Character: Essays by readers

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

Readers Write in the August 16, 2017 issue

In response to our request for essays on character, we received many compelling reflections. Below is a selection. The next two topics for reader submissions are **indulgence** *and* **silence***—read more.*

When I was 14, my father was a rural mail carrier near Little Sioux, Iowa. He drove two vehicles: a 1955 Chevrolet and, on rainy or muddy days, a 1950 Jeep. One day the Jeep needed repair and could not be driven, so Father came up with a plan. He would tow the Jeep, using a 20-foot chain attached to the Chevrolet at one end and the Jeep’s bumper at the other.

“Son, you sit in the Jeep,” he said, “and I will pull you up over Murray Hill to the garage in Pisgah.” Murray Hill is a beautiful spot that overlooks much of Harrison

County; it is also famous as the site of auto accidents. Drivers lose control there and crash at the bottom of the hill.

As we rode over small rises, the two vehicles began bumping. To avoid hitting my father's vehicle when it slowed, I tapped the Jeep's brake. This caused a loud *clank* as the chain suddenly became taut again. Each time, my father looked back at me with *the look*. Apparently he didn't agree with my braking efforts. On we went toward Murray Hill, with me occasionally tapping the brake and getting the look.

As it turned out, Murray Hill was not the problem. The problem began when the Jeep went over an especially high rise and began to gain on my father's car. I didn't want to get the look again, so I did what any intelligent 14-year-old would do—I steered to the left and began to pass him. I saw his head turn to look behind him and then—seeing nothing—turn around to the left. I will never forget the look of panic on his face as he saw me starting to pass him. Bang! The chain went taut, and the Jeep slammed into the side of the Chevrolet, making a very large dent.

We stopped, and my father got out and looked at the side of the Chevrolet. "Now I have to get two vehicles fixed!" he said. "Please be more careful."

When we arrived at the automobile dealer's garage, my father told me to stay in the car while he went inside. A few minutes later, he appeared at the garage display window with several mechanics. All of them were looking out at me and laughing and shaking their heads. I thought they were laughing at me. Now I know they were laughing because they remembered when they were 14 and tied by a chain to their fathers. I'm not sure that the steel cord between me and my father has ever been completely broken.

Alva R. Caldwell
Waukegan, Illinois

I was tempted. It would be so much fun. Yes, many things could go wrong and lead to my friend and me getting caught: a traffic stop, a car accident, a suspicious police officer seeing two kids in a new Mustang, a homeowner calling the police. But with or without me, Paul was going joyriding in Dr. Williamson's new V8 Mustang. The doctor, a surgeon who often got a late-night calls about life-and-death emergencies, left the keys in the ignition for a quick exit. He'd probably never know we'd been in

his car.

Paul had already taken the car out a dozen times without any problems. His joyride had always included a prank or activity: spray painting messages on neighbors' lawns, writing on car windows with shoe polish, letting the air out of tires, cutting laundry lines, or cruising for girls at Champs Hamburger Joint.

But no matter how tempted I was, I knew the joyride was wrong. Not just stupid. Not just illegal. Not just something that could ruin my life—but wrong. Why couldn't I get him to see this simple truth?

I'd ruin my social life if I turned Paul in; it'd be a betrayal of the ultimate teenager trust. If I told my parents, they could stop Paul in a way that would hide my role. But I couldn't do that. I role-played the anonymous phone conversation I could have with Dr. Williamson. The easiest thing, however, was to do nothing.

Then it happened. A police officer noticed a Mustang peeling out from behind a house at 2 a.m., and he chased it. Paul lost control of the car and ran it into a ditch. The next morning the story was all over school. And everyone knew that Paul and I were good friends.

The principal called me to the office and had five questions for me.

"Did you know that Paul was stealing the car?"

"Yes."

"Did you ever go joyriding with Paul?"

"No."

"Did you ever try to get Paul to stop stealing the car?"

"Yes."

"You knew it was wrong but wanted to be loyal to your friend, correct?"

"Yes."

"This has really challenged your character, hasn't it?"

"Yes."

Then he said, “I think it’d be best if your parents took you home.”

They were just outside the door, waiting for me.

Kent Logan
Black Mountain, North Carolina

Time was short. I had just finished my seminary degree and was working while my wife finished hers. We could not live on the salaries our seminary jobs paid and needed to find a ministry position soon. We wanted to go back to our home state, so when we learned that a church in the sandy hills of eastern North Carolina was interested in my application, we were thrilled.

We flew to Norfolk, Virginia, where members of the search committee were waiting for us. We introduced ourselves, and they told us about some of the events that were planned. They were courting me, and I was enjoying the attention.

Suddenly the leader of the group pointed to a group of well-dressed African American men who had been on the plane with us. “See those niggers there,” the church leader said. “They’re all from our town. They think they’re big shots. They’re just niggers.” One of the men laughed. I looked at my wife, but the other committee members acted as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

We drove through the town, and church members showed us the business area, several farms, and the schools. As we drove, the same man suddenly turned and pointed to a church. “That’s the nigger church,” he said. “You know those niggers we saw at the airport? Well, that’s where they go to church.” I cringed.

After meeting with several groups, we realized that the church was white by choice and design. I met with some of the youth. They were enthusiastic about their school—an all-white private school. I met with the deacons, and we discussed their expectations of the pastor and the pastor’s spouse.

Then the chair of the deacons, the same man who’d spoken up before, said that there was one more thing to tell us. “If a nigger comes to church and tries to join, it’s up to the pastor not to present him for membership that morning. Instead, the pastor must tell the nigger that he’ll have to meet with him first, then talk to him and find out why he wants to join. We don’t want no niggers coming to our church to

start trouble.” I was dumbfounded.

I struggled with what to do. The salary was fair, the parsonage was nice and clean, and we so much wanted to be in North Carolina. Could I overlook some members’ racism as long as I didn’t share their worldview?

I went home and prayed. As much as I wanted a ministry position, how could I grow a church in a town that was half African American if I couldn’t let black people join? Would I have any integrity left?

Later that week I called the chairman and told him that God just was not leading me to the church. I still regret that I did not tell him the rest of my thinking.

Years later my wife met the wife of the white minister who’d been called to that North Carolina church. The woman complained about how racist the community was. “Do you know what they call my husband?” she asked. “They call him the head nigger.”

Bobby J. Touchton
Ashland, Kentucky

From Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark*:

“If you’re a writer like me . . . you avoid forcing your characters to march too steadily to the drumbeat of your artistic purpose, but leave them some measure of real freedom to be themselves. If minor characters show signs of becoming major characters, you at least give them a shot at it because in the world of fiction it may take many pages before you find out who the major characters really are just as in the real world it may take you many years to find out that the stranger you talked to for half an hour once in a railway station may have done more to point you to where your true homeland lies than your closest friend or your psychiatrist.”

Like the Baltimore of Freddie Gray, Baltimore in the 1970s and ’80s required that young black men be brave every day. I learned that courage fighting on the streets of the mid-Atlantic port town where I was born and raised.

I fought my first battle under the weeping willow tree that stood somberly in front of my apartment building. I wasn’t alone. At my side were teammates who came to help me fight off these bad guys who had invaded our neighborhood. We would spring out of the building and dive behind the willow tree, which served as our base of operations. What the invaders did not know was that I could fly. (I also had the power to be invisible, emit kinetic energy blasts, and read minds.)

I would tell Wolverine to move in and get some recon on the enemy. Storm would create a cloud cover for us. Doctor Strange would engage the evil wizards. Finally I’d move in and rescue my mom from the evil alien Klansmen. But just as I stood face-to-face with the grand wizard, I’d hear a call: “Poopie! Dinner!” My mom’s voice would call me back to reality.

These imaginary journeys were a survival tactic—a mental escape from real battles that my eight-year-old self was too scared to take on. My mom was dying, and my father had lost his job due to racism. Until my mother’s death when I was 11, and even into my teen years, when my father died, I used the one superpower available to me—my imagination. When the reality of my life was unbearable, I jumped to an imaginary world where I had the courage and the tools to work for healing and for fighting back. I still have old notebooks with sketches of my dreamed-up characters and their powers. I saved the world hundreds of times.

Thirty years later, I’m writing at my breakfast table. I look out and see my daughters playing outside. Sometimes they’re practicing soccer or singing and dancing. But occasionally they’re running around talking to imaginary characters. Their adventures sound more like Nancy Drew mysteries or Harry Potter tales. I smile, because imagination lives!

I try to pass this message on to the young activists on the university campus where I work. Speaking out against oppression and injustice is essential. But we must also imagine something different and imagine ourselves working to build that something. Yes, we must draw from the prophetic aspect of our tradition, but also from the creation narratives of our faith.

I learned about 1960s activists like Martin Luther King, Ella Baker, and Stokely Carmichael as a kid, and they've walked with me ever since. From them and other activists I learned the phrase "power to the people." As a child I would have amended that to "superpower to the people!" or, as activists and artists in France said, "L'imagination au pouvoir!" ("Power to the imagination!").

Charles Howard
Philadelphia

When I walked into the AA meeting, alone and new to the group, Jesse stuck out his hand, introduced himself in a smoke-scarred voice, and gave me his phone number.

He became my sponsor, and for 17 years he told me the truth, refused to put up with nonsense, and opened his life to me. Over hundreds of cups of coffee, he challenged me and showed me what gratitude looks like.

I'd call Jesse regularly to report that I hadn't had a drink. In those first years there were many times when I was sure I did *not* have a drinking problem. I'd stare at a bottle, convinced that the only thing holding me back was that I didn't want to call "that old man." I had too much respect for Jesse to disappoint him. Character forms in community.

When I had been sober about four years, I moved to the fourth step: "Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves." I made a list in longhand, then went to Jesse's home for the fifth step: "admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs." I read aloud from my list of sins while Jesse prayed. Then we walked to a barbecue pit, and Jesse put the sheaf of papers on the grill. He pulled out his Zippo lighter and lit the edges of the paper, and the record of my past burned and drifted away as ash.

I entered the ministry while Jesse was still alive, and he honored me by asking me to speak at his funeral. On one of our last visits he hugged me and prayed a blessing on my life. I cherish his memory. He taught me to be unashamed of the truth and to face it. I pass on what I've learned to others. Character forms in community.

Frank Coats
Crosby, Texas

My mother had died, and I was angry. I began writing letters to my family members. My grandmother called them poison pen letters. Despite Gam's accusation, I kept writing them. I was eight years old.

There was no grace or mercy in the words I chiseled onto the page. I wanted someone to blame, someone who would not try to correct my feelings with some useless words about how my mom might have felt or what she might have said if she were alive. She was not alive, and I didn't want another person to tell me about my mother. I wanted someone brave enough to sit with me and all of the poison in my young heart.

Gam received many of the letters under her bedroom door that first summer after my mom died. One day I found her standing in the kitchen with my most recent epistle clutched in her fist. Staring out the window just over the sink, without a nod to my presence in the doorway behind her, she said through gritted teeth, "This hurt me. These words you have written have hurt my feelings." She turned to face me. "And so I want to know, Elsa, is this the kind of person you want to be? Do you want to be the kind of person who uses your words to hurt the people you love?" The answer is no. I think of it and of Gam every time I pick up my pen.

Elsa Cook
Salado, Texas

Outside, an ice storm raged in early springtime. Inside the hospital, it was hour 40 of my labor. I was exhausted. When doctors determined that I needed an emergency C-section, I was put on a gurney that flew me down the hallway and banged through the entrance into the operating room. The OR staff readied me for surgery. I felt like a car with people jumping up and down on its bumpers. The doctor cried out for assistance. It took two strong people to release the baby, who had been stuck on my pelvic bone. I was pushed and pulled and then—our son was born. His heart was beating but he had stopped breathing. Something was not right.

My husband followed the staff as they rushed the baby to intensive care. After all of the intense emotion and exertion, I broke down and sobbed. I had not seen our baby. I was alone. I was terrified. I called out, but no one came.

Then the anesthesiologist who had been in the surgery walked in. He came up to me and said, “All is well. Your son is healthy. We made the right decision not to put you under for the C-section because that would have jeopardized his breathing.” I nodded, but I was still sobbing and shaking.

He leaned over me, held my fingers in his, and gently wiped my tears away. Kindly. Calmly. Yet he did so with a deep intimacy. I knew that this man’s gesture was of God, and that God was there in the chaos, in my fear, in the unknown.

Anne Roser
Silver Lake, New Hampshire

For many years I served a large and vibrant church in Rochester, Minnesota. Each morning at about nine, I’d tour the building to greet members of the various groups that were meeting and share a cup of coffee or a pastry with them. I looked forward to the interactions.

Except on the second Wednesday of the month. That’s when the sewing and packing group met in the church basement to gather up clothes that had been discarded in the collection barrels. They’d repair the items they could repair and send them to mission stations throughout the world.

For some reason there was always an edge to my conversations with these volunteers, and I would often leave abruptly, making the excuse of needing to tend to “important business” elsewhere. It bothered me that our conversations were stiff and brief. I even talked to my psychiatrist about this, but we couldn’t put a finger on the cause of the contentious interactions.

Then one day my psychiatrist said, “Donald, tell me about Christmas when you were a boy,” “Ah,” I answered. “It was a wonderful time. We lived in Beirut, Lebanon, where my parents were missionaries. Every year we received this huge wooden crate from America, and on Christmas Day my father would put it in the middle of our living room and open it with a claw hammer. Gifts from a large church in America would tumble out on the floor like fruit out of a cornucopia. Then my father would offer a word of thanks to God.

“But as we opened our presents I always knew that I was receiving used toys, used clothes, and used athletic gear. I had seen magazines showing American children with *new* Christmas gifts, and it was obvious to me that God loved them more than he loved me. I couldn’t tell my father that I was angry with God for treating me so shabbily, and I couldn’t show my disappointment when my father was thanking the God I was resenting. So I kept my silence.”

Immediately I saw the connection. The hidden hurt was influencing my experience with the volunteers who were sending secondhand goods across the ocean—goods like the ones that had made me feel inferior and resentful. After that epiphany moment in the psychiatrist’s office, I realized that I had been the cause of all the angst in past meetings. And my meetings with the sewing and packing group came to be among my happiest memories.

Donald D. McCall
Madison, Wisconsin