Essays by readers: Help

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

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Clockwise from upper left: Youssef Naddam (Unsplash) / Chalabala (Getty) / Bakutroo (Unsplash) / Ivanko Brnjakovic (Getty)

The Buechner Narrative Writing Project honors the life and legacy of writer and theologian Frederick Buechner with the aim of nurturing the art of spiritual writing and reflection. Readers are invited to submit first-person narratives (under 1,000 words). Read more.

There are two words that offer a way out, and they're simply these: "Help me." It's not always easy to say them—you have your pride after all, and you're not sure there's anybody you trust enough to say them to—but they're always worth saying.

—Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark*

"You're a good man." Coming from Bill, the words went deep.

I met Bill while working in an adult day program at my church in Tennessee. Many who came to the program struggled with Alzheimer's or other forms of dementia, and all took active roles in the activities. The staff's role was to help participants like Bill shine: to foster a sense of accomplishment and pride in their abilities and to express the value of what they could do and who they were.

When Bill joined the group, he was in his early 90s and had early stage Alzheimer's. He was one of three Black participants I came to know in my seven years on the staff. We sat at the same table for three years.

Born in 1922 in a rural community 40 miles away, Bill attended school through tenth grade. He milked cows and mowed lawns while his mother did laundry and cleaning for White households for 50 cents a day. At age 12 he drove a truck delivering blocks of ice to homes and businesses.

During World War II and the Korean conflict, Bill served in Black logistics units in the army. He completed his GED and was recommended for promotion to second lieutenant, but according to his family he turned it down because he felt he didn't have enough education.

He was precise and thorough in everything he did. During our time together, I watched him slice, pour, stir, and mix ingredients that became snacks we all enjoyed. Wiping the table after lunch was one of Bill's specialties—except Bill didn't wipe tables, he *scrubbed* them. And anyone who wiped where he had already scrubbed received a reprimand.

As a care companion, one of my responsibilities was assisting participants in the bathroom. This task could be unpleasant and contentious, and it required staff to remain calm and patient. When I first met Bill he was relatively independent in the men's room. He was stable using a walker. He didn't wear a diaper or soil his pants.

Gradually that changed, and when it did, it was hard for him to accept help. Occasionally he refused to take off wet clothes and put on dry ones. “They’ll dry,” he’d insist, “and I’m not going to change.”

One day I asked Bill to sit on the toilet so I could help him put on a clean diaper, pants, and shoes. He glared at me and thundered, “Why do I have to sit back down on the toilet?!”

“Because it’s the safest way I know to do it,” I replied, “and I wouldn’t ask you if it weren’t.”

Bill sat down. I knelt in front of him, slipped a fresh diaper over his feet and ankles, and slid it up to his knees. Then I pulled his diaper and pants up over his knees while he remained seated. As I put on his shoes, he said softly, “You’re a good man.”

I said, “Bill, I’m blessed to be with good men like you.”

We stood, and I helped him pull up his pants and tuck in his shirt. As we approached the sink, he said again, “You’re a good man,” then added, “for an old man.”

Bill’s blessing felt like an ordination, at once empowering and utterly humbling. My previous ordination occurred in a large church in Chattanooga. There I knelt as a bishop placed his hands on my head and charged me to “preach the Word and administer the holy sacraments.” Forty years later, in a toilet stall at my home church, Bill’s blessing helped me to experience the sacrament of receiving and to recognize that it takes more grace to accept help than to give it.

Bob Cantrell
Oak Ridge, TN

Through the sleepy fog of a post-snowstorm western Michigan winter morning, I pull into a parking lot on the south side of town. It’s 7:23 a.m., and I see the white work van that serves as home and hearth to another soulful traveler. Stepping out of my car, I feel my spirit open wide. The cold air delivers quiet strums of an acoustic guitar, warming chords before sunrise, and I know my friend the van dweller is awake.

I make my steps to the dark-gray L-shaped building and open the door to a dimly lit entryway. Wiping my feet, I look up and see the first message to greet me here this morning: “Find your place in the universe,” written in red-orange marker in the top left corner of a dry-erase board. *Yes*, I think, *or be found by it*. I smile, delighted by the thought.

In this building there are many rooms. Each is named after a virtue coveted by seekers and members of this community: Peace, Hope, Serenity, Freedom, Surrender, and in the center, what we simply call our main meeting room. This is the inner chamber, which holds people and their sacred voices—voices speaking on the tragic and beautiful things of life. Volumes of stories, confessions, laments, praises, hard-won insights, and questions flow between and through us. We are a kaleidoscope of the human condition writ small, in a fellowship of perhaps the most jovial bunch of losers you could ever meet. I peer around the room at their faces. These are my people. I smile, consoled by the thought.

There’s a quick rapping of knuckles on the table; it’s time to begin. We pray.

Here is a patchwork of people who would never have come to know one another if not for a shared suffering, a shared longing. Affliction in side view and grace at our heels, we gather on this frigid and misty morning in January to tell as much truth as we can before the sun rises. And we rejoice in another day.

The chairperson asks if anyone is willing to start us off this morning. I breathe in, lift my eyes, and smile. “My name is Amber, and I am an alcoholic.”

Amber M.
Michigan

After retiring as a professor of character and moral development at a public university, I wanted to find a volunteer opportunity that would allow me to use my experience in a faith community setting. That fall my church’s newsletter invited congregants to contribute to the chaplain’s fund at the Allegheny County Jail in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in support of the Christmas gifts the office provides each year to the more than 2,000 residents. Along with a check I sent in a brief description of my background and inquired about volunteer opportunities. After the holidays, the chaplain invited me to meet with her. At the conclusion of our meeting,

she said that I should consider becoming a volunteer chaplain.

In college I had briefly considered a call to ministry. I had even applied and been accepted to divinity school. My vocational discernment included spending the summer of my junior year providing pulpit supply for nearby pastors on vacation. Ultimately Charles Merrill Smith's delightful *How to Become a Bishop without Being Religious* disabused me of the notion that I had a call.

The chaplain explained that in my role I would be assigned to a pod in the jail where a weekly announcement would notify residents that a chaplain was available in the conference room. There I would meet with anyone who wanted to talk or pray. I quickly found that the role involved considerable empathic listening, often about unfounded criminal charges. Most conversations included a prayer request, and occasionally someone would want to discuss a passage of scripture or ask for spiritual counsel.

One Saturday I awoke after a night of fitful sleep caused by challenges in my own family. I need eight hours of sleep, so on this Saturday I felt I was in no condition to be of service to anyone. But a sense that someone on my assigned pod might need a sympathetic presence came over me, and I headed for the city.

Shortly after entering the pod and being announced, I took my position at the door to the conference room. I noticed that someone across the way was looking in my direction but seemed hesitant to come over. He was someone with whom I had never worked. He slowly walked over to me and asked if we could speak. We entered the room, and he turned to me and said, "God put it on my heart that you may need some praying over." I realized that I needed to be at the jail that day for me. Heavy of heart, I admitted that I did, and he delivered a prayer that fed me: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Ps. 46:1).

Henry A. Huffman
Eighty Four, PA

Less than an hour from home, after about ten hours on the road, my daughter, Abri, and I noticed the low fuel light come on. The car's computer said we had 12 miles left before our gas would run out completely. Three miles later, we pulled into a small town with one gas station. It was 11:30 p.m., and the station was closed.

Abri was driving, having offered to travel with my wife, Jeanne, and me from Abri's home in Indianapolis. Jeanne had been released from the hospital earlier that day and wasn't cleared to drive. Abri and I took turns driving, keeping track of hospital signs along the way just in case.

We'd made good time, and our new car, a hybrid, was getting 44 miles to the gallon. We'd passed several gas stations earlier, but I neglected to check the gauge, assuming we'd have enough to get home. Now we were stuck here, and home was about 50 miles away. I called the local sheriff's office and was told what we'd already learned from Google: no stations open nearby, and the one where we were parked would not open until 5 a.m. An undersheriff drove out, only to tell us he couldn't help us.

Meanwhile, a car had pulled into the station and parked near the closed Subway shop nearby. A young man got out, and I went to talk to him, explaining our situation. Crazy, I know. Did I think he'd be carrying gas with him? He said he and his friend had stopped for a smoke break.

Later the two twentysomethings walked over to talk with us. One looked at the other and said, "We could drive back to Emporia and get some gas for you."

Emporia was 20 miles away, the opposite direction from where they were heading.

"Really?" I asked.

"Sure."

We learned they were on their way to Hutchinson, about 90 miles away. They worked for a crew that put up pole barns and were driving their boss's car. He didn't allow them to smoke in the car, so they stopped to smoke instead. Our good fortune.

I had no cash and borrowed $30 from Abri and gave it to them, along with thanks. They took off.

Forty minutes later, they were back with a two-gallon container of gas, more than enough to get us home. I put the gas in our car and gave them the can. Jeanne gave them another $15 for their expenses.

She said to one of them, "I'm not sure I would do this for someone."

He said gently, “You can change.”

They said goodbye and took off. By now it was 1:30 a.m., and they would have to wake up five hours later to go to work. We headed home, having just met Jesus on his smoke break.

Gordon Houser
North Newton, KS

It was a North Carolina ice storm that caused my plane to be delayed for four hours that evening. Instead of arriving at the Philadelphia airport at 7 p.m., it was after 11 when we touched ground. One reason I like Philadelphia International Airport is that you can take a regional rail train from the suburbs, where I live, right to the terminal and back. Realizing the lateness of the hour, I ran with my bags to catch what turned out to be the very last train leaving the terminal for the night.

As I sat and tried to catch my breath, the conductor came through the aisle taking money and issuing tickets. (This was before keycards and smartphones.) “Where you going?” he asked me.

“Lansdale,” I replied.

“No, you’re not.”

“Yes, I am,” I answered indignantly.

“No,” he insisted, “this train’s last stop is Fern Rock. We don’t go farther than that this evening.”

Now if you know anything about Fern Rock, you know there is no actual station there. It’s just a platform with a set of stairs and connections to city subways. I decided that if I had to spend the night along the tracks, my only choice was the 30th Street station. It is huge, covered, heated, and never sleeps. I gathered my things as we slowed down for 30th Street. That’s when the conductor reappeared. “Stay on the train,” he said.

“What?”

“Stay on the train!” For some reason I uncharacteristically obeyed. I sat down again in my seat, then watched as people exited each stop—abandoning me. When we arrived at Fern Rock, I heard the “Last call, last stop” announcement and froze.

It was not until we were moving again that the conductor reappeared. He simply said, “We have to deliver the train up to Doylestown for repairs anyway.” That was the last I saw or heard from him. The train stopped at Lansdale. The doors opened, and I climbed off. I walked to my car in the midnight air, scraped six inches of snow off my windshield, and got into the driver’s seat. Only after I started the engine and turned on the headlights did the train pull away.

I had never thought of God being like a train before, but my theology grew that evening. Sometimes we just have to trust that God is watching, God is caring, and God will deliver us safely even though we are given little or no reason for understanding. My new mantra for keeping the faith is *Stay on the train*.

Deborah Clemens
Dingmans Ferry, PA

In the winter of 2002 my wife and I were in a pediatric hospital near Kamakura, Japan, listening to a doctor try to explain in English what was going on with our fever-ridden two-year-old. “We’re going to have to keep the child here,” he said, speaking as clearly as he could. “We believe it may be Kawasaki disease—the child is very sick, and there is a small chance of death.”

I was gutted. *How could this be happening?* I thought. I’d never felt that way in my life. We’d moved to Japan six months earlier to serve as educational missionaries, and we hadn’t yet learned the language. We needed our colleagues’ help simply to get us to the right hospital. Only a few months into language school, we had no idea what the doctors and nurses were saying to each other in the room. Leaving our frightened, disoriented child there alone every evening at 5 p.m., per the hospital’s policy, was excruciating.

I remember the terror I felt walking out of the hospital without my little one that first night. At home, after my wife and our older child were in bed, I sprawled out on the living room floor, face down, sobbing. I have no idea why I ended up in that position, it just seemed to be what my body wanted to do. This seminary-trained,

theologically literate pastor-educator who'd been sent overseas to help others had no idea what to do. I couldn't do anything, in fact. I lay there for a long time, feeling numb—nearly paralyzed—wracked with guilt for having made a decision to come to this place with its unfamiliar germs, to expose our youngest to this. *There's a chance of death*. The phrase rang through my head over and over. I couldn't pray with words. I just emoted silently: *Help. Help. Help. Help.* Even now as I recall this experience decades later, my forearms shake and I find it hard to type. "The body keeps the score," as author and physician Bessel van der Kolk would say.

I'd left seminary with a heady and somewhat dogmatic view of the Divine as "the More which lures the universe into thriving" or something like that. OK. Tillich and process theology didn't matter much to me at that moment, weeping face down on the floor. The "wisdom of equanimity" I'd learned about in Asian religion courses didn't matter much either. I couldn't think of anything but my child—gone.

Now a hospital chaplain, I understand why even people who are not particularly religious can deeply appreciate prayer. Sometimes in prayer we communicate the only thing our hearts can produce: a confession of vulnerability, a cry for help. What I needed in Japan—and what I've come to realize many of my patients and their families need—is an understanding that there is a prayer of the heart which is beyond anyone's speaking. A prayer of pain or grief, or sometimes even guilt or regret, that nobody can rightly know but the One in whom we live and move and have our being.

My child survived that ordeal. But that experience changed me as a person. The illusion of invincibility and control I'd brought to the mission field had been considerably cracked in that period of waiting and utter dependence. I don't control as much as I thought I did. I need other people—my wife, my colleagues, my friends—more than I thought I did. I need help. There is a spiritual clarity in seeing these things, in seeing the helpers, and in the humbling sense that all this is nothing other than sacred.

Dwight Davidson
Delaware, OH

That noted theologian John Lennon may have expressed more wisdom in the song "Help!" than in all his other poetry and music combined. When he was murdered in

1980, I was an ordained PhD student finishing end-of-term assignments. During his lifetime, I was younger. I was a 15-year-old hiding in a movie theater to see another screening of *A Hard Day's Night* without paying again. I was a 16-year-old at the first Beatles concert in Toronto.

I was 17 when "Help!" was released, and I don't think I fully understood the lyrics at the time. Lennon said that he was depressed when he wrote it. That may explain the wisdom. He later told *Playboy* magazine, "When 'Help!' came out in '65, I was subconsciously crying out for help. . . . It was my Fat Elvis period."

"When I was younger, so much younger than today," he sings, "I never needed anybody's help in any way. / But now these days are gone, I'm not so self-assured. / Now I find I've changed my mind and opened up the doors." Help needs open doors.

The energy and joy of the percussive music might seem to betray the basic emotions of vulnerability and need. But music critic Dave Marsh saw the congruence, explaining that Lennon "sounds triumphant, because he's found a group of kindred spirits who are offering the very spiritual assistance and emotional support for which he's begging . . . though [the other Beatles] cannot cure the wound, at least they add a note of reassurance that he's not alone with his pain."

The lyric Lennon sings is about needing help; the music celebrates finding it. He is not alone. He has help. The Good News is often simply expressed; my congregation celebrates it in a four-word phrase almost every Sunday: "We are not alone."

Lennon never lived into his 70s, as I have, and probably never knew as many people in their 80s and 90s as I do, but his music and poetry express our experience. If we are fortunate, when we look back over decades of life in our families and friendships, in our careers and in our neighborhoods, we see an economy of help offered and received when needed.

Tom Sherwood
Ottawa, ON