Essays by readers: Source

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

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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).

The sad things that happened long ago will always remain part of who we are just as the glad and gracious things will too, but instead of being a burden of guilt, recrimination, and regret that make us constantly stumble as we go, even the saddest things can become, once we have made peace with them, a source of wisdom and strength for the journey that still lies ahead.

—Frederick Buechner, *Telling Secrets*

Potluck lunch is loud and hot. People are talking with and over each other with food in their mouths, chopsticks waving in the air above plates filled with noodles, tofu, and pork. The church is thrifty with air-conditioning, but no one seems to mind. Air-conditioning is a luxury in China and Taiwan, and too much cold air isn't good for the body anyway.

It is Sunday in Texas, and I am at Chinese Church, a place for Chinese immigrant families to gather together and *jiaotong* (fellowship), to speak and pray together in a shared tongue, language, and history. It is also where potluck lunch is almost as important as the church service itself; you're leaving Chinese Church early if you're leaving before potluck lunch.

At the kids' table, my sister and I are sitting alone because even though the church is our family, we don't have any friends. The other kids our age are talking about the latest *Dawson's Creek* episode. My sister and I don't know what that show is about. I wonder if that's why we don't have friends. I kind of hope it is, because deep down I think the real reason we don't have friends is because of how we look. How our skin looks.

My legs are covered in raw rashes and my arms are lined with scratch marks and dried blood. My sister has similar rashes on her neck and scalp. Our lips are not just dried and chapped; they are also cracked, and the corners of our mouths are marked by linear crevices that hurt if we open our mouths too wide.

I can't wait to go home and take off my pants and scratch my legs. Most of all, I can't wait to go home because that is where I don't feel like I'm on display—and diseased. Most of the elders know that my sister and I have atopic dermatitis, or eczema. Except at Chinese Church in the 1990s we don't yet have the gift of those English medical terms. We simply have *pifu bing*. Literally, "skin disease." My sister

and I are diseased children. We are like Job. The elders tell my parents—while my sister and I are standing right there—that their two daughters look quite *gan* (dry) and *xu* (frail) and that they are praying for us, but also perhaps my parents should make us more bone broth to nourish and strengthen our immune systems. And are they praying enough, and also have they thought about fasting for us to be cured?

A quarter century later, I am a pediatric nurse practitioner. I still have eczema, it being a chronic condition. I still avoid perfume stores, and I still use mostly Vaseline for lotion. I still pray. I still haven't watched *Dawson's Creek*.

Even now I can hear the hour-long sermons and ten-minute prayers at Chinese Church about God being our source of strength. My younger self wondered why this almighty God wouldn't just cure me. I thought I must not be praying enough. I fantasized about baptism, about being dunked under water and lifted back out, arising with perfect, undiseased skin. The fantasy brought my younger self much hope—but then I would get scared that baptism wouldn't cure me. Going to Chinese Church became a source of weekly dread for me. If God was the life spring that quenches eternal thirst, why did I leave church feeling more dry and drained? Why was a place meant to be a source of encouragement and love such a source of anxiety, dread, and isolation for me?

As I write this, I am going back in time and sitting at the lunch table with my sister and my younger self. I—not just as a pediatric nurse practitioner but also as an adult, a Chinese female, and a Christian—am telling younger me that our skin is neither evidence of nor punishment for a lack of faith. I am explaining that I see our struggles and our loneliness and our desire to fit in and how hurtful and painful things are and may continue to be—and also that God is in the midst of it all, sitting at the source of both our joys and worries.

Evelyn Blankenship-Lai
Richmond, IN

My phone vibrated in my pocket. I ignored it. I sat in Denver's majestic Saint John's Cathedral, savoring the worship, the sacred space. The caller could wait. For days I had been at my wife's side in the hospital. There it was again, the buzz in my pocket. Again, I ignored it. Then I realized it could be the hospital.

She’d been fine when I had left her the night before. We were there for her chemotherapy treatment and TPN—total parenteral nutrition, a bag of milky white nutrients her body craved. She had become a thin, frail, ghostly version of her usual vibrant self. But we had hope—it’s all we had during her six-year cancer journey.

I checked my phone: yes, it was the hospital. I bolted from the cathedral, found our car, and motored toward my wife. My pocket vibrated yet again. This time I took the call.

“I am sorry,” I heard. “This morning your wife aspirated, sending harmful liquid into her lungs. She went into severe shock, and her nurse initiated a rapid response. She is now in intensive care, intubated and in critical condition. A ventilator is breathing for her while medicine keeps her heart pumping.”

Her source of life was reduced to machines. I was stunned, suddenly facing the real possibility of losing my beloved wife of 44 years.

“He is not far from each one of us, for ‘In him we live and move and have our being’” (Acts 17:27–28). My wife loved and lived this verse. I cling to it even now, like how my fingers dug into the steering wheel that morning as I drove back to her.

In a caring and compassionate marriage, something remarkable happens. Two individuals can become more like one, start to look alike, act alike, finish each other’s sentences. It’s beautiful. It’s creepy. More than the sum of their parts, they become sweeter, wiser, achieving things neither could on their own. We had that kind of union.

“We see you have a standing order for resuscitation,” said the voice on the phone. “Would you consider changing that to a DNR [do not resuscitate]?”

“What?” I was jolted into a brutally different world, pulled into a dark, cold space where breathing was suddenly hard. I probed. “Why should I reconsider this? Tell me more.” My foot instinctively pressed into the accelerator pedal.

“At this point, her condition is precarious. Her body is so frail. Her outlook isn’t good. If her heart fails and we resuscitate her, she will most likely not be the person you know. We don’t advise it.”

I couldn’t believe my next words. “OK. I’ll change her standing order to DNR.” That decision, made while navigating freeway traffic—my mind racing faster than the cars

around me—was the hardest I'd ever made. In a few days I would face an even harder one.

She had been in the ICU before, so I wasn't completely unprepared. But when I arrived in her room this time it felt different. This wasn't planned. We weren't supposed to be here. She was motionless, expressionless. Nurses and interns were busily adjusting machines. With eyes swelled with tears, I leaned into her and spoke: "Honey, I'm here. I love you."

Her head awkwardly lunged toward me a few inches; her face still expressionless. Her head landed back on her pillow. I was a bit startled but excited that she heard me, knew I was there, and responded. That would be her last clear response. Her hands never answered my squeeze with one of her own. Her face showed no reaction as I lovingly spoke to her over the next four days. Her body fought valiantly, her vitals slowly creeping upward before worsening. On her fourth evening, her heart pumped for the last time; the flat line on the monitor mirrored my own sudden emptiness. Nurses entered the room within seconds, followed by the ventilator specialist. The specialist looked at me, awaiting my consent to turn off her breathing machine.

I waited a few seconds, maybe longer. It felt longer. I nodded in approval.

It was the right decision, but that doesn't take away the stench, the ache, the regret. The magnitude of that head nod added to my pain. My precious wife was now unplugged from her life source. And so was I.

With our union severed, I feel like I'm less than one. The math is weird. One plus one was remarkably more than two, yet this greater-than-two minus one has left me as less than one, less than me, a lost soul searching for life. Some days go well. On others I'm simply a big ball of weeping mess. That's the nature of grief, I'm told. So I do what I must. I accept. I go slow. I listen for my life source, for words of love, ready to leap into a divine embrace.

Samuel C. Hughes
Pagosa Springs, CO

I had wanted to see the Door of No Return for a long time. I wanted to go to West Africa, reversing the path that my ancestors traveled across the Atlantic to begin lives as enslaved people in the United States. When I told my father about this goal, he said, “Let’s go.” Since my mother’s death, he had been eager for adventure. So we went. Seven of us journeyed to Ghana in 2019—three generations of a Black and multiracial family on pilgrimage.

Elmina Castle sits on a hill on the Ghanaian coast. You can see it from a distance, a once grand, now shabby complex of ancient buildings. It seems picturesque: fading whitewash, palm trees, intensely blue sky adjacent to a lively harbor of small fishing boats. Despite its name, it was a slave fort. The day we arrived, it was hot and bright and empty; most tourists visit Cape Coast Castle instead, a better-preserved fort half an hour away. Our little group was alone.

We began our tour in the former church in the courtyard, where the guide described how the castle was built by the Portuguese in the 1480s and later became a Dutch outpost. He explained how African monarchs filled a pipeline of captives by selling their enemies and those who were simply unlucky. For over 300 years, White Europeans worshiped here, confident of their moral righteousness.

We moved to the “female dungeon,” where women were held for months waiting for the next ships to leave. Tens of thousands of prisoners died of disease and starvation each year, chained in fetid darkness. The bodies were dumped into the sea; the ocean around Elmina Castle was a cemetery. Directly over the female dungeon was the governor’s private residence, ringed by elegant balconies. How was it possible that people lived upstairs, ignoring the cries of agony and abuse?

Finally we came to the place that I had promised myself I would see, the Door of No Return through which prisoners were forced by their enslavers. From this point on, they were no longer Africans—they were exiles to be crammed into ships. The door is just a narrow slit in the wall. The guide told us that it was not necessary to have a broader exit, since all the prisoners were emaciated. In that dim, stifling chamber, the light from the beach outside was almost blinding.

Slowly we wound our way back up to the courtyard and its gaping window holes. I couldn’t speak. *Those who built this place and believed that Black people were not human*, I thought in my rage, *would be horrified by my family*. We were there to bear witness.

There are many starting points you can choose from to explore your own origin, places where the path that leads to you decisively diverged from others. For me, Elmina Castle is one of those points. A source. When my ancestors were dragged through a door and onto ships, their distinctive story began. I can't name those earliest enslaved people whose lives are hidden. Over the generations, however, my ancestors' grit and giftedness became a river of resilience that flowed from that tainted source: my great-great-great grandfather Jerry, who grew up enslaved and lived to vote as a citizen; his son Clem, who chose the name Minter for himself and his family; my great-grandfather Samuel, who brought his family north from Georgia; my grandfather Larry, who raised eight children in rural Ohio; and my father, Steve, the first member of his family to go to college—where he met and married my White mother at a time when interracial marriage was still illegal in many states. Now, me and my children.

After the tour we lingered on the beach near the Door of No Return. Ghanaian children paddled and splashed in the water, oblivious to the charnel house beside them. As my dad, my son, and I watched the children, another tour guide approached us. "Excuse me, sir," he said politely to my father. "What is your relationship to these people with you?" This curiosity is common when people encounter our multiracial family. My dad explained that I am his (racially mixed) daughter and that I'm married to my (Asian American) husband. And these, he concluded, were his (completely racially ambiguous) grandchildren. The tour guide stood puzzling, looking from person to person, trying to map the tangle of DNA and cultures. Then his face cleared, and with a dazzling smile of recognition, he proclaimed, "Americans!" Yes, we agreed. Yes. We turned toward the ocean and took a family photo.

Michele Minter
Plainsboro, NJ

I raced through the airport terminal toward Gate 22 to reach a connecting flight to Berlin. I was the last person to board the plane, and a flight attendant hurried me toward the only remaining seat as the plane was cleared for takeoff. Sitting next to that empty seat was a man who was wildly waving his arms in the air. His multitude of complaints certainly seemed to signal a sour, disgruntled state of mind. The availability of that lone seat was easy to understand. The other passengers had deliberately distanced themselves and were maintaining refuge behind paper walls

of reading materials.

I extended my hand to the grumpy man and asked permission to sit beside him. He muttered something undistinguishable, then added an abrupt “ja.” The plane taxied down the runway, and in a few minutes we were airborne. Just as quickly, I formulated a plan of survival. Sleep should protect me from the individual whose hand I’d just shaken. I dramatically yawned, closed my eyes, and pretended to sleep. Immediately there was a light tug on my sleeve. The man I had hoped not to engage with was asking why I was traveling. I answered, telling him I was planning to visit the German centers for the Community of the Cross of Nails. In response to his “What is that about?” I explained how the centers had originated in Coventry, England, after World War II to encourage peace and reconciliation. I was going there to visit and to study.

In turn, I asked why he was traveling to Germany. My question began a conversation that lasted the seven-hour trip. As if in reply, he unbuttoned the cuff of his shirt, folded it back, and revealed a row of black numbers tattooed on the inside of his wrist. Reacting with both surprise and sorrow, I reached toward him and placed my left hand over the numbers on his wrist. I noticed deep creases in his face, and I began to weep quietly as I covered the numbers on his wrist with my hand.

As the hours passed my new acquaintance told me about his arrest, about how his family had been forced into a dank train car with no knowledge of their destination. He shared his suffering, his despair, his bitterness, and the loss, one by one, of four family members. He told me that after their deaths he had managed an escape. I asked how. “Someone helped,” was his two-word answer. A period of thoughtful silence followed. Gradually I learned how a harrowing journey had taken him to Italy, to Argentina, and finally to the United States, where he now lived and worked as a university professor teaching the peaceful use of nuclear energy.

Looking intently into his eyes, I asked him what the source of his strength was. His answer was a question. “Do you know Assisi?” I answered yes. He paused, took a breath, and said he had lived in the Basilica of Assisi for two years. At great risk, the church had protected him, had given him a brown scapular to wear so he could blend in as a brother. He became a *silenzio fratello*—always mute, always unresponsive to sounds of any kind—because they feared his accent could reveal his identity.

When the plane landed, we gathered our belongings and walked together until we reached the concourse. We stopped and looked at one another. It was good to face him after sitting side by side for more than seven hours. He leaned forward, kissed my right cheek, then my left, and said softly, “You asked the source of my strength through those terrible times.” I nodded. He said with determined emphasis, “Assisi! Assisi is where I met your Prince of Peace.”

Jean Dodd
Jacksonville, FL