Return: Essays by readers

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

Readers Write in the November 21, 2018 issue

Photo by Ethan Weil

In response to our request for essays on return, we received many compelling reflections. Below is a selection. The next topic for reader submissions is **dirt** *—read more*.

I left home in search of breathing room. The eldest daughter of a blended family, I grew up fearing my stepmother’s ire. My father offered little refuge. He was a good but rigid man with a dualistic view of the world: sheep/goats, heaven/hell, men/women.

When I answered a call to ordained ministry, the chasm grew between me and parents. Women were to remain silent in the church of my youth.

But when my stepmother was diagnosed with stage IV ovarian cancer, I began asking new questions: Who did I want to be as her life drew to a close? Could I avoid being crushed by criticism if I participated in her care? Could I forgive without expectation?

I returned for a visit to find the cancer and its treatment had weakened my stepmother dramatically. She was unable to stand, sit, or lie down without assistance. Yet she raged against the cancer with the same resolve she brought to everything.

During my second visit, she thanked me for being there. “I wasn’t a good stepmother,” she said. “I am terribly sorry for that.” I was dumbstruck. I mumbled something about not being a good stepdaughter and changed the subject.

Helping her into bed that night, I brought it up again, noting the difficulty of merging two families in the late 1950s when the only blended families our rural community knew were on television soap operas.

“We had no self-help books, no role models to guide us,” I noted.

“No Oprah or Dr. Phil,” she added with a smile.

“You were—and are—a good mother,” I said, wincing at my words.

“You might say we did the best we could under the circumstances,” she observed.

As I left the room she called to me, “Beverly, you are a good daughter.” My eyes welled with tears. I couldn’t recall a time when she said I was good at anything.

In the weeks and months that followed, her health waxed and waned. Always a private person, she opened up to me again and again. No subject was off limits. She spoke about the challenges of moving into my father’s home, family, and church after they married. She explained how difficult it was to find her own place, how often she felt judged for a divorce she didn’t want and a remarriage that enabled her to make a life for her daughters. We covered all the important topics: women in ministry (she approved), politics (she swore me to secrecy), theology (she disagreed with “Dad’s church”), Dad (he was difficult but a good provider), death and dying

(she wasn’t afraid of death; it was the dying that scared her).

One afternoon when she napped longer than usual, I peeked into her room and found her lying in bed awake. I climbed into bed next to her. She took my hand, turned to face me, and told me she looked forward to my visits and welcomed our talks.

Then she inquired about my biological mother, who had long been a forbidden topic. I rarely saw her after she abandoned us. But I had recently returned from visiting her, inspired to make peace in that relationship even as I attempted reconciliation with my stepmother.

I explained how difficult it was to juggle two mothers, hesitating to speak of one to the other, believing a choice between them was required. I was coming to understand how each woman was gifted and flawed.

“Can any child have too many mothers to love them?” I wondered aloud.

“I don’t think so,” she replied. “I’m sure no mother can have too many daughters to love.”

Beverly Zell
Holland, Mich.

He’s rude!” “He’s obnoxious!” “He’s volatile!” “He kicked all of us out of his room, and it wasn’t pretty.” Three nurses agreed, “You don’t want to go in there, Chaplain!”

“So be it—I’ll be the next one booted out, or not.”

When I entered, the shades were closed and Butch was sitting on the edge of his hospital bed staring at the door. The urine jug sitting on the tray table was half full, and that gave me pause as a possible weapon in anger. Butch was wearing a Harley Davidson T-shirt. I looked at him and asked, “So, have you got a Harley? From what I’m told they are the best motorcycles out there.”

“Yeah, I do,” he said.

“One of my sons has a Ducati and the other a BMW,” I said as he frowned, “but that Harley name seems to have the most loyal followers.” This was now almost all I knew about motorcycles. “So which model do you have? How did you get started riding?” I asked.

With a lot of colorful language, the conversation began to unfold. He told me about all his Harley cycles, showing his pride in the several he owned, bragging about their tremendous power and the thrill he experienced riding them.

“Have you been to Sturgis, South Dakota, for the annual Harley gathering?” I inquired.

“You bet,” he said. “Have you?”

“As a matter of fact I have! Quite the display of bikes and bikers.” I had been there for about 20 minutes among leather jackets and roaring cycles, but when I saw a woman chained to her man’s cycle I knew I was out of my comfort zone. Butch talked about his trip to that mecca of Harleys: “I should be out there tonight riding, drinking beer with my buddies, meeting up with my gal. Instead I’m here.”

I nodded. “I hear you, Butch, and now you are fighting a disease you never expected to have.” He talked about how he got AIDS and the repercussions of that. “I lost 50 pounds, lost my job, take drugs that make me weak and nauseous. I don’t have the strength to party with my friends, and I had to move in with my parents. I am scrawny, gaunt, and useless. I hate being here! I am a walking shell of who I used to be.”

About 40 minutes into the visit, he looked at me and my name tag and asked, “Who the hell are you?” I held out my hand to shake his. “I’m Jeanne, the chaplain, and it has been a delight to get to know you. There are a lot of things you have to do here to feel better and control your disease, but my visits are optional. I will stop by tomorrow and pop my head in, and you can say yes or no—your choice.” He continued staring at me and then said, “You can come back.”

I visited Butch most days of his two hospitalizations. He continued to share his story and his feelings of anger, longing, and frustration. Once after a sleepless night, he whispered, “Do you know what I do when the pain is so bad I can hardly stand it?” I held my breath, given his past coping mechanisms.

“I turn to him.” He nodded toward the Catholic crucifix on the wall.

“I didn’t know you knew him,” I answered.

“Oh yes. I went to Sunday school as a kid. And he comforts me. He does. I guess I’m returning to my childhood faith, aren’t I?” I put my hand on his thin arm, and said, “Yes, Butch.” He nodded with a tear in his eye.

He died two days later. A nurse told me that his last expression was a smile.

Jeanne Donstad Olsen
Bettendorf, Iowa

I came out in 1972 when I was a freshman in college. I had been raised in the Evangelical Covenant Church but discerned it was not a safe place as a gay man despite the hours I had logged at services, Sunday school, confirmation classes, vacation Bible school, and youth group.

Leaving the church, a very human institution full of fears and prejudices often disguised as love and concern, wasn’t a carefully thought-out plan. It was more of a hunch, one that proved correct. Over the years I’ve heard the stories from people who stayed of lives, relationships, and calls to ministry that have been refused, denied, and judged unworthy.

Returning to church after an absence of 13 years was another hunch that proved correct. I attended the services on Easter and the following Sunday at Alice Millar Chapel at Northwestern University. Resurrection offered a new kind of freedom. I knew who I was and didn’t have to hide.

I learned a hymn new to me, “The King of Love My Shepherd Is.” I thought the image of straying from the fold and being carried home by the Great Shepherd who seeks the lost ones best described that time in my life.

But now I know I wasn’t lost. The church had left me as much as I had left the church. I wasn’t returning home. I was being welcomed into a new kind of community.

I don’t recall learning much about the Holy Spirit when I was growing up. But now I know the Holy Spirit issued the invitation to return. I heard it in the call to communion: “Come to this table, then, sisters and brothers, as you are. Partake and share.”

Wayne MacPherson
Evanston, Ill.

It was the worst drunk-driving accident in Virginia history. In a green Toyota pickup, three men in the cab and two in the flatbed were coming from a solid day of drinking at a place called Reno, a bar and gambling joint built out on a pier over the Potomac River at Colonial Beach. The driver’s blood alcohol content at death was .34, high enough to have caused him to pass out.

In a bronze Cadillac, my parents, my sister Betty and brother-in-law Gilbert, and Gilbert’s mother, Bessie, were heading to Colonial Beach to eat hard-shell crabs.

The Toyota crossed the yellow line and slammed head-on into my family’s car at 80 miles per hour. Gilbert died instantly. My father died five hours later. Mom and Betty suffered multiple broken bones but survived. Bessie, frail and in her eighties, survived for a few days but never regained consciousness.

Of the five men in the truck, four died on that day in 1983.

For many years, I couldn’t go near Colonial Beach, though I had many happy times there in my childhood. Once I unknowingly took a route that passed the hospital where my family members had been treated, in a town 20 miles away. Just seeing it again made me nauseous. I didn’t want to see where the accident happened. And I certainly didn’t want to see Reno.

Thirty years later, now an Episcopal priest, a friend accepted a call to a church not far from Colonial Beach. I preached at Ellen’s installation as rector in her new parish. The next day, I told her I was thinking about going to Colonial Beach on my way home. I wasn’t sure I’d have the nerve. Ellen told me how to get there from her house, and how to avoid it.

I got in my car and soon reached the intersection where I’d turn right to go to Colonial Beach or left to go back the way I’d come. I didn’t know what I would do

until I turned the wheel to the right.

I drove the road on which the accident occurred, not knowing exactly where it happened. Gentle bends in the road made me think, “Was it here?” We’d heard it occurred as the two cars came around a curve. Everything seemed eerily still. I went on into Colonial Beach.

Was this the town I remembered so vividly from childhood adventures? Was it really so small and rundown back then? Much had changed, but I recognized the Municipal Pier just fine—and Reno.

It was now Riverboat on the Potomac. The place looked locked up, but in the hour or so I spent there, I saw several people come and go.

I headed for a nearby swing set on the beach. I hadn’t swung since I was in high school. The weather didn’t suit the activity, but I did it anyway, slowly, lazily, as I watched a variety of ducks come in toward the shore.

Shouldn’t I be feeling something? I thought. But it was the sign I hadn’t known I needed: the ordinary, undramatic sign of healing.

Connie Clark
Earlysville, Va.

After being diagnosed with an aggressive but early stage breast cancer, I dyed my hair pink. I knew it would fall out with the chemo. When my hair started floating off behind me in a breeze, I resigned myself to shaving my head. I brought my little daughters with me to the barbershop. They laughed hilariously at the pink hair all over the floor, at my newly bald head, at the prospect of writing on my bare scalp with the Magic Markers I’d brought along. The hairdresser was silent. She understood the occasion.

That afternoon, I left the kingdom of normalcy. I was exiled to a territory of startled double takes and unwelcome sympathy from strangers.

Cancer brings all kinds of struggle. I endured the thrush that coated my tongue in white fungus, an infection that resisted all but the fiercest antibiotics, fatigue that put me to bed before it was dark out. But perhaps the hardest loss was my hair. It

was public and strangely shaming.

Chemo ended just after Christmas. It was four months before the stubble lengthened into legitimate hair. I left my wig at home on Easter morning. “Christ is risen, and so is my hair!” I announced. My hair was back. I was back.

Except, there was no back. My hair twisted into gray springy wires unlike any hair I’d ever grown before. Nothing fit quite right. Not in my closet, and not anywhere else, either. The language of friendship was sometimes strained. I lost focus at work. My husband struggled to keep up with my ricocheting emotions.

The Babylonians set the Israelites free to return to their promised land. The Israelites were heartbroken to discover that it was no longer as they remembered it. They learned that the temple had to be rebuilt.

I have returned, maybe, but I will be a stranger to myself for a very long time. This disorientation, this bewilderment—they are the terms of repatriation to my life.

Anne Turner
Arlington, Va.

> **From Frederick Buechner, *The Clown in the Belfry: Writings on Faith and Fiction***:
>
> **“Turn around and believe that the good news that we are loved is better than we ever dared hope, and that to believe in that good news, to live out of it and toward it, to be in love with that good news, is of all glad things in this world the gladdest thing of all.”**

Several weeks before I began my first call to ministry, my brother Earl, 13 years older than I and my mentor as a Disciples of Christ pastor, was in a car wreck.

While Earl was unconscious in the intensive care unit, I met a young woman in the waiting room. I went and introduced myself. She was one of Earl’s parishioners. We talked for a while. When the limited ICU visiting hours began, I asked if she would like to go back and see Earl. She nodded yes. I took her hand and we went and stood

by his bed.

After Earl died, the overwhelming grief was lessened by calls and visits from the young woman I met at the hospital. A year later we walked up the aisle of the church that my brother had served. It seemed like our marriage was a sign of God's grace in the midst of tragedy.

On a Sunday afternoon 25 years later, she told me she no longer loved me as a husband and maybe the problem began with the way we met. She was not happy and had not been for a long time. It was a surprise to me. Until three months earlier all of her words to me and on social media were about how much we had to be thankful for. Then I discovered there was another to whom she had given her heart.

I devolved into an utter mess of depression and feelings of failure. I was in no shape to do the work of a pastor. My voice to preach, my pen to write, and my will to lead were all gone. I resigned from my congregation.

The life-giving grace so present 25 years earlier seemed just as absent. My despair reached a climax one day in December. I looked into the bathroom mirror at the stranger I had become. I swallowed every pill in my medicine cabinet, then I lay down to die.

My sister and her husband found me and supported me on the road to reclaiming my life. In God's grace there were possibilities that in my overwhelming depression I did not see. I am grateful that others did and that I had the help of medication, talk therapy, a community of support, and my two children.

A year after my wife left, I returned to my life's work as a pastor with a new congregation. I said from the pulpit, "The peace of Christ be with you." They responded, "And also with you."

Mark E. Poindexter
Portsmouth, Va.

Nearly 50 years ago I gave away something I never expected to see return: my only child, a son. Many years later, my psychotherapist would point out that when I spoke of this part of my history, I referred to this baby as "it."

In the late ’60s, being unmarried and pregnant was a thing of shame. Such girls were hidden away in homes for unwed mothers until their babies were born and given up for adoption. I had the good fortune of moving out of state to live with relatives. My parents did what they thought was best so that I could move on with my life as if it never happened.

I knew nothing about my son, except that he was adopted by a family in Salt Lake City. I was not allowed to see him, although I felt his skin on mine when they laid him on my belly at birth. After I returned home, my parents never spoke of it to me. I could count on one hand the number of people with whom I shared my secret. I denied his existence thousands of times to people who casually asked if I had children. Shame is a powerful silencer.

I married, moved to a different state, and changed my name a couple of times, all of which would make it difficult if not impossible for my son to find me, even if he were inclined to search for his birth parents.

Decades later, a social media post caught my attention with information about adoption searches. After much considering, I made the contact that led to a reunion with my 47-year-old son. I’ve had the joy of getting to know him, seeing my blue eyes in his, and knowing that my funny side lives on in him. I’ve spent treasured moments with him, my daughter-in-law, and my five-year-old towheaded grandson, in whom I savor the little boy antics I never knew with my son.

After all the years of shame and secrecy, reuniting with my long-lost child has been for me a sure sign of redemption, resurrection, and a return to wholeness.

Janet Boyd
Elkhart, Ind.

My husband and I were seminary students visiting Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in January 2010 when the earthquake happened.

Buried underneath the concrete, Ben sang:

> O Lamb of God, you bear the sin of all the world away;
> Eternal peace with God you made: God’s peace to us we pray.

I listened for more. “Ben!” I called out. “Ben!” *O please, God, don’t let him die.* “Ben, keep singing, sweetheart, and we will find you.”

There was no more song. There was only one thing left to say: “I love you, Ben!”

A team of ordinary yet extraordinary Haitians, who lived in the neighborhood in which Ben died, dug him out of his tomb of concrete. “What would it look like,” they said, “if we left a guest in our country buried in the rubble? What kind of hospitality is that?”

For three days they dug, with nothing more than hammers, chisels, and their will to return their guest to his family. It was night when they unearthed Ben’s body. They carried him down from the collapsed building, the way lit by candlelight.

We buried Ben in the rocky hills of Decorah, Iowa. Tens of thousands of other people who died in the earthquake were in mass graves.

In 45 seconds, I became a widow at 27 years old. Who takes Psalm 104 literally anyway? “I will sing to the Lord, as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being.”

I didn’t want to return to our apartment. I stood with my hand on the doorknob and gathered my courage. With one deep breath I opened the door and stepped across the threshold. I moved methodically through our space, taking in my new reality.

How strange to know he was dead and yet smell him. His scent was strongest in our bedroom. His side of the bed still held his imprint, as if he had awakened there that morning.

The last room I entered was our office and music room. The hymnal was open on the piano. The tune of this hymn, “Where Charity and Love Prevail,” played over and over again in my head the night of the earthquake. Ben died singing the melody of this song, witnessing to the Lamb of God.

If I could have piled up rocks to make an altar at that piano like Jacob did at Bethel, I would have. Surely, the Lord was in this place.

Renee Splichal Larson
Bismarck, N.D.

It’s not often somebody knocks on a door of our large, sprawling church building and asks if there’s a worship service taking place. Our church has a multitude of doors. In this day and age, security realities mean that only one or two of those doors may be opened at a time, to monitor them more easily. On one Wednesday evening, the doorbell rang and I left a Lenten study to find out who might be there.

At the door stood two young women. One said to me, “You may not remember me, but you confirmed me 15 years ago at the church on the south side. Do you have a Lenten service tonight?” Then I recognized her younger self in her face. I invited them in and they joined the circle.

My long-ago confirmand and her husband were newly married and looking at a house in the neighborhood. They had determined it was time to find a church home and decided to check things out even before the ink was dry on the mortgage papers. They would be able to walk to a church of her childhood denomination, and her husband was eager to join her.

As a United Methodist pastor whose longest tenure was ten years, to reconnect with someone I knew as a teenager was a sheer gift. After the somewhat typical pattern of confirmation followed by not much commitment to organized religion, she was back.

Shortly after appearing at our door, this young couple was sharing their gifts with the congregation. When their two children were born, they were baptized and joined our children’s ministry.

At a time when many people no longer darken the doors of a church, this young woman had returned to her roots.

Sue Burwell
Cudahy, Wis.

The call came as I was drifting off to sleep. “Your mother has been sent to the emergency room,” a nurse informed me. I crept out into the wee hours of the morning for another bedside vigil. This time my mother’s do-not-resuscitate orders are being taken seriously. Medical staff surrounded her bed and looked at me

expectantly. “What do we do? You have a few minutes to decide.”

My mother’s life for the prior decade flashed before me: the many trips to the hospital, doctor’s appointments that seemed pointless, the tinkering with multiple medications. And I thought about our son’s high school graduation just weeks away. Would I wake up my family, call my sister and nephew, who were thousands of miles away, so they could say good-bye?

No one on the medical team had seen my mother before, and they could not give me the advice I desperately needed. With no one to consult, I told them I wanted her around for a while longer. They followed my orders.

The next day, my mother was more alert than she had been in many years. She did not know it yet, but she’d had, in the doctor’s words, “a massive heart attack.” She started hospice care.

Miraculously she returned to us, the mom and Nana we used to know. We took her picture with her grandson in graduation cap and gown, with her joking that she was taking all the attention away from him, and she attended his graduation party. She enjoyed conversations with relatives and nursing home staff, laughing like she hadn’t laughed in what seemed like forever. My daughter polished her nails one last time. We took her outside to breathe fresh air, soak up some sun, and wiggle her bare toes in the grass. She lived long enough to see pictures of her first great-grandchild.

She died a few months later. I will never know if I made the right decision. But, for a few weeks, I was happy I’d brought her back.

Jill Torbett
Marietta, Ohio

My mother had longed to visit Priverno, her family’s touchstone, in 1973 when my father took us all to Italy. My father, also the child of Italian immigrants, said he had crafted our tour meticulously (Rome! Sorrento! Florence! Venice!), and we had no time to spare. I think Dad, a proud member of the burgeoning postwar middle class, did not want to indulge what he saw as the squalor his and my mother’s parents had left behind.

Returning 35 years later with my family, I wanted to see Priverno. At the train station we were greeted by cousins: a civil engineer, his young daughter, and a pharmaceutical executive who ably translated for us all day long. The medieval city of Priverno was at the top of a hill, so our car climbed the narrowing streets. Then we ascended the interior stairs of a compact apartment building.

We were welcomed into a sunny living room, filled window-to-wall with a table set for 12. Standing and sitting in every available space were old people and young people, garrulous people and shy people, all descendants of the matriarch, the 90-year-old wife of my grandfather's youngest brother. We were led to the table, and from the bathtub-sized kitchen came plates of olives, buffalo mozzarella and artichokes, freshly made pasta, and red wine served in juice glasses.

We ate in abundance, leaned back, and started to rise. No, no, the chorus shouted, for out came platters of sausage and beef, green salad, more olives, loaves of bread, ricotta cakes, and platters of fruit. After an hour I stumbled to the tiny balcony for air and an unforgettable view of the hills and olive trees.

Later cousins took us for a walk around the oldest part of the town. We visited the 12th-century church where my grandfather was baptized and his family still worshiped. We saw my grandfather's house, where as a young man he left the rest of his family (and, supposedly, a young woman and her angry husband). We visited a small museum directed by another cousin, featuring statues, mosaics, glassware, and other Roman antiquities.

As night fell, we returned to the apartment. We were greeted by more happy people and a table laden with dolce accompanied by red, white, and blue plates, napkins, and an American flag cake announcing "Welcome!" Everyone ate, laughed, and talked some more. I presented gifts and marshaled enough Italian to deliver a short speech of gratitude. With every pause, 20 people urged me on and beamed when I chose any Italian word at all. I concluded to cheers and kisses.

I was stunned to watch still more food appear: cheeses, hams, salami, sliced bread. No one would partake until I did, so I staggered to the table again.

Before long, a cousin escorted me into the hall to marvel at the family pictures, some almost as old as photography itself. Among them was a cherished photograph of my grandfather and grandmother and their five children, with my 20-year-old-mother, the eldest, presiding over them all. I had seen the photograph many times,

but I gazed at it as I never had before. There in Priverno was my mother, among such loving people who had been strangers to me only a day before.

Carol Ann Siciliano
Falls Church, Va.