Essays by readers: Seed

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

Readers Write in the January 2025 issue
Published on December 13, 2024

Clockwise from upper left: Burney Image Creator (iStock / Getty), Kvnga, Yoav Farhi, and David Dawson (all on Unsplash)

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.

> *They are prepared for a mustard-seed kingdom of God no bigger than the eye of a newt but not for the great banyan it becomes with birds in its branches singing Mozart. They are prepared for the potluck supper at First Presbyterian but not for the marriage supper of the lamb.*
>
> —Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth*

When I recently moved into a house with a large front yard, I learned about the tenacity of dandelions and their seeds. They seem so innocent, those little fluffy clouds that break apart and fly through the air, often conveying a child's wish. And then they settle into grass and commence wreaking havoc on an unsuspecting yard. From such fragile seeds come root systems that are amazingly deep and strong. Eradicating them from our yard has required more determination than I imagined possible.

I do understand, though, how something as seemingly inconsequential as a dandelion seed can take root in a life, without anyone realizing the damage it has done until it's almost impossible to eliminate. In my midtwenties, I experienced a mental health crisis that involved severe anxiety. It started with small feelings of nervousness to go anywhere, which grew into obsessive worries. The thought of going to a public place made my face burn, my stomach churn, and my heart race. If I did miraculously make it to a restaurant, a movie, or even church, I would immediately feel a panic that I could not escape. I was eventually diagnosed with agoraphobia. If anxiety was the seed, my unwillingness to talk about it openly was the mulch and water that helped it grow.

In the midst of that terrible time, my parents gifted me a camera—and I believe the flowers I photographed helped save my mental health. At first I focused on nature photography because it didn't require human interaction or populated places. Concentrating on flowers also made me forget about myself and my anxiety. I realized that there are entire universes inside a single flower. To paraphrase Walt Whitman, they contain multitudes. Outrageous colors so vibrant you almost can't look at them directly. Perfect symmetry and exquisitely detailed patterns. Petals that seem to go on forever. How can all of this exist in a lone bud?

Nature photography got me back into the world. And it wasn't just that I enjoyed creating it—the people I showed it to also liked it. Some even bought my photos. I

had forgotten what it was like to feel pride instead of shame. Seeds of hope started to crowd out the anxiety and despair.

I will never be cured of my anxiety disorder. But I understand now that my anxieties really are like dandelions. They aren't overtly harmful, and they don't have to rule my life. They can even be useful sometimes: I will never be as unprepared as someone who has never experienced anxiety, because I have planned for every possible situation (and some impossible ones, too). Yet left unchecked, my anxiety, like dandelions, can become impossible to control.

Now, when I look out at the remaining dandelions scattered across our yard, I think more about their tenacity than about what the neighbors think. I don't have to let them take over, but I respect their existence. I give myself permission to get lost in a flower, to be in awe that so much beauty and strength can exist in such a small, commonplace, and fragile thing. If such multitudes can exist there, maybe they also exist within me.

Mary Trollinger
Danville, KY

We weren't the first LGBTQ Catholic workshop to be shut down by its diocese. But it was the first time it happened to me, and it really hurt. A local blogger had rallied her followers to protest our event, and the diocese caved. I was angry at their cowardice.

Upon reading the blog post, I discovered that we hadn't learned of it until ten days after she'd posted it. Had we known sooner, could we have kept the event from being canceled? I was spinning. How could I prevent this from happening in the future? Did our local LGBTQ ministry need an intelligence wing? I decided that it did, and I hastily created fake social media accounts. I slunk into the online circle of the blogger and, before I knew it, we were Facebook friends. Her posts were nasty and vile. I just couldn't get enough. I loved hating this woman.

I spent many late nights trying to figure out what makes conservative Catholics tick. I joined the Church Militant. (No easy task. I had to watch eight hours of their indoctrination videos.) Their inability to see the difference between the word of the law and the spirit of the law confounded me. I was torn between wanting to tear it

down from the inside and simply trying to understand this puzzle of fellow Catholics with radically differing views.

My ongoing anger eventually came to a head when I learned that a conservative anti-LGBTQ speaker was presenting to teens at a local parish. Part of me wanted to spit fire the way others had done to us. On the other hand, I would not have appreciated it if someone had disrupted one of our presentations. Did my own righteous indignation give me the right to upset theirs? Revenge seemed petty, but turning the other cheek seemed naive.

I decided I needed to learn more. I explored the speaker's website searching for insights. To determine the size of my adversary, I wanted to know how much she charged for her speaking engagements. It was not listed on her website, so I called her secretary to inquire. I made up a fake confirmation retreat at a real location and received a quote. A few hours later I received a voicemail message from the speaker herself. I didn't return the call.

I prayed on the way to the presentation for the strength to stand up to her, but to do so respectfully. I arrived to her railing against the "social contagion of transgender ideology." Afterward, I found myself able to calmly ask challenging questions. Neither of us changed the other's mind, but it felt like seeds had been planted.

I woke up the next morning with a strong compulsion to call the speaker and fess up to the web of lies I had spun two days before. When I did, she shared that she had been praying about me the night before. She prayed for our paths to cross again—a prayer that was answered very quickly. Over time, we have cultivated a polite relationship via phone, Zoom, and texts. I have come to see her as a human person and not a raging, conservative Catholic parent.

More recently, the local chapter of Moms for Liberty began speaking at our local school board meetings about bathroom policies and censoring library books. Fueled by my newfound confidence to keep calm, I decided to start attending the group's meetings. I see parents who love their kids just like I love mine. They fight for solutions to their children's struggles; they want to do all they can to protect their children from the harsh world we live in, just like I do. I don't agree with many of their conclusions, but I wonder if we have more in common than we have differences.

Are our shared fears and instincts as parents enough for us all to flourish together? I don’t know what these seeds will grow into. But I think trying to find the humanity in those who push against us is something that pleases God. And it pleases me too.

Paul Smith
Baltimore, MD

In April, North Carolina is enveloped by a profusion of pine pollen—a greenish-yellow dusting over cars, patio chairs, and steps—as if the mischievous garden fairies have decided to paint the world chartreuse. An open window will lead to yellow sills and pollen-plated furniture. Washing the car is futile because the next morning the windshield will be covered again and oak seed tassels will collect in the windshield cowl. These catkins cluster together into matted balls, nests, and tumbleweeds. The maples release their winged seeds, the sweet gums their spiked burs, and pecan trees their nuts. With such an abundant show of fertility, how can one not feel hopeful of the future?

The natural world bursts with new seedlings, prolific possibilities. An abundance of seeds are dropping on the world every day.

Theresa Yuschok
Chapel Hill, NC

There was a rhythm to life on the farm. Dad worked during the daytime, then went to a textile mill at night and fired boilers. Mom cooked our meals, kept up the house, tended the garden, took care of several elderly relatives, and kept my sisters and me focused on school and chores.

Twice a day we milked the cow and fed the calf and pig that would be butchered in the fall. During the winter months we helped prune the apple trees. In the spring we moved honeybees into the orchard to pollinate the fruit. In summer we thinned the apples by hand and laid irrigation pipes if the weather turned dry. The fall brought harvest, when thousands of bushels of apples were picked and sent to market.

Eventually the direction of my life took me away from the farm to college, seminary, and a 40-year career as a parish pastor. Whether I was on the farm or in the church,

my life has been focused on bearing fruit. I find it fascinating that the story of God's love for God's people takes place in gardens, vineyards, and fields of crops.

You might suppose that the purpose of a seed is to produce fruits and vegetables. That is a side benefit of what happens when a seed is planted. The seed's actual goal is to reproduce itself—to create more seeds. The fruit or vegetable is the ripened ovary that houses the fertilized seed until it reaches maturity. The fruit is consumed or decomposes, leaving the seed, which contains the potential for more seed and fruit.

Without water, germination will not occur. It activates and releases enzymes and sugars that provide energy so that the seed can begin the process. Water also breaks down the outer protective surface of the seed. Combined with adequate sunlight and heat, water causes both a root and a shoot to appear. New life, stemming from what appears to human eyes as the death of the seed.

Soil is alive. Seeds sprout and grow and die. Life is a process that God manages—and allows humanity and all of creation to participate in. Now retired, I have returned to my roots, to the farm where I grew up. I produce vegetables for our local food pantry. Like my dad, the first thing I do every morning is visit my garden to see what God has been up to overnight. From seed to harvest, life continues. Always bearing fruit.

Robert A. Sain
Vale, NC

One summer, I had a conversation with my parents about "going to seed." I no longer remember the substance of the conversation (perhaps because my brain is going to seed), but what stuck with me was the contrast between two very different perspectives on this idiom.

Colloquially, going to seed is a bad thing. According to the Urban Dictionary, it means "to decline or fall apart; to become worn and shabby." It is used to refer to people who have put their priority and attention on other things and ceased to take care of themselves or worry about their appearance.

In the gardening world, however, going to seed is the entire point of the process! Pretty green leaves and gorgeous blossoms are not the ultimate goal; they are tools to support going to seed. The point is to make sure there's a next generation of plants, a continuation of the species. To put vital energy there, other parts of the plant don't get as much support when their work is done. Leaves fade, get brown and wrinkled around the edges, and eventually die off. Blossoms wilt and decay once their work to entice pollinators is complete.

A glorious example of going to seed is a butternut squash vine that spread itself across a corner of my garden one year. As autumn approached, the larger leaves developed yellow splotches and began to shrivel. That happened partly because it was October and the days were getting shorter, but it was also because those leaves had done their work. The plant's primary energy was being put instead toward ripening the squash fruits and maturing their seeds.

The fact that we view going to seed as detrimental shows just how much our culture's focus on youth and external beauty misses the mark. People who choose a mate and beget children rightly turn their focus away from how they look and toward growing those seeds of the future.

In harvest season I think of the various ways I've gone to seed. Though I haven't borne children biologically, I've served as a stepparent. I've sown all sorts of seeds while blogging, leading retreats, and providing spiritual guidance. There are also the literal fruits of my garden, which sustain me and my loved ones. As God promises in Genesis 8:22, "As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease." How are you going to seed?

Shirin McArthur
Marana, AZ

There is a poem Wendell Berry wrote for a year of catastrophe, and I've been thinking about it a lot lately. It begins:

> I began to be followed by a voice saying:
> "It can't last. It can't last.
> Harden yourself. Harden yourself.

Be ready. Be ready.”

Berry uses seed, soil, and labor as the commonplace from which to discuss his thoughts on life and spirit. Here, a dark voice calls out to him from the ground, telling him to

> Gather round you all
> the things that you love, name
> their names, prepare
> to lose them.

Last year was one of those difficult years for my family. My wife and I have known since we met that we want children, and last year marked the first time we felt ready to try—only to learn that due to a genetic condition, any form of pregnancy could put my wife’s health at significant risk. Earlier in the year, my mother was diagnosed with a late-stage cancer that had metastasized under our radar, and despite early hopes for recovery, her health deteriorated rapidly over the summer, and she died before autumn. Add to this the pressure of having to finish my dissertation before Christmas, and you have yourself a recipe for the voice that Berry so drearily describes in his poem: “Harden yourself. Harden yourself.”

I usually find it apt in times like these to look to my faith as a well of consolation, hope, and strength. After all, any Christian ought to know that the God of life has already conquered death through the resurrection of Christ; that the dry bones in Ezekiel’s valley have been reanimated; that, like Job, our suffering can produce the character and humility that lead to hope; and that blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. I know this and I believe this. But the feeling of being deep in that somber valley of catastrophe is anything but hopeful.

Paul claims that all creation has been groaning as it suffers together the pains of childbirth, in anticipation of the future glory that is yet to be revealed (Rom. 8:19–23). I often linger on that image, picturing the universe as a woman ready to give birth, or like a seed in Berry’s poem, ready to burst forth with life. “Be ready. Be ready.” Yet, again and again, the birth does not come; the seed fails to sprout; the tension persists. What happens in the year of catastrophe when the sun refuses to sing its good news on the horizon?

For the first time last year I felt a sort of fear I haven't been able to put into words. At some point the questions at the core of that fear ceased to be about whether God really exists and became instead, "What if God can't end this catastrophe? What if God is too weak to save anyone at all? What if the seed of hope never sprouts? What if God miscarries?"

This is not how I articulated it back then, but in the deepest doubts of my faith, this is what my fear felt like. There are many examples in the Bible of such moments of deep, spiritual agony, perhaps the most famous of which are attributed to Jesus himself: his prayer at the garden of Gethsemane, his call, during the crucifixion, of "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" I also have to wonder what the disciples might have felt at that same moment, seeing all their hopes for God's victory utterly crushed, unable to even imagine the events that would take place at their Lord's tomb only a few days later.

But no, the Christian story tells us that things can never, ever end like this. "It can't last. It can't last." It teaches us to anticipate Christ's victory over death, while spending most of our waking hours in a world that often seems lost beyond redemption. As Berry discloses at the end of his poem:

> Then let go all holds, and sank
> like a hopeless swimmer into the earth,
> and at last came fully into the ease
> and the joy of that place,
> all my lost ones returning.

In a year of catastrophe, hope remains a lingering seed, a hopeless swimmer sunk into the earth, ready to sprout at its own unforeseeable time.

Luis Manuel Ontiveros
Bonn, Germany

I shook the little packet, listening as the seeds rattled. That sound used to signal hope, the promise of new growth, but now it echoed my fears. Could I garden without my husband?

He and I had gardened together for 30 years. He had tilled the soil, put up fencing, erected supports, done all the “hard” work. Together we would walk the garden in the evening, tend the plants, and pick the fruit. I have a photograph of him two weeks before his death, watering the garden from the ATV because the cancer had made him too weak to walk. After his death, when I looked at the barren ground, that image was all I could see.

The picture on the seed packet promised luscious fruit. I could envision our gardens from earlier years when pea stalks grew tall, covered with little white flowers. I could almost taste the sweet crunch of the juicy sugar snaps. But doubts rattled like those seeds. Was I strong enough to till and fence? What if the plants failed? How had something as hopeful as a seed packet made me fearful?

Growing sugar snaps had somehow become a metaphor for growing spiritually and emotionally. My life was the barren patch in the yard. If I wanted to be full of spiritual fruit instead of grief-riddled sadness, I had work to do. If I wanted my garden to be full of luscious fruit instead of weeds and dirt, I needed to prepare the space and plant the seeds. If I didn’t, I would never have tall plants, beautiful flowers, or delicious fruit.

With a friend’s help, I dragged the tiller out to the garden and prepared the ground. We put up the fence and secured it with landscape timbers. We covered the newly tilled ground with weed cloth and cut out rows to give the plants room to grow. These were all chores my husband used to do. My shoulders hurt, my legs were sore, my back ached. At one point I stopped and debated whether to continue. It was just too hard.

“Rest a minute,” my friend advised, taking the tiller from my hand. Resting, I shook the seed packet repeatedly. The rhythmic rattle calmed me like a Gregorian chant, like a promise waiting to be fulfilled. I made a long furrow in the fertile soil and dropped each seed in the waiting ground, covering them lightly.

Tiny leaves eventually appeared above the ground. They seemed to grow taller every day. They sent out tendrils reaching for the poles to lift them ever upward. By May, white blossoms dotted their leaves. Dangling beans fat with peas hid among the green stalks. I picked dozens each day. What joy those succulent sugar snaps brought me. God had transformed lifeless seeds into abundant fruit.

God has done the same with me. Emboldened by that initial success, I established a no-till garden. The fence stayed up and the tiller stayed in the garage. I have learned new ways to garden without my husband. I think he would be proud.

When winter passes, I stand at my window and stare at my garden, fenced and covered in cardboard. I shake my little packet, listening as the seeds rattle. They sound like hope.

Betsy Davies
Brentwood, TN

I recently facilitated a spring equinox gathering for a handful of friends and neighbors. As part of the celebration, I prepared a seed-planting ritual to invite those gathered into a space of reflection and contemplation. Before choosing seeds to plant, we would fill our little compostable cups with soil.

I started wondering if there was anything to contemplate in this first step, before the seeds make their descent into earth. During my three decades in church, I have heard Jesus' parable of the sower preached repeatedly. It is often presented as a warning or a sobering observation, a straightforward interpretation of the explanation Jesus offers: don't be surprised when you see people fall away from the faith, picked off by the devil or withering under worldly temptations. Only those in the good soil, who hear the word and truly understand it, will persevere in the kingdom.

But what exactly is this good soil that makes such growth possible? How does it come about? Perhaps the good soil is the church itself, a strong and loving community of faith, a place that helps one stay on the straight and narrow path. If this is the case, the call to action is to root down in the good soil, the safe soil of belief.

When I think about the nature of literal soil, however, I see a different lesson, one that Jesus ultimately lives out in his journey to the cross.

"Consider the soil in which your seeds will be planted," I wrote in my notes for the spring equinox ritual. "What is that soil made of? Decomposed dead things—plants and animals that have long since ceased to exist. It's from this that our new shoots

of life and beauty will spring. Take a moment to reflect on the death and loss you have experienced, perhaps as recently as this past winter, that can make for fertile soil in this new spring season."

In other words, good soil is pain, loss, and suffering transformed into the loam of the soul. If I have any hope of the seeds of my life eventually sprouting and growing, I must accept the dark concoction of corpses and waste that creates the conditions for fruitful life. The good soil of my life was getting divorced at age 29 from the only woman I've ever been in love with. In the five subsequent years, I have seen the fruit of dozens of encounters with doubting and hurting people, people I receive with compassion rather than the judgment or fear I used to hold. The fruit of an openhearted desire to listen to cries for justice from my Black and Brown brothers and sisters. The fruit of a beautiful disillusionment with fame and fortune as worthwhile goals in life. Perhaps most importantly, the fruit of a mystical inner knowing that God loves me—and everyone else, too.

Through grief, the opportunity to take root in good soil will come to each of us sooner or later, and it will do so repeatedly. The invitation is to take up our cross and follow Jesus into the grave—into the compost heap and manure pile—the place where the kingdom of God, in due time, miraculously comes into bloom.

Andrew Collins
Ventura, CA

Baby Jesus' right arm is severed at the elbow. Slivers of apricot-colored paint stipple the straw, exposing patches of white plaster. Beside me, my spry, curious twin toddlers cavort and giggle as they compete for the magical green button that triggers a miniature sound-and-light Nativity show at the tired but well-meaning small-town Santa's Land.

Two years ago, the twins' own beautiful, broken bodies were retrieved from mine as I lay splayed and unconscious under operating lights and anesthesia. Bodies broken enough to need UV rays to combat jaundice, oxygen to inveigle life into immature lungs, feeding tubes to replace placental nutrition, and incubators to mimic the jettisoned womb.

Six months before their birth, I had been handed an impossibly magnified ultrasound of their release into the wilds of the womb to bandy about before (hopefully) implanting. It was the first official baby portrait, black-and-white, naked as they come, two ripening seeds floating in the ether of the body, days old, boasting little more than a few cells apiece, evoking memories of single-celled “ancestors” conjured from primordial soup, specks of life floating in the murk of promise.

It had been love at first sight. And yet, I dared not love too fully because the line between life and death was so incredibly thin. A bump, a blip, and all the hopes and dreams would dissolve without ceremony. On one hand, all the promise and potential of a future inventor or painter or parent. On the other, annihilation without fanfare, one more unsettling juxtaposition of sacred and profane.

During those first days in the neonatal intensive care unit, tears came easily, hand in hand with terrifying anxiety and a minute by minute parade of what-ifs. “What if,” I said to the visiting priest, “death is imminent?”

“Special dispensation is provided,” he said, “for a layperson to conduct an emergency baptism.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “But will it make a difference? They are so tiny, so vulnerable. What good is tap water from hospital Styrofoam for little ones so fragile?” What I did not share aloud was the culpability I felt for orchestrating what throughout most of human history would have been considered a virgin birth, an immaculate conception, a miracle.

“Fragile?” the priest asked. “Let us remember that it is they—not we—who come so fresh from God, only days from his bosom, still aglow with the fire of his presence.” I stood before the incubators that nestled my two red-bodied babies, their arms flailing, looking more alien than human. The priest’s words affirmed my dawning instinct that in spite of all that is known about the mechanics of life and reproduction, even more abounds in mystery.

Reflexively, I reached for the sanctuary of story—that simultaneously private and collective space, as lush and teeming as any primordial soup, poised to provide contour and shape to the veiled, inexplicable, transcendent.

I settled into the oversized mechanical chair, kangarooing the still-plugged-in babies on my bare chest—all four pounds between them. And I told them a story.

From the Midrash Tanhuma, first published in Constantinople in 1522, comes the rabbinic legend of the angel Lailah, the patroness of children's souls. Equal parts guardian angel, fairy godmother, and storyteller, Lailah watches over the souls of unborn children. When a heavenly voice announces a coming birth, Lailah leads the child's soul out of paradise to their new home on earth. She commands them to transform into the shape and promise of a seed and cocoons the seed inside the mother.

Against the bubble and rise of oxygen, I heard the voice of Lailah, still at the tiny ones' side, breathing life into their little lungs, for she had not left them yet. Nor had she, I realized, left me. For we are all of us, old and young, living with broken bodies and beating hearts only a hair's breadth from death, between worlds, between the sacred heritage of our souls and the mundanity of everyday existence. We are held and we are loved.

Dawn Rachelle Kotapish
Arlington, VA