

Lapse: Essays by readers

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

Readers Write in the [January 1, 2020](#) issue



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*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 **dawn** and **movement**—[read more](#).*

The doctor led me to the X-ray room and said, “If we’re lucky, it’s pneumonia.” The following months were full of tests, surgeries, heart catheters, stays in the intensive care unit, emergency flights to the hospital, and learning about end-stage heart failure. With no risk factors or family history of heart disease, with low blood pressure, perfect cholesterol, and otherwise pristine health, I had never been asked to sign a DNR order. A crevice opened up beneath me as I read, “high risk of sudden cardiac death” on my medical record.

I lived in a foggy lapse of faith for nearly a year and a half, in the empty space between my beliefs about God and what was happening in my life. This deep, hollow place was foreign territory.

But God was at work within the lapse. I didn't realize it until I looked back that God was using the time to draw me close to him. The lapse became a sacred expanse that beckoned me into a deeper relationship with a love-driven God. The lapse created space and time to appreciate a God who doesn't appear at our every call but who always runs toward us in our pain. The lapse provided leeway for friends and family to enter my life in ways they never would have otherwise, bringing meals, and mentorship, and meaning. Round-the-clock prayer chains connected my reality to God's promises.

When I was hospitalized for an emergency appendectomy, doctors discussed the dangers of performing the surgery with my weak heart. They ordered an echocardiogram to evaluate the risk. To their disbelief, the tests showed my heart function had somehow become normal. The lapse had been bridged. But I was a different person. God had used those months to bind my faith into something stronger than it could ever have been in perfect health. I guess you could say I was lucky it wasn't pneumonia.

Lori Ann Wood
Bentonville, Arkansas

It was Beethoven's fault that I was late to school again. The Sanctus movement of *Missa Solemnis* was playing on the LP record in my room, crushing me with the violin solo's beauty. The school bus waited, and I didn't care.

My mother said, "You're listening to that mass again? You're turning into a Holy Roller." I didn't know what a Holy Roller was, but if it was anything like a Jesus freak, I was all in. I was a teenager, a string player, and I had a secret. My secret was a hunger for Jesus and love for church, which rendered my classmates wary.

I grew to know God through prayer and the mystery of bread and wine. But the God I knew through hearing and making music with strings filled me with a profound joy that I kept to myself. When I drew my bow over the strings in harmony with the cello section, the notes transported me to a place grander than our cinder block rehearsal

hall.

Then for 20 years I stopped playing. Marriage, family, and job pressures claimed my time. My viola sat in its case. My husband and I both pursued seminary and ordination into the Episcopal priesthood. All seemed well, but for me all wasn't well. Yes, I'd studied and entered into a calling. But I had neglected my first and sharpest connection to God.

During my first call to a parish in a university community, I joined a string orchestra, though by then it was tough to keep up with the professionals. When I was called to another congregation, a cellist and a harpist in the parish recruited me, along with a violinist and pianist, to perform around the city for a variety of events. The lapse in making music ended.

Now, when our group gathers to tune before another gig, the connection to the holy surfaces again. I breathe it in. I know that we offer our music with God's grace upholding us.

Raisin Horn

Davenport, Iowa

From Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark*:

Part of the inner world of everyone is this sense of emptiness, unease, incompleteness, and I believe that this in itself is a word from God, that this is the sound that God's voice makes in a world that has explained him away. In such a world, I suspect that maybe God speaks to us most clearly through his silence, his absence, so that we know him best through our missing him.

Soon after I joined my husband in retirement, he was diagnosed with tongue cancer. Instead of the feelings of expansiveness and lightness I had anticipated in retirement, I felt overwhelmed by the magnitude of what was coming. What would it mean for him, for us, to have his tongue surgically removed and replaced by a new one fashioned from thigh tissue? This was his second cancer diagnosis; we thought

we had finished with surgeries, challenging drug therapies, and tube feedings 20 years ago. Would he be able to speak or swallow at all? How would it be never again to taste food?

The hardest question of all: Would he survive? His team of doctors could make no promises. Probabilities were all we had to go on: “better than a coin toss,” the surgeon said. Lurking underneath the fear and concern was the temptation to lapse into an impenetrable sadness. I began to tilt toward despair.

It is my practice to rise early and engage in prayer and devotional reading. One morning, I happened to read John’s narrative of the wedding at Cana. “When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, ‘They have no wine.’” With the reading of these words, I began to sob. Metaphorically speaking, we were out of wine. The party seemed over. My heart was breaking for my husband and the hardships ahead for him in the potential loss of his speech and his ability to swallow. Our lives would be derailed by a second life-threatening cancer and another round of knock-down, drag-out cancer treatment. Worst of all, there was no promise of long-term survival.

Inspired by Mother Mary’s instruction to the servants to “do whatever he tells you,” I prayed out loud (more like shouted) in sadness to God in Christ: “Do something! We are out of wine here!” Just saying those words was cathartic. I quieted myself and finished the reading.

At Cana, in that situation of possible embarrassment and social dishonor for the family hosting the wedding, Jesus worked with the elements that were present in the situation and made more wine—the very best wine that would be served there, in fact. The good wine was crafted out of this potential calamity by divine grace and compassionate power. Lodging itself in my heart was the realization that the only good place for us to lapse would be into the arms of God—to trust God in Christ as Mary did at Cana, to trust that God would infuse us with the wine needed to navigate the hard way before us.

With God’s help, 12 difficult weeks after my husband’s surgery, we are rising each day with no small amount of joy, despite the ongoing struggles. We are more aware than ever of the preciousness and potential in each moment, taking nothing for granted. Trusting God to help us live fully and lovingly, we inhabit the life we have, a life overflowing with care from family and friends, and with opportunities care for

others and for creation. The new vintage of wine offered us has notes of creativity, heart, vulnerability, grace, and grit. Lapsing into God allows me to taste it.

Mary James

Durham, New Hampshire

One summer day, when my children were ten, seven, and two, we were driving home from a restaurant. It had been a fairly dreary day, and the traffic on the cross-county parkway was proceeding slowly. I was muttering under my breath at the driver who had just cut in front of me when I looked up and saw the most magnificent rainbow stretched across the sky. The colors were more vivid than in any rainbow I had ever seen, each color as easy to distinguish as in a child's painting. The arc spanned the entire width of the highway, each end disappearing behind the houses on each side.

Abruptly, I drove the car across the lane to the right and parked it on the side of the road. My husband asked if there was anything wrong with the car. I said, "Look! Look! Everyone get out of the car—but make sure you get out on the right." I unbuckled the youngest from her car seat. When she was out of the car, I pointed skyward. Once she saw the rainbow, she squealed and started jumping up and down. The rest of my family, arms linked, looked at the rainbow in awe.

Other drivers were concerned when they saw our family standing by the side of the road. One person yelled out, "Are you OK?" We pointed to the sky. The car pulled over and the passengers got out to look at the rainbow. This kept happening until five cars were on the side of the road and a group of us was looking upward. Finally, a police car stopped and asked if there had been an accident. We pointed up. He said, "You got out of the car for that? You need to move on."

At that point, the rainbow was starting to fade. All of us looked at one another and realized that the moment was over. Slowly, we returned to our cars and carefully eased back onto the highway. But standing on the side of the road, my arms around the other members of my family, I knew I had seen the covenant, and all was good.

Evelyn Riedel

Pelham, New York

A lapse in pastoral care turned into one of the best mistakes of my ministry. Annette was in her seventies and a longtime member of the congregation I was serving as an interim. She was on the transition team, so I had a lot of contact with her and had gotten to know her fairly well. One day she told me that she would soon be having minor surgery and would love me check in with her afterward. I told her that of course I'd be happy to do that.

Some weeks later I received a phone call from Annette asking to meet with me. When I asked what she wanted to talk about, she told me she would rather tell me in person, so we set a time. When I entered my office for our appointment, she was sitting there waiting for me. I sat down next to her. She put her hand on top of mine on the arm of my chair and greeted me with, "I'm very angry with you."

Her voice was firm, but she didn't sound cross or upset. "I had my surgery last week . . ." Before she finished her sentence my entire body slumped. I had forgotten about her surgery. I chastised myself with words unfit for clergy to speak in front of a congregant or publish for a public audience. My self-condemnation was in high gear. Although I heard her say, "and you forgot about me," I was too busy beating myself up to respond. I hung my head in shame.

Annette patted my hand, "Alright, now, now," she said. "You're my pastor, Tony. I needed you to be there for me and you weren't. That really hurt me. I wanted to tell you this in person."

"Oh my God, Annette. I don't know what else to say except you're right. I should have been there. I am so very sorry. I screwed up." I grabbed my phone from the table and checked my calendar. Sure enough, not only had I forgotten the surgery, I had forgotten to put it in my calendar. I blew it.

"I know you didn't ignore me. I know you just forgot. But I wanted you to know that the forgetting hurt. And I accept your apology." She got up and gave me a hug. And thus I was absolved.

Annette never mentioned it again. She was a reference for me as I moved on to other ministries. We've made sure to touch base at our denomination's annual national meeting. She updates me on what her congregation is doing and tells me time and again how much she learned and how much the congregation learned from

me while I was there. She remembers all the good I did.

I look back often on that lapse in memory. I learned never to wait until later to put things in my calendar. I learned the powerful lesson that when others hurt you it stings, but when the pastor hurts you, it stabs you in the heart. I also learned about how to practice the forgiveness I preach. Annette expressed her anger and disappointment with assertiveness but not contempt. I was able to respond by owning my mistake and offering a sincere apology without excuses.

When I spoke to her recently about this incident, Annette told me that I had created the environment that enabled her to address a hurt directly and openly. She said it was a big moment of growth for her to be able to do that.

What an awesome divine circle: in ministering to others we are ministered to, and in teaching others we are taught. Perhaps we are called to ministry not because we have the most to teach, but the most to learn.

Tony Lorenzen
New Britain, Connecticut

That Monday was a typical sunny, blue-sky afternoon in Hawaii. Our yellow school bus was transporting our newswriting class back to our high school after a field trip to a publishing house. Suddenly the bus came to an abrupt stop and my pastor came on the bus. He spoke to the bus driver and then took me off the bus without saying anything except, "Follow me."

Fear gripped me. Not a word transpired until we arrived at my home. Still not a word until we stepped into our small house, filled with family and neighbors. I thought maybe something had happened to my dad, but no, Dad was sitting in the corner. "Your brother died today in a plane crash."

I remember screaming, rushing to my bedroom, and slamming the door. Beloved brother, Yone, dead? God, how could this happen? He was a jet pilot, and the plane he piloted had a mechanical failure. It was so traumatic for our close-knit family that after the two beautiful civil and military memorial services, we could not speak his name. The pain for my parents and all of us siblings was so deep and profound it would take decades to feel normal again. My pastor never offered me a prayer or a

word of comfort.

I couldn't trust God anymore. The teenager who went to church twice a week—choir practice on Wednesdays and Sunday worship—stopped going to church. The nightly recitation of the Lord's Prayer stopped. My Christian life lapsed. It was not dramatic—no using drugs or alcohol—but I stopped placing trust in God through Jesus.

Saturday nights were spent dancing at the Hollywood Palladium or other music venues, and Sunday mornings was a time to sleep in. I married an engineer who was an atheist, which was OK because I had eliminated that part of life. We bought a home in a beautiful suburb of Los Angeles and had two kids.

One summer afternoon several mothers and I were with our children at a pool party. Suddenly my son came up to me and said, "Mom, Anne is at the bottom of the pool."

Emergency personnel came. Anne hovered between life and death. Who could I turn to? God? He let me down before. But in my trauma, I looked around. My best friend, Edna, belonged to a nearby Catholic church, and in those days churches kept their doors unlocked so people could enter and pray. Edna suggested I go to church.

So that's what I did. I returned to the One who had brought me joy and hope as a young teenager. I prayed desperately, "Oh, Lord, if you let her live, I will serve you the rest of my life!" What happened to my lapsed relationship?

Years later I read an article about how some people are "wired" for God. I came to understand that I truly am a person wired for God. "Come, all who are heavy laden, and I will grant you peace." Through my prayers I found peace and hope. On the third day of prayer, I entered the ICU and was shocked to see my daughter pink-cheeked and smiling. "Can I go home?" she asked. The doctors checked her out and said her vital signs were normal. We went home that afternoon.

My anger at God evaporated when Anne was given a chance to live. I will never understand why my brother, a loving, smart young man, was taken at the prime of his life. That will be my first question to Jesus. But then again, I may not ask that question. Perhaps it was in the blueprint of my journey of faith that I needed to go through that lapse. Perhaps this is why I am understanding of each person's faith journey. We will have journeys through valleys and hills and along the way, we may have lapses. Even during my lapse, when I called, "Jesus save my child!" he had

mercy and showed me grace and love.

Norma Nomura DeSaegher
Chula Vista, California

Every morning I read the newspaper at Grandma Maki's kitchen table while I awaited the beginning of our daily ritual. When she began to rustle about in her bedroom, I'd call out, "Good morning, Grandma Maki. Want some coffee?" Each time she would give the same response, "I'd love some coffee, but I can't make it anymore."

Over the past year, Grandma's dementia had rapidly progressed, compounding the difficulties of her gradually losing her sight. At some point, operating the coffee machine had become a task that was beyond her.

The struggle with dementia was the occasion for our daily breakfasts. A little over a month before, she woke at 4 a.m. in her third-floor apartment confused and dismayed. Unable to figure out where she was, she began walking down the hallway in her nightgown, knocking on doors and asking neighbors for help. In the family discussion that followed, the decision was made that someone needed to stay with her for a month or two while arrangements were made to move her to an assisted living facility. That someone was me.

At the time I was 24, unemployed, and heading to seminary in the fall. After finishing college directionless and drunk, I was living with my brother. Holding a steady job as a laborer for a construction company had helped me regain some semblance of stability and self-confidence. But I was laid off that February when the housing crisis hit. My newfound unemployment turned out to be just the kick in the pants I'd needed to apply to seminary, and I was now trying to convince myself that I could belong there, that I could be a serious, sober person.

Grandma Maki's place was only 15 minutes from my brother's, and I had nothing but free time on my hands, so every evening around 10 p.m. I'd head over to her place to sleep on the couch for the night. Typically, we both slept through the night uneventfully and saw one another the next morning at the breakfast table.

"That's alright, Grandma," I would tell her. "I can make it. I've got a pot on right now."

“Ohh! Well isn’t that fantastic news!” she would reply. Every morning the fact that I had made coffee was a wondrous surprise to her. Her lapse of memory allowed me to hear the utter delight in her voice each time.

Slowly, Grandma Maki would emerge from her room and take a seat across from me at the kitchen table. I’d push a cup of black coffee toward her, and she’d carefully take the mug in her hands. After her first sip, she would say, every time, “Ahh . . . I might just decide to go on living after all.”

I loved our morning ritual then, and now I am even more deeply grateful for the gift that Grandma Maki was for me at that point in my life. When I was struggling to believe that I could be a decent, reliable, and useful person, she marveled each morning at my ability to make a cup of coffee as though it had saved her life.

*Andrew Greenhaw
New Orleans, Louisiana*

Freshly printed graduation pictures showed my daughter’s smiling face. I showed them to my mother, who cooed over her only granddaughter. “So cute!” She hadn’t been able to attend the graduation, so photos would have to suffice. And they did. Sort of. Until a few minutes later, when my mother asked again, “How did graduation go?” Out came the pictures again. And again the coos. “So cute!”

On this slow journey, there have been many lapses. The first were lapses in judgment. Buying meat from a door-to-door salesman. Investing in scam insurance policies. Losing paperwork. Ignoring a wound. Since then, the lapses have picked up speed. Inability to understand a checkbook. Confusion about date and time. Uncertainty about personal care. Assumption that her parents are still living.

The advancing lapses have taken our relationship hostage, too. Her lack of stamina for shopping means even a trip to the drug store is exhausting—for both of us. Her passivity about using the phone means I am never pleasantly interrupted by her call. Her fading interest in the world beyond her building means she is no longer game for adventure, after a lifetime of asking, “Where to next?”

And what about me? My role as power of attorney sometimes eclipses my role as daughter. (Neither “power” nor “attorney” described our previous relationship.) My

longing for real conversation instead of repetitive messages sometimes leaves me heartsick. Other times, my impatience just leads to wrenching guilt.

Are there joys in this life full of lapses? Clearly. The joy that she knows me still. The joy that she remembers family and places. The joy that she is content and satisfied. The joy that she can still play the piano. The joy that she enjoys worship. The joy that I am nearby.

These joys are not all I want, but they are what I have. There is a lapse. And that lapse is filled with pain—emotional pain for both of us caused by a silent, unstoppable enemy chipping away at her brain. What to do with the pain? Does God see our many lapses?

“You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your record? Then my enemies will retreat in the day when I call. This I know, that God is for me” (Psalm 56:8–9). I must repeat that last line over and over, just to bridge today’s lapse.

Karen Hinz

Libertyville, Illinois

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Lapse.”