

Plate: Essays by readers

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

Readers Write in the [May 6, 2020](#) issue



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

When I was a child, we didn’t have a matched set of china. Maybe there had been one before I was born, but pieces had broken or just plain disappeared from sight, taken off somewhere by my older brother and sister, used to feed the dog, taken up into the treehouse, or filled with cookies and given to a neighbor who forgot to return the plate. So our table was set with a variety of dishes. Some of them even came out of detergent boxes or were gas station giveaways, but nobody minded.

The assortment of plates often reflected the assortment of people around the rustic table my father built to seat seven children, a foster child, and all the guests: neighbors, the pastor’s family, the youth group, people who dropped in

unexpectedly, people with no place else to go. Ours was an open table. Our farm provided food enough to share, and we enjoyed having company. If there weren't enough plates to go around, we could pull out some paper plates or substitute a bowl or two.

Still, it was a big day when Dad brought home a huge surprise box and set it on the counter. It contained a complete set of unbreakable Melmac dishes in bright rich colors, sleek and shiny, a brand new product on the market. Mom carefully removed the plates, cups, saucers, and bowls from the box and spread them out on the counter. The family was gathered around, looking with awe at the new acquisition, trying to imagine unbreakable plates. Why, they would last forever!

Then my nine-year-old brother reached out and grabbed a plate. He raised it high above his head with both hands and crashed it down on the cement floor, checking to see if it would live up to its promise. Our eyes followed its trajectory, and we saw on the floor three jagged pieces of the broken plate. Well, maybe not forever.

The set was no longer complete, but it would brighten up our table for a long while—and if a plate was missing, we would have to find another to take its place. A refugee from Germany, a pregnant teenager ostracized by her friends, a penniless cousin whose father had disappeared, an Egyptian couple who moved into the neighborhood, a traveler from India who always brought his own spices, a shell-shocked war survivor, a missionary from Africa—our table would always be full.

Carol Mariano

Mercer Island, Washington

I grew up with my two grandmothers living in the same town as me. Holidays involved going to both houses: feast upon feast, gift upon gift. And the two were utterly different.

My mother's family is Puerto Rican. Holidays were loud—head-throbbing music, people laughing hard. The door was open to anyone who needed some *tostones*. There was a whole stack of those basket plate holders, piled up to grab as you went through the buffet. When you were done, you tossed your paper plate so someone else could slide theirs into the holder. Meals were unpredictable, fluid, and abundant.

My father's family owned a hotel—hospitality was their livelihood. Meals were like clockwork and never rushed. On holidays my grandmother's table was set with beautiful china. Each person had a spot, whether at the main table or at one of the card tables set up for children around the family room. We would hold our china plates and work our way through the buffet line before returning to our designated seat at the table. The plates and chairs had been counted out beforehand. There was a place for everyone. We were expected.

My two grandmothers were great friends. They delighted in each other. They were so wildly different, and for that I will always be grateful. My Puerto Rican grandmother, the one passing out the paper plates in the baskets, taught me about welcome: about the wide open door, the food that never runs out, and the joy of adding one more. I can still hear her laugh, the laugh of someone who believed there would always be enough.

My china plate grandmother taught me about belonging: what it meant to be known, to be planned for and expected. She had a Christmas stocking with my name on it and a seat for me at her table. There was a space only I could hold. She remembered all the small details of my self-absorbed ramblings. When I would stop by and visit, it was as if I were the most important person in the world.

These two themes—welcome and belonging—are in constant play in our culture and in the church. When is it time to pile up the paper plates and throw open the door, and when do we count out place settings and call each other by name?

Nina R. Simone
Williamsburg, Virginia

The trip to Finland is a few days away. I am 24, and it's been a year since my parents were killed in a car accident. Now I'm about to spend several weeks in my mother's homeland. As her only child, I am my Finnish family's one remaining link to their sister and aunt.

I plan to take along some china plates my mother painted. Before packing them up, I take a close look. This plate features dark blue plums. Another highlights a pine bough with several cones nestled in it. Here's one with celery sticks and cherries. They are all true to life yet delicate. The background colors she brushed in are subtle

and muted rather than cheery and bright. It is said there's a pensive streak in the Finnish national character, and I can see it in my mother's painting. As I pack, I feel the sting of her absence.

My parents left me with a houseful of belongings, including several boxes of this hand-painted china. Along with taking plates to Finland, I gave quite a few pieces to dear friends. I still had a few boxes left. My aunt stored them for a while; I retrieved them when I married and bought a home. Valerie and I took some time to admire my mom's handiwork; as we did, my grief and wistfulness came back. Then we stored the boxes in a safe place.

After 22 years, during which the china remained mostly out of sight, we prepared to move into a home with less storage space. As we packed, we unearthed things we hadn't looked at for a long time. While part of me treasured any encounter with my mother's work, a greater part avoided such moments because of the hurt that came with them. I set aside a dozen plus pieces to keep and made the rest available to church members and friends.

Where would we put the ones we were saving? With Valerie's encouragement, I realized it was time for a fresh approach: we would use them. Not frequently, but for special occasions. My mother and I would cross paths more often. Maybe the sting in these moments would diminish.

Thanksgiving arrives; the plates come out. Beneath the upbeat holiday conversation, I share a moment of communion with my mom. The sense of helplessness that belongs to grief is countered now by a quiet engagement. As forks scrape against plates and cups touch lips, everyone connects with my mother in their own way. For my wife and my two adult children, who never knew her, I trust that this moment of meeting evokes respect and appreciation. For me, there is pride in sharing her with them. Better yet, my usual sadness takes a backseat. This time, the encounter is warm.

Michael Pennanen
Hammond, Indiana

From Frederick Buechner, *Telling Secrets*:

I remember sitting parked by the roadside once, terribly depressed and afraid about my daughter's illness and what was going on in our family, when out of nowhere a car came along down the highway with a license plate that bore on it the one word out of all the words in the dictionary that I needed most to see exactly then. The word was TRUST. What do you call a moment like that? Something to laugh off as the kind of joke life plays on us every once in a while? The word of God? I am willing to believe that maybe it was something of both, but for me it was an epiphany. The owner of the car turned out to be, as I'd suspected, a trust officer in a bank, and not long ago, having read an account I wrote of the incident somewhere, he found out where I lived and one afternoon brought me the license plate itself, which sits propped up on a bookshelf in my house to this day. It is rusty around the edges and a little battered, and it is also as holy a relic as I have ever seen.

I've counted points and calories. I've drunk chalky milkshakes and avoided white foods. I've sipped cups of hot sugar water and downed spoonfuls of canola oil. Like so many women, I have gone to great lengths to reduce my mass.

Finally, out of energy and out of patience, I walked into a weight lifting gym. I was reeling from the death of a friend and sick of fighting against my body all the time. It was like my mass was the unknown in an equation I could not solve. I kept erasing and trying different solutions, but nothing was working. I was too hungry and sad to try anymore. I was walking away from the chalkboard. Lifting was a last-ditch effort to establish an armistice with my body.

The gym is a cavernous space built into an old Coca-Cola bottling plant. On my first day I sat on a long bench against one wall, awaiting the coach who would introduce me to lifting. Fifty feet away was the platform where huge men held bars groaning with weight across the rack of their shoulders. Separating the two universes, like a fairy-tale gatekeeper, were the columns of plates: the bumper plates, ranging from one to 45 pounds, that are used to load up the bars.

Slowly, those plates began to heal my tired body. I lifted several times a week, learning as I went. After a few months, I stopped trying to suppress my appetite with sugar water. I gained mass as I gained muscle. I felt my life force returning, and I felt it was a response to the friend I still loved, a reminder that the best answer to death is to keep living. Over the months and years, gratitude for my strong body blossomed in me. The plates on the bar grew thicker. The plates on my table became an ally instead of an enemy.

I'm reminded of the truth I preach from my pulpit: we were all created by a loving God who said we were good. Our bodies are good. Our strength is good. Without our bodies we would not be able to move mass. We could not ache for those we have lost. We would never fail, we would never hurt, we would never eat, we would never hunger. The gift we are given is the gift of our bodies, temporary as they are, strong for giving and receiving love.

Sarah Stewart

Worcester, Massachusetts

Five years ago my plate went from full to overflowing. My mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and moved in with me. She went from caring for herself to being totally dependent. She looked like my mom, but she no longer took showers or washed her clothes. She could not remember if she had taken her medication.

And she was no longer eating. How would I get her to eat?

The doctor suggested medication to activate her appetite. Friends suggested preparing her favorite meals. But she just kept telling me, "I am not hungry. It's too much." She would push the plate away.

Out of frustration, I started doing for her what she did for me as a child. I grabbed a small salad plate and put a little food on it. "Just a spoonful," I said. And she ate—she cleaned her plate. It worked again the next day.

Maybe the medicine was finally kicking in? Maybe I had finally fixed a meal she really liked? Then it hit me: she'd been saying meals were "too much." Maybe the amount of food that most of us take for granted on a regular dinner plate was just overwhelming for her.

Now even when we go out, I ask for a small plate and then take whatever meal is served and divide it. I replate it with just a spoonful of potatoes, a quarter of the piece of chicken, just three or four florets of broccoli. She smiles and begins to eat.

Walking this journey with my mother has been full of trial and error. One important lesson is that I need to listen more and trust that even though she is sick, she is still telling me what she needs. And when life feels like it is just too much, I can't give up. I just try enjoying the meal in a smaller portion, on a smaller plate.

Donna Oberkreser
Clearwater, Florida

When I was the new pastor of a small congregation, I went to visit Audrey, who hadn't been seen at church in a while. I knocked on the apartment door and was met by the formidable presence of Audrey's housekeeper, Sarah. She was a no-nonsense person with little patience for such intrusions. Audrey, however, spoke up from the living room to invite me in.

I went in and was warmly welcomed by the white-haired woman seated comfortably in her recliner. We spent the next several minutes talking about the wall of photographs. The conversation shifted to the church, and Audrey walked me through the ins and outs of living in a seaside community. She asked about my family, where I grew up, and what I thought of the congregation and its ministries.

I found myself enjoying our visit very much—even though Sarah was nearby and clearly listening. Occasionally, I'd hear a grumble about something one of us had said. Taking my cue from my hostess, I didn't visibly react.

About a half hour into the visit, Audrey asked if I would serve her communion. A flush of panic flooded me: I had no bread, no juice, and nothing to serve them in even if I had them. My portable set was back in the church office, where it wasn't going to be of much help. Regaining my composure, I asked if there might be some bread and a bottle of grape juice around. I knew it was a long shot, and the humph I heard from Sarah confirmed that the answer was no.

"Sarah," I asked, "what do you have?"

Sarah rolled her eyes, but at Audrey's insistence she went hunting through the cabinets. After a few moments of searching and a lot of unnecessary noise, she pulled out a package of saltines and a small carton of prune juice. Audrey looked flustered and embarrassed, and I had to resist the urge not to laugh out loud. But we would make do. I asked for a cup and a small plate. Sarah pulled out a chipped, badly stained coffee cup and a plastic dessert plate with a crack running through it. Foolishly, seeking to try to make the moment sacred, I asked, "Do you have something a bit nicer?"

"No," Sarah grumbled, "this will have to do." I looked wistfully at the open door of the cabinet, where I could see a lovely small cut glass plate, but I gave in. I put the saltines on the plate and took the cup from Sarah, pouring in the dark brown juice. I asked her if she wanted to receive communion too; she rolled her eyes and said no.

As I proceeded through the short service and shared the plate and cup with Audrey, I knew Sarah was watching my every move. What startled me, however, was that she was also mouthing the responses: she knew the service by heart. I left that day wondering why she chose not to join us at the table, but accepting that her silent responses were sufficient before God.

Ricki Aiello
Enfield, Connecticut

How does a baseball player approach the plate, knowing he will face pitches as fast as 100 miles per hour? How does he approach the plate, knowing that he's likely to fail and that he might even get hit by the ball? I posed these questions to Dan, the new man in my life, a few days before we went to a Phillies game. Dan knows baseball better than I do, and at the game he pointed out nuances I would not have noticed—such as the edge of the batter's box, the threshold of home plate into which the ballplayer steps again and again. There is something beautifully vulnerable in this, something that seems brave and heroic.

There is a difference between a warrior and a hero. A younger me may have identified with the warrior, the one who fights no matter the cost. I see the hero differently: someone more interested in a journey that comes with deep change, redemption, and grace. These differences are illustrated in my yoga practice. The warrior pose is the climax of the standing series, a posture we are told uses every

cell of our bodies. Our arms are like arrows straight up and down. Later on we express Virasana, the hero's pose. We sit on the floor between our heels, knees together and forward, and place our hands on our heels. We lie back until we reach the floor, flat like a plate, and hold our elbows in opposite hands over our heads.

The yogi tells us that the hero's pose is named after Vir Hanuman, the monkey superhero who is both servant and hero. In this posture, the hero is in the position of purposeful vulnerability, with his heart wide open. In full expression, I see my own heart lift skyward with each breath.

I come to my new relationship with Dan not long after the dissolution of a long relationship with someone else. As I approach the plate, the pain of my former relationship threatens to distract me like overly zealous ballpark fans. I don't know if I feel more like a batter who struck out last time or one who took a fastball to the arm.

At the Phillies game, I see an old man walking very carefully down the concrete stairs with two ice cream cones. It must have taken him a long time to return from the concession stand, the ice cream melting as his aging steps draw him slowly back to the woman he loves, waiting in her seat. I imagine him as a young man, when his steps were more like leaps. As in my yoga practice, the time for the warrior is before that of the hero; the fight transforms into the thing worth fighting for.

Heroism is a choice made again and again. It's about approaching the plate once more, heart-first and disarmed. It's about bringing ice cream cones, over and over.

Jeannie Marcucci
Woodbury, New Jersey

After her evening bath, floating on a cloud of powder dusting, my GG (great-grandmother) would make her husband a liverwurst sandwich and pour him a small pilsner of beer. He would enjoy his snack and then retire, after which GG would clear the table and set it for breakfast. Normally there would be two blue willow plates, but with her two young great-grandchildren visiting there would be four.

Come morning, we children would hop down the stairs to the porch kitchen. Placed in the center of each plate would be a grapefruit, carefully sectioned, with a healthy

topping of sugar. GG, already fresh in her apron, would give us a smile and a “good morning” as we settled at the table.

Our parents were in the midst of a breakup, and we were sequestered on “the farm.” To us it seemed like an oasis, a quiet center in the storm.

As I sat at the old table, I lost myself in the blue willow plate. The beautiful blue and white designs were telling a story: ships, castles, strange figures, two birds in flight. My imagination soared along with them.

Soon it was time to walk the long driveway to catch the bus to school. GG waved us off, and I was relieved to know she would be waiting for us when we came back.

Years later, when GG died, I knew there was one thing I wanted to keep: her blue willow. Not her fancy dishes, just the plates she set out each night on the sleepy breakfast table, the everyday plates that could transport you to another world. I have used them regularly and reverently. They are holy dishes to serve up a taste of unconditional love.

Cindy Lanzetta
Marlboro, New York

Just inside the West Texas bus station doors were two water fountains labeled “white” and “colored.” My seven-year-old reasoning concluded that the signs were there for the colorblind. But my father thwarted my attempt to scale the brown fountain for a drink. “That one’s dirty,” he said, though in fact it was the cleaner of the two.

Just as we got situated in the waiting room, the stationmaster announced that our friend’s bus had broken down and would be substantially delayed. Dad lit a cigar and slipped its wrapper ring around my finger. Perhaps a dozen other people lounged in various states of consciousness on the hardwood pew benches. Weary from boredom, Dad soon parked his cigar and joined others in sleep.

From far down a hallway, the clatter of dishes and waves of shouting and laughter sparked my curiosity. My investigation revealed a room full of people with darker skin than mine, their conversations contributing to a collective roar. When the group sensed my presence, their voices cascaded downward into a startled silence. I

scanned the sea of faces as I plotted my retreat back to the safety of the waiting room and my father.

Two steps into my escape, a voice chased after me: “Hey, Old Timer, are you lost? Don’t leave—come join us.” He and a boy about my age were perched at a bar enjoying a mountain of French fries. “I’m honored to meet you, sir,” he said, offering his hand. “I am Ben, and this is my son, Ben Jr. Won’t you join us for supper?” With that he hoisted me onto an adjacent barstool and summoned a waitress: “Ma’am, please bring this gentleman a plate so he can eat this meal with us.” It was the tastiest and most memorable meal of my young life.

Ben Sr. spoke with a deep, mellifluous voice, as if he had swallowed a cello. He described their home in Boston, his joy in teaching students, and their recent findings on a family excursion to the ocean. I regaled them with tales of riding horseback through my version of the Wild West, encountering coyotes, rattlesnakes, and prairie dogs, enhancing the tales for dramatic effect.

At last, Dad appeared at the entryway, his face clouded with concern. Ben greeted him: “We’d enjoy your company if you’d be comfortable in joining us.” Dad was not comfortable, of course. But before returning to our waiting room, I extracted from Ben a promise that he and his family would visit our home to share a meal.

I watched for them for weeks. I choreographed the arrangement of chairs and plates around the dinner table and suggested that our heirloom china be employed for our special guests. They never came, but many years later that plate of sharing exists inside me still.

John Carpenter
Edgewood, New Mexico

My in-laws paused as they opened the box. My mother-in-law had died of cancer just days before, and my husband and his three siblings were tasked with divvying up her possessions: keeping, donating, tossing. Their father had died nearly 15 years before, but it was different this time.

The open box held a plate—fancy, ornate china that I had never seen in my mother-in-law’s kitchen. “Is that the plate?” one sister asked, and the other nodded. I had

heard the story of the plate before. Years ago, when they were just children, their father died by suicide. The family expressed their grief different ways. At one point the children came home from school to paper plates. There were no dishes in the cupboard. When they asked what happened to the ones the parents were given for their wedding, their mother grumbled and said she'd buy new ones—for now, they would use paper.

The siblings later found out that their mother had taken the plates into the garage and smashed them, one by one.

Yet even in her grief, she thought ahead. She didn't break all the dishes—she put one aside for each child to smash on their wedding day, a way to grieve their father's absence on an important day in their lives.

Now the family was on another significant day in their lives, sorting through the joy and sadness of life—and here was one last plate. They laughed as they found Christmas presents she had stashed away; they didn't need labels to know who each one was for. They smiled at the yarn squirreled away for all her knitting projects. They cried as they found the fake flowers their father had sent their mother just before he died. Each item was a connection to their past.

This was a grief ritual, one that their mother knew they would need.

Katrina Pekich-Bundy
Hanover, Indiana