Movement: Essays by readers

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

Readers Write in the October 7, 2020 issue

(Photo by Emile Guillemot on Unsplash)

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 **Spark** *and* **Window***—read more*.

“I’m stuck!” I said with a grunt, after rocking my car back and forth several times, digging it even deeper into the ditch. I was on my way home from work in the middle of a blinding Minnesota blizzard when I lost control and careened off the side of the road. I was physically OK but emotionally a mess.

Four months earlier, my husband of almost 20 years told me, out of the blue, that he wanted a divorce. I was stunned. He moved out. I felt lost. I didn’t know who I was anymore. My life felt as out of control as my car sliding off the icy road.

I couldn’t call him to help me like I normally would. Through a blur of tears, I called a friend instead, dialing his number on my freezing cell phone. “I’m stuck, Lon. Can you help me?”

As I waited in my car for my friend to arrive, I began to feel the tremendous weight of my sadness. All of my efforts to convince my husband to give our marriage a second chance had failed. He wouldn’t budge.

My friend dug me out of the ditch, hugged me, and said, “I hate to see you this way. You can’t just keep wallowing in your pain. You need to move forward.”

I knew he was right. There was a part of me that wanted to stay stuck because I was afraid to move into the unknown.

On the way home to my empty house, I spotted a tattered bookmark that had fallen out of my book when my car jolted to a stop. On it was printed the Serenity Prayer: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” That night, I began my long journey home to myself.

Claire Cassell
Arvada, CO

From Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark*:

Humans live largely inside their heads, from which they tell the rest of their bodies what to do, except for occasional passionate moments when the tables are turned. Animals, on the other hand, do not seem compartmentalized that way. Everything they are is in every move they make. When a dachshund takes a shine to you, it is not likely to be because he has thought it over ahead of time. . . . Such as he is, he gives himself to you hook, line, and sinker, the bad breath no less than the frenzied tail and the front paws climbing the air. Needless to say, the whole picture can change in a flash if you try to make off with his dinner, but for the moment his entire being is an act of love bordering on the beatific.

Last year, before we knew the world would stand still, frozen by a pandemic, my family was given a sabbatical, a period of months to restore whatever was worn out after 12 years of living and working in China. It seemed like the perfect time to take to the road. I wanted to go on a pilgrimage. I wanted to see God move mountains even as we moved among them.

So we planned for it. A long-held dream to travel for a year in a converted school bus started to become a reality. We would homeschool our five children. We would see the beauty of the earth. We would read good books and rest under the stars, climb mountains and find God dwelling in them. We would traverse the roads of our country and the inner roads of our souls.

At one RV park, where we stopped mostly for the reliable internet, we met Angel and David. Fortysomething with wind-whipped blonde hair and freckled skin, they were the managers of the park and full of a kind of midlife youthful energy. They welcomed anyone in, travelers and retirees alike, for pancake breakfasts and burger nights. They welcomed us as if we were long-lost family. Which, it turns out, we were. Angel and David were recovering Southern Baptists. Or, as they would put it, “just folks who don’t believe that shit anymore.”

David told us he attended seminary and after that became a pastor who baptized thousands and led as many to Christ. Now, he said, he felt like maybe in doing so he had done some harm.

“Do you think it’s possible to be in that position and not do any harm?” my husband asked. Our teenage boys sat in the backseat, hushed, listening.

“That’s a good question,” David answered quietly.

Angel and David let us tag along with a group of RV’ers driving down across the border to do some shopping. I rode with Saul, who told me about his husband and how they travel the country chasing nursing contracts. He was pursuing his MBA in hopes of finding more fulfilling work. We talked about life on the road, about community and the lack of it.

“This is for a season,” I said. “I don’t think I could do it long-term.”

“Exactly,” Saul said. “I think everything has its seasons. Even relationships. Sometimes it’s just like—OK, we’re done here. You know?”

I do know. I grew up in several different churches, and each of those churches split.

“Don’t tell your husband,” I said. He laughed.

We talked about having friends who wildly disagree with you, who are on opposite sides of important issues. We felt around the edges of the possibility that we were friends like this: souls, humans, not reducible to the caricatured ideas we might have of each other. The righteousness of God hit me like a mountain in this moment. God can move mountains—could move me, could move this man, could move a bitter ex-pastor, could dwell in the midst of unclean people in a church or RV park.

When my family pulled out of the RV park and waved good-bye, the dry dust kicked up in our wake and the sun baked down as if on dry bones. God was on the road with us, just as God is in any other place—in our homes, our work, our play, our worship. God moves no more or less in New Mexico than in Rome, on a highway in northern Maine, or in our church gathered in a shopping mall in China. Somewhere, in between the special grace I hoped to find on a made-up pilgrimage and the everyday, known world of our lives, lives God. The mountains of God are being moved around us, everywhere.

Christine Keegan
Highland, IN

The word *movement* often connotes progress or positive change. But after volunteering at the US-Mexico border at Tijuana, I began to think of the word differently. For the masses of people who want to come to the US, *movement* is a word rooted in hope and despair, in love and even hate.

My husband and I spent some time helping people who were seeking asylum. We saw families whose children were devoid of childhood joy and innocence. We saw mothers who wrote their names in permanent marker on their children’s backs in case they faced separation. We saw fathers whose eyes reflected despair, desperation, and extreme exhaustion.

We saw a judge who was fleeing her homeland because of the gang members she had sentenced, a brother whose sister was brutally killed by drug dealers who were now threatening his daughter, unaccompanied minors whose parents risked sending them alone to a strange land in the hope that they would find work to support the family. The list goes on, children of God whose stories were written in fear and despair. We saw an ugly side of movement, colored by gangs, cartels, White nationalists, and political enemies.

But the movement of migrants also reflects hope and love. We saw the face of Jesus in the asylum seekers, the unwashed mothers carrying their children, the well-to-do families with nice luggage and clean clothes. We saw the semblance of the exiled holy family seeking safety for the child Jesus.

We also saw love in the doctor from Canada who volunteered her vacation time and maxed out her credit card to buy medicine for people whose names were too many to remember. We saw hope in the college student who knew nothing about meal planning but volunteered to cook beans and rice for 40 or 50 people. I saw compassion in my husband, who worked tirelessly to make sure each families' documentation was secure and who still cannot talk about the children because it embarrasses him that a six-foot-two ex-military officer can't do it without crying.

And we saw faith that a God who cares for all people will someday end this misery.

We are home now, back in our safe, middle-class neighborhood. The movement goes on outside our daily lives. But once we have seen the faces of that movement, we can never look away. We have to tell anyone who will listen.

Jeanne Barnes
Gulf Breeze, FL

After my husband died three years ago, circumstances prodded me to move a little faster than anticipated: my granddaughter and her husband wanted to buy my home. This seemed a perfect segue, as home maintenance was proving to be a stretch for me.

So after five months of frantic downsizing, I rented a "senior living" apartment nearby. Among the many adjustments I had to make was this major one: accepting

that I would be living in a place for old people.

I had never been around older people all that much. My parents and siblings had all died relatively young. Most of my friends were ten years younger than I. I had worked (and played racquetball!) until I was in my mideighties. It was a shock to look in the mirror and face the reality that this age group and this place were where I now fit in.

I decided to make a spiritual goal of learning to love old people, including myself. It's been a heart-expanding experience. At the facility, I've connected with different groups of people based on common interests: exercise, bridge, book club. I even started a poetry circle. I can now count on friendly exchanges with scores of other seniors. When the connections happen, walkers and canes and disabilities are ignored in favor of the sheer human person. The gift of this learning prevails.

Janice Reash
Avon Lake, OH

My husband and I emerged from the Hanover train station into the open square of the awaiting city. As my eyes took in this new cityscape, I saw a large gathering of people on the far side of the square. As we rolled our suitcases in that direction, we perceived that they were mostly older women.

While it was clearly an intentional meeting or demonstration, the ambiance struck me as light and inviting. Women were chatting, laughing, and smiling, yet they were clearly here for a purpose. As we drew nearer, we saw that most were wearing signs that read *Omas Gegen Rechts*: "Grandmas against the Right."

I soon learned that Omas Gegen Rechts was started by two Austrian women whose childhoods were severely impacted by Nazi rule in Europe. In 2017 they began to witness an increase in extreme nationalistic politics in Europe and abroad. They sought to do what they could to stand up against it—and to stand in solidarity with immigrants, young people, and others most at risk. The movement was born.

The women's demonstration was unlike any other I had seen. Without a hint of anger, aggression, or threat, this gathered group exuded peace and hope, like bearers of true shalom in the midst of a gathering storm. It was their very presence

in the public sphere that spoke loud and clear, no translation required. It was as if they were saying, “You are not alone. Don’t be afraid.” An overwhelming sense of hope rose up in me.

The antidote to the violence in our world always presents itself as the radical opposite. Jesus was the antidote in his day to the political and religious principalities that eventually killed him. Likewise, I saw the Omas embody the antidote to the aggressive oppression, misogyny, and arrogance in so many of our leaders today. Like Jesus, they were demonstrating the way of truth and life.

Lisa K. Hill
Kandern, Germany

When I was 13, I could throw a football better than any boy in the neighborhood, thanks to my dad, who was always doing some physical activity with his three daughters. Running, downhill skiing, throwing grounders to each other in preparation for softball season, tackling the waves in Lake Michigan—my relationship with my dad was intimately connected with the movement of our bodies.

As I, the eldest daughter, grew older and my theology and politics broke out of the more conservative container in which I was raised, it was a comfort to be able to relate to my dad by playing tennis or riding bikes. During an election year, we could laugh while rolling down a sand dune together with my children rather than trying to talk about the candidates we supported. We found an intimacy that worked for us, hitting a Ping-Pong ball back and forth or playing “volley dog,” a game of hitting a small stuffed animal back and forth over the clothesline in the backyard.

This was better than discussing our differing views on climate change or racism or who is allowed inside God’s circle of love. We loved each other, and doing activities requiring movement kept us connected when we couldn’t talk about things.

Then Parkinson’s disease struck. My dad’s strong and physically fit body began to betray him. Though he continued to move his body as much as he could, the disease eventually left him wheelchair bound in an assisted living facility. Parkinson’s robbed him of many things, including his ability to relate to the world and to me through physical movement. I felt lost for a while. Even as my dad—with determination and integrity—learned so many new ways of relating to his body, his friends, and the

world, we would have to learn new ways to be in relationship with each other. I grieved not being able to move and play with my dad in ways we had always shared.

But amid the pain and loss, a new kind of movement began in my dad and in our relationship. It started with, “Come sit with me and watch the football game.” I did, and he reached over to hold my hand. We’d get agitated if Michigan was losing. We’d shout out loud if Justin Verlander, then with the Detroit Tigers, threw a shutout.

One day, the movement took a different form. Dad told me that the hardest thing about having Parkinson’s was not being able to do everything for himself and needing the help of others, even to clean his most private areas. “It’s got me thinking that I live my spiritual life that way, too,” he said. “I think I have to do everything. But I don’t. God’s grace means that is OK—I don’t have to do it. God does it.” I’d never experienced my dad sharing on that level before. That was a new kind of movement in my dad’s life—a movement of grace. And it created a new landscape in our relationship so we could move together. We could talk about faith and God’s presence and what it means to be healed.

We didn’t always agree, and we still didn’t venture into politics much. We surely couldn’t move together in that realm. But our relationship, by God’s grace, went from a familiar physical movement into a deeper, more internal movement that swirled with pain and, in the end, deep joy.

Laurie Hartzell
Grand Rapids, MI

All my life, I have been a storyteller with my body. As a professional dancer, I see dance as a complex language of gesture that allows one the chance to experience human connection on the deepest level.

My ministry today involves using the sensory language of the body to work with drug addicts and alcoholics. I use the body as a narrative tool to guide clients toward self-expression that nudges them to think of their bodies as ways of sharing their deepest fears and deepest emotions. Their stories are often filled with trauma and soul-wrenching life experience. When they capture some of their stories in body prayer—movement stories—I see their eyes light up.

I also see them begin to acknowledge who they are outside their addictions. The spiritual experience offers them more than just my words. I am curious alongside them about where God resides in our bodies, where divine presence is and how we access it through our bodies.

The clients and I become immersed in a “space hold,” a place where we encounter trust through our physical vessels. Trust, rest, and hope all happen in the place of the dance, where we create movement that echoes what we might be feeling on a given day. We work together to explore the trust of God’s presence, to explore an array of feelings and emotions, not answers. We embody what we wrestle with. We move and somehow we are freed.

Melody Ruffin Ward
Akron, OH

I contracted polio when I was six months old. I had several surgeries before the age of five. My mother helped me do stretches and exercises to learn to walk. The therapy was so painful that I screamed and cried. My mother cried too. But without her, movement would have been impossible.

I went from a cast on my left leg to a brace and finally to a lift on my shoe, due to my left leg being an inch shorter. The doctor opted not to do another surgery on my right arm, which would have attached it to a muscle in my back, giving me more upper-arm strength and movement. His view was that I was a girl and wouldn’t be climbing trees.

Little did he know me. I had three older brothers who challenged me and parents who weren’t overly protective or fearful that I’d get hurt. They allowed me to discover what I could and couldn’t do. I played softball, hiked mountains, and fished. About the only thing I couldn’t do that my brothers did was hunt; it was too difficult to hold a rifle and shoot.

After fifth grade, I had surgery on my right leg to stop the growth so that my left leg could catch up. It was both freeing and restrictive to my movement. Before that, I could dance the twist, all the way down and back up. But not after the surgery. I fell on the stairs a lot on the way to my sixth-grade music class on the third floor. I was usually more embarrassed than hurt.

The struggle was worth it: nearly a year later, I could walk without a lift. That was so freeing, for I could now go barefoot in the summer instead of having to wear heavy oxfords all year. In junior high I impressed my counselor with a balance beam routine, and in high school I joined the marching band.

By my forties, increasing pain in my legs and hips meant that I had to go back to wearing a lift in my shoe and sometimes use a cane. Reluctantly, I applied for a handicap placard.

My life has never really been as handicapped as people might expect. Most people don’t even know that I can’t lift my right arm or move it out to the side. (I did have to tell my German folk dance partners in college, so they would know to lift it up for me as needed.) I learned to walk fast to keep up with my taller friends. I spent a year touring Europe on foot and using public transportation.

As a teacher, I kept up with high school students on field trips, even on three-week exchange visits to Germany during my final decade of teaching. By my next-to-last trip, I had to use a wheelchair for some of the plane connections and tours. After a hip replacement, I was up and about and did one more overseas trip with students. No wheelchair, no cane, no lift. Since retirement, I’ve traveled the world. Age is now taking its toll on my movement, but that’s just part of life.

My most difficult barriers were and are people who view me as being disabled when I don’t see myself that way. Many movements that I might have lost from polio I instead never had in the first place, because I contracted the disease so young. A church group once wanted to pray for my healing. I didn’t see the need for that, but I went along with it anyway, with no visible results. I believe that God loves me the way I am. God has even used me to connect with people, especially teenagers who feel awkward and unaccepted.

I thank God for parents who helped and encouraged me but didn’t restrict my movement and activities out of fear. Movement for me is a way of saying thank you to God for my family, especially my mother—and for modern medicine. I have few regrets about my shortcomings when it comes to physical movement, and lots of blessings in experiences and memories despite them.

Deloris DeLapp
Aurora, CO

I woke to the rustle of sleeping bags and hushed voices. I sat up with a stretch on the top bunk bed, smiled, and remembered where I was: I was about to begin my pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago in Spain.

After I dressed and ate breakfast, I turned to the hostel hosts and heard their words, *Buen Camino!*—literally, “good way.” Slinging the backpack over my shoulders, I turned toward the way. I kept their words close to my heart, repeating them over and over again. The phrase is used as a greeting, blessing, and benediction: a way to say hello to pilgrims, give them courage for the way, and pray for their safety and arrival. On this first day it became my prayer: *Give me a good way, Lord. Be with me.*

My newfound Swiss friend, Marial, left at the same time, and we began walking on the way. In front of and behind us were fellow pilgrims, identifiable by their backpacks and walking sticks. Ahead I saw the sun beginning to push through a break in the clouds. At this early morning hour I needed my raincoat to keep the chill off. Turning to Marial I asked, “What time is it?”

She looked at me and declared, “It doesn’t matter anymore.” I felt her words like a slap in the face and a reminder that I had a lot to learn about being a pilgrim. How did this woman, younger than I, already know this fundamental truth? I didn’t respond as we walked and faced the Pyrenees mountains. At home I was so accustomed to knowing the time and filling every hour of the day. It was going to take some time before the way of the pilgrim became my way.

I climbed higher and higher up through the Pyrenees. I could only see one step in front of me. It felt like floating on the clouds, so thick was the fog. Over and over I said to myself: I am a pilgrim. I’m doing it. I’m walking the Camino de Santiago. I couldn’t see much of the path, and this required me to use my other senses. I felt the wind on my face and the slight drizzle from the clouds. I heard a bell in the distance and smelled wet grass. My desire to get to the night’s hostel to secure a bed ran in opposition to the fog that forced me to slow down. I returned to the phrase rolling in my mind: *Buen camino*, a good way. I remembered that this is why I traveled across the world, for the chance to be present to the path beneath my feet.

Clanging bells drew me forward as I scrunched my eyes, trying to find the source of the ringing. The higher I got, the less I could see. The bells belonged to cows in the

field somewhere beside me or in front of me. Perhaps walking next to me. Along with the rustling of my backpack and the crunching underneath my feet, I heard the bells and kept time with their cadence.

I kept walking forward and settled into a new rhythm, now content with slow and steady. With each step and crunch of the ground beneath me, with every missed view across the Pyrenees, with every echo of pilgrims past, I looked ahead of me and saw the way. I was fully awake, fully alive. Attentive. Aware of my surroundings, every step a declaration: I am here. I am on the way.

I didn’t take many pictures, knowing they wouldn't come out in the way I’d like to capture the scene. But this slow walking, this listening, this leaning into the ground formed snapshots of the first day, the slow becoming of a person who connects with the world around her and takes the time to pay attention to the way the ground feels under her feet.

I wondered when I officially became a pilgrim—with the desire to walk the Camino, the buying of my plane ticket, reading book upon book, placing the backpack on my shoulders for the first time, the first step on French soil, receiving my scallop shell, the first step on the way. Could it be all of these moments and more? The slow accruing of an identity rooted not in what I can accomplish but in who I am called to be—someone who sees the world with attention and awareness and a desire to see each person I meet as a fellow wanderer along the way.

Kimberly Knowle-Zeller
Cole Camp, MO

First-time motherhood confounded me in a way I could not, still cannot, put into words. The new life in my arms astonished me. I’d never before looked at one face for so many hours, day after day. I’d certainly never been simultaneously exhausted, enthralled, and overwrought for weeks on end. All the ways I knew to understand another human being were muddled, beyond what the mind knows and the heart shows. So one afternoon I asked my body to teach me how this small being named Benjamin perceived his world.

When just the two of us were alone, I set him on the carpet and lay down next to him. Then I imitated every single movement and sound my seven-week-old baby

made:

- pursed lips
- open lips
- wrinkled brow
- wide-eyed gaze
- arms sweeping the air
- arms held tight to the body
- feet and toes turning, flexing, flailing
- arms and legs jerking
- coos and bubbles
- hands in fists
- hands open, waving
- side-to-side wiggles
- long pauses of full-body stillness with a wondrously calm facial expression

I thought I'd experiment with this for a minute or two, but I kept it up longer. Something about it transported me to my own bodily memory of infancy. I felt, from the inside, a sort of freedom from the physical template created by years of upright posture and socially acceptable facial expressions. I felt helpless, yes, but also expansively connected—as if my being didn't end at the boundaries of my skin.

Insight arrived clear as spoken words that our bodies, mine older and his brand new, were temporal gifts. Our souls were the same size. I got up from the floor humbled.

Laura Grace Weldon
Litchfield, OH