



An UNEDITED Life

ON OCTOBER 24, MIKE YACONELLI was speaking to youth workers at a convention in Charlotte, North Carolina, when he compared living the Christian life to riding a roller coaster. “If I died right this minute,” he said, “I would be able to say, ‘God, what a ride! What a ride!’”

Just over a week later, a tape of that speech was played at his funeral.

Mike Yaconelli, former editor of *The Wittenburg Door* and owner and “fearless leader” of Youth Specialties (YS), an organization that trains thousands of youth ministers, died October 30 from injuries sustained in an automobile accident. He was sixty-one and is survived by his wife, Karla, five children, and four grandchildren.

Yaconelli founded YS in 1969 with fellow youth minister Wayne Rice, organizing their first national Christian youth workers convention in 1970. The group now claims to train 100,000 youth workers a year through seminars, conferences, resources, and a website.

They founded *The Wittenburg Door* (now *The Door*) in 1971 as a youth worker journal. When they realized that “Wittenberg” was misspelled on

A conversation about messy spirituality and the frightening power of grace with Mike Yaconelli

BOB SMIETANA

the first cover, they decided to focus the magazine on religious satire, with features like the “Green Weenie” award that poked fun at some “stupid things” they saw Christians doing.

“We made fun of the church because we loved the church,” Yaconelli, who edited the *Door* for twenty-five years, said in an interview earlier this year. “What we were upset about was all the stupid things the church was doing.”

“The *Door* allowed people who had been ridiculed, put down, shut up, told they were crazy or they were heretics to say, ‘By God I am not crazy—there are other people who see the same things I do,’ ” Yaconelli said.

In 1984, Yaconelli and the staff at the *Door* wanted to get evangelicals to talk about racism. So they designed a cover that looked like it had been photocopied, and stamped it with this message: “Attention Readers: Due to a shortage of printed issues, we have sent this photocopy of the rough layouts to you and others like you.”

A message inside the magazine added that, “We would’ve simply copied one of the finished, printed issues, but we needed to get all of those in the mail to our other customers.”

“We were making them feel like second-class citizens,” said Yaconelli. “People wrote in and said, ‘But I am a really good customer.’ We shocked them into thinking they got the Xeroxed copy.”

That simple tactic got readers to think about the topic of racism in a way they had not before, says Yaconelli. “It was one of the best things we ever did,” he said.

In his books *Dangerous Wonder* (1998) and *Messy Spirituality* (2002), Yaconelli mixed his trademark humor with honest accounts about his struggles with his faith. “I don’t want to be St. John of the Cross or Billy Graham,”

he wrote in *Messy Spirituality*, which was subtitled *God's Annoying Love for Imperfect People*. "I just want to be remembered as a person who loved God, who served others more than he served himself, who was trying to grow in maturity and stability. I want to have more victories than defeats, yet here I am, almost sixty, and I fail on a regular basis."

"If I were to die today, I would be nervous about what people would say at my funeral. I would be happy if they said things like, 'He was a nice guy' or 'He was occasionally decent' or 'Mike wasn't as bad as a lot of people.' Unfortunately, eulogies are delivered by people who know the deceased. I know what the consensus would be. 'Mike was a mess.'"

The idea that Christians are afraid to be vulnerable and to share their struggles was the theme of *Messy Spirituality*, and the theme of a book Yaconelli was working on at the time of his death, called *Impersonating Ourselves*.

Features editor Bob Smietana talked with Yaconelli in August 2002.

BS: In *Messy Spirituality*, you talk about the growth of the "spiritual growth industry." Why does it bother you?

MY: We have created a Christian culture, religious culture, where we place a great deal of significance on books and speaking and writing and seminars where complicated reality is reduced to principles and statements. And we are left with this unconscious feeling that the standards are so high that basically we never make it—but there are in fact a few people who have made it. The writers of the books and the leaders of the seminars and the speakers at our conferences somehow have found the secret, the key—the six principles that have made them successful in achieving a higher level of the Christian faith.

The reality is *that's nonsense*. If we all told the truth—if we would sit in a

room together and get rid of all of our fears and worries—and I began to really hear your story and you heard mine, we would both say, "We are a mess. You are struggling with all kinds of stuff, and I thought you had it all together, I thought you had everything figured out."

It turns out that I don't and neither do the people who write the books and do the seminars.

BS: You tell the story of meeting with a friend who brought along a cassette-

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tape of the testimony he had given at his church. On the tape, he shares about his struggles with alcoholism, something he couldn't bring himself to tell you about in person—he had to use the tape recorder.

MY: This person was terribly afraid that they would be rejected and that they would be eliminated out of the friendship. That they would be looked down upon and lectured and given advice and that people would try and fix them instead of really hearing what was going on in their lives.

BS: You tell stories of people who showed grace in unexpected ways. There's a college kid who knocks at a door in a public housing complex while doing door to door evangelism. There's a woman inside, smoking, while her baby ran around without a diaper. And she slams the door in his face—she doesn't want to hear about God from him. So this kid, who had never smoked in his life, goes out and buys cigarettes and diapers then spends the whole day with this woman, smoking and changing diapers, and showing her the love of God. It's a powerful story, but hard to believe that a kid on an urban mission trip would do that.

MY: Here's the reality—we do not believe in grace. We are scared to death of grace. We are worried that it is going to be abused or misused. And of course, we only worry about that after we are in. And then we decide to help God by becoming grace monitors and grace police and by sort of saying, "God's really busy and he has got a lot to do, so we will make sure that nobody else gets in." We make all of these rules, just like the Pharisees did, that determine whether or not you are functioning in grace.

Our secular pagan culture doesn't make us get drunk, it makes us dull. It robs us of our creativity. We don't sit around thinking, how can I redeem this situation? We have lost the power of the tiny, of the small, of the little thoughtful things that we can do for each other that will make all the difference in the world. That's what happens in a pagan culture. It's not that we run around doing these horrible sins. It's that we don't run around doing these little acts of grace that we ought to be doing.

BS: What are some of the other ways secular culture has affected the church?

MY: Let me tell you what the number-one issue is in churches—power. And you look at the battles that go on in your local congregation, and I am going to guarantee that much of it has to do with power. And that's why the church is so secular. Not because people drink and smoke. It's because they have bought into power. That's why everyone on the church board is an executive, high powered, if we can get them—a big time, powerful person. That's nonsense—the church should be unimpressed by power. The janitor

Bob Smietana is features editor for the Companion.

might in fact be the best chair of the board because this person knows God more than anyone else in the church.

We don't operate like that anymore. It's all about power now. It's the megachurches, and the biggest church and the person who speaks to a million people this year and writes eighty books, those are the people we honor and put out to the forefront. So authors like Frank Peretti and Tim LaHaye, who are very good people, we absolutely fall down and worship them because they sell millions of books and because they have lots of money.

BS: There's a trend in Christianity to demonize our enemies—we see it in LaHaye's *Left Behind* books, but you also see it in the way people delight in the belief that those they hate—the liberals, secular humanists, the heretics—are going to all end up in hell.

MY: Evangelicals are so delighted to have hell and they can hardly wait for people to go there. My feeling has been as I have gotten older, and I have done a lot of funerals, when you are standing up there in the pulpit talking about somebody who has just died, it's pretty hard to say, "Bob went to hell, too bad for him, what about you?" I can't do that. I am going to err on the side of grace in my funerals.

Now, I can see some evangelicals getting nervous already: "My God, what are you doing, you start to open that door and everybody is in [to heaven]." And my feeling is, "O.K., everybody is in. Woo-hoo!"

I have met some evil people in this world who I definitely hope that there is some place where they go, I admit that. But I don't know how God operates. I am not gleeful about anyone ending up there. And there is this kind of glee—really the term is arrogance. Most evangelical churches, you walk in and the one thing you come out of there with is arrogance. And that's the exact opposite of what you should be coming out of church with.

I walk into church and the one fragrance I ought to pick up is gratitude. Everyone there should be saying, "I don't belong here, I am just so grateful to be here."

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BS: Is there a difference between messy spirituality and sloppy spirituality, where grace is given without any cost or any repentance?

MY: Here's what I have discovered about grace—when you and I really believe, when I actually do accept forgiveness, it is incredibly terrifying and costly. When I sin and I ask God for forgiveness, I don't get away with anything because sin always has consequences. Even though Christ may have forgiven me, I have to live with those consequences for the rest of my life. I don't get away with stuff, and if I decide that I am going to get away with stuff, then I don't believe in grace in the first place.

That's why I get offended and even angry at my worst moments when people say, "You are just giving people permission to sin." Of course I am not giving people permission. What I am doing is saying to the majority of us, "Look, we are all a mess, let's quit pretending. Let's just accept who we are, and realize how rugged and difficult and messy this Christian life is."

BS: Can we really have this kind of a mess in our church services—especially in larger churches where the emphasis is on excellence and putting on more and more sophisticated services? Where megachurches have really become the model of a successful church?

MY: That's all about a worship of power, when the church should be the place where we evidence our power-

lessness. And in my church, which is the slowest growing church in America—we started with ninety sixteen years ago and now we have thirty. Because we have thirty people, everybody matters. Everybody knows everything about each other. They care for each other. They read about each other in the paper and send each other notes and encourage one another. We are all accessible and knowable. Numbers are not neutral. Size is not neutral. When we are big, we give up a lot.

Most church services now are edited. We edit the testimonies. We want to make sure we have good music, not bad music, so we have a selection process to only have the best singers and the best music. We want the best talks, and then we keep them within a strict time limit because we wouldn't want to bore people.

And that's why my church isn't growing—because our church service is unedited. You don't know what is going to happen. I still remember one of our guys wanted to sing a solo. It was horrible. Absolutely horrible. If we had any visitors that day, I am sure they never came back because the music was difficult and painful. But we don't care because Mike wanted to sing, and he needed to be allowed the freedom to know he was safe to sing in church.

The way we witness to the reality of the Christian faith is not that we don't smoke or we don't drink, it's that we are real. If you don't go to a church where people are real, if you can't be around Christians and be real, then what are we? What is the real witness of the people of God? It's that we are real.

BS: What are some examples of a church being real in a service?

MY: I have a friend who is a Presby-

terian minister, and everything in his church is done decently and in order, and services are all highly edited and planned. He got up one Sunday and it was time for the sermon, everyone was expected the same old thing. Then he walked out in front of the pulpit and he said, "When my daughter was nine years old, she invited me to a school dance, and I agreed to go. But I got so busy being a minister and serving God that I forgot and I never went to the dance." And he stopped, and all of a sudden music started playing in the sanctuary, dance music. And he looked down at his daughter, who was now seventeen, and he said, "I didn't dance with you then—but would you dance with me now?"

And that was the sermon. The power of that—the power of admitting that I have screwed up with my daughter, the power of asking her for for-

giveness, the power of being an example of how you redeem situations where you blew it—that's what the church is all about. That is what ought to be happening every Sunday and every day of our lives. But we have lost it all—we have let it all become a bunch of principles and points.

BS: How do you see that acted out in the church?

MY: We have reduced Christianity to being about what we have to do instead of who we have to be. We don't have any sense of the word *intimacy*. Christianity now means knowing about Jesus, but not about being intimate with Jesus—when in fact, that's the message of the gospel. Remember when Jesus showed up after the resurrection, and the disciples were out fishing? What Jesus wanted to do with those guys is

not preach them a sermon or say to them, "You still don't get it—we are going to go over this with PowerPoint and show you how this really works now." He said, "Guys, I have fixed a little fish here and I have got some bread. How about if we just hang out one more night before I leave?"

That is so wonderful. It is so like Jesus, it is such the gospel. He missed the guys—he was going to miss them and he just wanted to hang out with them. And I don't think most of us believe that. I honestly think that if Jesus showed up in my office today, he would be lecturing me about all the things he was disappointed about instead of walking in and saying, "I know you are busy and everything, I just wanted to have a meal with you. You think we could just go out, and hang out?" That's what this thing is all about. □

TELLING KIDS THE TRUTH: *Some Reflections on Youth Ministry*

BS: You have spent thirty years with Youth Specialties and training youth workers. There seems to be a trend in youth ministry, where kids are serious about discipleship and the Bible and are flocking to youth events. Is that something you are seeing—students excited about following Jesus in a different way?

MY: There are two sides to the coin. One is, of course they are, because they lived with a whole generation of people who thought that money and a house and college education and the opportunity to make lots of money was the meaning of life. They have seen the bankruptcy of it and what it has done to their families. They have seen the divorce and they have seen the distance between their mom and dad and they have all these things—but they are desperate, they are longing to find intimacy and a relationship, an experiential opportunity to know God, to know something beyond what we can see and experience. These kids are hungry, they haven't had any spiritual training and they haven't had anyone model for them what

following Jesus is about. They are desperate to find out—they realize the bankruptcy of material things and they are going for God like crazy.

On the other hand, there is this frightening illusion out here that big crowds and people all standing around worshipping together is a sign of renewed faith and a deeper understanding of God. I am afraid that much of it is a fad, that it is an emotional experience, that there is no connection at a deep level with God. I worry about that. I have always been a cynic, and I always see the glass as half empty. My problem is, when it hits the fan, when Dad ends up with cancer, or when they get in a car accident, or when their marriage doesn't work out—that all of this wonderful feelingness of Christianity is



suddenly going to come up short because they don't understand where God is. Because as great as these experiences are, we have got to tell kids the truth.

And frankly, that's what scares me because so much of what we are communicating out there with these spiritual growth bestsellers is not the truth. I want to be able to have a Bible lesson that tells kids about God in a way that ten years from now they will look back at me and say, "Thank you for telling me the truth. You didn't tell me that God was going to make sure I didn't get cancer or that my marriage would work out perfectly and that life would be great and that I'd have lots of money if I just followed him, that he would bless me. Thank you for telling me the truth that the Christian life is not about that, it's much deeper than that." □