

First Presbyterian Church
LaGrange, GA
The Shack
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What must Mack—and all of us—do in order to enter into the transformation God would give us?

I. We must courageously venture to the center of our brokenness.

A central image of Young's novel is the trip to the shack which is at once the ghastly site of Mack's greatest sadness and precisely the place where God and healing are found. The chapter that describes Mack's solitary hike to the Shack makes this vivid. The trip described is lonely, difficult, and fraught with temptations to turn back. It is only when Mack slumps at the blood stain at the place of Missy's murder and contemplates suicide that a small shaft of sunlight breaks into the room. (p.79) Prior to Mack's trip to the Shack, he is significantly paralyzed in his life at home. The author suggests this with the wintry scene that forms the backdrop of his receiving the note from Papa.

At several points in the novel, Mack must steel himself and force himself forward in order to encounter what God has in store for him. Papa makes it clear early in the story that Mack is free to use his time at the Shack in the manner he chooses. (p.94)

Clearly, avoidance or lack of courage is incompatible with the spiritual path—especially the path that deeply wounded people must follow.

II. We must come to know God better.

One of the most vivid scenes in The Shack is Mack's initial encounter with Papa—a radiant Black woman. The entire book is about Mack's continual adjustment of his ideas about God. Early in the novel Papa states this principle explicitly: "I often find that getting head issues out of the way first makes the heart stuff easier to work on later...when you're ready." (p.93)

The issue of knowing God better is a repeated theme. Often this knowing overturns conventional impressions that people and which dictate their relationship with God throughout their lives. Says Papa on p. 119: "I'm not asking you to believe anything, but I will tell you that you're going to find this day a lot easier if you simply accept what is, instead of trying to fit it into your preconceived notions."

The scene in the cave in chapter 11 "Here Come Da Judge" illustrates the power of intellectual discovery in transforming one's regard for God. In conversation with a character that embodies wisdom, Mack is led down a logical path that challenges him to think through his inclination to pass judgment on people. At length Mack realizes that all judgment is in essence judgment of all humanity and God himself. The culmination of this ruthlessly logical conversation is Mack's willingness to offer himself to receive punishment rather than having to pass judgment on others. This marks his dawning realization of the position God finds himself in in the decision for Jesus to enter the world and suffer and die.

It is enormously important for a believer to be willing to adjust his or her concept of God in the process of personal transformation and healing.

III. The transforming knowledge of God envisioned in the book is relational more than intellectual.

While learning about God is certainly a part of transformation and healing, it is discovering God's nature through an encounter and relationship with him that makes profound change. The scene under the stars with Jesus is illustrative. Mack and Jesus, in an intimacy situation commonly associated with lovers, enjoy and are enraptured as they gaze at the stars. In the presence of beauty Mack and Jesus in a companionate way share a kind cleansing laughter: "...With that he began to chuckle, quietly and restrained at first, but after a couple of snorts, laughter simply started tumbling out. It was infectious, and Mack found himself swept along, from somewhere deep inside. He had not laughed from down there in a long time. Jesus reached over and hugged him, shaking from his own spasms of mirth, and Mack felt more clean and alive and well than he had since...well, he couldn't remember since when."

This scene leads to a tender reassurance from Jesus.
"Jesus, Mack whispered as his voice choked. "I feel so lost." A hand reached out and squeezed his, and didn't let go. "I know, Mack. But it's not true. I am with you and I'm not lost. I'm sorry it feels that way, but hear me clearly. You are not lost."

Much as a lover or good friend calls forth from us a new outlook and summons us to greater aliveness, the relationship with God especially as it comes to us in Jesus Christ, is the core principle in our own healing, or salvation.