

Surprise: Essays by readers

We gave our readers a one-word writing prompt: “surprise.”

Readers Write in the [June 7, 2017](#) issue



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In response to our request for essays on surprise, we received many compelling reflections. Below is a selection. The next two topics for reader submissions are

door and indulgence—[read more](#).

On a hot afternoon, I head into church to help with the food bank. I do it with ill grace. Something's awry in my gut, and I'm not sure what. But I don't feel unwell enough not to go, and I remind myself that last time I arrived at the food bank tired but left reinvigorated. The physical work recalibrated my sluggish system. Our guests' needs were basic and imperative, their gratitude warm and unfeigned. Several said no thank you to celery: it might be nice, but someone else could have it, since their teeth—or lack of teeth—were not up to the task. I'm still turning this over in my mind.

Today I need a new celery revelation, but I'm not expecting one. I feel empty and fearful. The congregation is relatively new to me, and walking through the door I'm never sure I'll know the people there. Will I have to explain who I am again? Or will they remember me while I draw a blank on their names?

I arrived at this church rather intuitively, in a frantic search for solace after my husband left me. He was and is a pastor, and I had been happily part of his congregation for nearly 15 years. When the separation happened, I flailed about, trying to discern where to go next. He was there, inside, not saying much, so my place must be outside. The congregation seemed paralyzed. No one told me to leave; I opened the door and saw myself out. I felt rather Hagar-like, squinting in the oppressive desert light: the church the official wife and I the lesser one. To leave a congregation I knew so well and then learn to navigate the complex relationships within a new place—sometimes this all seemed too much to handle.

I enter the cool basement of the church. As soon as I do, a young girl I have met only once hurls herself toward me, putting her arms around my waist. Last time we served coffee and cookies together, and she is looking forward to working with me again.

At home later, I read an email from a young friend, someone I worry about. We're setting up a coffee date, and because of my strange inner ache, I have been putting her off. She's fine with that but, in the meantime, is there something she can do for me? I feel less like the despairing Hagar than the one who hears God suddenly ask, "What is the matter, Hagar?" while pointing out the well nearby.

I remember being surprised, years ago, when someone—surely my husband—told me that repentance is not explicitly about smartening up, toeing the line, or offering up heaps of shame. Repentance is, first, about turning. Sometimes the turn is started for us, and all we have to do is pivot with it. Undue fear and excess melancholy may not seem like big sins, but I have come to see them as obstacles that can lead us away from God. An embrace from a child I hardly know, a single sentence of grace from an unexpected source—I would have thought that the gap inside me would need a bigger patch. But later that day, when I think to inspect my inner damage, I find the wound still there but the ache nearly faded.

Sue Sorensen

Winnipeg, Manitoba

Visitors to people who are dying don't usually ask them questions unless they already know the answers. In my work caring for the dying, I learned to do the opposite—and to risk being surprised by the answers.

My favorite question to ask: "When you are here all by yourself, what do you think about?" This gave people permission to talk about what was important to them. Then, of course, I had to formulate a response.

Early one morning I entered a hospice patient's room. The medical director had asked me to visit, sensing some spiritual need that was making the man restless and depressed. I pulled a chair to the bedside, sat down, and introduced myself. He stared at the wall and said nothing. After several minutes I put my hand through the rails of the bed, placed it on top of his hand, and said, "When you are here all by yourself, what do you think about?" His lips began to quiver, and a tear formed at the corner of his eye.

"I killed three men," he said softly.

I don't think I was ever more surprised by a patient's response. I quietly asked, "Would you like to tell me about it?"

He described in detail that moment during World War II when he had killed three young German soldiers. Eventually he asked, "Will God forgive me?" By risking surprise I was able to help this man discover the forgiveness he had been longing

for.

William H. Griffith
Columbus, Indiana

When we moved into our Kansas City bungalow 23 years ago, the neighborhood was pretty diverse. We felt good about that. We knew that in the early '70s, it had resisted racist housing practices like redlining and block busting.

Today the neighborhood is even more diverse. It's also adjacent to Troost Avenue, beyond which lie the city's predominantly black areas. My sons have friends whose parents are nervous about letting them drive to our house—we're too close to Troost. You think you know people, and then you see them for who they are.

I'm at a grocery store far from Troost, west of my neighborhood. It's late in the evening, when the store is quiet and easy to navigate. I head into the baking aisle in search of—I can't remember what, because I've wheeled my cart into an explosion.

An African-American woman, dressed in scrubs, is blocking the aisle. She's shouting. Her whole body whipsnaps with her words, her face contorted. Listening is a man with his back to me, his body still. She's not angry at him, I don't think. But he is alert and completely absorbed.

I hesitate. It's hard not to flee the scene of loose anger. I could wheel the cart around and make for the safety of the frozen foods, give her some privacy.

Except she isn't exactly keeping her affairs private. No, I won't let her tantrum run me off. If she wants to have a meltdown in the flour-and-sugar aisle, so be it. I've got shopping to do.

But what if I get swept up in her rage? What if she catches me out of the corner of her eye and says, *Mind your own business, bitch*, what then?

A tiny girl sits wedged in the front of the woman's cart. Her chubby thighs and sandaled feet dangle, but her head is twisted around to study the woman. Her expression is uncertain; she's just on the edge of being frightened.

Suddenly I am angry, too. Who is this out-of-control woman spraying profanity all over the place? She's offensive, no sense of the appropriate time and place. And hey, lady, great example for your daughter. No wonder these kids don't know impulse control. Why are black people always so angry? And where's the manager? Is someone gonna ask her to leave? Then she'll probably threaten to sue, accusing everyone of discrimination.

Then I hear a voice inside me that is not my own. It says, *Stop*. Whoa. What's the matter with me?

I fine-tune my listening, and I realize that the woman is frightened. She's been lied about, accused of something falsely. There is panic beneath her torrential narrative: *I'm not safe*, it says.

I try to soften my expression, smooth out the twists of judgment around my mouth. I stay in the aisle and force myself to remember: powdered sugar, that's what I am after. I maintain a quiet presence out of respect for her need to be heard, even if only overheard by a stranger.

Later, I try to understand my reaction. Why was I angry? Was it the language, the child? Did I suspect that making other shoppers uncomfortable was what the woman wanted?

I hear the voice inside me again: *If she had been white, would you have reacted differently?* You think you know a person; you think you know yourself.

But I'm not a racist. I live in a diverse neighborhood, right by Kansas City's black-white divide.

Teresa Williams
Kansas City, Missouri

I had just finished my weekly preaching duties at my two churches and had returned to the parsonage to relax a bit. A year out of divinity school, I was still getting the hang of the routine and usually needed a little downtime on Sunday afternoon.

The doorbell rang and I answered it. I encountered two men, one who resembled me but 40 years older. "Are you John Patrick?" he inquired. He was John Paul, my

grandfather.

I felt the blood drain from my head. I'd been told the story for as long as I could remember. When I was four months old, my mother had me baptized at the local Methodist church, and my biological father's Irish Catholic family turned its back on us. He abandoned us when I was two. There was no child support, no help from the family, nothing. My mother remarried, and my sister and I were legally adopted by our new father. Our last names were changed. The earlier family surname was never spoken in our house.

And now, here was a flesh-and-blood manifestation of the family I had been taught to disavow, standing on my front porch.

I invited him and his brother into my home, where we chatted for a few minutes. He had the air of a gentleman, not the horned demon I had always envisioned. Since I had been assigned to a parish in the village to which his family—and, coincidentally, my adoptive father's family—had immigrated a century before, folks in town had been keeping him apprised of my activities. He said he would like to keep in touch with me, if that was alright. I said it was. He stood and shook my hand.

After he left, I felt a rush of anxiety, as if I had been a disobedient child. I had a thousand conflicting feelings. I called my sister, who exclaimed, "No way! Are you going to tell Mom?" We both realized that we were whispering.

I did eventually tell my mother. It upset her; it made her relive the considerable pain the family had caused her. On the other hand, my adoptive dad was very understanding. In the coming years, Grandfather would invite my wife and me to dinner when he was in town. He even met us once at the Miami airport when we were passing through with our infant daughter.

The happiness engendered by his surprise reentry into my life was tempered when it became clear that my biological father had no desire to have any contact with me. Grandfather apologized. He had tried to reason with him, but to no avail. I had maintained a lifelong fantasy of showing up on my father's front porch one day, much as Grandfather had appeared on mine. It was devastating to learn that, had I done so, I would have been rebuffed.

Shortly before our son's second birthday, Grandfather sent him a birthday card with a lovely note. The next week, Grandfather died from a stroke. I have had no further

contact with that side of the family, aside from a second cousin who found me while doing genealogical research. She has filled in many parts of the family picture for me—even sharing photos of my biological father, who died several years ago, and his subsequent children, none of whom have ever contacted me.

I remain grateful for that unexpected knock on my door. Much to my mother's relief, 37 years later I now resemble her father, not John Paul. But I carry him with me. He cared enough to take a great risk and come to my house and into my life.

*John Patrick Colatch,
Lewisburg, Pennsylvania*

It was an hour's drive from my home in the city to the rural church I was hoping to serve as pastor—if the day's interview went well. I hoped I wouldn't come across as too much of a city slicker.

A woman had kindly offered to meet me a half an hour before the interview for a building tour. I was reassured to see her spiky hair and trendy outfit. I admonished myself for my stereotypes of rural folks.

Inside I got my first introduction to older rural churches' tendency to defy building codes. From a tiny landing, two steep staircases ran up and down. The steps were so narrow that most people's feet would hang over the edge. We toured the upstairs, with its high-ceilinged sanctuary and beautiful stained glass. It was divided from the narthex by a large wooden panel, flanked on either side by 12-foot wooden doors. A step up in the narthex was a new "accessible" washroom.

We went down the two steep staircases to the basement. By this time I needed to use the facilities, and my guide pointed me to a short set of steep stairs to a small mezzanine with two identical, tiny, paneled washrooms. I was careful to follow the notice on the back of the toilet tank: "Make sure toilet stops running or well will run dry."

When I turned and put my hands under the faucet of the little sink, I saw something: a child must have left this rolled-up banana peel over the drain, back before Sunday school let out for the summer. Now it was dried out, with hard black bits and furry brown parts. I reached for a paper towel to remove it.

That's when it moved, and I realized that I had awakened a bat from a snooze.

For a city girl I do well with mice and spiders, but I will always be terrified of bats. My first impulse was to scream, but thankfully I kept that in check. Instead I backed out slowly and went into the other washroom. My hands didn't go under that tap until I was sure nothing was living in the sink.

I didn't tell my tour guide about the bat. I didn't trust myself to sound calm. The interview was a success, and I was called to serve the congregation. One evening each week, I held a drum circle there in the narthex. Almost every time, the vibrations of our playing brought the bats out of the basement. My phobia was no longer a secret, because people got to watch me duck and shriek as I tried to trap these winged marauders in the sanctuary by shutting those big wooden doors on them. There must be quite a colony in the organ pipes by now.

*Karen Boivin
Ottawa, Ontario*

From Frederick Buechner, *The Hungering Dark*:

Lord, catch us off guard today. Surprise us with some moment of beauty or pain so that for at least a moment we may be startled into seeing that you are here in all your splendor, always and everywhere, barely hidden, beneath, beyond, within this life we breathe.

On Thanksgiving morning of my senior year of high school, there was no turkey in our oven. Dad was out of work. He had been fired as the pastor of a church after reprimanding an elder for inappropriate behavior with a teenage girl at a church function. The board members backed their offended colleague, disbelieving any unseemly intent—and plunging our family of seven into precarious financial waters. Dad's moral valor seemed a paltry substitute for the missing turkey and no pumpkin pie.

After breakfast, I was summoned to the living room. Dad had an idea. Someone had given us a gross of boxes of chocolates, and he wanted me to go door-to-door selling them. If I were diligent, I could sell enough to buy a turkey before the grocery stores closed at noon.

Horried, I told him he should do it himself. He replied that people would respond better to a teenager. I protested that it was inappropriate to solicit on a holiday, but his mind was made up. Caught between his edict and the sure humiliation to come, I put on my coat and headed out into the neighborhood, where I could already smell other people's feasts.

As I headed up the block, the sound of someone hammering reminded me how Dad had swallowed his pride to make ends meet for us. When pastoral employment was slow in coming, he jumped at a chance to learn basic carpentry. He searched secondhand stores for tools, and he fashioned a tool caddy from scrap lumber. The ridicule he received on the job for his motley set of hammers and saws and their crude carrier was an affront to his Scottish pride and ministerial dignity, but he was not deterred.

So I resolved to put on a brave face. I would be my earnest best. Surely people exuding holiday spirit would perceive my awkward situation and respond with generosity. And besides, extra sweets might come in handy once their guests hunkered down in the den to watch football.

Some neighbors were polite. Some were embarrassed for me. Others were outright angry at the violation of the sanctity of their homes on a family holiday. One man, still in his bathrobe, slammed the door without saying a word. No one wanted to buy. After an hour of house-to-house humiliation, I threw in the towel and headed home to face the consequences.

As I rounded the bend of our street, I saw a vision: four heavenly beings in our yard, processing up and down the steps like angels on Jacob's ladder. They were the daughters of our friends, and they were unloading bags from their car. They and their parents had purchased holiday groceries for us, complete with a 20-pound turkey.

Before carving the roasted bird at the table, Dad quieted us down to say grace. As he recited God's blessings, leading up to the miraculous delivery of the Thanksgiving groceries, I wondered if he would include my neighborhood errand. But he didn't.

And I don't remember the fate of the unsold chocolates.

Andrew Scrimgeour
Cary, North Carolina

I hit a new low at the end of my penultimate semester of college. I slunk into the office of my gender studies professor and begged for a grade. I wasn't in danger of failing. I needed an A—not an A minus—to keep my 4.0 intact.

Even as I heard the words tumble out of my quivering lips, I knew my perfectionism had pushed me way past the point of reasonableness. There were plenty of warning signs before this—physical symptoms, my parents' concern, weekend nights spent studying while all my dormmates were out doing whatever it is that college students do—but I had convinced myself that all this was simply part of being a serious student. But now I knew; denial was no longer an option.

Unfortunately, the professor gave me the A. My perfect grades would continue to define me until I finally got that first blessed B.

It happened in my first semester of seminary, when I ran into the brick wall that was my first Walter Brueggemann book. Suddenly my ability merely to keep up was a question mark, and perfection seemed utterly unreachable.

To my surprise, I was the only one who cared about my B. (Actually, my parents cared—they were glad.) The grade came at the same time as I was making my first and best friends at seminary: five highly intelligent women who were full-time students but who also had real jobs and real lives. Grades were not their be-all and end-all. Multiple times each week they forcibly closed my books and pried me off my couch, inviting me to participate in, well, humanity.

I still made good grades, but not always As. And I no longer read every word my professors assigned. I cared about my work, but seminary was teaching me that I'm not loved any less if I'm not constantly striving for perfection. While many people supposedly lose their faith during their theological education, I unexpectedly discovered a new dimension of grace.

Seventeen years later, I am still caught off guard when people love me because of my imperfections, not just in spite of them. When I mess up leading worship, the

people in the pews remember that I'm one of them. When I make a bad parenting call, I have the opportunity to teach my son about owning up to our mistakes and extending forgiveness, and I become more trustworthy in the process. A supposed misstep opens the door for strengthened relationship. And in growing closer to one another, we are together moving nearer to God.

So I work hard—not perfectly, but hard—to be authentically imperfect. In some ways it is more risky than trying to be flawless; in other ways it's less so. But when my brokenness and shortcomings meet other people's, knowing and being known becomes a thin space between this life and life eternal.

Laura Stephens-Reed
Northport, Alabama

I walk in and the patient looks up from the bed. We talk for a while, but it is clear she doesn't really want to talk. I finally offer to bring her a rosary. I will put her on the priest's list for communion this afternoon.

I glance at her room number as I sprint down the hall for a brief lunch with my peer group. It's my first unit of clinical pastoral education, and lunch together is required. But first I stop to call admitting and change my patient's religion to *Catholic* from *None*, the erroneous designation on the census. Now the priest will be sure to stop by her room.

Forty-five minutes later I'm back, with two rosaries for her to choose from.

But something is wrong. It isn't her—it's not the same room.

"Excuse me," I say. "I didn't promise to bring you a rosary just now, did I?"

"Certainly not," she says. Silence.

"I'm so sorry," I say. "I'm Mary, the spatially challenged chaplain, just doing my rounds. And rounds and rounds, I guess."

She laughs. "What kind of chaplain *are* you?"

"Lost," I say, and we both laugh. "We are here to provide spiritual and emotional support. Not directions. Do you have a faith tradition?"

“Greek Orthodox.”

“Oh!” I say, eager to rush in, to fix my kerfuffle, to tell her that just a few steps away we have a real, bona fide Greek Orthodox chaplain able and willing to be rushed to the scene.

“But I keep thinking of becoming Catholic.”

“Really,” I say.

“My husband was Catholic.” Long pause. Deep sigh. Does the sigh signal divorce and regret or deceased and sad? No clue.

I punt. “He is . . . gone?”

“Yes,” she says. “Last year. He was wonderful. And sometimes I think I would feel closer to him if I was Catholic.”

Then she says, “I felt his presence once.”

“Really? Tell me.”

“We were at his family’s place,” she says. “We always met there for Christmas. We’d go out caroling in the snow, going door to door and singing, and I went up with the kids because it was still our tradition, you know.” The weather was bad, so they stayed in and sang by the fire. “Suddenly I felt this pressure all alongside me,” she says. She touches her hip gently and runs her hand up to her shoulder and back down. “All along my hip and my arm.”

It’s an intimate moment. I am in the room with her love for her husband and the presence—even the pressure—of his love for her.

“So . . .” she says, snapping out of the memory. “I was just telling my girlfriend on the phone that I want to be Catholic, and you walked in. She told me I should call a priest when I go home.”

I am getting up to leave but I hesitate at the doorframe, turning back. “You want to know something funny?” I ask.

“Sure,” she says.

"If we do nothing, a Catholic priest is already on his way." I explain the census and my message to the priest, mistakenly identifying room 708 as a Catholic who wants communion. "You know, because I mixed up the numbers," I say.

"I don't think you mixed them up," she says quietly.

"Oh geez." I backtrack, not wanting to encourage angelology.

"Could you possibly get me a rosary too?" she asks.

So I pull out the two rosaries stuffed in my pockets. One of which will eventually end up in the hands of its intended recipient, the patient I successfully find later that afternoon.

"You pick one for me," she says, transported.

I hesitate, not sure what territory we are traveling here.

"You pick," I say, trying to sound generous but knowing she will experience this as resistance to the miraculous. She wants an angel. I want her to be in charge of all her choices.

I freeze, my arms outstretched, balancing two rosaries in the palms of my hands.

A nurse walks in without knocking. "Oh honey, that pink one has you written all over it," the nurse says immediately. My angel beams.

Mary Barnett

New Haven, Connecticut

When I was a young college student in 1953, I spent a night stuck in a train station in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, waiting for my bus connection. The lobby where I waited was totally deserted. I sat down, placed my suitcase between my legs, read for half an hour, and dozed off.

At 3:30 in the morning I awoke to the sound of the door from the street. A young man came in and proceeded to enter every telephone booth in the lobby. "No one left any coins tonight," he said to me, before turning and leaving the way he came in. I attempted to sleep some more.

An hour later he came back—with five other men. They huddled near the door for several minutes, whispering to each other. Then they walked straight toward me and formed a half circle around me. Fearful now, I was aware that I had no avenue of escape. They stood with their arms folded across their chests, facing me in silence. What did they want? Were they waiting for a signal to attack me? I chastised myself for spending the night in this remote lobby, and I prayed for safety.

Gradually, as if by a silent agreement, the men stepped even closer. I knew I had to do something, so I decided to break the silence. I had gone to high school in Harrisburg, so I asked, “Do any of you know the great Henry Carlton, who used to play for William Penn High School?”

They looked startled. Eventually one of them mumbled, “Yeah, I know him.”

“I went to school with him,” I said. “He was the best high school basketball player I have ever seen.”

My comment seemed to disarm them. If my suitcase had made them assume I was an out-of-town traveler, they now knew I had lived in their city and knew one of their people. But they continued to stand there. What were they going to do?

The door opened again. This time a short man walked in as if in a hurry. He was dressed in blue denim clothes, with a baseball cap on his head and a lunch pail in his hand. He walked directly across the lobby to the men standing in front of me. Since I was hidden by them, I am not sure he ever saw me.

He reached out and pressed a gospel tract into each of their hands. “The blood of Jesus Christ, God’s Son, cleanses you from all sin.” He said it to them one by one, six times in all, like he was distributing communion. Then he turned and left as hurriedly as he came in.

The men stood there, tracts in hand, looking puzzled. Slowly, without looking at me, they broke ranks and walked out. I was left alone in the lobby.

Was the man a religious fanatic? That night it didn’t matter. He was a humble saint through whom I experienced an answer to prayer.

Ehrhardt Lang
Lompoc, California

An invitation arrived in our mailbox. My name was on it, and so was my twin sister's. We were ten years old, and our friend Alice was about to be ten, too. "Shhh!" the invitation read. "It's a Surprise Party!"

What's a surprise party? we wondered. Our mother explained. It was a secret. We were not to breathe a word about it to anyone—especially Alice. When we arrived at the party, Alice would not be there. We and the other guests would hide in the living room and await her return. When Alice arrived, we would jump out and yell, "Surprise!" Then the party would begin.

It sounded fun. What could possibly go wrong?

It was a Saturday afternoon, but my sister and I dressed in our Sunday clothes—matching dresses, white anklets, and patent leather shoes. Our mother combed our hair and adjusted our hairbands. Then she drove us to Alice's house.

We walked to the front door, carrying our gifts. We rang the doorbell—and Alice came to the door.

"Surprise?" we said with hesitation.

"What are you doing here?" Alice asked.

Within seconds our mother and Alice's mother joined us at the front door.

"You're early," Alice's mother said. "The party is tomorrow."

Our mother began to apologize but was interrupted by Alice's mother. I was expecting a reprimand. Instead she said, "Well, come on in," looking right at me. "I've been expecting you, just not quite this early. And don't worry. I was going to tell Alice anyway."

We stepped inside, and while our mothers made small talk over coffee, my sister and I played with Alice.

The following afternoon, we once again donned our Sunday finery and arrived at Alice's house. The party was underway. Alice was all smiles, and so was her mother.

This happened more than 55 years ago, yet still fresh in my memory is the unmerited kindness Alice's mother showed the three bewildered people on her doorstep. I have often reflected on this surprise party gone awry. I see the humor; I feel the embarrassment. But most of all I sense the invitation of God, who is always expecting me.

Dianne Morrison

East Grand Rapids, Michigan

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