

michael yaconelli

foreword by **karla yaconelli**

Messy Spirituality

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Messy Spirituality

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Contents

Foreword 9

for the New Edition by Karla Yaconelli

1. Messy 17

The Workshop of the Spiritual Life

2. Messy Spirituality 31

The Place Where Our Messiness and Jesus Meet

3. Resisting the Resisters 55

Overcoming the Saboteurs of Spirituality

4. The Ugliness of Rejection 79

Paralyzed by Our Past

5. Odd Discipleship 97

The Consequence of a Lopsided Spirituality



6. Unspiritual Growth 113
Unprinciples of Erratic Discipleship

7. Little Graces 137
The Triumph of Tiny Living

8. God's Annoying Love 155
The Irresistibility of Grace

Epilogue 171

Discussion Questions 175

Notes 185

Michael Charles Yaconelli

July 24, 1942 – October 30, 2003

Disorganized. Full of integrity. Kind. Sincere. Intense. Eccentric. Passionate. Spontaneous. Periodically angry. Extremely bright. Painfully honest. Gregarious. Deeply insecure. A curious mix of introversion and extroversion. Fun loving. Doubtful ... faithful ... faith *full* ... faith nurturing. Impractical. Extraordinary. Carefree. Lonely. Inquisitive. Adventurous. Blunderer. The absolute master of romance. Introspective. Inspiring. Forlorn. Tender. Energetic. Stress cadet. Snuggly. Grace obsessed. Grace filled. Grace spreader. Passionate. Clueless. Poetic. Road-rager. Indescribably hilarious. Both steady and erratic. Sensitive. Moral. Selfless. Whimsical. Prophetic. Artistic. Unruly. Wise. Honorable. Angst infested. Rebellious. Generous beyond description. Mess maker. Childlike. Remarkable. God haunted. Jesus lover. Jesus stalker. Jesus inhabited. His children's loving, devoted, playful, motivating, and encouraging father and friend. My true love, soul mate, and incredible, one-of-a-kind husband: Michael.

Messy Spirituality

Sometime between 8:00 and 9:00 p.m. on October 29, 2003, our family's life was irrevocably changed in the blink of an eye. Michael and I had been moving his father into a new apartment in southern Oregon, and the three of us were headed an hour and a half south to our home in northern California to spend the night. My father-in-law, who'd had aortic-aneurysm surgery a couple of weeks prior, seemed too tired to drive himself, so Dad rode with me while my husband went ahead of us in his father's small pickup truck.

As we pulled in the driveway, there was no white pickup to greet us. My heart began to race as I tried to assure Dad that Michael had most likely stopped at the store and would drive in shortly. Ten minutes later, when I phoned the California Highway Patrol with the license plate number of Dad's truck, my worst fears were confirmed: Michael had been in a serious, single-car accident and was in the hospital with major injuries and massive head trauma.

At 4:00 a.m. on Thursday, October 30, 2003, with family by his side, Michael Charles Yaconelli passed from mortal life into the eternal glory that is beyond time.

Is death the last step? No, it is the final awakening.

Sir Walter Scott

Mike Yaconelli doggedly chased after Jesus from the time he was ten years old—the *real* Jesus; not the ethereal, white-robed, sonorous-voiced, halo-headed, float-above-the-

Foreword

ground Jesus, but rather the earthy, untidy, wild, gritty, table-overturning, fully human yet divine, tender, compassionate, dangerous, understanding, grace-filled Jesus. That Jesus gradually revealed himself to Michael throughout his life, but never more profoundly than in the ten to twelve years preceding Michael's untimely death.

In the 1980s and '90s, as the editor of a satirical Christian magazine called *The Wittenburg Door*, Mike became a bit of a table-overturner himself in the face of the excesses of televangelism. (No need to name names from those days—a quick search on Google will tell you who they were back then. There's a fresh and plentiful contingent of them today.) He was appalled at the “false gospel” that was being sold to people through their television screens. For nearly twenty years, Mike used the vehicle of *The Door* (the name the magazine had morphed into) to expose the outrageously fallacious and downright ridiculous things being done in the name of the Jesus he so loved.

Mike began introducing young people to Jesus as a church camp counselor in the early 1960s, when he was just eighteen years old. “Rebel” that he was, Mike was kicked out of two Bible colleges before ultimately graduating from San Diego State University with a degree in communications. He was always fond of telling people that it took him ten years to get his four-year education, and he gleefully told the stories of how he came to be “kicked out” of those two Bible colleges. These stories encompass unbelievably terrible

Messy Spirituality

things like violating the “eighteen-inch rule” by sitting too close to a girl at a basketball game; hiding in the dormitory bathroom stalls (by propping his hands and feet against the walls) during the “lights out” room checks; calling the Dean of Men a liar and telling him to go to hell when wrongly accused of planning to meet up with a girl (it was accidental, but he did use the opportunity to chat with her); using real blanks in a shotgun during the performance of a play he was student directing (flames shot ten feet out of the gun); and so much more. I’m pleased to report that Mike’s mischief-making continued to be part of his repertoire throughout his life, growing into much more sophisticated pranks that had me, the kids, and most of our friends laughing so hard we were frequently in danger of needing a change of pants.

In the late ’60s, Mike realized that he could ultimately reach more young people by providing resources and training to the adult volunteers and (eventually) paid youth ministers who worked with kids in churches all around the country. With the help of a financial backer who appeared out of nowhere (though Mike always knew it was God who orchestrated it), Mike cofounded an organization called Youth Specialties, ultimately legitimizing and establishing youth ministry as a professional calling every bit as noble as that of a paid pastor of a church. Before long, Mike was speaking to churches, youth workers, and young people all over the US, as well as in a few other countries. Nearly forty years later, Youth Specialties is still serving youth workers—

Foreword

now internationally, thereby impacting the lives of adults and young people across the globe.

In the midseventies, Mike's unique voice concerning the church in America captured the attention of some people in a very small town in rural northern California. After multiple meetings, Mike was asked to come and be the lay pastor of a new church they were starting. He agreed, and though he didn't end up actually moving to Yreka, California, for two more years, this was the beginning of more than twenty years that Mike was a volunteer pastor (you heard that right: an unpaid volunteer) of first one and later a second little church in a tiny town that virtually no one has ever heard of. At the same time, along with his partners, Mike continued to lead the rapidly growing business of Youth Specialties in San Diego. My husband frequently referred to himself as a "K-Mart pastor" because he had never been to seminary and was not an ordained minister. For years, he was haunted by feelings of illegitimacy because he didn't consider himself a real pastor. But as he later came to understand, Grace Community Church itself was his seminary, and the people of the church, with their messy and broken lives, were his professors. You will find many stories of the people of Grace Community within these pages, as well as within the book that preceded this one (*Dangerous Wonder*, NavPress, 1998).

While for much of his life Mike would have been classified as a moderately conservative evangelical, life-altering

Messy Spirituality

events began taking place that would eventually cause the “conservative” to drop away, forever changing his understanding of God and launching him straight into the heart of God’s amazing, inexplicable, and unfathomable grace. First, Mike’s eighteen-month-old daughter was diagnosed with cancer. Though he didn’t know it at the time, walking through her treatment and ultimate recovery was the start of a radical spiritual transformation. So was his move from San Diego to Yreka to become a lay pastor. So was his divorce from his children’s mother several years after that. So was the fallout of his divorce on his children, his community, his business partners, and his ministry. So was his “scandalous” relationship and subsequent marriage to me, a classical ballet instructor nearly fourteen years his junior. So was the fallout of our marriage on his biological children, his stepchild, his community, and his ministry. So were the brutal years and trauma of what it took for us to become a truly “blended” and unified family, one that ultimately included his former wife. So was a week-long retreat in 1991, when Michael was nearing fifty, at a L’Arche community in Toronto, Canada, where Father Henri Nouwen was the priest and spiritual leader. During that time of living, praying, communing, dining, and worshipping with this community of severely mentally, physically, and emotionally “challenged” people, Michael came face-to-face with the fact that his own handicaps were much more acute than the “severely challenged” people of L’Arche. In this setting, Michael began to encoun-

Foreword

ter his utter spiritual impoverishment apart from the mystery and grace of God. Thus began a journey of God's grace manifesting itself to him in all its unfettered simplicity, all its majestic truth, and all its unparalleled glory. Now, we're talking *seriously* life-altering. In this book (and its precursor), Michael tells you his story from that point forward in his own words. His astonishing journey into the arms of grace continued for the rest of his life, until that same grace escorted him back to his true home.

I had the great fortune and the staggering gift from God to share nearly twenty-five years with this amazing, grace-filled man. Needless to say, he turned my world upside down. In a large sense, we “grew up spiritually” together. Together we learned not only that, despite our warts, flaws, and most egregious mistakes and shortcomings, God's grace is infinitely bigger than we'd ever dreamed, but also that God actually had a special fondness—a downright preference, if you will—for misfits and “screwups” like the two of us.* And there came a day when we knew we could trust this as surely as we could trust the air that we breathed and the hearts that beat within us.

I know if my beloved husband could say anything to those of you who are reading these words and who are about to

* God's preference for “screwups” is much more inclusive than this statement may sound, given the fact that we're all pretty much losers. Some of us are simply more acutely aware of our all-encompassing “messiness” (to use Michael's term) than others.

Messy Spirituality

embark on the adventure of reading this book, it would be this:

Take heart, my friends. You are in good company. You, with all of your faults and imperfections; you, with your defects and failures; you, with your hang-ups and emotional scars; you, with your weaknesses and your defeats; you, with all of your blunders, brokenness, and floundering: you are God's beloved, God's favored, the disciple whose name God calls, the one Jesus prefers to hang with, eat with, play with, talk with, cry with, and laugh with. You are the one whom the holy God of heaven and earth longs to spend time with. You are all of this and more. You always have been. And you always will be.

Karla Yaconelli

March, 2007



Messy

The Workshop of the Spiritual Life

I stake the future on the few humble and hearty lovers who seek God passionately in the marvelous, messy world of redeemed and related realities that lie in front of our noses.

William McNamara

Dear God,
I'm doing the best I can.

Frank,
Children's Letters to God

I go into churches and everyone seems to feel so good about themselves.

Everyone calls themselves a Christian nowadays. How dare we call ourselves Christians? It's only for Jesus to decide whether we are Christian or not. I don't think He's made a decision in my case, and I'm afraid that when He does I am going to be sent straight to hell. I don't feel I can call myself a Christian. I can't be satisfied with myself. We all seem to be pretty contented with ourselves in church and that makes me sick. I think all this contentment makes Jesus nervous.

Robert Coles,
Wittenburg Door

My life is a mess.

After forty-five years of trying to follow Jesus, I keep losing him in the crowded busyness of my life. I know Jesus is there, somewhere, but it's difficult to make him out in the haze of everyday life.

For as long as I can remember, I have wanted to be a godly person. Yet when I look at the yesterdays of my life, what I see, mostly, is a broken, irregular path littered with mistakes and failure. I have had temporary successes and isolated moments of closeness to God, but I long for the continuing presence of Jesus. Most of the moments of my life seem hopelessly tangled in a web of obligations and distractions.

I want to be a good person. I don't want to fail. I want to learn from my mistakes, rid myself of distractions, and run into the arms of Jesus. Most of the time, however, I feel like I am running away from Jesus into the arms of my own clutteredness.

I want desperately to know God better. I want to be consistent. Right now the only consistency in my life is my

Messy

inconsistency. Who I want to be and who I am are not very close together. I am not doing well at the living-a-consistent-life thing.

I don't want to be St. John of the Cross or Billy Graham. 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."

When I was younger, I believed my inconsistency was due to my youth. I believed that age would teach me all I needed to know and that when I was older I would have learned the lessons of life and discovered the secrets of true spirituality.

I *am* older, a lot older, and the secrets are still secret from me.

I often dream that I am tagging along behind Jesus, longing for him to choose me as one of his disciples. Without warning, he turns around, looks straight into my eyes, and says, "Follow me!" My heart races, and I begin to run

Messy Spirituality

toward him when he interrupts with, “Oh, not you; the guy behind you. Sorry.”

I have been trying to follow Christ most of my life, and the best I can do is a stumbling, bumbling, clumsy kind of following. I wake up most days with the humiliating awareness that I have no clue where Jesus is. Even though I am a minister, even though I think about Jesus every day, my following is . . . uh . . . meandering.

So I’ve decided to write a book about the spiritual life.

I know what you’re thinking. Based on what I’ve just said about my walk with God, having me write about spirituality is like having Bozo the Clown explain the meaning of the universe, like playing Handel’s *Messiah* on the kazoo. How can someone whose life is obviously *unspiritual* presume to talk about spirituality? How can someone unholy presume to talk about holiness? It makes no sense.

Unless. *Unless!* Unless spirituality, as most of us understand it, is not spirituality at all.

Sadly, *spiritual* is most commonly used by Christians to describe people who pray all day long, read their Bibles constantly, never get angry or rattled, possess special powers, and have the inside track to God. *Spirituality*, for most, has an *otherworldly* ring to it, calling to mind eccentric “saints” who have forsaken the world, taken vows of poverty, and isolated themselves in cloisters.

Nothing wrong with the spirituality of monks. Monks certainly experience a *kind* of spirituality, a way of seeking

Messy

and knowing God, *but what about the rest of us?* What about those of us who live in the city, have a wife or husband, three children, two cats, and a washing machine that has stopped working? What about those of us who are single, work sixty to seventy hours a week, have parents who wonder why we're not married, and have friends who make much more money than we do? What about those of us who are divorced, still trying to heal from the scars of rejection, trying to cope with the single-parenting of children who don't understand why this has happened to them?

Is there a spirituality for the rest of us who are not secluded in a monastery, who don't have it all together and probably never will?

Spirituality for the Rest of Us

The answer is yes!

What landed Jesus on the cross was the preposterous idea that common, ordinary, broken, screwed-up people *could be godly!* What drove Jesus' enemies crazy were his criticisms of the "perfect" religious people and his acceptance of the imperfect nonreligious people. The shocking implication of Jesus' ministry is that *anyone* can be spiritual.

Scandalous? Maybe.

Maybe truth *is* scandalous. Maybe the scandal is that all of us are in some condition of not-togetherness, even those of us who are trying to be godly. Maybe we're all a mess,

Messy Spirituality

not only sinful messy but inconsistent messy, up-and-down messy, in-and-out messy, now-I-believe-now-I-don't messy, I-get-it-now-I-don't-get-it messy, I-understand-uh-now-I-don't-understand messy.

I admit, messy spirituality sounds . . . well . . . *unspiritual*.

Surely there are guidelines to follow, principles to live by, maps to show us where to go, and secrets we can uncover to find a spirituality that is clean and tidy.

I'm afraid not.

Spirituality is not a formula; it is not a test. It is a relationship. Spirituality is not about competency; it is about intimacy. Spirituality is not about perfection; it is about connection. The way of the spiritual life begins where we are *now* in the mess of our lives. Accepting the reality of our broken, flawed lives is the beginning of spirituality not because the spiritual life will remove our flaws but because we *let go* of seeking perfection and, instead, seek God, the one who is present in the tangledness of our lives. Spirituality is not about being fixed; it is about God's being present in the mess of our unfixeness.

Look at the Bible. Its pages overflow with messy people. The biblical writers did not edit out the flaws of its heroes. Like Noah, for example. Everyone thought he was crazy. He certainly *was* a little strange, but Noah was also courageous, a man of great faith and strong will. Against the backdrop of unrelenting ridicule, Noah built a huge ark in the middle of the desert because God told him it was going to rain. No

Messy

one believed him, but the rains did come and the flood happened, and after the water receded, Noah triumphantly left the boat, *got drunk, and got naked*.¹

What? *Drunk and naked*? I don't recall any of my Bible teachers or pastors talking about Noah's . . . uh . . . moment of indiscretion . . . er . . . weakness . . . um . . . failure. The Noah I've always heard about was fiercely faithful, irrepressibly independent, and relentlessly resolute. Noah was the model of great faith. Very few ever refer to Noah's losing battle with wine. Maybe being strong and faithful has its downside. Maybe for flood survivors life is more complicated than we would like to think, and maybe even Noah could have bouts of depression and loneliness.

Why should I be surprised? Turns out *all* of the biblical characters were a complex mix of strengths and weaknesses. David, Abraham, Lot, Saul, Solomon, Rahab, and Sarah were God-loving, courageous, brilliant, fearless, loyal, passionate, committed holy men and women who were also murderers, adulterers, and manic depressives. They were men and women who could be gentle, holy, defenders of the faith one minute, and insecure, mentally unstable, unbelieving, shrewd, lying, grudge-holding tyrants the next.

The New Testament characters weren't much better. Look who Jesus hung out with: prostitutes, tax collectors, adulterers, mental cases, penniless riffraff, and losers of all kinds. His disciples were hardly models of saintliness. They were committed to Jesus, were ready to follow him anywhere

Messy Spirituality

(with one notable exception), but they were also troubled by infighting, always jockeying for position, suspicious of each other, accusatory, impulsive, selfish, lazy, and disloyal. Most of the time, they did not understand what Jesus was talking about, and when he died, they had no clue what to do next.

One very clear example of the messiness of the disciples took place in a tiny Samaritan village. On their way to Jerusalem, Jesus and the disciples stopped in this village for the evening. The Samaritans, however, weren't in a mood to cooperate. Most Jews didn't give Samaritans the time of day, so the Samaritans decided to return the favor by making it clear that Jesus and his disciples weren't welcome in their town. James and John (this would be the *beloved* disciple John) were furious, storming up to Jesus with the very undisciplelike question, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?"² Not exactly an example of mature, unmessy discipleship.

You might say Christianity has a tradition of messy spirituality. Messy prophets, messy kings, messy disciples, messy apostles. From God's people getting in one mess after another in the Old Testament to most of the New Testament's being written to straighten out messes in the church, the Bible presents a glorious story of a very messy faith.

Sounds like you and I are in good company.

Messy Spirituality unveils the myth of flawlessness and calls Christians everywhere to come out of hiding and stop pretending.

Messy

Messy Spirituality has the audacity to suggest that messiness is the workshop of authentic spirituality, the greenhouse of faith, the place where the real Jesus meets the real us.

Notorious Sinners

A few years ago, I was introduced to a group of uncouth Christians who call themselves “the Notorious Sinners.” These are men from all walks of life who meet once a year to openly share their messy spirituality with each other. The title Notorious Sinners refers to the scandalous category of forgiven sinners whose reputations and ongoing flaws didn’t seem to keep Jesus away. In fact, Jesus had a habit of collecting disreputables; he called them disciples. He still does. I like people who openly admit their notoriousness—people who unabashedly confess they are hopelessly flawed and hopelessly forgiven. Graciously, these men invited me to be a part of their group.

The Notorious Sinners meet yearly at spiritual-retreat centers, where from the moment we arrive, we find ourselves in trouble with the centers’ leadership. We don’t act like most contemplatives who come to spiritual-retreat centers—reserved, quiet, silently seeking the voice of God. We’re a different kind of contemplative—earthy, boisterous, noisy, and rowdy, tromping around our souls seeking God, hanging out with a rambunctious Jesus who is looking for a good time in our hearts. A number of us smoke cigars, about

Messy Spirituality

half are recovering alcoholics, and a couple of the men could embarrass a sailor with their language. Two of the Notorious Sinners show up on their Harleys, complete with leather pants and leather jackets.

I admit I run with a rough crowd—Christians whose discipleship is blatantly real and carelessly passionate, characterized by a brazen godliness. Unafraid to admit their flaws, unintimidated by Christians who deny their own messiness, these guys sometimes look like pagans and other times look like Jesus. They are spiritual troublemakers, really, which is why they look like Jesus (who was always causing trouble himself). They are full of mischief, laughter, and boisterous behavior, which is why they look like pagans. Truly messy disciples. The Notorious Sinners are definitely a bizarre mix of the good, the bad, and the ugly, living a spirituality which defies simple definitions. Oh, and they are some of the most spiritual men I know.

Messy Spirituality is a description of the Christianity most of us live and that few of us admit. It is an attempt to break through the religious wall of secrecy and legitimize a faith which is unfinished, incomplete, and inexperienced. *Messy Spirituality* is a celebration of a discipleship which is under construction.

Messy Spirituality is the scandalous assertion that following Christ is anything but tidy and neat, balanced and orderly. Far from it. Spirituality is complex, complicated, and

Messy

perplexing—the disorderly, sloppy, chaotic look of authentic faith in the real world.

Spirituality is anything but a straight line; it is a mixed-up, topsy-turvy, helter-skelter godliness that turns our lives into an upside-down toboggan ride full of unexpected turns, surprise bumps, and bone-shattering crashes. In other words, messy spirituality is the delirious consequence of a life ruined by a Jesus who will love us right into his arms.

The Scandal of Spirituality

Jesus is not repelled by us, no matter how messy we are, regardless of how incomplete we are. When we recognize that Jesus is not discouraged by our humanity, is not turned off by our messiness, and simply doggedly pursues us in the face of it all, what else can we do but give in to his outrageous, indiscriminate love?

Anne Lamott, a fellow messy Christian, describes perfectly what happens when Jesus pursues us. In her book *Traveling Mercies*, Anne recounts her conversion to Jesus. Things were not going well in her life: addicted to cocaine and alcohol, involved in an affair that produced a child whom she aborted, helplessly watching her best friend die of cancer. During this time, Anne visited a small church periodically. She would sit in the back to listen to the singing and then leave before the sermon. During the week of her abortion, she spiraled downward. Disgusted with herself, she drowned

Messy Spirituality

her sorrows in alcohol and drugs. She had been bleeding for many hours from the abortion and finally fell into bed, shaky and sad, smoked a cigarette, and turned off the light.

After a while, as I lay there, I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner, and I just assumed it was my father, whose presence I had felt over the years when I was frightened and alone. The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there—of course, there wasn't. But after a while, in the dark again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus. I felt him as surely as I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this.

And I was appalled. . . . I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and it seemed an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said out loud, "I would rather die."

I felt him just sitting there on his haunches in the corner of my sleeping loft, watching me with patience and love, and I squinched my eyes shut, but that didn't help because that's not what I was seeing him with.

Finally I fell asleep, and in the morning, he was gone.

This experience spooked me badly, but I thought it was just an apparition, born of fear and self-loathing and booze and loss of blood. But then everywhere I went, I had the feeling that a little cat was following me, wanting me to

Messy

reach down and pick it up, wanting me to open the door and let it in. But I knew what would happen: you let a cat in one time, give it a little milk, and then it stays forever. . . .

And one week later, when I went back to church, I was so hungover that I couldn't stand up for the songs, and this time I stayed for the sermon, which I just thought was so ridiculous, like someone trying to convince me of the existence of extraterrestrials, but the last song was so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape. It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt like their voices or something was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling—and it washed over me.

I began to cry and left before the benediction, and I raced home and felt the little cat running along at my heels, and I walked down the dock past dozens of potted flowers, under a sky as blue as one of God's own dreams, and I opened the door to my houseboat, and I stood there a minute, and then I hung my head and said, . . . "I quit." I took a long deep breath and said out loud, "All right. You can come in."

So this was my beautiful moment of conversion.³

Anne Lamott is the most improbable candidate for spirituality I could imagine, until I consider my own candidacy. Anne Lamott seems hopelessly messed up until I remember the mess of my own life. I recognize "the little cat running along" at her heels. He's the same "cat" who's been

Messy Spirituality

hounding this messy follower of Christ all his life. No matter how hard I've tried, I've never been able to shake him. You won't be able to shake him either. So we might as well give up, as Anne did, and let "the cat" in. Then we can decide what we're going to do with the not-so-little Jesus who, running wild in our hearts, will wreak havoc in our souls, transforming our messy humanity into a messy spirituality.