

Scar: Essays by readers

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

Readers Write in the [December 30, 2020](#) issue



(Photo © Marco Montalti / iStock / Getty)

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

A year ago I had brain surgery to remove a tumor on my balance nerve, which had made everyday life a nightmare of vertigo, dizziness, headaches, and blurred vision. As best I know, the operation was a success: the troublesome tumor was plucked out of my head, and all the king's horses and men put me back together again, almost as good as new.

But they left a scar that curves up from behind my ear, sweeps over toward my forehead, and then makes a big downward turn. The knife work was done by a master, the incision clean and confident, the stitching marvelous. Yet there it is, my head scored in livid color, a question mark missing its dot.

I've always found it easier to ask questions than give answers. I was never gifted with certainty, with a sense that I am right. Now I have a question seared into the side of my head.

After 12 months, I've gotten used to the scar and sometimes even forget it's there. But when I brush my teeth, currents of energy shoot from my lower molars, sprinting up my trigeminal nerve to the side of my head, where the shiver ends its nervous ride in that final, sweeping curve. On occasion the scar will surge with brief but agonizing pain, and instinctively I'll reach a hand up to my head as if I could staunch the hurt. I feel a bit like Harry Potter, his forehead scorching like lightning from Voldemort's anger. At those times, it's my own anger or worry that burns into questions. Why did this happen to me? Does this mean the tumor is growing back?

The scar has its gifts too. Once, when it was really showing, I turned at just the right moment during a class discussion and said, "That's a very good question," as my students erupted in laughter. My children are fascinated by its presence; they like to trace its arc with their pudgy fingers. And the scar is a reminder of a successful procedure and recovery. How to keep a grip on the wonder—my gifted surgeons, my good fortune—without laying hold of the fear and resentment as well?

There is a scar beneath the scar: the section of skull that was removed and then screwed back in place is stabilized by scar tissue. Much like the scar on the outside, a question mark is seared into the skull that protects my brain. A hidden cicatrix, the site of trauma is now a source of strength. Can I do what my body has done? Can I transform my violent worry into an enduring faith?

My head is marked by questions.

Evan Gurney
Asheville, NC

From Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark*:

If you manage to put behind you the painful things that happen to you as if they never really happened or didn't really matter all that much when they did, then the deepest and most human things you have in you to become are not apt to happen either. . .

. We do the best we can with the worst that happens to us, and insofar as such ways keep the worst from destroying us, there is no denying their usefulness. But although they may help us to survive, they do not help us to grow, to change, to be transformed into something more nearly approaching full personhood.

We tried everything to flip her. My third daughter, breech throughout my pregnancy, remained so as the days rushed toward her due date. I burned incense. I visited the chiropractor and the acupuncturist and the pool, where I turned somersaults. I lay on an ironing board upside down. My husband and I read and sang and played music for her. We scheduled a procedure in which two nurses and a doctor pushed on my rounded belly. Nothing. So we scheduled a cesarean birth.

This would be my second cesarean. The outline of my first, faded though still tinged a deep purple, hugged my womb in the shape of a half-moon. The old wound ached as my body expanded to make space for another child.

Eliana, we named our oldest child: God be with us. Seconds after her birth, we saw how the skin on her chest rippled and tore at the pediatrician's touch. Epidermolysis bullosa, we learned, meant that her skin would break without the ability to mend fully.

She was beautiful, curious, and engaged. And she lived in pain. While my incision began to heal, the pediatrician's gentle pats left an open wound on her chest. Her very interactions with the world—sucking and wiggling and moving as babies do—caused lesions and abrasions all over her body. Healing never seemed to come.

My husband and I could not ignore her broken body, so we adapted. We sang and read to her and watched her, our movements an expression of our overwhelming love, even as we could not nurse or hold her.

We learned to let go. Accepting the visible brokenness of Eliana's skin empowered me to understand and respect her whole, imperfect being. This was a necessary counterweight to my unconditional love for her, which, even as it kept me present, could distort reality. Through the simple acts of being with my daughter, I learned to separate my love for her from my hopes for her living.

Still, I remember some Sunday after she died, sitting in church listening to a story of Jesus healing the sick, even as he did not heal her. I could not understand a God who healed some and not others. I let go, then, of miracles, just as I let go of my daughter. I could understand only a God of practical presence: a God who sat with us in our pain as we sat with our daughter in hers. And I understood, then, her name, God be with us, as an expression of God's restorative embrace, embodied in Jesus' very life, which itself was limited and ordinary. Forgiving our brokenness created space for living again, a gift no less ordinary than God in human form.

Five months after Eliana died, we got pregnant with our second daughter. When the doctor told us 16 weeks later that she would not live, I followed my body as it let go even when I could not. Ava, we named her, holding her lifeless body just days after we had remembered the promise of Jesus' birth. My body carried the story of the lives of my two oldest girls even as my arms remained empty.

The birth of my third daughter, Hanah, by cesarean, reopened the scar, my body's remembrance of Eliana, to create space for her arrival. I held my breath as the pediatrician patted her down, and I exhaled a long, deep cry when they placed her on my chest, her skin smooth and warm. Her story would be different but her living no less ordinary.

Elizabeth A. Honig
Riverside, IL

My husband fell recently and hurt his hands. A combination of thin skin, breaking the fall with his hands, and landing on rough concrete led to three deeply lacerated fingers and a trip to the emergency room. Jimmy came home with multiple stitches and pain meds, along with instructions for dressing and caring for the wounds.

When friends and family found out, they didn't ask us how he fell, how many stitches he got, or what the ER was like during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their first question was always this: "Will he be able to play guitar again?"

We never know exactly how others see us or what they most need from us. Jimmy is a guitar player and a songwriter with 50-plus years under his capo, but in the beginning it was just for his own enjoyment. When he picked up that first guitar years ago, he could not have known that over time this avocation would become his

ministry.

So with the knowledge that his fingers weren't just about him, we committed to the recovery process. Turns out you can avoid physical therapy bills by playing guitar. And thank goodness for muscle memory. Our body's natural desire is to reset to normal, even when our souls want to give up.

As we monitor his progress, it is clear the scars are here to stay. Like Thomas, we keep touching them, looking for signs of healing. These jagged marks on Jimmy's fingers are no doubt ugly. But the music is filling the house again, and that is the sound of beauty.

Jill M. Johnson
Austin, TX

The single mom and her son lived just a few blocks from the church. They'd filled out a pew card requesting a pastoral visit.

A scrawny boy, still mussed with sleep, came to the door. "I'm Jack," he said, "and I'm actually 11 years old. I'm just kind of small because of stuff." Without waiting for a response, he took my hand and led me into the house.

In the living room I saw a woman so thin her bones were like coat hangers for her clothes. With a pained smile, she rose from a daybed to greet me. As she smoothed her skirt, I thought, *Weary, worn out.*

"Go on. Go on!" she said to her son, with an impatient throw of her head toward the back of the house. "Go get your magazine." When he had gone, she said with resignation, "Always been almost too polite. No matter what I say, he wears this apology for all the trouble."

Before I could say anything, he was back. Stood right in front of me, almost touching knee to knee, as I sat in an easy chair. Then, with a magician's ta-da, he turned the cover of a *Life* magazine toward me, holding it like a breastplate against his frail chest.

"That's me."

I saw a younger slip of a boy in a wheelchair. His mother said, “Jack was the first infant to successfully receive a heart. He’s had several surgeries since then.”

Jack then slid onto my lap, something I thought only a much younger boy would do so unself-consciously. Or maybe this was the gesture of a boy who, years ago, dismissed the boundaries the rest of us call normal, since with every beat of his heart there was an echo of another beloved child.

Turning the dog-eared pages of *Life*, he named every nurse, every doctor, like a young child of Adam waking to a frightening, painful, but also unimaginably gentle ICU Eden where, he claimed, “Everyone loved me so much.” He unbuttoned his shirt and, taking my hand, placed it on the long, pale scars. “See how smooth they are?”

His mother leaned forward and said, “He likes to touch his scars. It comforts him.” I remembered Jesus’ disciple Thomas, who needed to touch terrible injury as a way to begin to comprehend a great mystery—that such grievous wounds could become the calligraphy of new life, when unnaturally still young hearts can once again leap for joy.

Rody Rowe
Seattle, WA

I warned my junior high classmates about the stretch marks on my arms and shoulders. I didn’t want them to freak out when I had to change into my gym clothes. A heavy kid, I’d put on even more weight and hit a growth spurt at the exactly wrong time. Bright red lines streaked my belly and shoulders.

I’d gained weight because eating was a readily available coping mechanism. To let my depression be visible would distress the adults in my life, and a dutiful, caring child like me would do whatever it took to save them from that. So I snacked.

But the bright crimson stretch marks drew even more attention to the flesh that I longed to hide. People would see them, and my young brain frantically imagined what thoughts and judgments would be piled upon me in whispers or cruel jokes. My stretch marks would confirm just how bad I was, an outward and visible sign of my inward spiritual disgrace.

I wish I could reach back in time to comfort my younger self. When I remember my lack of athleticism, my fat, my scars, I see my gifts hiding there, too. My body bore pain, but it also offered me a way through anxieties of sexuality and gender. My fat was a way of being a man without being a bro. Teddy bear sweetness was part of me, too, and my fat gave me a way of being my gay male self in a confusing time.

I can look back now and see grace operating in my stretch marks and scars. God did not abandon me. In my scars and in the scars of Christ, I see the healing power of God at work.

Joseph Farnes

Boise, ID

"Stop!" I cried out to the shuttle driver as we pulled out of the driveway of Seattle Cancer Care Alliance. From the window, I noticed my son, Shammond, then ten years old, running to catch up. The driver heard me, applied the brakes, and opened the door. Shammond jumped aboard.

I was used to Shammond running to find me. Before coming to Seattle for a bone marrow transplant, I was at St. Vincent Hospital in Green Bay, Wisconsin, diagnosed with leukemia. My husband drove our six children to visit me. When he parked the car, Shammond jumped out and ran ahead of the family, navigated the doors of the hospital and the elevator, and found me before the others did. He popped up beside my bed like a seal surfacing from beneath the water, smiling.

Shammond is adopted. He had already lost his birth mother, and doctors had told him I was dying. Feeling the warmth of his small body next to me on the shuttle seat, I knew myself as mom, needing to protect him. As the bus moved through traffic, we were both glad to be sitting next to each other.

We were there to remove my Hickman line, a catheter inserted in the chest wall that gives doctors long-term access to veins with decreased risk of infection. When the Hickman line had been installed, I'd been awake, watching the procedure on a screen, the delicate tube threading through me, ultimately lodging in a vein above my heart, taking on the outline of a person at prayer, head bowed. What would the removal procedure be?

"You can't be here," the doctor told Shammond. "Grown-up nurses pass out when they watch this procedure."

I lay on the bed between them. Nurses in gowns with masks and gloves stood by, ready to apply a blue sterile drape. A stainless-steel table was beside the bed with cleansers, scissors, bandages, gauze, tape, needles, forceps. I had to look away.

"Put a chair behind him for when he faints," the doctor instructed.

Shammond was quiet, looking into my eyes.

After injecting lidocaine to numb the area where the Hickman line was embedded, the doctor began to cut me. Shammond did not quiver. The doctor dislodged the plug and pulled the line from my body.

Now, after a decade of treatments to battle cancer, I have many scars, and Shammond has been with me for all of these wounds. When my donor cells attacked me, Shammond became my eyes. Five times in five months, he drove me to the University of Illinois eye specialist, a seven-hour journey from our home. Shammond was my caregiver through two eye surgeries. I cherish the memories of him opening doors, carrying luggage, applying eye drops, and cooking for me while my vision was being restored.

When I towel off my body from a shower and look in the mirror with eyes that can see, I notice the depression on my chest where the Hickman line was pulled from my heart. I remember my son at ten years old, holding my hand through procedures, and at 20 years old, taking the steering wheel as my shepherd.

*Valerie Ann Fons
Washington Island, WI*

On July 5, 2001, I was assaulted at gunpoint in my parsonage. At 26, I was a recent seminary graduate and had just completed my first year of pastoral ministry. My attacker raped me, asking, "Do we need the gun for sex?" He told me he was going to kill me and then kill himself.

At just the right moment, when my attacker was distracted, I managed to grab my keys and flee to the police station a mile away. I was lucky to survive what so many

others do not. My attacker was caught that same night and later sentenced to seven years in jail.

While my physical bruises healed in the weeks following the assault, my emotional and spiritual wounds remained. For years, I struggled with the invisible burden of panic attacks, insomnia, hyper-vigilance, and flashbacks. My post-traumatic stress disorder worsened as the date of my attacker's release from prison approached. As I waited for the parole board's decision, I could barely function, personally or professionally. I tried many things to stop the suffering. In the depths of my despair, though, I couldn't envision a life beyond the darkness surrounding me.

Thankfully, my family and my counselor did not give up on me. Desperate and exhausted, I tried one more treatment method. The same weekend my attacker walked out of prison, I partnered with a service dog.

Bady, a sweet but imposing German shepherd, accompanied me wherever I went, vigilant so I wouldn't have to be. The first night he curled up at the foot of my bed was the first night I slept through in seven years. Over the next several years, Bady gave me the space I needed to heal from the inside out. Today he lives a life of leisurely retirement, and I live a life mostly free of PTSD.

Like many people with PTSD, I was skilled at hiding it. Even in my darkest days, my outward appearance projected health and success. Yet there were times I wished for a scar. There was no physical sign on my body to bear witness to the terror I lived through, nothing to tell others that I was wounded, fragile, and in need of tender care.

On my 38th birthday, 12 years after my assault, I gave myself a permanent scar: a tattoo of Bady's paw print surrounded by a heart. My right forearm will carry the evidence of my journey for the rest of my life. This scar, though, is not a symbol of my pain but a testimony to my healing.

Kristabeth E. Atwood
Burlington, VT

The doctor who finally diagnosed the cause of my infertility explained it to me as scars. Endometriosis leaves scars on the ovaries, on the fallopian tubes, and inside

the uterus, scars which prevent conception or obstruct the attachment of a fertilized egg. As the doctor put it, sounding like a teacher grading me on a failed science project, my inability to “achieve a successful pregnancy” came down to scars I did not know existed.

I’d certainly felt like I was being carved up inside during the debilitating pain I experienced for several days each month. But I’d had no idea that the blood that accompanied the pain was not the simple sloughing off of unneeded tissue but bleeding that produced lesions that would not heal.

As the months and years passed, I managed the pain as I built loss upon loss, the injuries inside wounding me into hopelessness, scarring not only my organs but my spirit. Who is a woman if she cannot bear a child? Why do most of the images of God as a woman have to do with birth and child-rearing? In whose image was I created?

Unfortunately, the church was no help. Infertility didn’t come up in sermons, except in relation to the two women whom God healed of it. Hannah and Elizabeth got children despite infertility; did God not love me as much as God loved them? Mother’s Day services brought numbness.

In my first pastorate, in a rural small town, two teenage sisters got pregnant within two months of each other. I baptized their babies. Back home, I railed at God that these young women, in my humble opinion thoroughly unprepared for motherhood, could bear children while I could not. Like a heartsick, disappointed child, I wept to my parent. It was not fair.

Thirteen years after my diagnosis, my husband and I welcomed home our first son by adoption. A daughter and a second son would follow. Adoption does not cure infertility. The emotional scars formed during months of cycles of anticipation and despair remain. Adoption did, however, make me a mother. Over time it became clear that for me “achieving a successful pregnancy” was just a route to parenthood, not an end in itself. My scars could not block love.

The scars from my endometriosis still exist. I remember the pain that created them, and when I see another woman struggling as I did, I don’t offer shallow platitudes. I sit with her, holding the hope her scars would defeat, until she can find her own path into the possibility of new life.

Rochelle A. Stackhouse

Hamden, CT

I had severe acne in adolescence, and my mother didn't want me to pop my pimples because this would leave lasting scars on my face. She placed notes around the house to remind me. The worst was the one she put on the mirror: "Thou God seeth me." I was furious. God had nothing to do with this, I thought, and I didn't want to have to deal with God, too. Did she and God even know how much those pimples hurt?

Another time, she took me out to a tree in the yard that was knurly because of broken-off limbs. She told me that the tree could heal but the scars would be there the rest of its life. Stubborn soul that I was, I wasn't convinced that knurly trees looked so bad. They had character; their shapes were fascinating to me, artful in their design. Was it really so bad to carry scars?

Years later, after my mother learned more about the wounds in my life and the efforts I have made to heal from them, she said to me, "You are a beautiful daughter." Perhaps she too had come to love knobby, knurly trees.

Grace Dickerson

Washington, DC

I see in fragments, having been diagnosed with a rare eye disease at age 29. The specialist told me a lesion, perhaps an extra piece of protein or skin, now resided in my macula. It was not cancer, it was not genetic, and it was not actively infectious. But he could tell me no more.

Six sleepless nights and a diagnosis came: unilateral acute idiopathic maculopathy. My condition is exceptionally rare, like only-nine-people-diagnosed-with-this rare. You and everyone you know have never heard its name, though maybe the count of sufferers is up to 50 by now—I'm no longer keeping track of the medical journals like I used to, obsessively.

When I shut my right lid, I see whole images like I have since I was 14, when an optometrist prescribed me glasses for nearsightedness. But when I blink my left eye

now, my center vision goes cloudy. My ophthalmologist describes the scarring and remains of the lesion as a grey inner tube in my vision; I say it's a donut of grey static. Through both eyes, I see a quiet double vision, like when rain drips onto my glasses.

I have read that every single light-sensitive cell in the body pulses in the retina. Rods and cones are irreplaceable, will not regenerate no matter how many green salads I eat, which essential oils I rub into my forearm, which naturopath or acupuncturist or PhD or MD I see, or how much I beg Jesus for a miracle.

Myopia means you live with permanently distorted vision—a scar in the line of sight like the holes in the hands of the resurrected Christ. Colors dim, light diminishes, straight lines distort permanently. I have learned that at least one woman with my disease continued on with her squiggly vision well after the disease receded. My own myopia will likely continue, too.

Recently, I have been dividing my life into six-week increments, receiving injections of medication right into my eyeball. This has been a sort of miracle for me—not entirely, but close. In 2019, the injections delayed the lesion from damaging my retina further, for reasons we don't understand. My ophthalmologist has advised me not to get caught up in a prognosis for my disease; we cannot see into the future.

So instead, I live with scarred vision. I inhale; I exhale; I say thank you for what I can see today. What else is there to ask for but the next shimmer of light?

Liz Charlotte Grant
Aurora, CO

As a toddler, my niece named her baby blanket "Sniff." Sniff was made out of a fleece-like material with a satin border. He was originally white but over time became the shade of grey my mum refers to as "well-loved." Faye brought Sniff with her everywhere and talked about him a lot. Sometimes she'd spread Sniff out carefully on the floor, then pinch his center with her fingers and lift him up. She'd wrap her little hand around the pinched middle, about five inches down. "That's his head," she'd say, pointing to the gathered fabric above her hand.

One day we were sitting around the kitchen table when Faye slid Sniff across the table to me. “Here, Tanta,” she said. “I’ve been waiting to come to your house because Sniff has a rip, and I thought since you know how to sew you could fix him.”

I have remedial mending skills at best and worried that my work would disappoint Faye. I wanted to make sure she knew that because of the type of fabric and where the tear was located, Sniff wouldn’t just go back to the way he used to look. Sniff was always going to have a little scar. She listened seriously and said that was okay. So I stitched up Sniff. The tear was gone, but a few stitches were visible and the material was slightly puckered in one corner. Faye was delighted.

People like me, who don’t have children of our own, sometimes have an underlying suspicion—even if it is our choice to be childless—that maybe God didn’t think we were up to the task. When that thought gets loud in my mind, I remember that Faye asked me to mend Sniff. I could someday write a best seller, preach a sermon that brought a hundred people to Jesus, or finally manage to give up cursing, but the thing I would be most proud of in this life is that Faye trusted me to mend Sniff, despite knowing that I would scar him.

We all have wounds that need to be gently named, pushed across the table, and lovingly mended. Painful as those times are, surely the grace-filled path is simply to be honored that God trusts us enough to be part of each other’s mending, scars and all.

Ashley Jane K. Boots
Concord, NH

This article was edited on December 30, 2020, to remove a duplicate paragraph.