

CLEARINGS

by Mike Yaconelli. Published in *The Door* Jan/Feb 1995.

My life at present seems like an impenetrable jungle of responsibilities, a jagged briar patch of relationships, a tangled web of obligations. It feels like I am lost in the darkness of everyone else's needs, silently pursued by a growing crowd of strangers who crave one more piece of me. Even in the dark, I can feel the penetrating stare of those who don't know me. Feelings of loss and loneliness dog my steps, and I begin to sag under the weight of it all. Exhausted, weak, confused, I remember the words of Tilden Edwards:

The more that rushes through our minds, the more complicated and anxious life seems. Maybe TV will help settle us down—or the newspaper—or some work—or a big snack. Less seems to gnaw at us then. Life stays put for a moment. We feel in control again—we're "doing" something—anything.

The after-effect of the doing leaves us more anxious but more drugged. We've exchanged a gnawing anxiety for a dulled sensibility. Maybe, at least, we can sleep now. We do, on the surface. But not below. Our dreams are troubled. Fragments of life whirl round and round without a center. We wake tired, and struggle out for another round.

You and I share such an "underlife." It usually is bearable; it even seems "normal," sometimes out of sheer habit. Sometimes it is even fun. But it is not fulfilling. We are grown for more than that. When this becomes most clear, when the whole daily round feels most wearisome, we hear ourselves crying out...How long will I, must I, tromp through this dense jungle half-crazed and blind before the clearing appears?

"Half-crazed and blind?" Wait a minute...that sounds like me! And here is the most frightening part—no one knows I'm half-crazed and blind! I look normal! The reality is that I not only look normal, I look better than normal. After all, I am a minister, I do talk about God a lot, I appear to everyone around me to be a good person. So I not only look normal, I look better than normal.

But I'm not. I am "tromping" through the years of my life, half-crazed and blind, looking for a clearing, longing for a clearing, desperate for a place where life can stay put for a moment.

Apparently (and this should come as no surprise,) I have to be half crazed and blind before I am willing to do anything about that which makes my life half crazed and blind. Apparently, I have to experience density before I look for a clearing. I am beginning to understand that life is not so much a search for answers, as it is a search for clearings. Clearings are the required stopping places in our lives when our lives get to be too much.

A clearing is a place of shelter, peace, rest, safety, quiet, and healing. It is a place where you get your bearings, regroup, inspect the damage, fill out the estimate and make the repairs. It is the place where the mid-course corrections are made—where you can change course, even, or start over. A clearing is a place where you can see what you couldn't see and hear what you couldn't hear.

Clearings are not optional. They are longings in disguise. They are the required rest stops of life when our exhausted souls run out of steam. A clearing is the only place left to go when the madness of our lives has left our souls dying, hungering, gasping for oxygen and nourishment. If we don't seek the clearings, then we will be brought to them forcibly in the form of a heart attack, illness, breakdown, anxiety attack, depression and/or loneliness. I am beginning to believe that life is not a search for jungleless existence, but rather a search for a few clearings in the midst of the jungle. Life is not triumph over the jungle, but rather submission to reality that clearings are integral to life in the jungle.

Life requires not only the recognition of the need for clearings, but the humility to look for guides to get us there. Those guides have different names (wife, husband, minister, child, friend, mystic, books, mentor, counselor, dad, mom.)

The Christian life is a "tromp." It is a majestic tromp, but a tromp, nonetheless. The Holy Spirit doesn't bring us to a limousine; it brings us to a clearing.

I didn't find my first clearing until I was approaching 50, and now, three years later, I have sought out my next clearing. I have sought it out because I had no choice: my anxiety level was dangerously high, my relationships were clearly in jeopardy, and wherever I looked in the aftermath of my life, someone was getting damaged. My friends, my wife, and my children could see what I couldn't see, and they hemmed me in with the truth so I had no alternative but to desperately find a clearing.

My clearing this time was in the form of a counselor who spent three days taking me through the jungle of my life. (My counselor, by the way, made it very clear that I cannot preach about my experience nor write about it. I have become quite good at writing about clearings rather than experiencing them.) I can tell you that my clearing was not all that fun. It was painful exhilaration, though—and in time, I will be ready to cautiously move into the jungle once again.

For now, however, I'm going to hang around the clearing for awhile—maybe even dance around it—just so I can savor what it is like to experience sight and sanity once again.