

Where The Light Fell



a memoir

PHILIP
YANCEY

PRAISE FOR
WHERE THE LIGHT FELL

“[Raw], honest, beautifully written, and at times searing . . . We live in a world that is always clouded by ungrace, by strife and anger and division, according to Yancey, and Christians should be on the other side. . . . The pain of [Yancey’s] early life gives his words and his witness an authority and authenticity that he would otherwise not have. He has become, over time, a person to whom the wounded and the brokenhearted are drawn, compelled by his message of grace.”
—*The Atlantic*

“*Where the Light Fell* is in many ways a classic spiritual autobiography tracing one man’s conversion from cynic to believer. But it’s more. It’s a searing family story as revelatory as gothic Southern fiction. It’s an exposé. It’s a social critique. It’s a tragedy. It’s a tale of redemption. . . . The memoir itself is an answer to the question that looms throughout: What do we do with the burdens, sins, and pain of our past?”
—*Christianity Today*

“Searing . . . heartrending . . . This stunning tale reminds us that the only way to keep living is to ask God for the impossible: love, forgiveness, and hope.”
—KATE BOWLER, *New York Times* bestselling author of
Everything Happens for a Reason

“An illuminating autobiography that could very well have been titled *The Philip Yancey Philip Never Knew*. Delicate, tender, humorous, and brutally honest, *Where the Light Fell* accomplishes quite significantly not only as the author’s biography, but also as a biography of our nation grappling with her faith. At once pain-filled and healing, through this book we come to know a ‘trickster’ who falls into the ‘mysterious power of words,’ revealing the cracks and fragments of our culture at large, but reminding us afresh how grace can ultimately prevail over us.”

—MAKOTO FUJIMURA, founder of the International Arts Movement,
artist, and author of *Silence and Beauty: Hidden Faith Born of Suffering*
and *Art and Faith: A Theology of Making*

“[A] graceful, illuminating memoir, a gift to [Yancey’s] readers.”

—*Booklist*

“[A] gripping memoir . . . Yancey’s eloquent descriptions of coming to faith and his exacting self-examination make this a standout. Exploring the corrosive role of fear in faith, Yancey’s piercing and painful account invites comparison to *Hillbilly Elegy*.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“*Where the Light Fell* could be a Faulkner novel, with racist preachers, off-kilter parenting, tormented siblings, and religious hypocrisy right and left. It’s not an overstatement to say that this stunning memoir might be the miracle we’ve all waited for. I believed every word.”

—CAROLYN S. BRIGGS, author of *Higher Ground*

“A forthright recounting of a rocky journey to self-knowledge.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“We’ve known for years Philip Yancey carries a well of sorrow. . . . Now we know where the well is, and how deep. . . . In *Where the Light Fell*, Yancey opens the door wide into his heart and soul. . . . Trauma casts a long shadow, a very long shadow. The reader will look for where the light finally falls, perhaps not realizing it’s all around and always just a step away.”

—*Baptist Standard*

“What raises it above [a misery memoir], however, is Yancey’s lucid writing, and his preparedness to look clear-eyed into the paranoia of the fundamentalist Christianity that forms the background to much recent political activity among the Evangelical right in the States. And, ultimately, it is still a story of grace.”

—*Church Times*

“It’s a story of how one man’s painful upbringing birthed a passionate curiosity and fueled a writing career behind some of the most celebrated Christian books of the last 40 years.”

—*Religion Unplugged*

WHERE
THE LIGHT FELL





WHERE THE LIGHT FELL

A Memoir

PHILIP YANCEY



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For Janet, naturally





It was by following the sun's rays that I reached the sun.

—Leo Tolstoy, in *Tolstoy Remembered* by Tatyana Tolstoy



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PART ONE
THE FAMILY PLOT



There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside you.

—Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*

CHAPTER 1

THE SECRET

Not until college do I discover the secret of my father's death.

My girlfriend, who will later become my wife, is making her first visit to my home city of Atlanta, in early 1968. The two of us stop by my grandparents' house with my mother, have a snack, and retire to the living room. My grandparents sit in matching recliners across from the upholstered couch where Janet and I are seated. A television plays softly in the background, tuned to the ever-boring *Lawrence Welk Show*.

Normally my eighty-year-old grandfather snores through the program, waking just in time to pronounce, "Swellest show I ever saw!" Tonight, though, everyone is wide-awake, fixing their attention on Janet. *Philip's never brought a girl over—this must be serious.*

Conversation proceeds awkwardly until Janet says, "Tell me something about the Yancey family. I'm so sorry I'll never get to meet Philip's father." Thrilled by her interest, my grandmother rummages in a closet to fetch some photo albums and family scrapbooks. As

pages turn, Janet tries to keep straight all the names and faces flashing before her. This ancestor fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War. That distant cousin died of a black widow spider bite. Her father succumbed to the Spanish flu.

Suddenly a folded clipping from *The Atlanta Constitution* flutters from the album to the floor, newsprint yellowed with age. When I lean forward to retrieve it, a photo that I've never seen catches my eye.

A man lies on his back in a hospital bed, his body pitifully withered, his head propped up on pillows. Beside him, a smiling woman bends over to feed him with a spoon. Right away I recognize her as a slimmer, youthful version of my mother: the same prominent nose, the same mass of dark, curly hair, an early trace of the worry lines that now crease her forehead.

The photo caption stops me cold: "Polio Victim and Wife Spurn 'Iron Lung.'" I hold the paper closer and block out the buzz of family chitchat. The printed words seem to enlarge as I read.

A 23-year-old Baptist minister, who was stricken with polio two months ago, has left the "iron lung" in which he was placed at Grady Hospital because, as he put it, "I believe the Lord wanted me to."

The Rev. Marshall Yancey, of 436 Poole Creek Rd., Hapeville, said about 5,000 people from Georgia to California were praying for his recovery and he was confident he would be well "before too long."

He signed his own release from Grady against medical advice.

Those three words, *against medical advice*, send a chill through my body, as though someone has poured ice water down my spine. Sensing the change, Janet looks at me quizzically, her left eyebrow arched so high that it touches her bangs. I slide the clipping over so that she, too, can read it.

The newspaper reporter quotes a Grady Memorial Hospital doctor, who warns that removal from the respirator "might do serious harm," followed by a chiropractor who claims the patient is "defi-

nately improving” and may begin walking in six weeks if he continues their course of treatment.

Then the article turns to my mother:

Mrs. Yancey, the minister’s young, blue-eyed wife, explained why her husband left Grady:

“We felt like he should be out of that iron lung. Lots of people who believe in faith healing are praying for him. We believe in doctors, but we believe God will answer our prayers and he will get well.”

I glance at the newspaper’s date: December 6, 1950. Nine days before my father’s death. I flush red.

Janet has finished reading. *Why didn’t you tell me about this?* she asks with her eyes. I mime surprise: *Because I didn’t know!*

Dozens, scores of times I have heard the saga of my father’s death, how a cruel disease struck down a talented young preacher in his prime, leaving a penniless widow with the noble task of wresting some meaning from the tragedy. My growing-up years were dominated, even straitjacketed, by a vow she made—that my brother and I would redeem that tragedy by taking on the mantle of our father’s life.

Never, though, have I heard the backstory of what led to his death. When I replace the clipping in the scrapbook, I find on the facing page a similar account from my mother’s hometown newspaper *The Philadelphia Bulletin*. Quite by accident I am discovering that this man whom I never knew, a saintly giant looming over me all these years, was a sort of holy fool. He convinced himself that God would heal him, and then gambled everything—his career, his wife, his two sons, his life—and lost.

I feel like one of Noah’s sons confronting his father’s nakedness. The faith that exalted my father and gained him thousands of supporters, I now grasp, also killed him.

As I lie in bed that night, memories and anecdotes from childhood flash before me, now appearing in a different light. A young

widow lying on her husband's grave, sobbing as she offers her two sons to God. That same widow, my mother, pausing to pray, "Lord, go ahead and take them unless . . ." before seeking help as her sons thrash convulsively on the floor. Her rage that erupts when my brother and I seem to stray from our appointed destiny.

An awful new realization hits me. My brother and I are the atonement to compensate for a fatal error in belief. No wonder our mother has such strange notions of parenting, and such fierce resistance to letting us go. We alone can justify our father's death.

AFTER CHANCING UPON the newspaper article, I have many conversations with Mother. "That was no life for him—paralyzed, in that machine," she says. "Imagine a grown man who can't even swat a fly off his nose. He desperately wanted out of Grady Hospital. He begged me not to let anyone take him back there." Her reasoning is sound, though unsatisfying.

"I get that," I protest, "but why was I never told about the faith healing? The most important fact of my father's death I learned by chance, from a scrapbook. You invited a reporter into the room, and a photographer. You told *them* the truth, but not my brother and me!"

Once exposed, the mystery of my father's death acquires a new, compulsive power. When I start asking around, a family friend confides in me, "So many of us were dismayed at their decision, moving your father from a well-equipped hospital to a chiropractic center."

I feel as if someone has twisted the kaleidoscope of our family myth, scattering the shards to form a wholly new design. I share the news with my renegade brother, who has incurred Mother's wrath by joining Atlanta's hippie counterculture. He immediately jumps to the conclusion that she deprived us of a father by "pulling the plug" on her own husband. A chasm opens in our little family that likely will never be bridged.

I don't know what to think. I know only that I have been misled. The secret is now out, and I determine to investigate and write it down someday, as truthfully as I can.