

Interview with William P. Young—THE SHACK

**Servant:** Good morning, Paul. Where are you located?

**Paul:** In Oregon, just out of Gresham in the Portland area.

**S:** Thanks so much for taking the time for this. I don't imagine you've heard of Servant magazine.

**P:** I have. I went 3 years to Canadian Bible College in Regina before I moved to Calgary and I was very close friends with one of your alumni, Scott Mitchell.

**S:** You know, I just learned of that. Scott and Connie lived upstairs from us when we were first married and we spent a lot of time together. So you knew Scott. What a guy! There's an incredible story there. Connie told us that you had some interaction with him and that he had a part even in this book, that there was a bit of Scott in there.

**P:** Yeah. Going through The Shack, which is a bit of a metaphor for the house of the soul, that you build and people help you build, Scott was definitely part of that for me.

**S:** That's great. We're doing a cover story on the book and offering it to our readers and I know it will be a help to so many. Your family—I understand you have six children. Are they grown?

**P:** Yes. We've got two grandbabies and one on the way.

**S:** I hear they are better than actual children, these grandchildren.

**P:** You know, people say that but we loved our kids. I think it's not so much the grandchildren but that I've changed so much over the course of my life. My attention span is much better. I listen more.

**S:** You were raised by missionary parents in New Guinea?

**P:** Yes, C&MA.

**S:** Prairie is historically a very missions oriented school so I may ask you a few questions about that. But let's talk about The Shack. How did it come about? I'm sure you've told that a thousand times, but would you tell us again?

**P:** I've always written as gifts but never tried to publish anything. I'm an accidental author at best and publishing was never even on the radar. I just wrote all through my life as a gift for my kids, friends and this was really no different. Kim had been encouraging me for about five years to bring together in one place for the children just how I think because it's sort of outside the box. So finally I was ready to do it in 2005. I didn't know what that meant. A few months ago she told me she meant 4 to 6 pages. But I finally grabbed some time. I had come out of my "shack" at the end of 2004; it was really an eleven year process, which I squeezed into a weekend for Mackenzie in the book. But it was just a gift. My goal was to give it to a local print shop by Christmas, maybe about 15 copies for the children and some friends.

**S:** So you wrapped it up and put it under the tree?

**P:** It didn't make it. I didn't quite have enough money to do the printing so we made it to last Christmas. I put together enough money to finish the project and gave it to them as a gift. But then my friends started giving it to their friends and it ended up with people I didn't know and they were writing emails about how the book had impacted them. And I thought, what's going on here? So I sent it to the only real author I knew and he immediately sent it to a bunch of his friends, two of whom are movie producers. They began looking at it as a potential screen play. So that started a conversation and I didn't know what to do with it. I was trying to get Wayne involved since he was the only one

who had some history in publishing, a whole realm that I knew nothing about. He didn't want to get involved because he had just come out of it and his experience with the publishing industry hasn't always been wonderful. But the movie guys were pushing me to do something and I didn't know what to do. Finally the four of us got together in Los Angeles in the spring of 2006 and began to take a look at the book, the screenplay, our relationships and we talked about collaborating on an editing process. We were all working regular jobs so over about 16 months we re-worked the material, sent it out to a whole bunch of our friends for their feedback. It was highly collaborative on a number of levels. Finally it was ready to send to a publisher. We sent it to a couple of dozen major publishers, faith-based and otherwise and nobody wanted it. The faith-based guys said we love the book personally but we don't have a niche for it and it's too edgy. The secular publishers said they loved the book personally but they didn't have a niche for it and it had too much "Jesus." So Wayne and Brad (one of the producers) said we believe there's this huge middle market, a group of people who are quite tired of the same old stuff under a different cover. We've always wanted to have a publishing company so we would have some latitude to do what we would like to do, so they created Windblown Media. So technically the book isn't self-published; it's published by a publisher but it's these guys. Windblown Media was born because of *The Shack* and it was born with just one title. So we borrowed money and pooled our resources for the first print run, ordered 10,000 copies, which now we find out it quite aggressive.

**S:** That's pretty huge.

**P:** But we didn't know what we were doing. We did a hard back at first because people wanted it, then we did a soft cover and set up a website so it wouldn't cost us anything and attached it to Wayne's. Because we weren't dealing with wholesale versus retail we were able to give multiple discounts so we built that into right from the beginning. Actually because of a computer glitch 11,000 copies were delivered to Brad's garage. From the garage we shipped out books. Brad and Wayne have a podcast called [thegodjourney.com](http://thegodjourney.com) which goes out to 140 countries. We presold about 1000 copies through that because they'd been talking about it for over a year. So those books went out all over the world and we started giving it to our friends and they gave it to their friends. It was just like you'd lit a fire and these sparks would go flying off and those sparks would start fires and those fires would cause sparks. We watched people come to the website and they'd buy one. And a week later they'd buy 5 and two weeks later they'd buy 10 or 20 or cases of 36. We were thinking two years but it took only four months—the whole goal was that down the road as this book might do ok we could hit 100,000 books which would open up the door for a potential movie, which was what the guys were most interested in. Four months later we'd gone through 11,000 books. So we ordered 20,000 and they delivered 22,000. People are looking on Amazon and all over for this book, they can't find the publisher, can't track it. So companies are now coming to us asking if they can put our book in their distribution chain and allow them to sell it in stores. So even up to today, we've spent less than \$300 in marketing and we're at \$1.7 million in sales.

**S:** Incredible.

**P:** It's been #1 on the New York Times Bestseller list for seven weeks. We're at #2 in all of Amazon, #1 in Barnes & Noble nation-wide and we've done virtually *nothing*. It's been through word of mouth. None of us have any—there's no doubt in our minds that this is

something God has decided to do. He's decided to bless something and we just carry the bags, not because we're brilliant or had the perspective to do something for God. I just wanted to write a story for my children.

**S:** How has the success of this and all that's happened changed you?

**P:** People don't understand that the book was not written as 'part of' a healing process. It's written *after*. It's a metaphor. I built my shack for 38 years and it all came tumbling down and I had to deal with all the stuff in the shack for 11 years which ended in 2004. I came out of the shack, by the grace of God, one of the healthier people that I know. I had no addictions left, no secrets, no skeletons, no reputation. It's one of these situations where my identity is in Jesus. I don't have an identity as an author so that hasn't changed. When I prayed at the beginning of 2005, not about the book but just about my life, my prayer was "Papa, I'll never again ask you to bless anything that I do—never because I'm so done with religious performance. But if you've got something you're blessing and it would be ok for me to hang around that, I would be all over it. I don't care if I'm cleaning toilets or shining shoes or holding the door open. And people don't understand where I've come from so they don't understand there is no way I would change the sense of being in the presence of the Lord and having him as a constant companion. I will not change that for anything. So this has some new and different challenges but the book doesn't touch anything that matters. It's been real the whole time. The book doesn't add anything to my significance; it doesn't give me an identity now. The world will but I know better. I know I walk with a limp, I know where I've come from. I know every breath is grace. I used to think I understood what God was up to and I used to tell everybody. I don't do that any more. I don't understand *anything* about what he's up to. I like living this one day at a time inside the grace of one-day stuff.

**S:** It's fascinating to hear you say some of these things. You know enough about Prairie to know that you and I are probably from similar backgrounds in the sense of coming to a point of knowing that it *is* all about grace. I've said that I want on my tombstone "He found God's grace too amazing to keep to himself." Way to go. That's such great stuff.

**P:** We both grew up with a God tainted with the face of a father whose expectations we couldn't live up to. And it's all guilt-motivated and performance-oriented. It's up to us to find God.

**S:** And I got pretty good at that and I was very proud of it. I could put on a show for whoever was in the room.

**P:** The façade in front of the shack.

**S:** I was going to ask you about the "too edgy" comment. What were they talking about specifically?

**P:** It's different for different theological perspectives. Don't get me wrong—theologians love this book. I've gotten huge support from Catholic, Protestant, Eastern and Western Orthodox—it's been all over the map as far as support for the book. But here are certain theological perspectives that are a little more tightly wound. So they have certain problems because they've got a lot invested in judgment and an angrier God. The Southern Baptists spent two weeks going through the book with their theologians before their convention and then issued a statement that they found nothing of questionable theology and nothing unorthodox about the book that would warrant it being pulled from the shelves or banned and they've reinstated it nation-wide. Some of it is that people in the west struggle with the imagery, they read things into it. People find their identity in

‘being right.’ One insight we got from the publishing company is that if somebody else is doing it, we can’t do it and if nobody else is doing it, we can’t do it. It’s really there. So all the gatekeepers are saying I’m sorry, we can’t publish this because it’s going to potentially offend this person or this group or whatever. So all they do is what they’ve published before and that’s why you get a thousand titles on the same material.

**S:** As I was reading it I could see some people taking it out of context. You have the character of God saying “In Jesus I have forgiven all sins against me.” So for someone who sees Universalism behind every bush, what do you say to a person like that?

**P:** I say II Timothy, chapter 4 says “This is statement that is true and worthy of all acceptance, that Jesus Christ is the savior of all mankind, especially of believers.” Or “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself through Christ, not counting their sins against them.” To me the issue is not the issue of the finished work—he died once for all. He will never have to die on the cross again. The issue is not an issue of God reaching down and accomplishing salvation; the issue is one of relationship. He’s not going to force a relationship on anybody. If you want outer darkness, you can have outer darkness if that’s what you really want. People hold to their idolatries and their false thinking and their blindness and their lostness and they don’t want the light. And that’s respected. But it’s not because the way has not been absolutely and certainly supplied in Christ and by the finished work of God the Father, and the power of the Spirit and the Son. It’s all because of Jesus. The path narrows to one man, the second Adam, Jesus Christ.

**S:** So you have not accepted Universalism into your life?

**P:** I have never believed all roads lead to God. It’s clear in the one passage in the book where Jesus is talking to Mac who asks him, Do all roads lead to Papa (God)? And he tells him, No, most roads don’t lead anywhere. But I will go down any road to find you—which is the story of the incarnation. It’s the story of the Good Shepherd who leaves the ninety and nine to go and find the one. God knows how lost we are. And he will be the one who bridges the gap. We love him because he first loved us. He expressed his love first before we even had the capacity to respond. It’s always moving from God’s side toward us. He’ll go down any road to find us but that doesn’t mean that any particular road we’re on is The Way. Just because The Way penetrated a particular dead-end road that you’re on, whether it’s religious road or a political road or a business success road or an addiction road, he’ll come down and find you, but that doesn’t mean that heroin is the way to God. It’s just because that’s the road he found you on.

**S:** How would you boil down the central message of this book? What’s it really about?

**P:** It’s fundamentally first about the character of God. Is he good and is he involved? Is God a God of love? That’s the underlying central issue for Mackenzie because love is what casts out fear. So often we have painted God as demanding perfection and setting the bar so high we can’t reach it and communicating to us his disgust at our inability. So the central theme is who is this God really? What is his character? Because the character of God is the first thing that’s maligned in scripture. The first accusation against God is about his character. If that is in question, then everything else is uncertain. Life is uncertain; God’s behavior is uncertain. If the character of God is uncertain, then we are totally on our own in trying to make it. Besides who is this God really, the second question is well, then, who am I to this God—the issue of identity. And that’s the second major question. Who am I to this God? Am I someone who signed up for a test? Am I a

servant? Or am I a son? Ephesians 1: 5 is right. It says that his whole purpose before the foundation of the world was to adopt us as sons. Am I to understand the adoption as a son as an identity issue or does he send his \$25 a month to support a child? What's our understanding. Everything says that our adoption as sons allows us to enter into the same relationship with the Father as Jesus has. That relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit is what we get invited into. Even more than the sense of inviting Jesus into our lives, we're invited into his. And the affection of the Father to the Son is what I am now in the middle of. In the story of the prodigal son, there is never any question whether or not the two boys are his sons. At no time are they going to be disowned as sons. The question really is, when are the boys finally going to realize the love of the father? Because they're both functioning outside of the love of the father. The love of the father is constant throughout the story but the boys don't understand that so one turns to rebellion and one turns to religion. The beauty is that the one who turns to rebellion is the first one to come home. The other one has been in the house the whole time.

**S:** So which one are you?

**P:** I'm the religious one. For sure. But I'm a shame-based religious person, not truly pride-based. Shame was so deep in my life that it was the motivation for everything that I did. When I accomplished things or did things that people approved or applauded I always felt like I'd lied my way to it or faked it. Shame was the reality inside my shack.

**S:** The back cover of the book says that you suffered great loss as a child and young adult. And I read in USA Today that you were involved in an affair a number of years ago. In the wake of what we've talked about regarding shame, how did you get through that?

**P:** It just about killed me, let me tell you. That's the piece that Scott Mitchell helped me through. Because when it all blew up I was 38 years old and my sixth child was born, that's when the affair happened. But the childhood stuff that built the shack was not being connected to my parents, being on the mission field, growing up inside another culture, being a third culture kid, etc and all of the sexual abuse that was part of that culture as well as at boarding school, all of that stuff made me a damaged person seeking the approval of a father who is only angry. So that is the basis for The Shack. The Shack is a place that houses the decrepit house of the soul. Other people have helped you build its foundation on pain and lostness. You have rooms where you hide your secrets and rooms where you store your addictions and all your lies are the fabric that holds this house together. And meanwhile you build a façade that's outside, the think that you want people to see. And you paint it and make it as beautiful as possible so that people will think it's perfect. You change the colors as people's expectations change but really the corruption in the shack is never touched by all the performance on the outside. My façade was the three-month affair with one of my wife's best friends. She caught me so January 4, 1994 she called me on the phone and she said, "I know and I'm waiting for you at your office." I called the other woman and she said, "Run away with me" which is part of the survival mechanism for abused people and I said, "No." It was a sick affair in a real demonic sense in that I thought Kim was going to die, that this was a God-thing, that he was fulfilling some great romance—it was way outside the box. And in the confrontation of that moment, it was--if I don't deal with all this crap, because I could just not hold the religious façade together in the face of this kind of devastation. So it was either do I face this or do I run? If I run you might as well kill me? So do I allow the shame at this point

to kill me or do I face it? It took eleven years. And really it was Kim's anger. She's from a real salt-of-the-earth family and there are no shades of grey in her world. So she just came at me with every bit of fury that she had. And it was the intensity of her fury that pushed me to deal with everything. I've been saved twice in my life, once by Jesus and once by Kim. It took eleven very hard years for her and me to be ok. She didn't believe anything for the first two years. And Scott played a part in those first two years, just undoing stuff, unraveling my identity. The only reason Kim let me stay in the house was because she loved the kids and because they broke hard and because I never pointed a finger in her direction. I just didn't care any more; I needed to deal with stuff. Pointing the finger in someone else's direction is a survival skill. And by the time I came out of the shack I didn't care whether I ever spoke again. Because I was a performer, a rising young Christian superstar and my identity was in being approved and always being right in a conversation. I knew I was out when joy had become a constant companion, my identity was in Christ, when Kim and I were good, and when I was the same person in every situation. I'm the same with my kids as I am at work, as I am at play, when I'm alone, when I'm travelling—I'm the same person. And that was just unbelievable to me. The integration and the healing of the pieces of my heart took eleven years. I was in Indiana recently and talking to Kim on the phone and I told her there was a rumor out that she and I were separated and seeking a divorce. She laughed and she said, "The funny thing about it is that we are the best we've ever been." In a group last summer she said in front of me, "I never thought I would ever say this in my life, but it was all worth it." So I understand grace. For people to think that this is all going to go to my head they don't understand what I would have to give up for that to happen and I'm just not there. I know where I came from and the process that it took and I know what I have. If the book went away tomorrow and all of it, the speaking, the movie, if I was back where I was at the beginning of this year still shipping soldering tips out of a manufacturer's warehouse and cleaning the toilets—if I went back to doing that I would be fine. I have everything that matters. This book doesn't add anything to me or take anything away. It's a lot of fun, but I feel like I'm hanging around something God is blessing. This is not my gig. Even in the controversy it stirs up, it's at least opening up conversations that have just never been there before. That's the beauty of it. People are talking about things, even with people that they thought they knew really well, having conversations that are just unbelievable, transforming. They're not just sticking the book back on the shelf and going on to another one. It's not because of the book but it's because this is something the Spirit of the Lord has decided he wants to breathe on. I love being a part of it but I'm very clear that this is not because of me. I understand my role in it and I understand that it was my life and my fifty years before I could write this story—I understand all that. But even scripture, if the Holy Spirit doesn't breathe life into it, it's just words on a page. My favorite quote about the book so far is from a college student named Tyson who said to Amy, my twenty-year-old my daughter, "Amy, this book is just so far beyond your dad." The beauty of being in a family is that we know that apart from Christ we can do nothing. There are no pedestals. How can I say Look at my nothing. It's bigger than your nothing. It's shinier than your nothing. It's nothing. I love that.

**S:** God uses the under-qualified to do his work, would you say?

**P:** Here's proof that God still uses the foolish. I said to Nicholas, my 25-year-old, "You know what's funny about this? I'm talking in front of thousands of people now. A year

ago nobody cared what I had to say and I'm as dumb now as I was then." It's an enigma, God's joke and I love it.

**S:** A lot of our readers are missionary kids and I can think of one who's been right where you are. In our conversations he's been in tears about being in boarding school. Any advice for parents involved in missions overseas? I know some things have changed.

**P:** A couple of things for parents. You've got to go at the pace of the slowest and that's in scripture—give honor to the weakest members. Because in God's kingdom every person matters. A lot of times we get an objective, a vision, a goal, a ministry—whatever. And we get those in our mind and we think finally we've got something that's going to give us a sense of worth and identity and security and we're going to do something great for God. And we run at it and in doing so we run right past our kids and our spouses and our friends and the people who would intersect our path if we just walked in the presence of God. So there comes a point where you make decisions based on the people in your life, not the value of a goal or product or end result. We live one day at a time and we only have what's in our life today and how we spend it in terms of relationships that are right in front of us is significant. To your friend, I understand. I know the hardest question is "Where are you from?" You don't fit anywhere. And yet you can stand from the outside and see all the inconsistencies and see them as a weapon or in the healing that God does in our hearts we can begin to allow God to use that ability, which missionary kids have, an incredible ability to not to adapt to culture but to see its inconsistencies but to allow God to use that insight to bring healing in gentle sorts of ways. Both MKs and PKs can tend to be pretty screwed up and its because a lot of us came from homes where the parents were sold out to the ministry and they hadn't dealt with their own baggage so it got dumped on us. And then we end up in a hostile environment where all these kids who are somewhat fractured are trying to find acceptance through dominance or power, plus who knows the experiences they've had. Their parents don't know or are unaware. My parents had no clue about the abuse that was going on neither at the boarding school or inside the tribe. I was disconnected and disassociated from my own parents. I didn't have that sense of home except inside the tribal culture inside of which I was being abused as well. The path to come to healing to deal with the stuff is unique to the individual and there is a process of opening up and letting the light come in and moving toward authenticity which I think is one of the greatest drives of the human heart. And you know what? God has never done anything alone. There's always been three. We're made in his image; we can't do this alone. We've got to let people in and be a part of the process. The other piece is that God has begun a good work and he doesn't build roads that lead nowhere.

**S:** The character Mac experiences incredible healing to his pain, but what would you say to those who haven't heard God speak and long for healing?

**P:** I'd say that the God who knows we can only hear at 10 decibels won't talk to us at 9.9 and then get mad at us for not being able to hear him. There is a uniqueness to every human being and that uniqueness is so astoundingly intricate that it makes the physical universe pale in comparison and God respects that creation in a way that we don't. and the process of even physical healing, Jesus never healed twice the same when he healed physically. Even that responded to the uniqueness of the human being. So the whole process of the healing of the soul is unique to each person because the damage has been unique and damaged a unique person in very unique ways. And only God is big enough

to take your pile of balled up, knotted string and untie that ball one knot at a time in the right order so that the string doesn't break. And that takes time and it's a process because he won't violate you or abuse you in order to heal you. I don't think God heals us to use us; I think he heals us because he loves us and then begins to invite us in our freedom to play. The beauty of the affection of this God who pursues us is that he has come to set us free. And there is no plan B. I can say very confidently that you are right where you are and are known to be where you are at this time in terms of the purposes of God. It comes down to the basic questions: is he good and is he involved? It's one thing to believe he's good but not involved. It's another thing to believe he's involved but he's not good. But if you can put your feet down in the middle of the quagmire of whatever you're dealing with in your life and you can plant your left foot on "He's good" and your right foot on "He's involved" then I can stay inside a day's worth of grace. I don't have to scramble to figure out my healing. And you know what? The process of transformation is not one that's hindered by shame. God can use shame to accomplish righteousness. That's why he nailed shame and condemnation to the cross.

**S:** And that's in a nutshell the message of this book. Any plans for a sequel?

**P:** I don't think there will be a sequel, no. I have a website called [windrumors.com](http://windrumors.com) and I write a lot of stuff on there. I'm starting to work on a lot of things, but there's no pressure unless it's something God wants. They're looking very seriously at a movie. I think they're about to announce a director. If it's done, it will be done right. We're not giving up creative control.

**S:** How would you like to be remembered after all this is said and done?

**P:** Different things come to mind. An enigma of grace is probably one thing. My life just doesn't make any sense. It's been such an extension of grace. The wastefulness of grace is all over my life. Wastefulness—if you're dealing with a human being it's easy to feel like, I've extended way too much grace. I'm done. Look at creation. How many shades of green are there? There's just this wastefulness of green. And in our relationship to God you can not go deep enough to run out of grace; it's not just enough—it's way more than enough. And you get gifts all the time for things that are just, I sit back and think that's just unexpected and unanticipated and not earned, of course, and undeserved and all of that. And he's doing it because that's the way he is and he loves to do this. This flood of grace is in our lives and all around us.

**S:** You smile as you say that. Humor is a part of this book as well.

**P:** Well, where do we think humor came from? The fruit of the Holy Spirit didn't show up when we were created. They are expressions of the life that exists between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

**S:** How are you going to make sure The Shack doesn't become this commercial marketing machine? You must have had some interesting offers.

**P:** Most of the time we just laugh about it. The commercial piece of it is going to happen even if people don't have permission. But we're really not interested. You have to make choices along the way, whether it's to the praise of God's glory or just stupid. You make your decisions one day at a time and I've got too much in front of me today to worry about tomorrow.