

An Interview with Heather Gordon Young
author of *Fireflies: Finding Light in a Dark World*

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Tell us a little bit about yourself and your background.

Whenever I begin to talk about myself, it's funny how compelled I am to begin with where I live. I think that's because my identity is so tied to the landscape of British Columbia. We live in a tiny little town on the west coast of Canada called Powell River. It's a very pretty little place. It's only accessible by ferry or plane, so it's much like an island only on the mainland. We are literally on the edge of civilization, surrounded by endless cedar forests, fresh water lakes, mountains, and streams, and of course, the Pacific Ocean. At this time of year you need to be cautious outside in the evening so you don't surprise a bear sleeping on your lawn—literally. In January we'll be empty nesters (I'm steeling myself now for that inevitable moment...) with both kids away at university in Australia, which is where we lived when they were little. I'm also busy in my other career as the Executive Director of a not-for-profit organization that supports vulnerable children, youth, and their families.

What's the story behind *Fireflies*? Why is it needed today in the church and beyond?

Fireflies tells the story of my brother, Jimmy and me. Jim was an amazing wildlife artist who took his own life when he was 26 years old. While *Fireflies* tells the story of losing him, it's also the story of the Church and how easily we fail the vulnerable people for whom we are responsible. I wrote the book because I wanted people to understand where it can all go terribly wrong when facing complex issues around mental illness, addiction, loneliness, and faith in the communities in which we find ourselves. I wanted readers to have a greater sense of what we're called to in loving one another well.

Christians, in one sense or another, make up about a third of the world's population: more than 2 billion of us on the planet. Imagine what a difference we could make if we all got on the same page about what we ought to do to love the world! That's exciting for me. *Fireflies* is a book that reaches to be part of the stories that shape who we, the Church, want to be. I believe writers are responsible for the stories God gives us. We're responsible for them, for releasing those stories into the world.

What's the best advice you can offer to church leaders seeking to embrace/understand addiction, mental illness, and its relationship to faith?

Be humble. Humility is the beginning of learning; it's what allows us to become useful and equipped as leaders. Somehow we think when we're leaders—particularly Christian leaders with a handbook that's apparently got all the answers—we're meant to have it all figured out; we're meant to *know*. And when this happens we find ourselves making stuff up or avoiding the questions altogether. Addiction, mental illness, and faith are always going to be messy and filled with uncertainty. We're never going to feel as if we've got it all figured out. I think that's why the church has such a hard time dealing with these things. We think we ought to have the answers; we think we have to have it exactly right. Instead, we

need to decide to learn more, to pull in other experts, and to love more deeply. Seminary does not make one a mental health and addictions expert.

What are you reading right now that has absolutely nothing to do with your work?

I've just finished Paula Hawkins, *The Girl on the Train*, which is a cleverly written thriller about ordinary people living ordinary lives. An excellent, fun read! But I'm also really absorbed in the *Times Complete History of the World*, which I am loving for the context it creates for where we're up to as human beings. And I'm re-reading Hans Kung's *The Church*, with great interest given that it was written in the 60s.

What are you doing when you're not writing, reading, teaching, preaching, serving, or answering questions for this newsletter?

Here is the answer I want to give you: I love to spend weekends hiking, kayaking, fly fishing, waking early to morning yoga, cooking new recipes and drinking good wine. But the truth is I live a terribly unbalanced life juggling two different kinds of careers (writing and not-for-profit management) so unfortunately I find myself often only managing the good wine part while my husband cooks new recipes. Worst-case scenario: I will have real weekends in heaven and will get to the other items on my list with more regularity.

Just as your book will inspire authors, what authors have inspired you to write?

First and foremost, Annie Dillard and Joan Didion. But also Carol Shields, Alice Munro, Terry Tempest Williams, Anne Lamott, Stephanie Dowrick, Miriam Toews, Dinty Moore, Tim O'Brien, Frank McCourt, Tobias Wolff, Mary Oliver, and Jeanette Walls. This is the short-list. So many other lovely writers on the long-list.

What do you want your tombstone to say?

I would quote Andre Gide: "Be faithful to that which exists within yourself." And then my kids would have to write something about how well I did in the end. *Is that like a report card?* Maybe it is. Of course they'd have to say something nice which, now that I think of it, I might make a condition of their very theoretical and not-yet-existent inheritance. But your question made me think. I guess I'd want to be remembered for having never quit trying.

If you could have chosen a completely different career path, what would that have been?

Well I guess that means suspending reality, which is fun. I would have been a wildlife biologist *and* a helicopter pilot. This would allow me to get into all the remote places of the world quickly and easily. I would have loved to observe and write about disappearing species, the migration of big game and butterflies, the movement of animals between seasons, the breeding and feeding and play of the animal kingdom. Many of my most memorable moments involve wildlife. Almost nothing excites me more.

If you could solve one big problem in the world today, what would it be and why?

Loneliness. It's the beginning of the world's great tragedies. It's the soil in which destruction eventually grows. It's the place you will find the beginnings of selfishness, pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, anger, sloth. Loneliness is the place that addiction and mental illness meet and together become deadly.