Dawn: Essays by readers

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

Readers Write in the August 12, 2020 issue

(Illustration © Vikiss / iStock / Getty)

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

My firstborn daughter was named Dawn. A bundle of joy, she quickly became the family’s conversation piece. Early on we saw her gifts of personality and promise. After earning a degree in music and business, she entered the give-and-take of the world. We soon saw signs of turbulence in her life. We suspected drugs. She plowed on from occupation to occupation, despite the family’s efforts to help her reroute life’s journey.

Then one day she abruptly took flight to a southwest city, declaring a job change that she claimed would restart her life. After several months and many phone calls

we moved from denial to acceptance that Dawn was indeed battling various demons. Later we learned what we had silently wondered: she had become a resident of the streets, living in temporary shelters and grasping for meaning.

It was not long before she called to tell us of severe pains she was suffering. Doctors discovered stage-four cancer in her body. This brick-in-the-gut news brought the entire family to its knees. As we visited her over the ensuing months, we watched her decline in a homeless shelter for people who were medically disabled.

Finally, a reckoning came as she moved from chemo treatments to a final decline. On my last visit to see her we talked hopefully, all the while knowing that death was imminent.

Beside her bed in a hospital-like room was an electronic keyboard she often played as she was able. She was masterful at the piano and had won many awards. As I rose to say good-bye she said, “Dad, wait a minute. I want to play something for you.” She struggled to the keyboard and began playing and singing “Amazing Grace,” giving emphasis to the lines, “I once was lost, but now I’m found, / Was blind but now I see.”

At that moment the Dawn of my life dawned. She had moved out of a darkness into a light that gave her a peace she had not known for many years. We hugged and said good-bye, both knowing that daybreak can follow great darkness. Dawn is the holder of a very thin veil that separates darkness from light. It knows the reality of darkness even as it declares the presence of light. Dawn is that break into the day where the new begins, giving grace its definition.

Don R. Stevenson
Hagerstown, MD

> **From Frederick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey***:
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> ***God speaks to us through our lives, we often too easily say. Something speaks anyway, spells out some sort of godly or godforsaken meaning to us through the alphabet of our years, but often it takes many years and many further spellings out before***

we start to glimpse, or think we do, a little of what that meaning is. Even then we glimpse it only dimly, like the first trace of dawn on the rim of night, and even then it is a meaning that we cannot fix and be sure of once and for all because it is always incarnate meaning and thus as alive and changing as we are ourselves alive and changing.

I commute to work by bicycle, and I always get there very early. Years ago, on a very early summer morning, I rode under a lavender velvet sky. It was breathtaking. Then above the western horizon, between the roofline of the car dealerships and a scraggly urban redwood, I saw the full moon, golden and profuse. I got off my bike, stepped onto the sidewalk, and burst into tears at the unbidden beauty.

I soon realized that I was also crying because so very early in the morning there was no one around to share the moon with me. Relationship is what makes so much of this life so heartbreakingly beautiful. Alone, I ached with an inability to fully bear witness.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw someone approach. A man, older than I, was pushing a shopping cart filled with overflowing garbage bags full of recyclables. He clanked down the street, came up to me, and stopped. Noticing my streaky face, he asked if I was OK. I managed to nod. “Yeah,” I said. “It’s just . . .” I wiped my nose and jutted my chin toward the moon.

“Oh wow,” he said. “You’re right.” We stood there together on Broadway and regarded the moon. He uncapped his Mountain Dew, took a drink, and then extended it to me. “Want some?”

I still regret not accepting it. He was offering me so much more than soda. He was welcoming me into our mutual yearning for connection. He was offering me communion.

I grew up as the daughter of a minister, and my mom would always remind us just before praying the Great Thanksgiving that the table belongs to God and we are all invited. For me, the most important part of a worship service is when people queue up to receive the elements—standing in liminal space between our past and God’s future, illumined by the ancient and steadfast light of ritual, zippering together as

we exit the pews every other aisle, helping those with walkers, always inviting someone to go ahead of you.

I still ride by where I saw the moon and that man. I don't think I've seen him again, and I know I've never seen the moon quite like that again. But I still carry that dawn with me, and I imagine that he does too. It was a moment, a refraction of the divine light brilliantly present, when the terror and banality of our human reality was fused with the exquisite beauty of God. And I often think of that Mountain Dew when I'm shuffling down the carpeted church aisle to receive the elements, my hands each holding the small hand of one of my daughters, wondering at the miracle that we've found each other—not just my family but each of us here on earth trying to make our way, holding on to one another and continuing to offer ourselves again and again, every dawn while we draw our breath.

Alicia Van Riggs
Oakland, CA

At 2 a.m. an orderly rolled me into room 505 at Good Samaritan Hospital. For the previous eight hours I had been in the emergency department dealing with breathing problems. Weakened muscles from polio, with me by that point for 76 years, often necessitate hospital trips.

The room was divided by a heavy gray curtain, and I was put in the bed closest to the door. I wondered if there was someone on the other side.

I soon heard my roommate's feeble moans. Sooner or later I would find out why she was there, but for the moment I needed to let sleep soothe my being.

Nurses came in and out during the night to check our vital signs. My roommate sighed gently but did not speak. Around six, following a restless night, I heard throat clearing. Here we were, two women in the same room, not communicating. I decided to risk offending her by saying just a few words. "Good morning," I said. She responded, and after a few more simple exchanges, she asked in her accented English, "Would you like to watch the sunrise? We can see it from my window."

What a welcome surprise! "Yes, please," I replied. Maria (by now we had exchanged names) slowly, carefully lowered herself from the bed. Despite showing signs of

pain, she reached up to pull back the curtain. A gentle gray sky greeted us. In silence we saw streaks of soft pink turn into a bright apricot. Sturdy red rays appeared quietly. As the sun gradually appeared through our window, I felt an overwhelming sense of awe and wonder.

Maria kept repeating, “Gracias a Dios.” And I echoed, “Thanks be to God.” She played a song on her phone: “How Great Thou Art,” sung in Spanish. This holy matin moment counteracted the bustling sounds from the hallway. We both inhaled the beauty and marvel of daybreak.

We were roommates for the next two days. Each morning Maria asked in almost a whisper, “Do you want to share the sunrise?” Each time she played her recorded hymns. Our simple ritual bonded us.

When Maria was discharged, we knew we would probably never see each other again. But now when I experience the drama of dawn I often remember her, and I chant, “Gracias a Dios.”

Dosia Carlson
Phoenix, AZ

“How do you know when the night is over and the day has dawned?” an old rabbi asked his students. “It is when you can look into the face of any man or woman and see there the face of your brother or sister. Because, if you cannot do that, no matter how bright it is, you are still in the night.”

I used to share this quote from the pulpit. While I knew its truth intellectually, my heart and body remained in the dark until I’d been retired as a pastor for almost three years. I was using a meditation app on my phone when it began to vibrate. My brother-in-law was calling. “Jane’s gone,” he said, “Jane’s gone.”

The police had just arrived at his front door to tell them that our younger sister had been found that morning on the floor by her bed. She was dead. After several years in and out of treatment for alcoholism, she’d relapsed one last time.

I thought I knew death pretty well. I’d known the deaths of grandparents, parents, other family members, friends, colleagues, and parishioners. But in the two years since I learned that Jane was gone I’ve realized that I didn’t really know death at all.

Later on the day she died I was walking along the river near our home. Vivid memories of our time together streamed through my mind, bringing both intermittent tears and occasional laughter. Jane was born when I was nine years old. The day she came home from the hospital I remember being very anxious, having heard that she had a soft spot on her head and that everyone had to handle her very carefully. I kept thinking about a broken robin's egg I'd seen in a nest behind our house; I was afraid that Jane would be just as fragile.

Before my last year at seminary, we took a trip to the United Kingdom together and shared hotel rooms to save money. I can still see the clerks rolling their eyes when I told them that she was my sister.

As I reached the spot where Lake Erie empties into the Niagara River I began hearing in my mind the lyrics to James Taylor's song "Fire and Rain." When I heard, "I always thought I'd see you, one more time again," I began sobbing. I wondered if I'd ever stop.

A family friend led the memorial service at a country club. Jane was "spiritual, but not religious." Those who gathered all deeply loved her. I read a poem that kept coming to mind following her death—John Donne's "No Man Is an Island," which I adapted to include all humans. "Anyone's death diminishes me" is the line that wouldn't let me go.

It still won't. Having known how diminished I've felt losing a sister has made me feel all the more diminished at the deaths of others—no matter who they are or how well I know them. I now know more fully than I'd ever known before that the old rabbi had it right when he explained that it's only dawn when you can look in the eyes of anyone and see a sister or brother. Knowing that my sister has closed her eyes for the last time has opened my eyes to the mystery and wonder of the love in which we all live and move and have our being, the love that knit us together in our mother's womb.

Bruce McKay
Buffalo, NY

I don't recall what prompted me to yell a swear word of epic proportions at the top of my lungs when I was at my friend's house across the street. But my mother heard

me, and apparently she didn't think it was an appropriate thing for her ten-year-old daughter to say, let alone shout.

When I walked back into our house at dinnertime my mother ushered me back to the kitchen, squirted some Dawn dish detergent into my mouth, added a little bit of water, and asked me to slosh the mixture around a bit before telling me to spit the suds into the sink. This left a taste in my mouth that elicited the reaction for which my mother had hoped: I vowed never again to say that swear word—at least, not in front of my mother.

A friend says her mother preferred the bar-of-Dial-soap method. Whatever the variations, the practice of washing out an offending child's mouth with soap was reportedly once common in the United States.

I still use Dawn to wash dishes. I suppose I could have switched over to the Joy brand as a means of reframing the shame of my childhood punishment. But using Dawn reminds me of my mother. I'm grateful I can place that one incident from nearly 60 years ago within the context of a childhood in which I felt safe, loved, and valued. Mom continued to love me, no matter what she had heard me yell from my friend's house across the street. I'm certain she hated the mouth-washing punishment as much as I did but felt it was something she needed to do. Recalling my Dawn story helps me to remember my mother, who died 25 years ago, as a flesh-and-blood human being with her own struggles, rather than as someone deified in the rearview mirror of my imagination.

Because dawn brings light, the word carries a connotation of insight and awareness. When my mother died suddenly, it *dawned on me* that at the age of 42 I was an orphan. The night before her funeral, I went to sleep with an empty sheet of paper and a pen by my bed, having absolutely no idea what I would say at her funeral the next day. When I awoke to the light of dawn the words were there, pouring from pen to paper. It was a day of mourning but also of promise, as we were filled with God's grace in the gathered community of her beloved family and friends. Zechariah's prophecy, which I pray each morning as part of the liturgy of the hours, was realized in our experience: "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high has broken upon us, giving light to all of us who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and guiding our feet into the way of peace."

Sandy Selby
Akron, OH

The sun shone through the window in the hotel dining room, and I changed my course. My run could wait—perhaps I could catch the tail end of the sunrise.

I walked toward the small vending area, where a woman stood, staring at the ice machine through her sunglasses. I planned to squeeze in behind her and slip out the door on the other side.

Before I could, she looked at me in terror, jumped up, and shouted, “Oh no!” I laughed nervously and apologized, explaining I didn’t mean to scare her. She was panting wildly, holding her chest. “You scared the hell out of me. Why does everyone sneak up on me?” I apologized again. “I was just recently attacked,” she said. The smile left my face. Like a rushing wave I felt the familiar empathy, my gift and my curse, pour into my body.

“Oh God,” I said. “I’m so sorry.” The words felt meaningless. I knew my apology wouldn’t heal her or bring her attacker to justice. She pointed to a faded yellow bruise on her shin and then pulled the collar of her shirt down just above her breast.

“I was beaten, kicked, punched—for 20 minutes.” She went on to describe the attack, but I can’t remember what she said because it was all too painful and shocking for me to absorb in that moment. She paced back and forth as she told me.

“I feel everything. I sense everything. But everyone keeps sneaking up on me. Here you come dressed in black, and I’m trapped in this vending area with nowhere to go.” I put my hands up, suddenly aware that she still felt threatened and had backed up into the door. I retreated backward as well. She got out a cigarette and started to walk out the door—it seemed bizarre that she was leaving without ice, her whole reason for being in this cramped space. She held the door for me, talking quickly about how she should have been dead. Tears were dripping down my face.

We made it to the beach, where she lit her cigarette. “This is the best sunrise in the world,” she said. “Look at it.” I glanced over my shoulder. I had my back to the sunrise, because I couldn’t face something so beautiful in that moment. “And last night, I heard the moon was gorgeous. I missed it. But there’ll be another one in a

month. The sun keeps rising. The moon does, too.” She took a drag from her cigarette.

I listened a while longer. After we parted I put my earbuds in and walked around the building. My tears were now pouring. I was completely shaken. Being a survivor myself, I never wanted to make someone feel like I would attack them. It struck my core. As my feet rhythmically hit the concrete, more tears fell.

When I finally reached the beach again, I squatted at the water’s edge. Birds cawed as the salty water splashed upon the rocks in the sand. I wept bitterly. I walked until the sand ran out, then turned back around. I gripped a large, smooth stone in my hand. I gathered more rocks—a white stone, a large reddish orange one. I stacked them, a tower of prayers to God. I thought of Jacob in Genesis as I said a prayer for this woman, for all women, the stones in our hearts stacked upon each other to create a safe space: a new dawn.

That afternoon I almost forgot about the encounter. I was buzzing from the excitement of the conference I was attending and had walked downtown to feed my coffee addiction. Across from the coffee shop I saw a store selling feminist artwork. Inside I saw a display: seven rocks stacked on top of each other. Here in this shop made for women was the same symbol I created on the beach. My empathy is a curse, because I have such a hard time letting go of others’ stones. Yet, it is also a blessing, because it is when we stop having these visceral reactions to abuse and hatred that we lose hope. When we stop feeling other people’s pain, something is wrong.

Katrina Pekich-Bundy
Hanover, IN

She died at dawn, my wife of 58 years. It was the darkest day I have ever known. God must have had other things to do that day, because I felt utterly alone—abandoned.

It was almost four months from that first frantic rush to the hospital when she suddenly could not breathe until she breathed no more. Thyroid cancer, operation, a stroke, right side useless, tracheotomy, lost voice. She would point to letters on a chart. I was slow to comprehend, and she’d smile at me. Stomach tube,

helplessness, medications—so many medications—wheelchair, walker, her always with a smile, me always fearing, trying to comfort her, to hold her up. How many kinds of therapy are there? We must have endured most of them. We held off on the radiation, hoping for strength to return.

And then it was too late for radiation. With treatment at an end, she was sent home in my care and hospice was called in. And still she smiled at me. All I could do was tell her I loved her and give her a kiss. Oh, how I loved her—all the while despairing. We battled so hard that last night, her so uncomfortable, me so weary and feeling so inept. And then, on the dark side of dawn, she left me. Suddenly there was nothing left to do but call 911 and cry.

Others have walked such valleys before us, many of whom I have known and who did not emerge. Maybe if I had walked it by myself, I could have feared no evil, but walking it with her I was so utterly afraid. It was as though I could see nothing but darkness ahead, whereas she smiled bravely in the face of it. Maybe indeed she felt God with her when I could not.

In the days after her death, gratitude crept in very slowly. I was grateful to God for allowing me to share so much of my life with this wonderful woman, grateful for all her gifts that made our life together so wondrous, grateful for the children she bore and raised so well. Grief never left, but it slowly gave way to gratitude—and the more it did, the closer I once again felt to God, even to the point of thanking God for relieving her of living on in pain and without hope.

I am an early riser, but dawn will never be the same for me. It has been almost a year now, and there is no dawn that I do not think of her again, of how I loved and lost her, of how I miss her, and of all we shared. And then, once again, I thank God for her.

Herb Evert
Cottage Grove, WI

It was 1972. I was ten years old. I had lived this moment a million times in my imagination: boarding a train for my first long-distance ride. I imagined sharply dressed porters standing at attention alongside a gleaming stainless steel train. I had placed myself in a 1950s railroad brochure my uncle gave me.

The train in the brochure touted vista domes—train cars with a glassed-in second floor for panoramic sightseeing. I imagined climbing the spiral stairway to sit under glass as the landscape swept by. I would drink in the view. I would fly through it, watching as grassland changed into cropland, into trees, into hills cut through by rivers, and then into a cityscape.

But the brochure I picked up as we waited at the station did not mention vista dome cars. I was devastated.

There were other disappointments. The conductor was not a smiling chap looking at his pocket watch. I had imagined I would ask him questions about the train, and he would put his arm around me and warmly welcome me aboard. I guess I had not heeded my mother's warnings about letting my mind carry me away from reality. This conductor appeared stern and impatient. "Climb aboard quickly, please. We are late and have no time to waste." I remained silent, afraid to bother him.

So boarding the train was nothing like I had expected. I had not had time to look at our car, let alone the 12 or so others down the line. It was dark and cold. My only clear view was of the arm of my dad's tweed jacket and the floral pantsuit of a young woman in front of me. In the darkness of 3 a.m., the dawn was my only hope of seeing that for which I had so longed and dreamed: the vista domes. They would make up for all these other broken illusions.

Meanwhile, not everything was disappointing. The interior of our coach fit my daydreams perfectly. The window shades were exactly like the ones in Uncle Gail's old brochure. So were the seats. My mother nudged me and commented on how comfortable they were, and I reminded her that they were called "sleepy hollow seats." I learned that from the brochure, too. My initial disappointment upon boarding was replaced by a muted excitement.

As the porter dimmed the lights and the train eased its way out of the station, my mother noticed an elderly woman across the aisle struggling to figure out how to recline her seat. "My son knows all about how these seats work," said my mother. I was more than eager to help her, hoping to appear as a veteran railroader. The woman rewarded me with rich gratitude.

Everyone else soon fell asleep, but I was too excited. I amused myself by pressing my face against the cool glass of the window, straining to see the train cars ahead and behind. But at that point there were no curves in the track, and it was very dark.

So I waited and hoped. I fell asleep with my head still against the window.

I awoke with a start. The steady hum had been replaced for an instant by the sharp squeal of the wheels' metal flanges grinding against the steel rails as they began a sharp curve. As I adjusted my eyes to the dimness of the early morning, a sudden beam of light struck me. It was the sun, creeping over the top of the embankment.

Because the dawn came exactly when it did—during that curve in the track—it gave me a glimpse of the cars ahead and behind. And there they were, in all their stainless steel and glass glory: vista domes. Just like in the brochure.

The rising sun transformed disappointment and doubt in a split second. At that moment, I knew I would get to ride in a vista dome. And the joy from that reality, coming after several disappointments, returns to me every time I bring that trip to mind. Ever since then, I have looked to the dawn for hope.

Randall Goeke
Atkinson, NE

"My sister's name is Morning Dove and brother's name is Rain," I cried out to my husband. I was trying to contemplate how I was going to fit into my biological family, with which I had just made contact at the age of 28. Every fiber of me felt the fear of not fitting in anywhere, of being different yet again. "How will they ever accept a woman from Connecticut with two children, a husband, and a dog? For goodness sake, the only thing I don't have is a white picket fence."

I projected judgment from people I had never met, and I looked to my husband for reassurance. "Honey, they will love you," he said. "You will fit right in."

I looked at him, stunned and confused. Had he not heard me? They were from Oregon. They had often lived without electricity and running water, and their names were Morning Dove and Rain. What would we possibly have in common aside from 50 percent of our DNA?

He looked at me and laughed, "You don't see any connections here? Morning Dove, Rain, and Dawn?" He lengthened out my name, emphasizing each letter.

I had never heard my name in that context. I was named after a doll. Dawns were fashionable, lifelike dolls that came out before Barbies. My mother told me the story over and over: she loved her dolls and always said one day she would name her daughter Dawn. This story had become part of who I was—I was a gift that answered a childhood prayer. When she was young, Santa brought the doll. When she was an adult, Catholic Charities brought me.

I thought to myself, *Who was this Dawn that went with morning doves and rain?* Did this mean I was a different me—not a doll, not a gift, but an elusive space in time when the sun peeks over the horizon? A liminal threshold between night and day that slips away almost before you take full notice of it but is breathtakingly beautiful if you take the time to bear witness?

In the many years that have since passed, my biological mother has never told me the name she would have given me or if she even had one picked out. But the coincidence was powerful. I was one child with two names, even though they are spelled and pronounced the same way: Dawn, the morning sun and the childhood doll.

On that day, a feeling of belonging overcame me that superseded any logic: Morning Dove, Rain, and Dawn. I'm not sure who laughed harder as the recognition of what my husband had said rolled over me. God had shown that I was beloved both where I came from and where I was. My fears washed away. I was Dawn.

Dawn Adams
Brimfield, MA