

'Anyone seeking knowledge and union with God will be informed, edified, nourished and utterly charmed by this book. I savoured every story and was nurtured by the expression and depth. It is a book absolutely after my own heart.'

*Anne Lamott, author of Traveling Mercies
and Small Victories*

'One thing is for sure, there are no cheap and easy answers to why our experiences can be maddeningly painful, deeply disappointing and feel like we are wrestling with darkness. However, Mark Yaconelli's book will help you to feel safe to ask why. Through a powerful use of stories, he helps us to see beyond comfortable answers to find that Jesus is on the same road as we are, so we too, like him, can move forward.'

*Russ Parker, author of Free to Fail
and Healing Wounded History*

'I am undone. Maybe it's because Mark Yaconelli is the best storyteller of his generation or because these pages are so achingly honest or because somehow this guy just has my number – but whatever the reason, this book made me softer, more open, more human. This is a book of dazzling grace, a slice of holy ground, as life-giving as water in the desert. Take your shoes off and drink up.'

*Kenda Dean, Professor of Youth, Church, and Culture,
Princeton Theological Seminary and
author of Almost Christian*

'Mark knows how to tell stories and share ideas that pull at the soul. He writes about faith in a way that makes perfect, comforting sense while taking us to often uncomfortable new places. This constantly surprising, intricately constructed book is a gift to anyone who has ever sat and wondered at the profoundly, heartbreakingly, tragically beautiful nature of life, and asked: "How on earth do I make sense of it all?" Mark might not have all the answers, but he makes a fine travelling companion as we wrestle with the biggest questions of all.'

*Martin Saunders, Contributing Editor, Christian Today
and author of The Beautiful Disciplines*

DISAPPOINTMENT, DOUBT
and other **SPIRITUAL GIFTS**

MARK YACONELLI



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For Jill,
through sorrow or joy,
in hardship or in ease,
I am yours.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Yaconelli is a writer, speaker, spiritual director, retreat leader, community activist and storyteller. He is the founder and executive director of The Hearth Community, a registered non-profit organization that assists cities and charitable agencies in producing personal storytelling projects. He is the author of numerous books including *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, *Growing Souls* and *Wonder, Fear and Longing* (all published by SPCK). Mark lives in southern Oregon, USA, with his wife Jill and their three children.

Introduction

THE ALCHEMY OF GRACE

*I love the thing that I most
wish had not happened.*

STEPHEN COLBERT

ONE APRIL AFTERNOON I sat in the backyard of a nineteenth-century farm house with my friend Eric watching our two ten-year-old daughters run and play across a green meadow dotted with wildflowers. Enjoying the smell of apple blossoms, the late afternoon light and cold iced tea, we became engaged in conversation and lost track of our daughters. Thirty minutes went by until Eric's wife called from the house, "Where are the girls?"

Chagrined, we stood suddenly and scanned the field. To our surprise we spotted the girls atop two horses, riding along the far perimeter of the meadow. Eric did not own horses. Our daughters had no equine experience. Quickly, and without a word to Eric's wife, we ran across the field where we spotted a woman in Wranglers and a straw cowboy

hat standing in the shadow of an oak grove, shouting instructions to our daughters.

Her name was Jane and she worked a ranch up in the Green Springs Mountain area above our valley. She had rights to bring her horses down to the hundred-acre meadow for fresh grass, water and “to stimulate their minds and hearts.” Jane called herself a “horse shrink”—a therapist for horses. She took in abandoned and abused animals, brought them back to their natural selves and then sold them to caring owners. We stood in the shade of the black oaks as Jane told us about her work. “Sometimes I get horses who have spent their whole lives cooped up in a barn. Since birth they have lived in darkness, eating from an oat bucket, drinking from a trough. They’ve never seen the world, never had fresh water from a creek or eaten grass in a field or had space to run in the open. When I’m given one of these horses I bring it down here to this meadow for a week or so. I set up a camping trailer and just let it go free.”

“What happens?” I asked.

“Well, the first day and night it stays next to my trailer whining for oats and water. Here it has over a hundred acres of green grass, and it stares at me like it’s starving, begging for food.”

“Do you feed it?”

“No. I walk it to the creek or take it out to the middle of the meadow, and still it whines and begs. Sometimes it stands in the creek, with water running over its hooves, crying with thirst! It is so routinized to buckets and troughs that it doesn’t recognize anything, even when its nose smells water.

“And then, out of sheer desperation, the horse will bow its head and brush its lips along the creek and stick out its tongue, and then suddenly drink and toss its head and whinny with happiness. And a day later, because it’s half-starved, it will reach down into the meadow and tear up a clump of grass and eat. Then, all of a sudden, it knows. *I am surrounded by food!*”

Jane laughed.

“What happens when the realization hits?” I wondered.

“It runs. The horse will take off and gallop and kick and run. That’s the moment I love most. That’s why I do this work. To see that moment when a creature realizes it’s free within a big beautiful world. That’s pure joy.”

Standing at the edge of the meadow I felt I was hearing a parable for my own life. The horse’s experience was all too familiar: The safe, restricted, unending life of routine and predictability. The unexpected (and unwanted) disruption and accompanying fear. The overwhelming despair and grief at the loss of the familiar. The fixating on the past. The distress that blinds one to surrounding possibilities. The shock of joy when you realize that beneath the suffering lies verdant fields of life and freedom.

Watching my daughter atop that black horse striding calmly through the green grass, I had a deep awareness that one of the invitations in this life is to hold confusion, frustration and suffering as possibility. If only I could loosen my own expectations (of self, others, God) and embrace moments of disappointment and doubt, I might discover a field of green. It’s not that we ought to look for suffering, but if it should find us there is a truth that life’s

hardships, if we're able to accept them, often contain unexpected gifts.

Of course, this is a recurring insight that I struggle to embrace. As a white, middle-class Westerner, I have been taught that the pursuit and realization of my individual desires and appetites are my birthright. I have been taught that with discipline, planning and hard work, life will conform to my expectations. Our society doesn't tolerate the idea that we (individually and collectively) lack control. Even in our spiritual lives we hold up teachers, books and spiritual practices that promise happiness, peace and health. And yet is there anything more destructive than human beings who believe they have life under control? Under this illusion we assume our every fortune is earned and every suffering deserved. How isolating.

We need to cultivate an ongoing awareness that we are small, sensitive creatures with short lifespans in a world that is often chaotic, capricious, mysterious, terrible and wonderful all at the same time. Failure, disappointment, loss and other difficult experiences call us to accept our humanity, feel grateful for what has been given, receive the care of others and seek guidance from the Holy Spirit.

To help us along, Christianity (with its stories, teachings, prayers and rituals) offers a kind of alchemy, a process by which the despairing heart, the anxious mind, the downcast spirit might be brought into the loving Presence and transformed. In this new place we find ourselves slowly made into the loving and creative people we have longed to be.

From Jesus' perspective our sufferings provide an opportunity for awareness, insight and enlightenment. In the

Beatitudes we hear Jesus claim that our disrupted plans, our broken faith, our poverty and sufferings, our grief and unmet longings can be held as gifts that make us more compassionate toward others and more open and available to God's love.

Looking back on nearly five decades of life, it is still sometimes difficult for me to admit that my struggles, disappointments, doubts and failures in life and ministry have opened me to the very love, acceptance and peace that all my controlling behaviors sought to attain. Ultimately, grace can never be earned. Like all gifts it can only be received, requiring that I simply open my hands and trust. The more I accept difficulty as a natural part of the spiritual life, the more I find myself available to the deep gifts of the Spirit—compassion, trust, gratitude, humility, wonder, joy.

The question is how? How do we move toward trust when things fall apart? How do we receive the gifts of the Spirit when love fails us? How do we keep from sinking into despair, cynicism and apathy when injustice persists? What do we do when our faith dissipates, our friends turn to enemies, our self-worth transfigures into self-hatred? What do we do when we find ourselves enmeshed in shame, grief and judgment? How do we find God's comfort and peace when our bodies churn with frustration and anxiety?

It's interesting that Jesus had no system for helping move people from despair to hope, from fear to trust. Jesus used a number of tactics—he told stories, he confronted, he led people into nature, he put his fingers in ears and smeared mud in eyes, he stayed silent, he asked questions, he challenged preconceptions. In all that he did he sought to shift

perspective. His words and actions disoriented those around him, inviting listeners to step away from their fearfulness and suffering (sometimes just for a moment), remember their humanity, and become aware of God's field of grace.

Jesus moves us to behold with compassion our suffering, the suffering of others and the suffering of the world. To do this a change of perception is required. We need some distance, some space, some practice to help us step out from our hurt and see ourselves and others through the eyes of love.

A woman is caught in adultery. She is humiliated, filled with shame. The men around her are burning with self-righteousness—and most likely, for some, fear that she might expose them as coadulterers. What does Jesus do?

He writes in the sand.

Such a strange act, so out of sync with the typical violent, shaming tension between victim and accusers. Jesus writes in the sand, and this creative act disorients. It draws people's attention away from the hurt and anger and onto this unusual teacher. When they are knocked off balance, Jesus is able to speak a word of recognition that diffuses the hostility, empowers the shamed woman and humbles the crowd, allowing everyone to become more available to God's grace. Through a change in perspective the whole unfortunate incident moves from tragedy to blessing.

We all need holding spaces where our perspective can deepen—a friend, a community, a prayer, a chapel, a story, a forest or a book to hold us until the rage calms, until the despair is comforted, until the voice of self-hatred quiets. This is what the Christian faith offers. It provides us

with stories, rituals, people, imagination, sacred places and practices that move us out of confining barns with dusty oats and tepid water so we might hear and see the wider landscape of our being and receive the love of God.

We fall in holes. Plans fall apart. Dreams die. Faith disappears. Suffering is real. We need help to recalibrate our lives back to our compassionate, God-trusting selves. Often we need safe, creative space and trusted companions in order to move through hard and disorienting experiences. My hope is that the chapters in this book might provide that same creative companionship. Like life itself, this book does not present a formula for transforming difficulty into spiritual freedom (only God can bring about that mysterious conversion). What I am offering is a holding space: stories, personal experiences, honest reflections and, at the end of each chapter, practices that might help you move out of the hurt and disappointment for a moment and remember your deeper capacities for love and generosity. These same stories and practices have helped me to receive my own failings and sufferings as spiritual gifts. My ultimate hope is that you might be stirred to trust your own story as revelation, that you might begin to widen your perspective and discover that within your own struggles there awaits a (sometimes difficult and hard-won) blessing.

One caveat. There are some injustices and some losses in this life that simply feel too difficult to bear. Although there are chapters that explore grief and other deep sufferings, for the most part the chapters in this book deal with the often neglected “middle sufferings” of life—burnout,

shame, vocational failure—the frustration, self-doubt and emptiness that can slowly corrupt our ability to access our deeper spiritual capacities. This book does not explore experiences in which life is not only disrupted but irreparably shattered. I do not want to suggest that all experiences can be easily held or healed, some experiences in this life can't—without time, wise and loving companions, and God's grace. My hope in those cases is that we might find a way to trust our own need for distance and safety with self-compassion, knowing that God holds the darkness we have lived through with deep sorrow and gentleness, regardless of whether we ourselves can do the same.

I often travel for work. When I return home, whether I've been away for one day or seven, whether it is late at night or early in the afternoon, whether I am confused and tired or joyful and energized, my daughter will come running. She will hear me walk across the front porch and immediately sprint for the door. As soon as she gets within four feet of me, without slowing, she will jump. She will open her arms wide and she will jump, fully trusting that I will catch her and embrace her. She does this spontaneously. I don't need to get my affairs in order. I don't need to make myself presentable. No devotional practice is needed to earn her affection. All that is required is that I come home. Disheartened or jubilant, successful or lost, whatever my state, I come home. I open the door and receive the one who loves me. And little by little my daughter's embrace brings me back to my senses, reminds me of what matters, of who matters. And when I remember, when I come home

to myself, come home to God, suddenly kindness, generosity, patience and all the fruits of the Spirit become available to me.

And I can begin again.

MADDALENA

The Gift of Burnout

Someone's boring me. I think it's me.

DYLAN THOMAS

I WAS STUCK. BURNED OUT. My activities both at work and home had become routine, predictable. My thought patterns looped and looped over the same tired ideas. I had been overworking, overcaring, overserving until one morning I woke up hollowed out, numb—empty of all feeling, desire, imagination. I found myself spending more and more time eating ice cream in front of the television or drinking beer on the back deck. I was tired of myself. My speaking and teaching was flat. Life had lost its mystery. God had become a chore.

“What do you need?” my wife asked me one night.

“Not to be asked questions,” I told her.

For ten years I was driven. Driven to prove my worth to God and myself. Driven to attract my father’s attention.

hat standing in the shadow of an oak grove, shouting instructions to our daughters.

Her name was Jane and she worked a ranch up in the Green Springs Mountain area above our valley. She had rights to bring her horses down to the hundred-acre meadow for fresh grass, water and “to stimulate their minds and hearts.” Jane called herself a “horse shrink”—a therapist for horses. She took in abandoned and abused animals, brought them back to their natural selves and then sold them to caring owners. We stood in the shade of the black oaks as Jane told us about her work. “Sometimes I get horses who have spent their whole lives cooped up in a barn. Since birth they have lived in darkness, eating from an oat bucket, drinking from a trough. They’ve never seen the world, never had fresh water from a creek or eaten grass in a field or had space to run in the open. When I’m given one of these horses I bring it down here to this meadow for a week or so. I set up a camping trailer and just let it go free.”

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