Mistake: Essays by readers

Readers Write in the July 6, 2016 issue

Image by Daniel Richardson

In response to our request for essays on the subject **mistake**, *we received many compelling reflections. Here is a selection. This series is supported by a grant from the Frederick Buechner Center, which celebrates the work and concerns of the essayist, novelist, and pastor. The next topics for reader submissions are* **surprise** *and* **character—***read more.*

On the final morning of a church backpacking trip in the Sierra Nevada, I got lost. I was headed out for my morning "constitutional," carrying a roll of toilet paper and a plastic trowel, when one mistake (ignoring landmarks) triggered another (meandering where I hadn't explored). The camping spot at Middle Sapphire Lake went from *right there* to *where the heck is it?* I yelled and whistled. No response. I was the group's leader. Now I was just lost.

Ignoring the advice of experts who say, "Stay where you are when disoriented," I tramped through the woods until I came to a lake. But it was not Middle Sapphire Lake. I recalled that three lakes were mentioned in the guidebook—which was back at camp. I wasn't sure if this one was Upper Sapphire or Lower Sapphire, or neither. (I'm disguising here the real names of the lakes.)

More bushwhacking could mean losing touch with the lake. I might be just four miles from the trailhead, but I knew a few wrong steps could easily double that mileage. What if my companions searched thousands of acres of wilderness for me but neglected the solitary acre where I wandered? What if this speck of water wasn't on

the map? What if I sprained my ankle or broke my leg?

I tried to slow my rapid breathing. I studied the streambeds for links between the lakes. They must be there, otherwise why dub the lakes upper, middle, and lower? My prayers were blunt in their whispered versions of “What next?” I’m not one to ask God why something bad happens, instead trusting that the Creator has given humans the gifts of hope and gumption and choices.

Circling the lake, I identified three dry streambeds. The first vanished in a copse of lodgepole pines several hundred yards uphill. The second snaked into a promising meadow until fading into thick, impassable bushes. Both were probably wet only during the spring runoff. Following each failure, I trudged back to my starting point.

The third path was the sigh-of-relief charm. Soon widening, it was perhaps a lively creek in the big snow years. I followed the boulder-strewn inlet to Middle Sapphire Lake. Cue the angelic choir. After two hours, still clutching the trowel and roll of tissue, I encountered my fellow hikers, who welcomed me back. They’d started searching an hour before, but in the opposite direction.

I didn’t become a headline—or a statistic. But I won’t forget my stupidity. Or my fear. I was lost for two hours. Two hours is the length of a lazy Saturday lunch with friends or an irksome wait in a doctor’s office. But it was long enough for panic’s sharp elbow to jab my side and the bile of dread to rise in my throat. Fear was a raw, harsh reality forcing me to remember I’m not the Creator. I’m a foolish mortal.

Upon reaching Middle Sapphire, and not yet noticed by my companions, I scanned the rocky streambed I’d just traversed. How could I not have spotted the obvious signs in the landscape showing a link between one lake and the other? Why is it so easy to get lost? Just a few steps the wrong way, perhaps distracted by something trivial, and fear suddenly stalks every potential direction and decision.

Larry Patten
Fresno, California

As a child I had a difficult time making friends. One day the “in crowd” included me in a little prank they were going to play on one of the less popular students. I was pulled in by flattery and the feeling of being part of something.

Suzie was funny-looking and didn't seem clean most of the time, and I'm sure most of us thought that whatever she had was contagious. We did not see that the part of her that was contagious was her feeling of being left out of all the fun.

Here was the plan: we would play a game of tag and whoever tagged Suzie "it" would slap her hard in the face. I did it. I was smiling until I saw the look on her face and was too shocked to say anything. The whole group turned on me with a vengeance, as if I had thought up the idea and acted on my own. They would not have anything to do with me. I had hit the home run but for the wrong team.

It took a while for me to become less than a pariah on the playground. I could not get myself to talk to Suzie. I didn't get it that Suzie needed a friend every bit as much and maybe more than I did. If I could speak to Suzie today I'd say, *I'm the one who was unclean*.

Dorothea Juno-Johnston
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Years ago I participated in a meeting of a church women's group that ended with a worship service and Holy Communion. I agreed to help serve communion, and I was excited because I had never done it before.

I dutifully stood with my paten of wafers and let each person take the wafer from the plate. But then, not sure if this was correct, I suddenly decided to place a wafer in each person's hand. I was so intent on the logistics of serving that I didn't notice that an African-American woman was next in line.

After the service, the woman approached me and asked why I had served her but let everyone else take the wafer from the plate. She was so upset that she did not stop for an answer. She became angrier as she spoke. I couldn't get a word in, and she walked away. I went home mortified by what I had done and what she thought I had done. She thought I had served her because I didn't want her touching the communion wafers. I wish she had let me explain. I wish I could talk with her. I wish I could tell her that I'm sorry for my mistake.

Doris Page
McLean, Virginia

It was a Saturday night, and I was set to start a job as a minister to children the next day. But there was a problem. I had just been clubbed in the head with a call to preach—and there would be little or no chance to do that in my new position. I did the only thing my rule-following self knew to do in that situation: I got up the next day, pasted on a smile, and went to work.

I had a short, tumultuous tenure at the church. My ambivalence about being there made it hard to invest in relationships. Since much of ministry is built on the willingness to know and be known, I didn't have a lot of credibility for leading, teaching, or giving pastoral care. Circumstances came to a head when I inadvertently crossed a power player in the congregation. I wanted to hash the conflict out, but the senior minister barred me from making any attempt at reconciliation. My hands tied, I sat in my office until 10 p.m. one night while the personnel committee met. I waited for the chairperson to summon me for a solution-focused conversation. She never made that short walk down the hall, and I spent the long drive home wondering what outcome I really wanted.

It didn't matter. It became clear the next day that my only choice was whether to quit or be fired. Unable to stand the thought of a termination on my résumé, I turned in my notice.

At the time, I thought the situation was the fault of others. It was the complainant's fault. The senior pastor's fault. The church's fault. In my righteous indignation I vowed to work diligently for congregational and clergy health. I never wanted anyone else to endure the conflict, the toxicity, the injustice I'd just escaped.

Luckily, over time some self-awareness kicked in. My purpose, however, remained unchanged. I was—am—convinced that for churches to fulfill their God-given mission, they must be healthy.

I began to understand that my trajectory had been set from my teenage years, when I watched my beloved home church undermine its youth directors on an annual basis. I learned how to be an intentional interim minister, and I stocked my toolkit with consultant training. I snapped up an invitation to take coaching classes. I wanted to create spaces in which my colleagues could thrive in ministry. I had found the niche where I could be my most passionate and effective self.

I made a bad call in taking an ill-fitting job, but I came out of that very difficult year with a sharpened sense of my pastoral identity—who I am, what I am about, what in myself I need to work on. And I had a renewed trust that God would not abandon me, even when I made anxious choices.

Laura Stephens-Reed
Northport, Alabama

When I was in Harare, Zimbabwe, for the assembly of the World Council of Churches, I went with a group to experience Victoria Falls, a boat ride on the Zambezi River, and a safari. Henry, our safari driver and guide, took us into the bush country and brought us up close to elephants, zebras, giraffes, tigers, lions, and various exotic birds. On our return to the city, Henry stopped alongside the road where men and women were selling carved stone sculptures. I had been looking for a nativity set and was delighted to find one. I happily paid for my purchase, called a crib set, and then asked whether it would be possible to have two additional sets carved during our stay in the city. Henry interpreted for me, and arrangements were made: when the crib sets were complete, Henry would drive me out to the site to claim them.

Ten days went by, and I became concerned that I had not heard from Henry. I telephoned the safari tour office and asked for him. The woman on the telephone questioned me about why I was calling. What business did I have with Henry? I briefly described the situation, expressing my anxiety about obtaining the nativities that I had partially paid for.

She became very angry, saying that the drivers were forbidden to take tourists to roadside shops, and that it could put tourists in danger. Mistake. My mistake. His mistake.

I did retrieve the two crib sets that became Christmas gifts, but Henry lost his job. Henry called the next day and asked to see me. We met in our hotel lobby, and he quite politely read me the riot act. He blamed me for his getting fired and told me what I already knew—his prospects for a new job were bleak. This position as tour driver and guide was a good job in Harare, where unemployment was the norm. Henry asked for money. He said I owed him. He wanted unemployment compensation. I felt guilty and expressed my regret. I was terribly sorry, but I

refused his request. I had made a mistake. He had made a mistake.

When I unwrap and display my stone nativity set, I am struck again by the artistry. But I never experience the original joy that was mine when first I spotted the crib set on that hillside outside the city.

Sally Almen
Elgin, Illinois

"O thou, who art the God no less of those who know thee not than of those who love thee well, be present with us at the times of choosing when time stands still and all that lies behind and all that lies ahead are caught up in the mystery of a moment. Be present especially with the young who must choose between many voices. Help them to know how much an old world needs their youth and gladness. Help them to know that there are words of truth and healing that will never be spoken unless they speak them, and deeds of compassion and courage that will never be done unless they do them. Help them never to mistake success for victory or failure for defeat."

Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark*

The denominational official who sent me out to serve a church in central North Carolina neglected to mention that the church had been torn apart by conflict. About half the members had left. All of 25 years old, I had no idea how to handle the kind of pain I discovered in that congregation. I preached my best. I visited folks in their homes. I visited people who stayed in the church and those who had left. I loved the people who told me I talked funny and looked like a little Yankee soldier in my blue suit coat, and I found grace in the middle of the Piedmont.

Then the anonymous notes and phone calls began. They were never directly threatening, but they were unsettling. Someone who knew me very well and was a part of the congregation was writing the letters. On the phone calls, someone would stay on the line, saying nothing.

I prayed. I studied the letters and looked for a pattern. At one point I decided that the source had to be the wife of one of the farmers in the congregation. During the conflict in the church, her husband had stopped attending worship, but Betty and her three adolescent children continued to come. She and one daughter taught a Sunday school class. The family lived in a simple, white frame farmhouse at the end of a gravel road. Making ends meet for them was, I thought, a struggle.

I called Betty and asked if I could come visit. It was a warm, summer day when I knocked on the back door of the farmhouse. We sat at her kitchen table. We made small talk for a few minutes, and then I told Betty that I knew she had been making the anonymous phone calls and writing the letters.

There are times when you suddenly see something you have missed. As the words came out of my mouth, I suddenly saw another piece of the puzzle that made it impossible for Betty to have been the caller and the letter writer. But the words had been spoken, and they sat there on the kitchen table between us. I braced myself for a storm to break over my head. I waited for Betty to promise that she and her family would never again darken the doors of a church with such a foolish young pastor.

There was no storm. Betty looked at me across the table, and I saw disappointment in her eyes. “No, pastor,” she said quietly, “I didn’t make those phone calls or write those letters.”

I can’t remember if I said anything. All I remember is sitting there in the quiet of her kitchen. Then Betty said, “Pastor, would you like some sweet tea?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said. Betty poured me a glass of sweet tea. I remember the sound of the ice cubes falling into the glass. Betty sat there with me, and we drank tea. We talked about the family, the farm, weather, and the church. When the tea was gone, she let me pray. She walked me to the door, shook my hand, and said she would see me on Sunday.

Now when I think of grace I always think of sweet tea, the way the disciples must have associated grace with bread and fish, remembering the morning the risen Christ served them breakfast on the beach even though they had all slipped away when he needed them most. Sweet tea reminds me of the afternoon when grace came to me unexpectedly and a saint held onto me despite my foolishness.

Mark Owen Fenstermacher
Bloomington, Indiana

For me, the one mistake behind most of the others is not asking for help. And it started long before the church draped a stole around my neck. I am totally lacking in role models for this. Childhood polio greatly weakened my mother’s left side, but she didn’t take kindly to people offering to help carry a stack of books or navigate a flight of stairs. My dad carried the atrocities of Iwo Jima with him for 60 years without ever asking anyone to help shoulder the emotional burden.

I have acknowledged the mistake of not asking for help without actually asking for help. I have confessed it without correcting it. I’ve gotten good at this over the years.

Then one morning I looked down and a woman and her husband were putting my socks on for me. A week and a half earlier, a January storm left a glaze of ice on the city streets. That afternoon I waved good-bye to a friend and approached the concrete steps that connect the church parking lot to the sidewalk. I slipped at the top of the steps and fell to the bottom, hitting each step with my back before coming to rest on the narrow swath of grass between the sidewalk and the street. By the next day my body had knotted itself around my lower back and I couldn’t stand without help.

Parishioners and friends made generous offers when they heard the news. It seemed important to them that they do something. I awkwardly obliged. “Sure, I mean, if

you’re going by the pharmacy anyway.” “OK, if you’re getting a sandwich for yourself and are going to be in the neighborhood.” “Well, I think I can drive myself to physical therapy, but I’ll enjoy the company.”

I couldn’t pick up the phone and ask someone to come and just sit with me. I couldn’t initiate the favor of having someone drive me to their home to sit in their whirlpool, even though people wanted to know how they could help. I couldn’t bring myself to ask someone to drop off some food or heat packs or some badly needed muscle relaxants.

My big mistake had caught up with me, and it was causing me to make a lot of smaller yet still consequential ones. I could ask for just about anything else—for people to increase their financial giving to the church, for the congregation to go boldly down any number of risk-fraught paths, for individuals to march with me or join me at some public hearing—but I couldn’t ask for help.

Until, of course, I had no choice but to ask for help. A new vulnerability enveloped me, and not just because I couldn’t put on my own socks, or because I had to lie on the floor of a minivan while being driven to physical therapy, or because someone had to help me onto the bar stool in the pulpit on my first Sunday back at church. It was more than that. The cloak of invincibility had shattered.

And with the vulnerability came a deep sadness, partly because I realized I had made my own life more difficult, but more importantly because my insistence on not needing help had made me less of a genuine companion on the journey with others.

Those friends did more than put my socks on for me. They ushered me at least a few steps in the direction of mutuality and solidarity. It’s a gift to be strong and scrappy, but something like the January ice eventually comes to us all. The greater gift is to be human with each other, to be as open to receiving help as we are eager to give it, and to allow a community’s care and companionship to laugh away the most debilitating mistake of all.

William B. Kincaid
Indianapolis, Indiana

It was obvious growing up in my household that my father wanted a boy. I was the oldest of four girls. Even though he spent time teaching me about science and mechanical engineering, I often heard him say I wasn't going to be able to be what he wanted me to be because I was a girl.

The church mimicked my father's belief by telling me I couldn't be an acolyte or an usher because I was a girl.

I couldn't be a Boy Scout and do Boy Scout kinds of activities because I was a girl.

I didn't begin to understand the shame I felt being a girl until one day I blurted out, "Yes, I wanted to be a priest." It happened at a renewal weekend for teenagers called Happening. I was an adult sponsor, but I entered into the ice-breaking game when the teens were asked, "Have you ever thought about being a priest?" It wasn't that I was the wrong sex. It was that I thought the ideas I had in my head that what I wanted to do or be were mistakes. I thought I must be hearing God wrong. If God wanted me to be ordained, he would have made me a boy. I was a mistake. However, at Happening, the key phrase I heard was "God doesn't make mistakes."

My father never became what his father and his father-in-law wanted to him to be or what he wanted to be, and he drank to cover the pain. My grandfather, who wanted to be an architect, was told by his father that only gay men were architects. He never became an architect, and he drank to cover the pain. I suddenly realized that God had not made a mistake. If I had been born a man, I would still be carrying the scars of three generations of alcoholics who never were able to be who they were called to be.

I broke the dynamics of our family system. My journey to ordained ministry was long, with many hoops to jump through, but I became who God called me to be.

Nancy Smalley
Waxahachie, Texas

After my wife and I had agreed to be on the teaching staff for a summer family church camp, the director announced that we would be using a completely intergenerational approach. We would do everything in groups of six to eight families—meals, recreation, singing, worship, crafts, and morning classes. This news

took us way out of our comfort zone.

Having no experience with intergenerational education, my wife and I decided to use art and drama as our main approach to teaching parables from Luke's Gospel. Our plan was to focus on one parable each morning by encouraging the very young children to draw pictures depicting the parable and having the rest act out the stories. The first day we used the parable of the sower. We acted it out and the young ones drew, and then we talked about the meaning of the parable. I don't think we shed any new light on anything, but we did get through the day. The second day we used the great banquet story and had a mild discussion, during which most of the young people said they were bored, leaving the parents embarrassed. The third day the story was the good Samaritan, and to our chagrin all the young boys wanted to play the robbers who beat up the traveler on the Jericho Road, not the Samaritan who helped. Some were willing to be the passers-by or the innkeeper. We didn't think we added much that day to anyone's biblical understanding. By this time most of the adults had serious misgivings about intergenerational learning.

We came to day four's class on the prodigal son with some fear and trembling. Again we acted out the story. We had many young volunteers to play the wild brother with adults playing the father and the elder brother. When we got to the discussion of the parable, we started with the end of the story and the brother's refusal to attend the feast. All the young people said they would go to a party for their lost brother. At this point the adults started saying that the kids didn't know what they were talking about. The classroom became pretty loud with everyone talking at once.

The adults insisted that the young people had no understanding of what the younger son in the parable had done, and the young kept saying they didn't care about that. I knew that most all of these young people had probably said "I hate you" to one of their siblings, but they could not imagine not being glad to get back a lost brother.

If we had any doubts about having all ages together, we now were sure it was a mistake. We split the class into young and old. I went with the adults and heard some sad testimonials, including that of someone who hadn't spoken to a brother in 20 years after the reading of a will. We only talked a little about the naïveté of the young, but I began to wonder if some of the adults wished they could be as naive.

After class, the conversations among the adults went on and on. Clearly our being all together with divergent understandings opened up the parable anew. So what I was

sure was a mistake ended up leading us to a fresh encounter with an old story.

The last day’s parable was the lost sheep. Young and old were on the same page. No one questioned the wisdom of going after a lost lamb, and everyone hoped that that was God’s way with us also. The next morning the closing friendship circle seemed tighter than ever, the hugs longer, and the hopes even stronger that next year we would be together again.

David Walter Lauer
Elkhart Lake, Wisconsin