shepherds
with a specific role in the Christian community.

Authority in the Church is a *service* to believers to help them hear God.
When you think “hierarchy”, do not think “top-down”, think “bottom-up”
(not “bottoms up”!).

Those in authority have been entrusted with the task
of helping us to hear God, of carrying,
and they are to be instruments of love and light.

They do not always do it well, but that is another question!

If entrusted this task, the Church will and does, at times, say,
“You will probably have difficulty hearing God with the interpretation to
which you have come because it does not seem to be consonant with what
2000 years of reflection and listening have understood.”

However, Church hierarchy does not have a monopoly on the truth.

Church hierarchy is guardian of the truth
that emerges in the hearts of all believers who are the Church.

Such guardianship does include steering this continued reception
of revelation and thus the ongoing theological exploration.

Such guardianship does include making certain theological declarations
which, in the end, are proposed as surer paths to the mystery of God.

But doctrine is not an end.

As the Catechism of the Catholic Church says,
“Dogmas are lights along the path of faith.”

And as the prologue to the Catechism so eloquently states,

**“The whole concern of doctrine and its teaching must be directed to the
love that never ends. Whether something is proposed for belief, for
hope, or for action, the love of our Lord must always be made
accessible, so that any one can see that all the works of perfect Christian
virtue spring from love and have no other objective
than to arrive at love.”**

Thus, because everything is with a view
to this intimate relationship with God,
though we try to hear God in communion with the whole Church,
including the hierarchy, the Church hierarchy
does not replace our personal hearing.

Although we are part of the Body of Christ, we also stand alone before God, and, in the end, we make decisions according to our (hopefully informed) conscience.

Faith

A next interesting issue that surfaces is that of *faith*.

In the beginning of Chapter 5,

Young makes interesting, clever statements about faith.

“There are times when you choose to believe something that would normally be considered absolutely irrational. That does not mean that it is actually irrational, but it surely is not rational. Perhaps there is supra-rationality; reason beyond the normal definitions of fact or data based logic; something that only makes sense if you can see a bigger picture of reality. Maybe that is where faith fits in.”

Faith enables our minds to touch the mystery of God,

God who is beyond the realm of immediate human experience.

“Beyond the realm of human experience”

does not mean above the clouds, i.e. far away.

“Beyond the realm of human experience”

means that we do not touch, see, taste, hear, or smell God.

Basic, real human experience normally engages/involves the senses,

thanks to which the human mind grasps reality, the world around us.

God, however, is invisible

and thus not object of sensation and immediate grasp of the mind.

Consequently, we often wrongly conclude that God is far away.

Faith enables us to “touch” God, and to know that he is real and real near.

God is more real than the tears you cried last night.

God is more real than the dinner you had or did not have this evening.

God is more real than your new car, your partner’s snoring, your dreams.

Faith, as Young says, thus has to do not with the irrational

but the *supra*-rational.

As clever as his statements are, allow me, nevertheless

—if I may, to underscore a contradiction of his.

On page 65—just before these statements—

Young describes Mack’s rift with God and Mack’s faith experience.

“Instead, he tried to embrace a stoic, unfeeling faith.”

Young suggests, however, that there is something lacking in this.
 If faith is what we just described—
 to which Young himself seems to ascribe in speaking of the supra-rational—
 then faith will, at times, many times, seem stoic and be unfeeling.
 One only feels when what one experiences is visible, tactile, etc.
 If God is *not*, then, in the faith experience,
 we do not necessarily feel something.
 Faith can be *unfeeling*.
 In fact, properly speaking, faith *is* unfeeling
 —I hate to break the news to you.
 If we feel something, it is because God is being extra gentle with us.
 But it is not par for the course.

In the end, we *choose* to believe, we *willfully exercise* the gift of faith –
 which can seem stoic.
 And this is actually fine.
 As uncomfortable as it may be,
 as much as we may want to “feel the love” or “feel the faith”, this is fine.
 We are not prompted to acts of faith by feelings (or for the sake of feelings),
 but by what we know deep inside and our will to believe.

As we continue reading, we find, on page 71,
 Mack thinking to himself something very common.
**“Maybe what happened to Missy is God’s judgment
 for what I did to my own dad.”**
 I highlight this because it needs to be addressed, and, as we will see,
 Young does so very nicely later.
 Mack brings this question, as well as the Great Sadness,
 and much pain and desperation, to his Trinitarian encounter.
 His situation is not unfamiliar.
 What do we do when we are in a similar situation?
 As we read, Mack does exactly what we should do.
 He expresses it—albeit strongly and angrily.
 But this is fine.
 We are not called to be polite and pretty, prim and proper with God.
 We are called to be *honest* with God.

Mack initially finds the shack empty.
 The most familiar thing he finds is a painful remnant:
 the blood-stained floor.

“And finally his heart exploded like a flash flood, releasing his pent up anger and letting it rush down the rocky canyons of his emotions. Turning his eyes heavenward, he began screaming his anquished questions. “Why? Why did you let this happen? Why did you bring me here? Of all the places to meet you – why here? Wasn’t it enough to kill my baby? Do you have to toy with me too?...I hate you...so where are you? I’m here God, and you, you are no where to be found! You’ve never been around when I needed you – not when I was a little boy, not when I lost Missy. Not now! Some “Papa” you are!”

And just before leaving the empty shack Mack whispers,
“I’m done God. I can’t do this any more. I’m tired of trying to find you in all of this.”

“I’m tired of trying to find you in all of this.”

How often have we said this?

“I’m tired of trying to find you in my loneliness, in my broken marriage, in my unpaid, un-payable bills, in my scandal at all the suffering in the world, in my boredom at church.”

How often have we said this?

Mack walks out the door, tears the note into little pieces, and with heavy footsteps and with a heavier heart starts the hike back to the car.

As he is walking, a magical transformation of the wintery landscape occurs.

Mack turns to notice that the dilapidated shack had been replaced by a sturdy and beautifully constructed log cabin.

He decides to make his way to the cabin and, as he is engaged in a series of reality checks, hesitation, and inner conversation, the door opens.

And he finds himself looking directly at the face of a large, beaming, African-American woman.

Trinitarian encounter

Whisked inside the shack, Mack very quickly encounters the three persons who claim to be the Trinity.

- The first person: (as I envision her) a cross between Aunt Jemimah and Queen Latifah, whom Mack will call “Papa—adopting the name used by his wife, Nan. **“This woman stood there with her arms**

- outstretched as is they were the very arms of his mother. He felt the presence of love. It was warm, inviting, melting.”** (page 83).
- The second person: a muscular Middle Eastern man dressed like a laborer, whom Young describes as “not particularly handsome”. I would actually beg to differ. There is a passage from Psalm 45, verse 3, traditionally attributed to Christ **“You are the most handsome of men; fair speech has graced your lips, for God has blessed you forevermore.”** (New American Bible) **“Thou art beautiful above the sons of men; grace has poured abroad in thine lips; therefore have God blessed thee forever.”** (Douay-Rheims Bible)
 - The third person: a small distinctively Asian woman dressed in plain jeans with ornamental designs at the fringes and a brightly colored blouse with splashes of yellow and red and blue. As is quickly revealed, her name is **Sarayu**.

There was an unsettling yet irresistible connection with all three persons. And, of course, when Mack asks **“Which one of you is God?”**

All three say in unison **“I am.”**

What are we to make of this depiction of the Trinity?

As we try to answer, in order to answer,

allow me to try to be theologically precise

—some may call it being picky, i.e. splitting hairs! Feel free!

Mack, expressive of his distrust, engages this big black woman, Papa, with—as he thinks to himself, a questionable sense of humor.

Papa, from the outset—so to help him be real in relating to him—declares something of paramount importance regarding Mack’s pain, which extends to all of life, to all of our lives.

One page 92 we read, **“I have no magic wand to wave over you and make it all better. Life takes a bit of time and a lot of relationship.”**

In a sense, God could wave a magic wand but he rarely does.

Why is this?

As Young so beautifully expresses, it is because it is all about relationship.

God proceeds mysteriously—always at work

—to lead us to greater and greater love.

Sometimes a waving of the wand will do that

—if, say, our hearts are completely blocked.

Most often, however, because love presupposes freedom and love is lived *together*, God works differently,

inviting a free choice of Him and cooperation.

God as father?

Now, we do well—as we are this evening
—to try to understand the mystery of God,
but it is significant that God reveal himself to us as a “parental figure”.
The suggestion is that we are to understand God *in relationship* with God.
We are called to be *children* of God.
Young knows this and gets daringly playful
in his attempt to lead to a discovery of this.
Young gets daringly playful and presents the first person of the Trinity
as a woman, a woman racially different
than the presumed majority of his readers.

Is this good? Is Young crossing the line?
To be honest, I think it is fine— especially given our tendency
to relate to God via the image we have of God.
It is paramount for us to realize that God
is not the image of God that we have—no matter what the image.
There needs to be purification in our relationship with God
in this department.
Prayer is not us talking to an image—no matter how pious it may be.
It is important to know this,
or we can be led down a slippery slope of misconception
and think that things are happening spiritually
that are in fact simply our own doing.
Images prompt emotion and emotion prompts behavior/action.
Thus, it can happen that we take a moment to pray—or so we think,
because we are, in fact, taking a moment to consider our image of God,
and we find emotional comfort in this
—in the image, instead of God Himself.
Of course, God, in His goodness, makes do;
but, properly speaking, prayer takes us beyond our images of God.
Prayer is about God, more than about any comfort we may experience.
Recall what Papa says to Mack (page 191):
“My purposes are not for my comfort or for yours.”
I think what Young does is just fine.

Papa, *Elousia* shatters most of our images.
He/She is wonderfully outside the box. How clever of Young.

The imagery is disturbing, disturbing in a good way.
As Mack says **“I think it’d be easier to have this conversation if you weren’t wearing a dress.”**
Papa then proceeds accurately to state
that He/She is neither male nor female
—which suggests that, in order truly to grasp something of God,
we must go beyond any and all images.
Our images of persons are either male or female.
God is spirit and therefore beyond what we imagine.

Young falls short, however.
In order to lead us beyond imagery,
he tries to mix the metaphors, actually keeping us in the realm of imagery.
He tries to explain God as father by limiting the Revelation of God as father
to compensation for what is missing in our world,
which tells us little about God properly speaking.
“Father” is not just about how God adapts Himself in coming to us,
but is a Revelation of God himself, of who God is in Himself.
On page 94, Papa says
**“Let me say for now that we knew once the creation was broken, true
fathering would be much more lacking than mothering. Don’t
misunderstand me, both are needed—but the emphasis on fathering is
necessary because of the enormity of its absence.”**

The Christian tradition has generally understood
that God is revealed as father prior to, independently of our lack of fathering,
our need for fathering
(please do keep in mind that when I speak of God as “Him”,
I am, of course, limited. I could technically say “It”, but this would,
for most of us, in our thinking, position God beyond possible relationship—
which would do our reflection a disservice.)
God is like a “father”, but the analogy is found beyond any imagery
and thus beyond any reference to the male body and maleness.
[Bear with me, I am stepping out on a limb here.
This is open to interpretation, for this is one of those questions
that is *not* a theological “done deal”.]

I think “father”, in God who is “spirit”, refers not to anything related to generation or procreation, and thus to the sexual act around conception, but to the other, more important aspect of fatherhood: rearing/raising a child. The analogy for God as “father” is found in what we generally see in parenting by fathers. Allow me to call it “transcendent attraction”. A father generally rears a child by “taking further”, by attracting the child beyond itself. Motherly parenting, on the other hand, is often characterized by enfolding or enveloping and carrying. It is very important here to state that *God is also mother*, or, more precisely, that the fatherhood of God *includes motherhood*, for God enfolds or envelops and carries. Why then do we not hear this more often? Another tragic consequence of patriarchy in the Church? There can be patriarchy in the Church, but I think there is a properly theological reason. It seems to me that God is primarily referred to as “father” so first to underscore transcendence and otherness. God *first* transcends us and is *other* than us before being immanent to us (which would refer to motherhood) and being closer to us than we are to ourselves, and thus enfolding or enveloping and carrying us. Papa does speak along these lines on page 97. **“I’m *not* like you.....I am God. I am who I am. And unlike you, my wings can’t be clipped.”**

Who are the Three?

The next important topic which invites reflection is that of the *Trinity*. On page 102, Young tries to explain something of the Trinity. **“You do understand that unless I had an object to love - or more accurately a *someone* to love - I did not have such a relationship within myself, and I would not be capable of love at all? You would have a God that would not love. Or maybe worse, you would have a God who, when he chose, could only love as a limitation of his nature. That kind of God could possibly act without love, and that would be a disaster. And that surely is not me.”** May I beg to differ? I’m begging!

You will notice that what Young says is very true of human relationships—*human* relationships.

It is my opinion that Young projects onto God what is true of human beings and human relationships, instead of simply acknowledging the mystery of God, instead of simply acknowledging that, in God, it is more mysterious. Human beings need an object to love, a *someone* to love. Otherwise, we do not love. Our capacity remains dormant. The persons of the Trinity however, do not need each other to actuate a capacity to love.

God *is* love. God is *source* of all love.

The persons of the Trinity love one another, period—for all eternity.

There is no actuation of a once-dormant capacity.

Herein is exemplified the limits of the example Young is using of three human persons, three *separate* persons.

The Persons in God are *not* separate.

Instead, think: *one God* in whom there is a mysterious eternal procession.

There is one Person coming forth from the Other,

and a third Person coming forth from these Two

—forever, in perfect simplicity.

God is perfectly simple.

This imagery inevitably introduces much complexity.

Incarnation

Young, of course, also treats the question of the Incarnation, of God become human.

His presentation of the Incarnation, dare I say, falls short.

In an effort to highlight the humility of Jesus,

and in an effort to assure full humanity,

Young presents a view which is somewhat erroneous.

Young rightly states that “**by nature Jesus is fully God**” (page 99).

Two paragraphs later, he says

“Although he is fully God, he has never drawn upon his nature as God to do anything. He has only lived out of his relationship with me, living in the very same manner I desire to be in relationship with every human being. He is just the first to do it, the uttermost - the first to absolutely trust my life within him, the first to believe in my life and my goodness without regard to appearance or consequence.”

It seems as though Young is saying that Jesus put his divinity on hold

in order to be fully in submission to the Father, and to live humanly.
 This might seem logical,
 and we can even spontaneously think along such lines.
 It is easy to think that this need be the case.
 It is difficult for us to grasp that Jesus as God would not make
 Jesus as human simply go through the motions of being human, right?
Wrong.

The Incarnation is primarily the *mystery of the God-Man*:
 fully God and fully man—not fully God on hold so to be fully man.
 The mystery lies in the intersection or *union* of the two,
 these two which are seemingly mutually exclusive,
 but in fact meet and are perfectly one. Young compartmentalizes God.
 Jesus “**lives only out of his relationship with the father**”.
 If God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit are perfectly one,
 and their oneness is not altered by the Incarnation,
 then Jesus, in his humanity, lives out of *all Three*—necessarily.

Jesus' mind

Young also states that Jesus was “**the first to believe**” in the Father’s love.
 The general theological consensus is that Jesus did *not* have faith.
 Jesus did not have faith because he *saw* God.
 Faith connects the mind to God *until we see God*.
 When we see God, faith disappears.
 In the Incarnation, Jesus did not put seeing God on hold.
 We may perhaps think this to be the case
 because we read about Jesus growing in wisdom.
 Jesus did grow in wisdom—*all the while seeing God*.
 In Jesus, the two are not mutually exclusive and therein lies the mystery...
 The growth and wisdom of which we read characterize the human mind.
 It is the natural progression, which Jesus experiences in His humanity.
 This growth in wisdom, however, cohabitated with His seeing God
 —as difficult as this may be for us to grasp.

Regarding the question of Christ’s mind—and beyond simply His mind
 —it is important to recall that, in the Incarnation, the Second Person
 of the Trinity takes upon Himself certain “deficiencies”, certain brokenness.
 He takes upon himself those deficiencies
 which do not diminish his divinity—for example: hunger, sadness, death.
 He does *not* take upon himself any intellectual deficiencies.

In other words, Jesus cannot be ignorant.
 As Saint Thomas Aquinas articulates, Jesus took upon himself
 “defects of body”, but not “defects of soul”
 —which would have diminished his light and love.
 Defects of body do not necessarily diminish divine light and love.
 Keep this in mind as you struggle with your diet or your back ache
 or your fatigue! They are not obstacles to closeness with God.

When asked about Jesus healing the blind,
 I find Papa’s response is also very limited.
 Papa states that Jesus **“did so as a dependent, limited human being
 trusting in my life and power at work within him and through him.
 Jesus, as a human being had no power within himself to heal anyone.”**
 It is false to separate and to compartmentalize in this way.
 Again, Jesus never put his divinity on hold.
 He with-held the glory that was in his soul so that he could suffer,
 but that was not “divinity on hold”.
 Jesus heals as the God-Man and is no less human for it.
 Jesus expresses the Father’s heart not by virtue of putting his divinity
 on hold and **“resting in his relationship with the father”**
 but simply by virtue of his perfect oneness with the Father.

The story of “The Shack” raises *many* important questions,
 invites exploration of many issues.
 We can only touch upon a few, and that only summarily.
 We have considered a few:

1. Revelation and Scripture
2. teaching authority and church leadership
3. faith
4. God as father
5. Trinity
6. Incarnation

The list is too long for us to explore everything. To name but a few:

1. freedom
2. consequences of Original Sin
3. Eden
4. good and evil

5. image of God
6. Jesus as center of Cosmos
7. law vs. spirit

Loved unconditionally

Let us see where we can go.

I find very clever and very moving how Young speaks

of the presence of God, and the intervention of God in our lives.

He beautifully states, **“Mack, I don’t want to be first among a list of values. I want to be at the center of everything. When I live in you, then together we can live through everything that happens to you. Rather than a pyramid, I want to be the center of a mobile, where everything in your life—your friends, family, occupation, thoughts, activities—is connected to me but moves with the wind, in and out and back and forth, in an incredible dance of being.”**

It is all about relationship.

It is all about a relationship in which God takes the initiative.

As we read in John’s Gospel, chapter 15, verse 6:

“It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you.”

And, in his first epistle, John similarly says,

“In this is love: not that we have loved him, but that he loved us.” (4:10)

Why does God choose us?

Mack poses the question rather poignantly (on page 200),

“Why do you love me, when I have nothing to offer you?”

Papa responds, **“It should be freeing to know that you can offer us nothing, at least not that can add or take away from who we are...That should alleviate any pressure to perform.”**

This suggests that we are chosen out of *pure* love.

There is an old medieval adage: *bonum diffusivum sui*.

I think the expression originated with Saint Thomas Aquinas,

but one finds the understanding articulated as far back as Aristotle.

“The good is self-diffusive”.

In other words, “the good communicates itself”.

God comes to us, not to get anything, but because He is good, *the Good*,

Which, by nature, communicates Itself, radiates, spreads.

Papa says it well (on page 124): **“We want to share with you the love and joy and freedom and light that we already know within ourself. We created you to join our circle of love.”**

Regarding this, Mack asks (on page 175), **“So what do I do?”**
“What you’re already doing Mack: learning to live loved. It’s not an easy concept for humans. You have a hard time sharing anything.” He chuckled and continued. **“So, yes, what we desire is for you to re-turn to us, and then we come and make our home inside you, and then we share. The friendship is real, not merely imagined. We’re meant to experience this life, your life, together, in a dialogue, sharing the journey. You get to share in our wisdom and love with our love, and we get...to hear you grumble and gripe and complain, and...”**
 Papa also declares **“My life inside of you will appropriate risk and uncertainty to transform you by your own choices into a truth teller, and that will be a miracle greater than raising the dead.”**

Mysterious presence

God come to us is faithfully present, in ways *mostly intangible*.
 You may recall, in chapter 14,
 we find Mack on a little canoe trip by himself.
 He goes for a solo exploration of the lake.
 His freedom has grown, and he even begins to sing to his daughter Katie,
 with tears flowing.
 Suddenly Sarayu appears, sitting in the prow of the canoe.
 Startled, Mack inquires **“Have you been with me the entire time?”**
 Sarayu responds **“Of course, I am with you always”**
 —reminiscent of the last thing Jesus says before ascending to heaven,
“I am with you always, until the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20).
 Mack is bewildered—much as we can be—**“How come I didn’t know it?”**
“For you to know or not”, Sarayu explains, **“has nothing to do with whether I am actually here or not. I am always with you; sometimes I want you to be aware in a special way—more intentional.”**

“I am with you always.”

Such declarations are to be received in faith.

Faith translates into trust.

We are to believe and trust that there is so much more than meets the eye.

Trust requires letting go, surrendering.

Sarayu explains this very well in speaking of how we must go beyond rules.

Catholics, of course, are either thrilled and reassured with lots of rules or terrorized by lots of rules!

Rules, any and all rules, are relative to relationship.

“There is no mercy or grace in rules” Sarayu declares so well. (page 202)
“Don’t look for rules and principles; look for relationship—a way of coming to be with us.” (page 198).

She further articulates, **“It’s true that relationships are a whole lot messier than rules, but rules will never give you answers to the deep questions of the heart and they will never love you.”** (page 198)

Trust is paramount.

“Be willing to reexamine what you believe. The more you live in truth, the more your emotions will help you see clearly.

But even then, *you don’t want to trust them more than me.*” (page 197)

How does He do it?

The question of how this faithful God works is very well treated.

We often wonder where God is in the mix when things get very complicated.

We wonder where God is when the suffering gets intense.

We are often at a loss as to how God works.

Mack poses a very important question, which leaves Papa taken aback:

“Did Missy have to die so you could change me?”

“Whoa there, Mack!” Papa leaned forward. **“That’s not how I do things.”**

And begins a very enlightening discourse.

“Mack, just because I work incredible good out of unspeakable tragedies doesn’t mean I orchestrate the tragedies. Don’t ever assume that my using something means I caused it or that I need it to accomplish my purposes. That will only lead you to false notions about me. Grace doesn’t depend on suffering to exist, but where there is suffering you will find grace in many facets and colors.”

I think of the Scripture verse: **“As far as the heavens are above the earth, so far are my ways above your ways.”**

How and where the Lord works indeed often escapes us.

This should be fine, however, because He knows what he is doing.

Sarayuu reassuringly declares on (page 196), **“Mistakes are part of life, and Papa works his purpose in them.”**

Papa puts into accessible terms this merciful, faithful work in our lives,

“Mackenzie, my purposes are not for my comfort, or yours. My purposes are always and only an expression of love. I purpose to work life out of death, to bring freedom out of brokenness and turn darkness into light. What you see as chaos, I see as fractal. All things must

unfold, even though it puts all those I love in the midst of a world of horrible tragedies – even the one closest to me.”

New eyes

Towards the very end of Chapter 14, Papa proposes a gift to Mack.

“Mackenzie, if you would allow me, I would like to give you a gift for this evening. May I touch your eyes and heal them, just for tonight?”

Sarayu touches his eyes—**“like ice, unexpected and exhilarating.”**

Upon opening his eyes, Mackenzie finds himself in a different place, a different realm. Nature is ablaze with life, cascading with color.

Mack feels no pain and is filled with delirious and delicious joy.

Was Mack given a greater taste and glimpse of heaven?

The description seems to suggest: luminosity, harmony, which, as we read, results from perfect reconciliation.

There is an interesting description of persons and their love manifested in colors,

and how each is unique and yet combines.

On page 213, Sarayu articulates for Mack

“Each relationship between two persons is absolutely unique. That is why you can not love two people the same. It simply is not possible. You love each person differently because of who they are and the uniqueness they draw out of you. And the more you know one another, the richer the colors of that relationship.”

This realm offers Mack a unique opportunity.

In the midst of this world of color—led by Sarayu of course,

Mack notices one person amidst agitated lights.

This person – along with others is **“waiting”**.

Mack notices that this man is focused on them (Mack and Sarayu).

Sarayu corrects him. **“He is focused on you...The one having so much trouble containing himself—that one—is your father.”**

What follows is very moving.

“He found himself running across the meadow to find his father, running towards the source of colors and emotions. He was a little boy wanting his daddy, and for the first time he was not afraid. He was running, not caring for anything but the object of his heart, and he found him. His father was on his knees awash in light, tears sparkling like a waterfall of diamonds and jewels into the hands that covered his face.

‘Daddy’ yelled Mack, and he threw himself onto the man who could not even look at his son. In the howl of wind and flame, Mack took his father’s face in his two hands, forcing his dad to look him in the face so he could stammer the words he had always wanted to say: ‘Daddy, I’m so sorry. Daddy I love you’. The light of his words seemed to blast darkness from his fathers colors, turning them blood red. They exchanged sobbing words of confession and forgiveness, as a love greater than either one healed them.

Mack somehow knew that this was not a time for conversation and that his time with his father was quickly passing. He sensed that by some mystery this was as much for his dad as it was for him. As for Mack, the new lightness he felt was euphoric. Kissing his father on the lips, he turned and made his way back to the small hill.

The question was posed: Is this a greater taste and glimpse of heaven?

I would venture to say that it is *not*.

“Why?” you may ask? Because heaven is *perfect* relationship with God, in the light of God’s presence.

As the Book of Revelation says there are no more tears or pain” in heaven, in the definitive divine embrace.

Purgatory?

Young paints an amazing picture, but of a place of waiting, of passage, of preparation, of last reconciliation and healing before entering the fullness of the Divine Presence.

Indeed, on page 216, Jesus says to those gathered “**Come**”, *subsequent* to which they all engage the celestial dance.

Is this not—perhaps unknowingly to Young—an intuition of purgatory?

Now, I know that our Protestant Brothers and Sisters are about to pass out. Just hold onto a neighbor (and we’ll deal with this issue later!).

Unfortunately, we often envision purgatory as a mini-hell.

Saint Catherine of Genoa (+1517) dismantles such thinking.

In her treatise on Purgatory, she says, “**I believe no happiness can be found worthy to be compared with that of a soul in Purgatory except that of the saints in Paradise; and day by day this happiness grows as God**

flows into these souls, more and more as the hindrance to His entrance is consumed.”

You may ask **“What about all the pain associated with purgatory”?**

The pain of purgatory is not that of punishment but that of the purification of love (notice how Mack’s father was pained yet joyous) and that of longing for the fullness of God for which those in purgatory are being prepared.

Young describes a realm of final healing.

Mack’s father experiences the healing that he needs—with his son—which readies his heart fully to enter God’s presence.

Journey of closure: forgiveness

In chapter 16, we read of another particularly moving event.

Papa takes Mack on a hike and visit to the cave where Missy’s body lay.

On the way, Papa, of his own initiative, addresses the question that tortures Mack’s heart.

On page 222, Papa says “Could I have prevented what happened to Missy? The answer is yes”. Papa continued “First, by not creating at all these questions would be moot. Or secondly, I could have chosen to actively interfere in her circumstance. The first was never a consideration and the latter was not an option for purposes that you can not possibly understand now. At this point all I have to offer you as an answer is my love and goodness, and my relationship with you. I did not propose Missy’s death, but that doesn’t mean I can’t use it for good.”

These statements are meant to prepare Mack to see Missy’s body, to bring closure.

For there to be closure, however, Mack must do something very particular, something very difficult.

Seeing Missy’s murdered body alone will not bring closure.

Forgiveness will bring closure.

Forgiveness brings closure because forgiveness frees the heart, and a freed free heart is a heart with closure.

Young does a tremendous job of situating forgiveness.

Ultimately, we can not really forgive without God as Papa says.

“Forgiveness is an incredible power Jesus gives to all whom he indwells.” Papa defines forgiveness, **“To forgive this man is for you to release him to me and allow me to redeem him.”** He then states

something extremely important, clarifying a grave misconception.

“Forgiveness is not about forgetting. It is about letting go of another person’s throat.”

Indeed, the injustice and the pain of the past are not forgotten.

With forgiveness they simply do not interfere with the relationship.

Papa then clarifies another grave misconception.

Mack asks, **“So then what? I just forgive him and everything is okay and we become buddies?”**

Papa responds, **“Forgiveness does not establish relationship.”**

And later states, **“Unless people speak the truth about what they have done and change their mind and behavior, a relationship of trust is not possible. When you forgive someone you certainly release them from judgment, but without true change, no real relationship can be established.”**

Papa also states, **“Forgiveness does not excuse anything. Forgiveness in no way requires that you trust the one you forgive. But should they finally confess and repent, you will discover a miracle in your own heart that allows you to reach out and begin to build between you a bridge of reconciliation. And some times – and this may seem incomprehensible to you now – that road may even take you to the miracle of fully restored trust.”**

Papa then makes a statement which deeply shifts Mack’s heart.

“Missy has already forgiven him (the murderer)”.

Mack can only respond,

“Help me. What do I do? How do I forgive him?”

“Just say it out loud” Papa says.

The advice is interesting. Just saying it is, of course, insufficient.

But, as many of us have experienced: truly saying something presupposes something interior, something in the heart.

Truly saying something requires a choice.

“Just say it out loud” is best translated

“Just choose to forgive. Just will forgiveness.”

Forgiveness is a choice. Forgiveness is a choice because love is a choice.

As Mack is willing this forgiveness, he notices intense anger surfacing.

And, like us, he wonders if it is normal.

“So is it alright if I am still angry?”

Papa is quick to respond, **“Absolutely! What he did was terrible. He caused incredible pain to many. It was wrong, and anger is the right response to something that is so wrong. But don’t let the anger and pain and loss you feel prevent you from forgiving him and removing your hands from around his neck”.**

Forgiveness is an act of love for someone who has hurt us.
So long as the wound is still there, we continue to forgive.
There *may* be a day—this side of heaven
—when we realize that we are healed
and the forgiveness is then simply love.

Our place in the world

The final issue I would like to mention is that of our place in the world,
our actions towards others.

Mack is given the choice of staying with Missy
or returning to Nan and the other kids.

If I may mention in passing, I think that the “either/or” option is false.
Why? Because our deceased loved ones are not elsewhere.

They are silently, *really* present.

Regardless, Mack opts to return home
but wonders about the relevance and impact of his presence there.

“I really don’t do much other than working and caring for my family and friends”.

Sarayu responds – and I can hear Mother Theresa – **“If anything matters, then everything matters. Because you are important, everything you do is important. Every time you forgive the universe changes. Every time you reach out and touch a heart or life, the world changes. With every kindness and service, seen or unseen, my purposes are accomplished and nothing will ever be the same again.”**