

Storm: Essays by readers

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

Readers Write in the [January 17, 2018](#) issue



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*In response to our request for essays on storm, we received many compelling reflections. Below is a selection. The next two topics for reader submissions are **return** and **bridge**—[read more](#).*

When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast of Mississippi, my husband and I sheltered in the church where I was pastor, along with some of the members. We listened as the roof creaked, praying it would hold in the 130-mile-per-hour winds. We watched huge trees topple over, crushing the roof next door. Flying debris hit the windows. Phone service stopped and the lights went out. Our home disappeared sometime during that day. We would not know that until the roads were cleared.

When I could think at all, the question came: Will anyone notice what happened here? Will anyone care? People are busy. But then church groups started coming by the hundreds, then by the thousands. They kept coming for years. They worked despite the heat, humidity, and gnats. They brought their tools, bottled water, handmade quilts, food, gifts, cards, and love.

They cried when they had to leave because they believed they had not done enough. I told them that even if only the yard was cleared of rubble and tree limbs, we could see hope. If only one room now had walls and a floor, we could believe we would be whole again. Together we sang in church on Sunday through our tears, fears, and sorrow. I never heard a church member or volunteer blame God for what happened or wonder where God was in our need. Jesus came to us through the volunteers and in our worship.

People have said, "It was just stuff," and that is true. But it was our stuff, and some things cannot be replaced. I still reach for something that is somewhere in the Gulf of Mexico. I grieve for our children's baby books, framed photos of now-dead relatives, a grandfather's pocket watch, my mother's silverware. We took some photo albums and important papers with us, but one cannot take one's whole house along to some shelter. I cried over the loss of our cat more than the house. I have cried that our church life was wounded as members moved away to find new jobs, to live with grown children, or simply not to live in a devastated place anymore.

Twelve years later, we have new churches and homes with better construction. Friends and family mean much more. And we still thank God for the churches whose people answered the call to be of good help.

Barbara J. Hunter

Long Beach, Mississippi

When I saw the edge of the windowsill lying in the grass, I knew something was not right. I can remember the feeling inside of me, as if all of a sudden the pressure in the air had changed and the winds had picked up.

The only understanding that my eight-year-old self had about mental illness was that Mom got “headaches” sometimes and had to lay down in the bedroom for most of the day, on most days. My spirit told me that there was more, but like a sudden sweeping of the wind, I was powerless to describe where it came from, powerless to resist its force. I would later learn that my mother had had a sudden break with reality that day and leapt from her window. She felt that she must run away into the woods to be safe. She was seeking some kind of refuge in those trees, I think, from the storms inside her own manic mind—storms that would not allow her to sleep longer than a few minutes and storms that told her not to take her medications.

My family tree has been so laden with stories of mental illness that it has toppled over from the generations of people suffering without the help that they have desperately needed. I have decided to stop trying to replace the roots of this upturned oak in a hopeless effort at concealing. All that I can do is kneel beside the open wound in the earth where the roots have been and reach in with both hands to tend the soft space that the storms have turned up from the hardened soil.

I have spent so much energy trying to force my mother back into the bedroom window, back into a darkened place where I could pretend that my family was some kind of caricature of an American dream. Shame needs secrecy. In leaping from her bedroom window that day, my mother let the light in. Light is what comes eventually after a storm.

Will Grinstead
Muncie, Indiana

Will you come?” she asked. She had never asked me to come visit. Angie and I live a thousand miles away from one another, and worlds away from where we grew up together.

Her voice was so small, not like Angie at all. She said the doctor told her the fetus was not viable, and she would miscarry in the next few days. She’s a pastor (so am I) and was worried about miscarrying in the middle of Sunday’s worship. The Gospel

reading that day was about Elizabeth's and Mary's baby bellies bouncing in recognition of one another. Even worse, she feared she'd miscarry in the middle of the candlelight service on Christmas Eve.

"Will you come?" she asked.

"Yes," I said.

We set a date. I ordered the biggest bouquet of lilies I could and sent them straight to her house, so that it would smell like the church on Easter morning and she'd remember, even on this eve of death: resurrection is on its way.

"She asked me to come," I told Katie, who grew up with us. "She's never asked me to come before. Her voice was so small."

"That's not like Angie at all," Katie said. "And, God, it's the Mary and Elizabeth passage this Sunday." Katie is a pastor, too, and we'd been pregnant at the same time and played Elizabeth to one another's Mary. Only now, there were no bouncing baby bellies, only an ache for this child who would not be and a deep need to be with one another. "Do you think I should come too?"

"Yes," I said. We kept Katie's coming a surprise.

The weeks crawled by, and we crawled with them, calling one another and consoling Angie through the miscarriage and aftermath.

The week of the trip, a storm was predicted. I called Angie. "This storm. What do you think?"

"It's Cape Cod. If someone sneezes too hard, we lose power. We'll cook over the fire. It'll be like camping."

I don't remember when they named the storm Nemo, that nor'easter of a blizzard that blew in, paralyzing the East Coast for days. That's the storm that Katie and I flew into to be with Angie.

I embraced Angie in the airport pickup lane, praying that the timing would be right, hoping Katie would call just as we planned.

"I can't believe you came," Angie said, still sounding small. "Let's go home."

Katie called at that moment, and I handed the phone to Angie.

Angie's face changed. "What? You're here?"

"Better pull over," I said, pointing. "There she is."

Sacred surprise—the way Elizabeth must've felt when she saw Mary arrive.

As the wind began to whistle and all the flights were canceled, we set about nesting. Not because a baby was coming home, but because God was about to do a new thing, even in this grief, even in this pain, even in this ache inside Angie as deep as the snow outside.

When the lights flickered for the last time, we built a fire, lit the candles, and settled in for the storm. Nemo raged relentlessly. I felt so small compared to the storm outside, compared to the storm inside Angie: chaos and creation swirling together. We all felt very small. But God is bigger than our fear.

Katie and I anointed Angie's belly, laid hands on her, and prayed:

Healing, come.

Renewal, come.

New life, come.

Holy Spirit, come.

Will you come?

Leah Robberts-Mosser

Urbana, Illinois

From Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark*:

"You can preach your own sermons to yourselves from here on out. You don't need a preacher. . . . Remember the crazy winds that have blown you off course as again and again they have blown me off mine. Remember the scudding clouds that have

blotted out the moon and the cruel white lip of the wave curling over the gunnels. Remember the fear at your own helplessness, at being lost in a storm very often of your own making. Remember what it's like to be old with death ahead of you and what it's like to be young with life ahead of you. These are among the storms for each of us to preach about to ourselves, remembering always too that somehow we have survived the storm and that even at the worst of it there was something in us that clung on for dear life because even at its worst life is dear."

The refrigerator whirled to a stop. That was the first sign. It happened every time the rain came in the Namibian village where I served as a teacher.

I didn't mind the sound of deafening thunder or the sight of split lightning, didn't mind the nervous chickens fleeing for cover or the stray dog hugging the door. But it was the sound of the power shutting down that always made me freeze. Without power, we had no water.

The electricity and water might not come back on for two or three days, long enough to get tired of dirty dishes, dirty toilets, a dirty self. I could almost shrug off the loss of refrigerated groceries. So what if the nearest market was 80 miles away and required hitchhiking eight hours round trip, crammed in the back of a pickup truck with 11 other people sitting on sacks of rice? That's fine. But the water. I just wanted to wash my hands.

I had come to this village with a thirst for God's kingdom, following a call to be among the poor, to offer what little assistance I could. But I didn't know that rainstorms here meant losing the one thing they were supposed to bring.

Then, a knock at the door. On the doorstep was one of my fellow teachers. "Miss, you must come eat with us."

"How are you cooking when we don't have electricity?"

"We cook over the fire."

I peered around him, into the next yard. The smoke wafted over. It was always easier just to decline, to retreat to the privacy of my house. At times, I think I got so

used to the desert that I didn't want to leave. I wanted to stay stuck. But this time I said, "OK. Thanks."

I followed him outside. The rain had barely dampened the dust beneath our feet.

"How do you have water to cook with?"

"Miss?"

"Every time it rains, we lose water."

He laughed. "We keep some always. You must just use old bottles. I will bring you."

My face flushed, but my heart quieted. I felt little drops of water misting over the parched places in my soul.

We rounded the bend of the house, and he pointed up. "Outowombura," he said. Bow of rain.

We stood side by side. Neither of us cared about our unwashed bodies and thrice-worn clothes. We were looking up.

Sarah L. Swandell

Pinehurst, North Carolina

Is there anything I can get for you?" asked the cardiologist as I sat by the bedside of my husband at the Hadassah Medical Center in Jerusalem. A few minutes before, he had told me that nothing more could be done for my husband. He was dependent upon the machine that was breathing for him. Those were my final moments with my husband of 23 years.

We had been traveling with a group of church friends on a tour of Israel when my husband was hospitalized. By now the travel group had returned to the United States.

The tour had started in northern Israel. On our first full day we took a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee. The group leader had asked me to lead our daily devotions while at sea. We spent some time reflecting on Luke's account of Jesus calming the storm (8:22-24). The day was quiet. The waters were still. But we knew of the potential for

a sudden storm blowing across the Sea of Galilee. We considered the unsuspected storms that can suddenly rise in our own lives. Did we really trust in God's presence to calm the troubled waters that could suddenly disrupt our days of calm?

As I sat in the family waiting room of the cardiac intensive care unit, I pondered the times I had sat in similar situations with parishioners whose loved ones were in distress. I realized that there were no words of comfort in such times. I was unable to focus on words from the Psalms. I only knew that I had to trust in God to carry me through this difficult time.

The cardiologist said, "I am so sorry. We did everything we could. Would you like to spend some time with him before we disconnect the machines?" He then served me a cup of tea as I waited for Jesus to still the storm.

Joyce B. Duerr
Westerly, Rhode Island

One evening while reading in the sunroom, I was sure that I heard cicadas in the walls. It took a few evenings over a few weeks for me to realize that the cicadas were not in the walls. They were in my head. I had tinnitus, the sound the brain creates to fill the space that normally would be taken up by noises a person hears.

I come from a long line of hearing-challenged adults, so I wasn't entirely surprised at the diagnosis. Over the years I lost all of the hearing in my left ear, and my balance is sometimes suspect. At the last visit to the audiologist to adjust my hearing aids, the test showed dramatic worsening in my right ear—the only ear that has been working at all.

We all long for quiet at various times in our lives. What a relief not to have the cacophony of modern life raging around us. But it's different when it is not a choice. How do you tell someone else what it is like to see the wind blowing but not hear it? To feel the rain but not hear it on the roof?

Conversations can be like playing *Wheel of Fortune* as you try to guess words and sentences from the few sounds of letters you pick up. The sound of silence is sometimes the sound of isolation and loneliness, sometimes anger and paranoia, and always frustration and resignation.

Yet it's not always quiet. Often the sound in my head is so loud that I have actually asked the person next to me if they could hear it. Sometimes I hear those cicadas again. Often I have a male chorus in concert harmony in my head. And many nights I am awakened by sounds so loud I have to get up in order to distract my attention for a while.

I am fortunate. I still have some hearing in one ear and technology helps keep me connected, including hearing aids and various assist devices for my phone and television. But my hearing will get worse, not better. My task is to find meaning in the silence, not to succumb to isolation and despair, and to learn to live graciously with a condition for which I am not grateful.

Grant Story

Omaha, Nebraska

It was a hot day as I drove to our family lake cottage with my three young children. We pulled into the driveway and headed out to the end of the dock to watch a storm blow in. Sheets of rain skated across the water. The sun cut through a cloud—a sign, it seemed, that it would soon clear.

Our eyes were fixed on the lake when suddenly we saw it. Directly across the bay, a funnel rose above a low cloud. We froze at the spectacular sight. My boys shouted in exhilaration. My daughter and I stood in awe as the wind roared. We were hypnotized by the monstrous triangle taking over the sky when we suddenly realized we were seeing debris flying off all sides of it. The tornado was getting bigger and bigger as it traveled along the shoreline heading straight for us.

I panicked. I yelled to the boys, grabbed my daughter's hand, and raced for the cottage. We didn't have a basement or a stairway to hide under so I shouted, "Get to the bedroom closet!" It was the only space where we'd be protected from windows shattering. The roar of the wind turned to a scream, and we felt the pressure in the cottage change as if we were in a jet taking off. A sound like a bomb threw us to the floor. The walls around us began to shake.

"Lord, save us," I prayed, fearing we would die. "Please, God," I begged, "save my children." My daughter read my mind: "Are we going to die, Mom?" Wanting to distract her, I cracked open the closet door. Trees and boat trailers sailed by the

window.

Moments later an eerie quiet fell. The storm was over, but the strange silence it left behind made me shiver. I touched each child, reassuring myself they were OK. The cottage was intact. Outside, the devastation took my breath away. The explosion we'd heard had been the house behind us. It was gone. The entire neighborhood was gone. Only the small cottages lining the lake had been spared.

My oldest child wondered aloud if neighbors had been killed. I wondered if it was wise to check, since power lines were down. But adrenaline overrode reason, and we piled into our pickup to drive up the block and see if anyone needed help. We found dazed survivors. I helped one woman climb out of the rubble. She stared right through me, her hands shaking. "Have you got a cigarette?" she muttered. I guided her away from the pile that was once her house.

The buzz of chainsaws began as first responders worked to get through. My focus shifted to getting out of there. An hour later we drove home and collapsed into bed.

The next morning I learned that a neighbor had been killed. It took months before my brain stopped playing the event over in my mind like a constant rerun. I wondered some days if it had been real. I felt confused by the randomness and humbled by what felt like a true miracle. We'd been 25 yards away from death and we escaped. I had begged God to save my children and they were alive.

Yet I was angry, too. While we were untouched, neighbors suffered deeply. A family had lost a husband and a father. Many others lost everything they owned. Had they cried out to God, too? What was their answer? Why did someone have to die? What was the purpose? I haven't stopped pondering how these mysteries and our miracle collided that day. I'll never understand it, but I also won't forget how it felt to land in the path of a tornado and be spared.

Phoebe Love
Oregon, Wisconsin