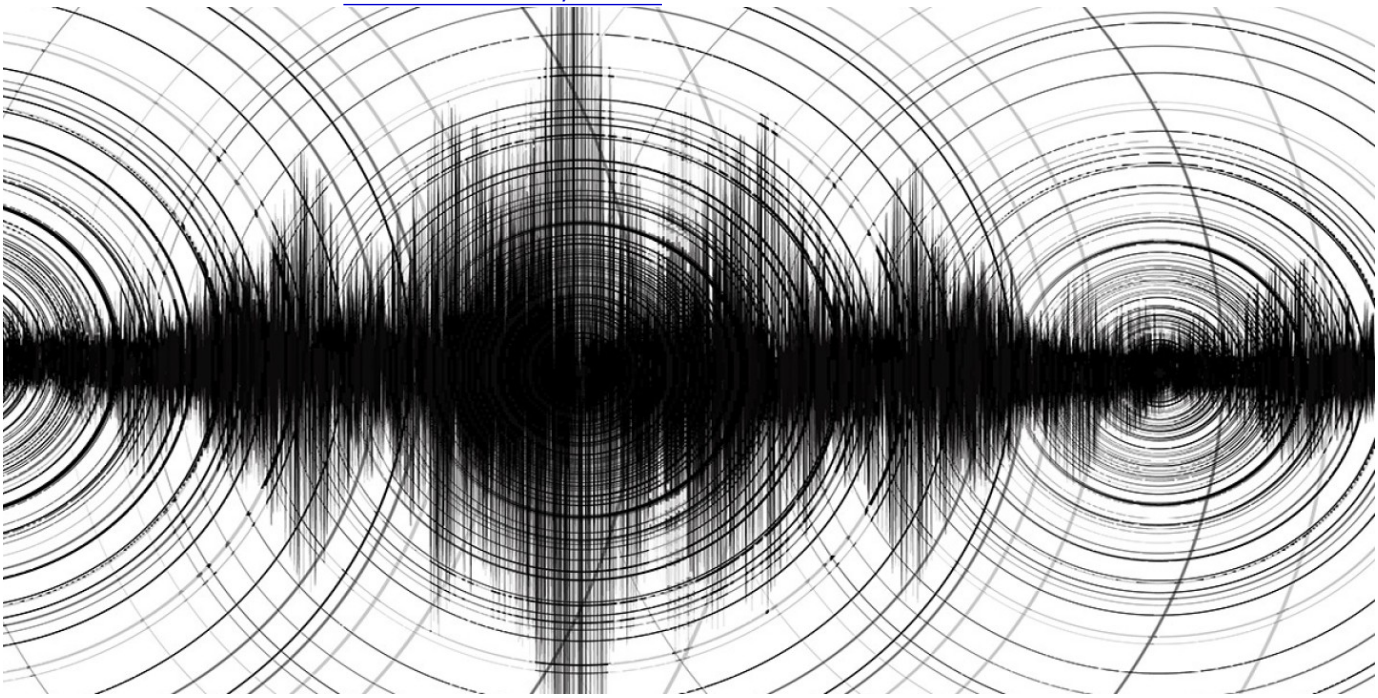
Quake: Essays by readers

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

Readers Write in the December 29, 2021 issue



(Illustration © Varunyu / iStock / Getty)

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

I almost forgot that I’d been in an earthquake because I hadn’t felt it. My dad called while I was driving on I-95, close to the epicenter in Virginia, and when he told me, I thought he was kidding.

The reality finally began to sink in when I had to detour around the bridge I usually cross into Maryland—engineers had to confirm it was safe. Then I heard on the news that in DC, both the Washington Monument and the National Cathedral had sustained damage.

Maybe it’s not that uncommon. There are times when our senses just miss things, even earthquakes. Life never stands still—though we may wish it would, especially to avoid events that bring our world down around us and leave us aching for what used to be home.

Before my dad died, I felt the ground starting to shake. I had the perspective of the daughter who visited from out of town, not the one who lived nearby, so maybe the change in him was more noticeable to me. Then on Father’s Day at P. F. Chang’s, he shared only with me, “I think this is the last time I’m going to eat here.” Soon after, on my sister’s boat, he became very quiet and still, looking at all of us. In my mind, he was thinking, *They will all go on without me*.

When the time came, we were fortunate to be there as a family, keeping vigil through the night in his hospital room. As a chaplain, I had witnessed the moment of transition before, when it is visible that the body is no longer animated by the spirit. But waiting beside Dad, holding precious each last moment we all had together, it wasn’t at all clear at what precise moment he crossed the bridge, going where we could not follow. Dad slipped away, gentle in life, gentle in death.

How could something so peaceful be so devastating? Our family, our lives, *home* would never be the same. It was off the Richter scale.

Holly Ulmer
College Park, MD

Even though it was my second pregnancy, I continued to be surprised by the newness of the experience. From early on, my two children were already remarkably different. I had new symptoms and cravings. I survived on macaroni and cheese with the first and spicy food with the second. The first was off the charts in size and the second was average. But I began to panic when I felt the second baby shake rapidly within my womb.

I had felt kicks and hiccups before—sharp movements that were uncomfortable but welcome. It meant the baby was moving and healthy. These movements felt scary, as if this second baby was trembling. My entire belly would quake. “Could this child be having a seizure?” I anxiously asked my doctor.

She asked if I knew what the startle reflex was, and I did. My first child was a pro at these involuntary muscle spasms a baby has when sleeping. It is a reaction of the muscles gaining strength and growing into their power. I loved watching my first baby sleep—the gentle face they made while clearly dreaming of nursing, raising their arms up in the air suddenly. Sometimes I would place a light burp cloth over their arms and pull it away quickly, because it would nearly always create the startle reflex, making them look, well, startled.

The doctor, who had seen this before, explained to me that some babies have the startle reflex in utero. Their muscles are growing stronger than they can contain, resulting in rapid flailing within the womb. My anxiety calmed, but of course I wouldn't be certain all was well until my baby was born.

The startle reflex continued. We learned that the rapid movements would persist well beyond the baby stage and become a signal for pure joy. When we had pizza for dinner, my child would quake excitedly from head to toe. When we went to the park, my child flailed with joy. When my child woke up to another sunny day of life, their whole body danced uncontrollably, startled with joy each and every day.

Katrina Pekich-Bundy
Hanover, IN

On a June morning, as COVID-19 protocols relaxed, I took my twin girls to the county library. Thinking of their recent obsession with an animated children's show about underwater explorers, I steered them to the oceans and marine life aisle. Surely a book about dolphins or narwhals ("the unicorn of the sea") would interest six-year-olds. Nope. The book they wanted was about tsunamis.

"You really want to read this one?!" I asked, with the raised eyebrows of parental judgment. I try to let my kids follow their own interests, but did a book on a natural disaster really have to be their choice, especially after the year we'd had? The previous spring, COVID had shaken these girls' lives to the core—suddenly no school, no grocery store trips, no playdates, no library, no playgrounds. On top of that, our valley filled with wildfire smoke for weeks in the summer and fall, turning the blue sky an orangey gray and coating the yard with ash. We started having to stay inside because of air quality, and the girls started picking up on how much trouble our earth is in.

At least, I told myself in the library that day, tsunamis are simpler to explain than the troubles we'd been grappling with. Tsunamis are caused by earthquakes and thus lie beyond human control. On the other hand, human behavior has directly influenced the causes and severity of California's recent wildfires, extreme drought, and even COVID-19.

In the midst of cataclysmic-feeling interruptions to our daily lives, my girls are piecing together that the very way we live has fueled these catastrophes. As hard as it is to find solid footing during a tsunami, is it any less daunting to find the right way to live while we are shaking our ecological foundation to the point of collapse? What other quakes, I wonder, will rock their lives, and what will be their solid ground?

Anna Hazen
Turlock, CA

Gray morning sky; wisps and strips of light-filled clouds; a small flock of little birds, black against the bright gray; a few ducks in the canal, bobbing for breakfast. I savor this delicate peace as I walk to the train, remembering the blood-red sunset three days ago in the stricken city. The sun itself was bright red in the last few moments before it disappeared below the smoky skyline.

What strange arrogance to build a world so high, above ground so pregnant with disaster.

I feel a sense of joy and relief to see trains running in and out of the station on schedule. I recall the cautious helter-skelter of traffic with no signal lights working. Streams of pedestrians uncertain where to go. Lines of people at phone booths, the faint smell of leaking gas, and the unfamiliar darkness in restaurants and stores. I remember my intense desire for home—and the bewildered sense of surprise when my brain was too numb to provide me with familiar phone numbers.

But it is over now. I feel a touch of grief deep within—tears yet unshed over pain, loss, and horror experienced by others, which I cannot yet assimilate. I recall my office on the 32nd floor rolling like a ship in a storm as I lurched away from windows, down the hall, and under a table, my heart beating a prayer with no words. The sidewalk this morning feels good beneath my feet, through the sneakers that carried me down 64 flights of stairs when the power was out. What strange arrogance to

build a world so high, above ground so pregnant with disaster!

My stomach twists with fear when I consider the possibility of more quaking to come, of “the big one.” And yet, in spite of or perhaps because of all these memories and feelings, I know this: life is a fine and valuable gift.

Ann Frobose
Pleasanton, CA

From Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures*:

It was Elijah’s turn to show what Yahweh could do. He was like a magician getting ready to pull a rabbit out of a hat. First he had a trench dug around the altar and filled with water. Then he got a bucket brigade going to give the offering a good dousing too. . . . He then gave Yahweh the word to show his stuff and jumped back just in time.

Lightning flashed. The water in the trench fizzed like fat on a hot griddle. Nothing was left of the offering but a pile of ashes and a smell like the Fourth of July. The onlookers were beside themselves with enthusiasm and at a signal from Elijah demolished the losing team down to the last prophet. Nobody could say whose victory had been greater, Yahweh’s or Elijah’s.

But the sequel to the event seems to have made this clear. Queen Jezebel was determined to get even with Elijah for what he had done to her spiritual advisers, and to save his skin he went and hid out on Mt. Horeb. Again he gave Yahweh the word, not because he wanted anything set on fire this time but just to keep his hand in.

Again the lightning flashed, and after that a wind came up that almost blew Elijah off his feet, and after that the earth gave such a shake that it almost knocked him silly. But there wasn't so much as a peep out of Yahweh, and Elijah stood there like a ringmaster when the lion won’t jump through the hoop.

Our wedding was a month away. After a long bath, I went to bed at 2:30 a.m. When my fiancé, David, finally crawled under the covers, the clock read 4:15. As we were dozing off, the windows rattled. Everything started to shake. We heard the crunch of countless windows shattering. I propelled myself to the door. (When a Chicagoan moves to Los Angeles, you learn what to do in an earthquake. *Stand in a doorway*.) The floor was slanted. I stumbled over unknown objects.

David pushed me out the window, and somehow I landed gently on the concrete. Our building had sunk—the windowsill was at ground level. I crawled into the courtyard, unable to see without my glasses.

This all happened in about 20 seconds.

David, my hero, went back for the glasses. It was a miracle he found anything in that mess. But I still couldn't see. Without electricity, it was pitch black. I stood in my bare feet, stunned. Our neighbors were calling out in the darkness, doorway to doorway, balcony to balcony, making sure everyone was OK. One neighbor's door was jammed. I heard David and another neighbor pull him out through his window with one big *heave-ho*.

Our building had sunk—the windowsill was at ground level. I crawled into the courtyard.

A man behind me said, "Here, put these on," and handed me a pair of sneakers. To this day, I don't know who that was, but I am grateful for that act of kindness. Without those shoes my feet would have been cut to shreds by the broken glass everywhere.

By dawn, disaster swirled around me: Whining car alarms. Screaming fire trucks. Families huddled together in their pajamas. From a smoldering building across the street, some men were pushing a mattress off a balcony, guiding it to the sidewalk.

Tears welled up. I blubbered, "How will we ever find anything good to redeem this day?"

David took my hand and placed a gold band with a simple diamond on my ring finger. With tenderness in his eyes, above the roar of the sirens, he said, "Will this do?" He'd picked up the ring that very evening at the airport, sent overnight from his mom. When he'd gone back into our apartment for my glasses, he'd also

retrieved the ring, still wondering what he was going to say when he gave it to me. That was all answered by the sirens and serendipity.

Aftershocks continued all day. The trees swayed. The ground bounced like the “L” train. No lives were lost at our building, just lots of scrapes and bruises. My soon-to-be in-laws and some friends helped us rescue whatever we could fit through the window.

Meanwhile, the aroma of barbeque spread across the neighborhood. People were giving food away, making the best of what was left in their fridges. In the midst of chaos, generosity abounded. Over the weeks that followed, we all empathized with strangers, without a trace of the usual big-city mistrust. We became good neighbors.

Before the earthquake, I wasn’t a good neighbor. I despised small talk. I ignored people. But the 1994 Northridge earthquake shook me up. Now I couldn’t stand in line without talking to someone. I looked people in the eye and really listened. This new behavior was in part a reaction to trauma. But 27 years later I’m still doing it. I pray daily for ways to be a good neighbor.

Our wedding and reception took place outdoors because the building we’d rented had been condemned—but amid orange groves and roses, with friends and family, all was right with the world. We stayed in David’s childhood bedroom at his father’s house until we found an apartment without any cracks.

Three years later, we moved to southern Oregon. We’ve now survived the Almeda fire, too. With hope and courage, we find a way to redeem each day. And I know now that even the smallest gesture of kindness makes a difference.

Janis Hunt Johnson
Medford, OR

A couple of years ago, my family and I went to a Christmas Eve service at a church we had recently started attending. The service was organized differently from anything I had ever experienced, with readings and songs meant to tell the Christmas story in the evocative way of traditional British Christmas services of the past. With daylight still pouring through the stained glass, the readings provided a kind of historical background to the Christmas narrative.

I had heard the Christmas story for decades, but this time the emotions of those at the first Christmas made a distinct impression on me. When we sang “O Holy Night,” I was struck by the encouragement to “fall on your knees.” I didn’t grow up in a church where candles were lit by congregants at Christmas services, so I was stunned when, as the sun set and the sanctuary grew imperceptibly darker by the minute, we started passing candlelight from one person to another. We sang “Silent Night,” and I felt undercut by the line, “Shepherds quake at the sight.” This was exactly how I felt in the moment, quaking at the beauty of it all. With this recognition came goosebumps, tears, and a literal feeling of being weak in the knees. My soul felt refreshed and rejuvenated and full.

The emotion I felt that Christmas was so different from emotions I experienced in the past. I seemed to feel the shepherds’ terror and the villagers’ amazement on that first Christmas. My world and my spirit seemed to open to something new and profound. My experience of Christmas hasn’t been the same since.

Andy Tix
Hastings, MN

I’m a native Californian, so I’ve experienced the trembling, rolling, and jolting of a fault line adjusting itself to a new, temporary normal. My bio is filled with seismic episodes. I am also familiar with the force of earthquakes—and their geological cousins, volcanoes—for another reason: I’ve been down inside their faults and fissures, with cloven ground stretched out above and around me. Like a bug taunting a trap to spring shut, I’ve clambered around inside deep chasms, mazelike underground caves, and split lava beds.

Those experiences started when I was a young boy vacationing in the California Sierras. One summer afternoon, my brothers and I got to explore an earthquake fracture. This massive split in the earth was near a volcanic mountain still covered with debris from ancient eruptions and speckled with fault lines that had developed from mammoth tectonic shifts. That was back when my sense of danger was less well developed—or at least took second place to my sense of adventure.

I was excited to climb down to the bottom of that narrow crevice, 60 feet deep, not aware that this fault had been birthed only about 600 years earlier, a geologically recent event. I was a small lad contemplating a huge mystery. Reacting to indescribable forces reaching out from the planet’s core, an immovable mountain

had split open in an instant! Cutting laterally through miles of volcanic stone, an earthquake had marked the terrain with a humbling reminder of nature's dominance. The steep sides of that gash in the earth were like the walls of a cathedral devoted to nature's power.

The sides of the gash in the earth were like the walls of a cathedral to nature's power.

Looking up at the sky, I realized how removed I was from the ground-level world far above me. The character of that place quieted me into the reverence that total awe requires. Those thoughts gathered around this most fundamental piece of theology: God is powerful, and don't you forget it! Another spiritual tenet was born in me: this moment, this place, all the rest of my life circumstances—they're all precious, because everything could change suddenly in another unpredictable, seismic event.

While I was drifting to sleep that night, the immensity of that experience hit me with a fearsome possibility: that rift in the ground could have closed up around me, swallowing me like Korah and his family, who rebel against Moses in Numbers 16. I wondered if perhaps I, too, could have angered God in some unknown way, enough to be punished in like manner. That fault could have shut again. In a sudden spasm of geology, I could have disappeared forever, buried deep in the ground.

The forces of God's natural world are beyond my ability to control, beyond my imagination, beyond my meager words here. That experience—and others inside volcanic fissures and caves in the Sierras adjacent to the famous San Andreas Fault—has stayed with me throughout my life. Those events have contributed to a practical theology that starts with my dependence on God's grace to protect and nurture me. I am grounded in the reality that I am a beggar, undeservedly blessed by God's gifts, and therefore grateful for whatever power and purpose I have been given.

Bob Sitze
Wheaton, IL

I was 17 at that first meeting for worship. Required to attend church but not limited to the one with my father in the pulpit, I'd enjoyed exploring whatever options I could find in our West Cleveland neighborhood. Now, at college, I was sampling the

small Quaker meeting on campus.

I didn’t yet know about the literal quaking with the spirit that earned the Religious Society of Friends its other name. My experience that morning in 1955 was almost the opposite: relief, relaxation. For once, the messages which broke that silence did not trigger my oppositional thoughts. In the presence of this strange but comfortable simplicity I could take off my armor. I felt at home.

Weeks later, talking after meeting with Joe Havens, a professor who sometimes spoke out of the silence, I must have mentioned that I couldn’t imagine speaking there. Joe mentored me, gently but firmly, and I learned that it is my responsibility to be willing to receive and share a message. Since then I stand when it is required of me.

Eliza Gilchrist
Yellow Springs, OH

The Great Alaskan earthquake occurred on Good Friday, March 27, 1964. At 9.2 on the Richter scale, it remains the most powerful earthquake recorded in North American history.

My wife and I were living in Kenai. We heard the shock waves coming like a train approaching our home. We experienced nearly five minutes of violent movement of the earth. I held the kitchen cabinet shut to protect our valuable dishes, and my wife held a valuable artifact made of soapstone. We lost only 67 cents worth of our possessions.

At first it seemed like an adventure. Then word came of the loss of life and damage to property. A state trooper informed us that a residential section of Anchorage had slipped into Cook Inlet. Portions of the downtown area had dropped many feet, destroying buildings. At least two communities were completely destroyed by tidal waves. In Seward, the entire industrial rim of the city was gone. Railroad engines had been tossed about like toys. One hundred and thirty-one people died.

Communication systems were down, so we could not assure our families that we were safe. After two days, my father-in-law in Ohio made contact through a ham radio friend in the community, asking, “How are the Shaffers?” Immediately his

friend said that we were okay. “How do you know?” asked my father-in-law. The answer: “My children were in their Sunday school class this morning.” It was Easter morning. I had mailed a letter to our parents on Saturday, assuring them we had survived.

As a pastor, I conducted memorial services for five of the victims—doubly difficult because their bodies were never found. The building they were in at Whittier just disappeared when the tidal wave hit. Seminary did not prepare me for this type of pastoral care. Phrases like “the will of God” did not bring comfort. I could only sit with the grieving in silence. It seemed to help those who remained. A few families got into their cars and left the state permanently.

I did memorial services for five of the victims. Seminary did not prepare me for this.

There was a great outpouring of funds, both governmental and church-related. In my denomination, the giving set records. The Jesse Lee Children’s Home in Seward had been destroyed, but the community raised $600,000 to move it to Anchorage. An ecumenical group established Alaska Children’s Services there, and its witness and services continue to this day. Earthquakes also continue in Alaska, but none has been as violent as the one we survived.

John J. Shaffer
Auburn, WA

Forty miles north of San Francisco, a dozen nine-year-old girls in black leotards and pink tights were stretching on the hardwood floor with both exuberance and self-consciousness, warming up for ballet class. A mirrored wall running the length of the room reflected over-the-shoulder glances meant to appraise without seeming vain. I had already learned the lessons our culture so carefully teaches to little girls: Be quiet. Speak up. Do your best. Don’t try so hard. Jesus loves the little children, but you’d be more loveable if you were thinner. What could we do but work on our splits and try to make ourselves narrow enough to receive a blessing?

Then all at once the world was shaking. Breaking into that fall day in 1989, the Loma Prieta earthquake jumbled our little Degas scene as we yelped and searched for something to hold onto. Our teacher ran into the room and yelled for us to get away from the mirrors as she braced herself in the doorway. We flailed as we clambered

back toward the barres on the opposite side of the room. Then, just as suddenly, all was still.

Seeing we were safe, our teacher hurried down the hall and we girls erupted in high-pitched chatter. We were too far from the epicenter to know about the collapsed bridges and crumbled buildings. We gave no thought to the crowds gathered for the World Series at Candlestick Park as we giggled nervously with relief. In short order, our teacher was back and clapping her hands to cue the start of class. With the unique resilience of youth, we got on with it. The mirrors stayed affixed to the wall in unflinching witness, and it would be years before I argued with the truth I thought they reflected.

How many times in my life since then has the world shuddered around me, leaving cracks and fissures to be reckoned with? After a breakup, the loss of a career, the death of a loved one, I brace myself in the doorway, waiting for the rumbling to stop. I am afraid everything will be different—just as I also dread the thought of business as usual. But each time, after the commotion is over, the reflection I see in the mirror offers more truth about who I am and less deceitful noise about who I think I should be. Each time there is a bit more grace looking back at me. Because after a quake, in that brief stillness, we can hear the voice of the one who breaks the darkness, telling us like Paul and Silas to throw off our chains and step out into the light.

Kathleen Eckert
Denver, CO