

When did you begin writing?

I was one of those flashlight-under-the-covers compulsive readers as a kid, and my reading addiction progressed naturally to writing. I remember in the first grade ("grade one" for my Canadian compatriots) our teacher gave us a piece of paper with some scribbled lines on it. We had to turn the lines into a picture and then write a story about it. I decided my picture was an African woman with a water jug on her head. (My picture did not actually look anything like that; I never had much of a gift for the visual arts). I wrote a story about the African lady and a family of missionaries, and it was seventeen pages long! (What I lacked in quality I made up for in quantity.) The teacher photocopied it and sent it home with everybody, and though the other kids must have thought I was an insufferable keener, I got hooked on the power of words. From that day on, whenever anyone asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I always said "an author."

When I got a little older, I discovered I also really enjoyed writing songs, and music has been a primary focus for me for much of my life. But I never lost my love of prose, and I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to try my hand at it more seriously with *Wrestling with Angels*.

In the intro to *Wrestling with Angels*, you say it's difficult for you to describe what this book is about. Why?

Well ... the book is a collection of stories from my life, but it's not an autobiography. It's about some pretty heavy subjects (the nature of evil, the role of doubt in faith) but my readers tell me it's also pretty funny. So it doesn't fit into a tidy little box. That's good, I guess, because it's a book that describes my own journey from a place where I hated the fact that I couldn't fit life into a tidy box to a place where I celebrate and embrace the parts of life (and of God) that are mystery.

You've always been noted for your ability to write lyrics that connect with people on a deep emotional level, and now you're receiving the same praises with *Wrestling With Angels*. How do you manage to convey such a sense of transparency?

Oh, I'd wear a mask if I could figure out how! I'm kidding

(mostly)! I guess I've become convinced that one of our primary tasks while we're on this planet is to tell our stories, to simply document the things that happen to us. For believers, this job takes on a special and holy dynamic, because if we're paying attention at all, we begin to see that God is intersecting with our lives in all sorts of big and little ways. Our calling is to document our encounters with Him, and that requires a certain amount of self-revelation.

If we're afraid to be real, afraid that we won't measure up to some sort of pious benchmark, we need only look at our spiritual ancestors in the Bible. They messed up all the time. But they stayed in relationship with God. He used them in spite of themselves and He often transformed them ... because of their faith (their relationship with Him), not because they had it all together. Remembering them helps me resist the urge to try to pretend to be something I'm not.

Who are some people who have helped you become who you are today—both as a writer and musician and as a person?

Most foundationally, my parents were and are a huge influence on me. I grew up in a household filled with books and music and faith. (It was also full of Kraft Macaroni and Cheese and Wonder Bread, but hey, it was the '70s.) These days my husband Mark is probably my single biggest influence—he is a man of unwavering integrity, so it's nice to have him around.

Musically, Rich Mullins was a huge influence—both the songs that he sang and the way he lived his life. There's an artist here in Canada, Steve Bell, who operates from such a deep and thoughtful spiritual center that he is a source of constant inspiration.

And then there are authors—too many to list—but a few who have really challenged and changed me are Madeleine L'Engle, G.K. Chesterton, C.S. Lewis, Philip Yancey, Mark Buchanan and Frederick Buechner.

Can you share some memories of Rich Mullins? What lasting impressions has he left on your life?

When I think of Rich, I think of his grin and his passion for the things he loved—books, music, food, nature, his friends, and God.

I also think about the way he was about the Bible. I met him when I was in my mid-twenties, and at that time I'd gotten a bit blasé about the Bible. I'd grown up with it, and I read it routinely in the morning like taking a vitamin. But Rich thought the Bible was the most fascinating, exciting, wild, thrilling book in the world. He talked about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob like they were friends, or uncles, and he couldn't wait to meet them. He got me to see the Bible with fresh eyes.

He was the same way about the church. At that time, a lot of my friends were frustrated with the church and were becoming disenchanted with North American Christianity. But Rich loved the church with all his heart. He saw the flaws in it (like the ones in himself) very clearly, but it only made him love it more. He said he so enjoyed going to church because it was the only place you could hear men singing enthusiastically out of tune.

Rich was rough around the edges—sometimes shockingly so—but over the months I toured with him I began to see he was truly a man after God's own heart. It seems to me he was so consumed with knowing God that he didn't have time to cover up the parts of himself he was still waiting for God to help him change. He modeled transparency—and he's still the sort of artist I hope to someday grow up to be like.

In the chapter "A Summer in the South," you share about a time in your life when you felt you'd lost your faith. You say, "I could not feel the presence of God." Looking back on that time, what would you say to someone else going through a similar experience?

I would start by assuring her that her experience is not necessarily an indicator that she's doing something wrong. It amazes me when I read the Bible (and the stories of believers who have lived since biblical times) how many great believers have experienced "dark nights of the soul" during which they struggled to perceive God's presence. I think if I'd known that my experience was somewhat normal, it would have helped me not to panic as much as I did.

I would also encourage anyone going through a "dark night" to focus on the person of Jesus. When we don't have answers to so many of our questions—Why does God seem to intervene in some situations and not others? When will there be ultimate justice?

How will God bring it about?—we still have the answer to the “who” question. If we wonder who God is—if He is truly about justice and mercy and a love for us that cannot be exhausted—we only have to look at Jesus to get our answer. Knowing who Jesus is allows us to trust God’s character even when our present emotions or our circumstances lead us in other directions.

Finally, I would encourage anyone struggling with doubt or feeling distant from God to follow Jacob’s example in the book of Genesis. Jacob wrestled with God all night long, and told Him, “I will not let You go until You bless me.” I think God understands how hard it is for us sometimes to perceive Him in our humanity, but if we hold on anyway, He blesses that.

In one chapter, you talk about the concept of remembering—of us remembering God and what He’s done for us and of God, remarkably, remembering us. Why is this idea so important? Can you share a “remembering” experience you have had in your life?

I was talking earlier about how important it is for us to tell our stories, and that’s because they help us remember. If we don’t actively remember something, we forget it, and this makes us very prone to forgetting what God’s done for us. When God is telling the Israelites to remember the commandments He’s given them (to love Him and each other), He says: □ These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deut 6:6–9, NIV)

I love that advice God gives, to do every practical and poetic thing you can to help yourself remember Him and what He’s all about.

Wrestling with Angels is my attempt to remember some of the different ways I’ve encountered God in my life so far—moments when I learned something about who He is. When I sat down and really tried to remember, I was surprised by all the details that came back—things I had forgotten—from different times in my life. I hope the book encourages people to do some remembering of their own.

You recently started a blog on ConversantLife.com. Tell us about that.

ConversantLife.com is a very cool community of people talking about everything under the sun from a faith perspective. I'm excited about blogging there—and I have to confess I've spent as much time reading and responding to other blogs on the site as I have working on my own. There are some really fascinating people contributing to the discussion there, and I have a feeling it's just going to keep getting better.

What are you currently working on? What's on the horizon?

Well, today happens to be a snow day, so I'm working on a snow fort with my kids! Vocation-wise, I've just agreed to be a regular columnist for Christianity Today, and my next column is due in a few days—so that's what's on my mind right at the moment. I hope to begin work in earnest on a new book over the next few months. I'm also taking seminary classes (one at a time) and loving the way I'm being challenged and growing. I'm continuing with my concert ministry, but doing lots more speaking as well. Every day is an adventure (especially with a couple snowy kids storming around the house) and I'm just hanging on tight!