

Spark: Essays by readers

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

Readers Write in the [June 3, 2021](#) issue



(Source photo by Dawid Zawila 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 **Quake** and **Scrap**—[read more](#).*

“Do you see all this grass?” asked the woman in the seat beside me as I drove. It was Sunday morning after church, my first Sunday in the pulpit in the foothills of the Sierra Madre. She didn’t wait for me to answer. “That’s ready to burn. One spark and we’ll have a wildfire.”

She was right. It had been a wet spring after years of drought, and the growth of grasses had exploded. When the rain stopped, the grass died, turned brown, and became tinder. Dead trees, victims of the drought and insect infestations, would be the fuel that turned a fire into an inferno.

Three weeks later, the fire raged, ignited by a spark from someone target shooting, an activity that is prohibited in the dry summer months. But the fire hadn't made it to our town, and except for the increased presence of firefighters and the ever-present plumes of smoke, life went on. Then one day, just as the church office was ready to close, a rumor appeared on social media that the sheriff had called for an evacuation of the town. My secretary and I looked at each other.

"What's the procedure for evacuating?" I asked. "Just on the chance the rumor is true."

"Um, we don't have one," she replied.

I called my district superintendent for advice. She had two instructions: get somewhere safe, and make sure the people in your church are safe.

I had already called a pastor in a neighboring community to see if my dogs and I might seek shelter with him. But instead of leaving immediately, I skipped ahead to the second instruction. A native of the Gulf Coast, I'm no stranger to natural disasters, but my experience with evacuations was all related to tropical storms and hurricanes—for which you have many hours, if not days, to prepare.

I packed to go, and as I did I began calling my people to make sure they were safe. Then my cell phone provider cut service and the power went out. I should have jumped in my car then, but instead I continued to reach out to people. One woman I called was confused and a little angry that I hadn't already left. "The fire is nowhere near us," she said. "You. Need. To. Leave."

Finally, I herded the dogs into the car and set off. As I approached the main road, I saw that the town was completely deserted. I realized my serious error. The people who knew the danger best had heeded the order immediately—they were long gone. I looked at the dogs and said a prayer of thanks that we were on our way and that it wasn't too late.

The most direct road to the pastor's house was already shut down. I had to figure out how to navigate the back roads. It was almost dark when I pulled into his driveway, safe.

As wildfires continue to plague the West, I watch the stories of the hurried evacuations, people leaving with little more than the clothes on their back, and I

realize how fortunate I was. That could have been me. I have a new appreciation for the power of one spark.

Allison Byerley
Tulare, CA

The night after George Floyd was murdered by police, I got a call that the medic site serving demonstrators near the Third Precinct in Minneapolis needed to find a new home because of encroaching fires. The caller asked if the church I serve as pastor, located in the heart of growing unrest, would open its doors and tend to the wounded.

It was a big ask. Our building had been completely closed for two months because of the pandemic. But faithfulness and love require different things from us in different moments, and that night we needed to say yes. Because some congregants were already protesting in the area, we went from doors locked tight to doors propped wide open in about 20 minutes.

A few days later, a man approached me carrying a lantern. He introduced himself as Brian Dragonfly from MIGIZI, a Native youth empowerment organization located across the alley from the church. MIGIZI's building survived the first night of unrest in the neighborhood, but the next night a fire spread from a neighboring structure. The building and most of its contents were destroyed.

When Dragonfly arrived to assess the situation, the building was still burning. "I decided to capture the fire," he told me, holding up his lantern. Would Holy Trinity Lutheran Church tend the fire for MIGIZI until they could rebuild? He thought that the flame might bring some comfort to his community in the weeks and years ahead.

In our sanctuary, he set the lantern on the altar. I ran to find a candle. We shared the fire and along with it the trauma of the preceding days, the conviction that not all that was destroyed was to be mourned, and the hope that the ashy moment in our neighborhood's life would be an opportunity for new life.

Later, I decided to bring the flame home for the night—I was more than a little fire-conscious in those days. I drove the candle home in my car's cup holder. When I made it to my home with the flame still flickering, I wept. Even shattered dreams

need tending.

Ingrid C. A. Rasmussen
Minneapolis, MN

From Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark*:

The original creation of light itself is almost too extraordinary to take in. The little cook-out on the beach [at the end of John's Gospel] is almost too ordinary to take seriously. Yet if Scripture is to be believed, enormous stakes were involved in them both and still are. Only a saint or a visionary can begin to understand God setting the very sun on fire in the heavens, and therefore God takes another tack. By sheltering a spark with a pair of cupped hands and blowing on it, the Light of the World gets enough of a fire going to make breakfast. It's not apt to be your interest in cosmology or even in theology that draws you to it so much as it's the empty feeling in your stomach. You don't have to understand anything very complicated. All you're asked is to take a step or two forward through the darkness and start digging in.

When my father was outside working, I knew to avoid looking at the flash of light. It was my job to tell him it was time for supper and occasionally to lend a hand as he positioned pieces of steel to join them together. I was instructed not to look directly at the bright light, so I watched carefully as he held the welding rod poised in his big right hand over where he would leave a perfect bead to fuse the metal. If I saw him raise his chin and nod, so that his welding helmet flipped down to protect his eyes, I would look away from the center of the light as sparks flew.

Dad was a welder. He worked in mobile home and RV factories in Northern Indiana, making frames to carry the weight of the structures. At night and on weekends, he made utility trailers at home to sell on the side. He worked until the sun went down and sometimes later. Then he'd rise early the next morning and go off to his job.

My father was the hardest-working man I knew, and the trailers he made were both functional and beautiful. He took pride in his craft and took care to protect himself and others from the potential dangers. He'd caution me to stand back and, of course, not to look at the arc. His steel-toe boots protected his feet. Thick leather gloves protected his hands. The helmet protected his eyes. But his work clothes were always pocked with tiny holes from the sparks.

Sometimes he wore a mask filtering out the dust and the shiny black paint he sprayed on the trailers. But not often enough. His lungs were battered and compromised. Years later, he was diagnosed with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. He could only walk a short distance without starting to breathe heavily.

When the pandemic arrived, we talked about how he was at high risk from a virus that attacks the lungs. He took measures to stay safe, but it was difficult for him to wear a mask. In late August, I took him to the COVID testing site, and he struggled to keep the mask positioned over his face. I could hear his labored breathing.

We lowered our masks so a former neighbor could put the swabs in our noses. A few minutes later, we learned the results. He was positive.

He fell that night, likely a result of the falling oxygen level in his big body. In the emergency room, the doctor called his lungs "moderately ugly." He was admitted to the hospital and died there four days later.

As I grieve my father, whose 83rd birthday would have fallen on All Saints' Day 2020, I keep praying. I pray that we remember the value of the public good and the power of loving kindness, the power to wear a strip of fabric over our mouths to protect our neighbors. I pray my anger doesn't burn as bright and hot as a welder's arc.

Marshall V. King
Goshen, IN

The waitress had already started clearing away our breakfast plates when my dad started talking about the fire. We were tucked into a red leatherette booth in the diner across the street from my apartment in Philadelphia. We almost always ate there when my dad was in town for a visit. He had a special affection for this place.

It was run by the same family that owned the diner near the oil refinery where he'd worked as a young man.

I was only two years old when the refinery fire happened, so I didn't have any memory of it myself. What I knew, I knew from my grandmother. She brought up the story often, but to hear her tell it, it was a story mostly about her. She was the one with not one but two sons working at the refinery; she was the one watching on the news as the fire swelled into an 11-alarm blaze. She was the one waiting by the phone, smoking and fretting and drinking cups of black coffee. I'd never actually heard what my dad was doing while she was worrying—that is, until that morning, when we sat in a diner, and our waitress filled our coffee cups over and over, and my dad talked and talked.

The fire started on a Sunday; we had just gotten home from church when Dad saw the breaking news report. A massive storage tank near the docks had exploded, and the refinery had been burning out of control for six hours. Dad had already worked there for a few years by this point, so he understood the scope of the danger in a way that the newscasters and my grandmother could not. He also understood his duty in the face of that danger—get there, fast, and help however he could.

Getting there, though, was nearly impossible. The bridge that led to the refinery's entrance stretched right over the heart of the fire, so Dad had to drive the long way around to the back entrance. When he got there, he faced a gauntlet of fire trucks and a tangle of white hoses. Instead of turning back, he drove our family car—a 1960s Volkswagen Bug we called Herbie—right through the mess, bumping and weaving his way down the road like a rally car.

A group of firefighters was stationed alongside the tank where the fire had started. They'd been there for hours, some pouring water on adjacent buildings to keep them from igniting, others trying to smother the fire with a thick, flame-retardant foam. As they worked, a froth of filthy liquid began pooling at their feet. The electricity was out, and the refinery's drainage pumps weren't working; without this system, there was no place for any of the runoff to go—the water, the foam, or the highly combustible petroleum-naphtha mixture that had spilled out of the ruptured tank.

The men knew there was oil at their feet; they saw the danger creeping up their boots, higher and higher. Still, they stayed. Three of them were standing in the center of the noxious pool when it sparked. In a flash, the world exploded beneath

their feet.

The rest of the company saw what had happened and did what all firefighters do: they ran toward the fire, rushing headfirst into a sea of flame. There was no chance for rescue. Eight men died in the flare-up, and 14 more were critically injured.

He didn't say much after that. We sat quietly in the booth, blinking away tears and wiping noses with crumpled napkins. He didn't tell me how long he'd worked that day or how he'd gotten home. He didn't tell me anything about his brother or his mother, my mom, or me. After telling me about those men, my dad had nothing more to say. Their story was the one he wanted to tell, even after 40 years.

Years later, my dad told me another story about that day. After his detour and trek through the fire trucks, he finally arrived at his post. When his boss saw him, he dropped what he was doing, ran to him, and hugged him hard. Dad teared up again when he told me this, and in those tears I recognized a truth he would probably never admit: that even though he did not lay down his life for his friends, there was love in what he did. His story, too, was a story that mattered.

Erika L. Takacs
Chicago, IL

I was walking from my house to the street when I spotted two painted rocks—one with a ladybug and one with a mountain scene—neatly placed on our walkway. I smiled and wondered who might have placed them there—the neighbor girl, some kids from the church down the street, maybe a playful adult. I kept the rocks on the dining room table for a few weeks to remind me that there are caring people in the world, but eventually I put them away.

Then the pandemic hit. I stayed inside as we were told to do, feeling helpless in the face of it. What could I do to make a difference? Then I remembered the rocks. Maybe I could bring a smile to someone, surprising them. That morning I took a walk, picking up seven smooth rocks of various shapes. I washed them and got out my paints, brush, and marker, decorating the rocks with flowers, butterflies, trees, and hearts.

When the paint was dry I walked around the neighborhood to deliver the rocks. As I was deciding where to leave my surprises, I imagined who lived in the houses and what the people there might be going through during the pandemic. If there were toys in the yard, I thought about kids and the challenges facing parents. If the house was neatly manicured, I imagined that the chaos of these times might be especially hard for those who have a need for control. Eventually I came across an unkempt house with a rusted, broken-down car in the driveway. Perhaps someone in this house could use a pick-me-up. I left one of the painted rocks on the ledge by their driveway. When I had distributed all my rocks, I went home.

The next day, I went out walking again. No rocks this time, just exercise on a nice day. When I passed the houses where I had left the rocks, I glanced to see if they were still there or had been taken. Most were taken. Then I came to the house with the rusty car. There on the ledge by the driveway, in the exact spot where I had left the painted rock, was a vase of fresh flowers.

I was touched and humbled. This unknown neighbor and I had communicated without seeing each other, and they had made my day. I was also motivated. Over the next few weeks, I collected, painted, and distributed another 35 rocks.

“It only takes a spark to get a fire going,” the old camp song goes. I don’t know who lit the first spark in our rock sharing, but whoever lives in the house with the rusty car inspired me to pass it on.

Dana Morgan McBrien
Salem, OR

The parsonage was located beside a menagerie. On their several acres, the neighbors kept dogs, cats, a pony, goats, chickens, guinea fowl, peacocks, and other large birds so exotic I could never identify them. Sometimes I enjoyed the squawks, bleats, neighs, and other sounds drifting through the trees between our properties, and sometimes I was annoyed by them. But when the peacocks visited and spread their stunning plumage, like fans fallen from heaven, my petty resentments were swept away.

When the neighbors moved, they took or sold everything except, inexplicably, two roosters. We called them the leftover roosters.

They lived wild in the little patch of woods and crowed at all hours of the day and night. No one fed them or looked after them in any way. But they survived somehow, and they crowed and crowed and crowed.

Often, awakened in the middle of the night by those roosters, I imagined various ways of dispatching them. A few times I was ready to act, but my conscience or my wife always stopped me.

After an embarrassing amount of thought given to those two roosters, I deduced that they behaved the way they did because they were driven mad by starvation. So I bought my first ever bag of chicken feed and started feeding them. They stopped crowing.

Well, they crowed, of course, but only in the mornings, like roosters are supposed to do. They also began roosting in a tree outside our bedroom window, which didn't bother me either. They were easier to feed that way.

When I started toward them each morning with my little bowl of feed, they made the neatest cooing and clucking noises. We had a routine. We had a relationship. I had roosters.

I had transitioned from plotting to take their lives to caring for them. The roosters did not change, except for the change that care, nurture, and a relationship made possible for them. The essential change took place within me.

I call this the chicken lesson, a parable sparked by neglect, cries for help, and unwarranted grace that transformed my heart.

Michael Lyle
Purcellville, VA