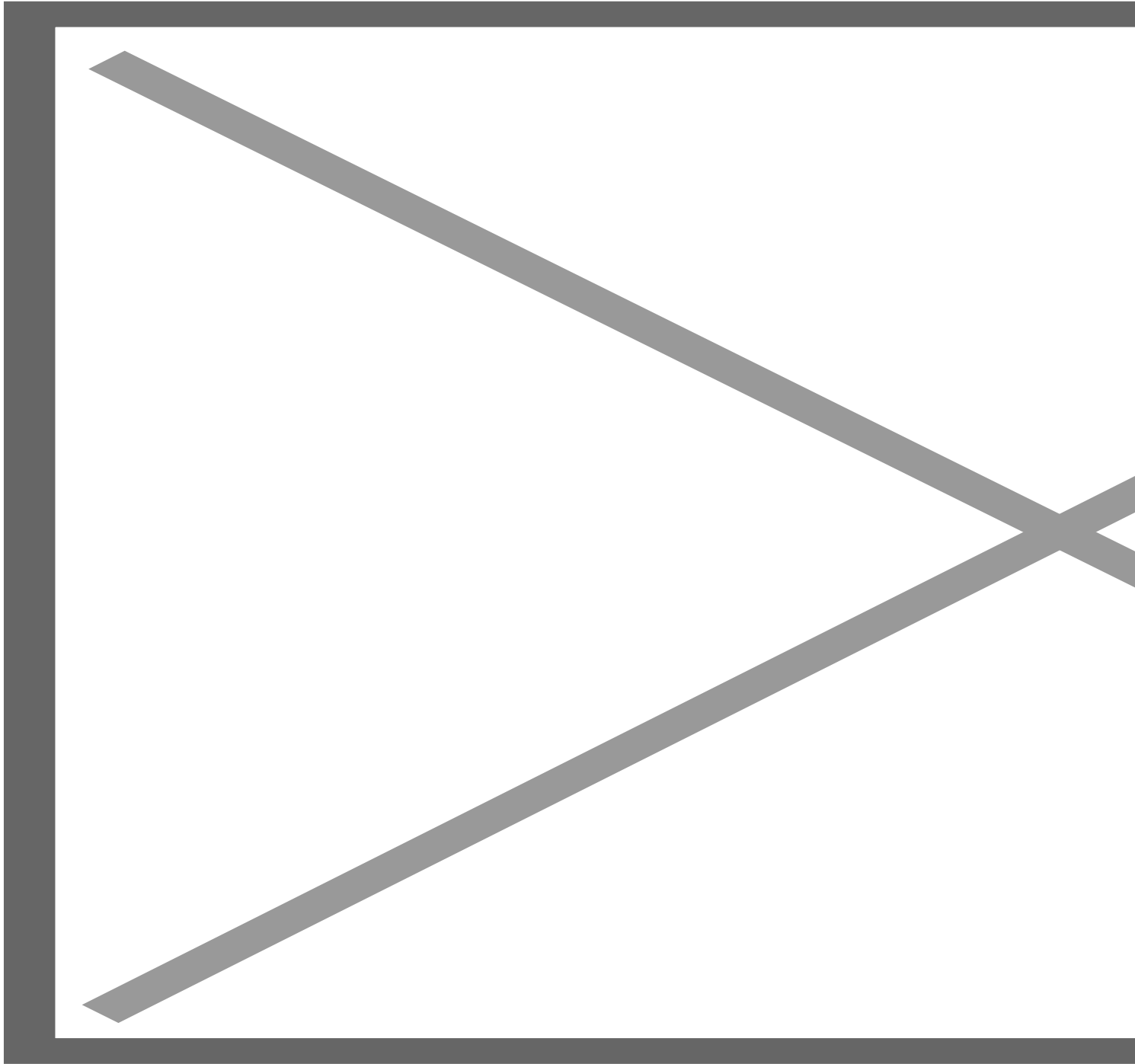


Essays by readers: Flight

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

Readers Write in the [January 2026](#) issue

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Clockwise from upper left: Nitish Waila / Getty; jagi11 / Getty; Arts Cub of Chicago; US Library of Congress

[Noah] remembered the endless days in the ark—the miserable food, the seasickness, the smells. When the downpour finally stopped, he sent birds out to see if they could find any dry land anywhere, and he remembered watching them fly away until they were no bigger than flyspecks on a windowpane, remembered the feeling in his stomach when they finally flew back having found no place to roost.

He remembered especially one of the doves and how, when he saw it returning, he had reached out over the rail, and it had landed on the calluses of his upturned palm. With his eyes closed and tears on his cheeks, he had touched his lips to its feathers, and as he felt the panic of its bird's heart, it had seemed to him that the whole world was just as fragile and as doomed.

—Frederick Buechner, from Peculiar Treasures

I had no idea my 31-year-old nephew Karleton had booked a morning flight from Boston to Los Angeles on September 11, 2001, to attend a business meeting. So when I began to see early reports of some sort of plane hitting the World Trade Center, my only interest was whether the unfolding event was something I would write about in my role as an editorial page columnist for *The Kansas City Star*.

When it became clear the United States had been attacked on multiple fronts, the editors decided to publish an extra afternoon edition of the paper. They asked me to write the lead commentary piece, meaning I had about an hour and a half to put together 800 or so words that might help readers grasp not just what had happened but why—and how we should respond.

I was halfway done when I got a call from my wife: “Have you seen your sister’s email?” I hadn’t. “Please read it now.” And she was gone.

I pulled up my email and saw this subject line: “Very bad news.” My sister Barbara wrote that she and her husband had reason to believe Karleton was on the first flight to smash into the Twin Towers on that malevolent day, though so far they had no proof.

The damnable proof would arrive soon. As it did, our family’s world collapsed in grief and anger over losing this remarkable young man, who just a day or two earlier had learned that his wife was expecting their second child. Karleton was a funny, whip-smart man who studied economics and philosophy in college and went on to become a bond analyst for John Hancock. We were close, and I loved getting his random emails, several of which contained just this: “Do you realize how smart, tall, and handsome I am?” He was definitely all three.

Because he got on American Airlines Flight 11 that morning at Logan Airport, I later got on flight after flight—to be with family, to bury the one small recovered bone fragment, to travel to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Uzbekistan to write opinion columns that tried to explain what happens when a generative and fascinating world religion like Islam gets hijacked by people who imagine that God wants them to murder Americans to make some kind of political point. It’s now impossible for me to get on any airplane—or even hear one passing overhead—without thinking about Karleton and the nearly 3,000 other people who were murdered that day because of diseased theology.

I’m now part of the organization September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows, which works to bind up wounds and to advocate for nonmilitary, humane responses to war. That work includes ongoing efforts to close the despicable US-run prison at Guantánamo Bay, where so many people have been incarcerated, often without ever being charged with a crime.

I cannot remove Karleton from Flight 11. I cannot reanimate what little of his body—a piece of thigh bone—was left to bury. I cannot unteach the hijackers the poisonous theology that drove them to act. What I can do is to give my words flight so they might warn others: When theology makes us murderers, when it moves us to destroy instead of create, when it allows no probing questions of itself, it must be grounded and never allowed to take flight again.

—Bill Tammeus
Kansas City, MO

There is a flight of stairs in our retirement apartment that leads to a rooftop deck and a world of wonders. Up there we have watched sunrises and sunsets, solar and lunar eclipses, spectacular full moons, meteor showers, firework displays, and soccer games on the field across the street. In summer, it is a garden of herbs and flowers, surrounded by nearby treetops.

When we come back down that flight of stairs, we return to our everyday world where retirement life is level: a flatter, fixed-income world, featuring medical appointments, volunteer work, and trips to the pharmacy.

That flight of stairs leads us to the mountaintop, to transfiguration and more abundant life. Up under the open sky the universe seems to extend forever without limits. Is it a flight of fancy? A flight from reality? I think of it as a route to richer reality.

But the stairs are getting steeper now, or so it seems. The staircase seems to stretch higher than it used to. It is harder to take flight from our life here below. My wife struggles to make the climb, so she stays downstairs more and more. My hip hurts, and I hold the handrail tighter. Gravity can be a cruel law, limiting our physical experience of life, lowering the ceilings and closing in the horizons. Taking a flight of stairs can be uplifting if it leads to views of remembered joys and imagined possibilities.

You might suggest that when I need an escape from everyday life, I could turn to social media or watch TV. But I would reply, “No thanks—I’ll take the stairs.”

—Tom Sherwood
Ottawa, ON

When I planned an academic sabbatical just before filing for divorce, I did not anticipate that I would cut it short by rushing to a transatlantic flight, unsure of my teen daughter’s safety.

It had not been easy for me to leave three girls in the care of an alcoholic father who thought nothing of driving them while drunk. But I overcame my paralyzing codependency, packed my bags, notified my children only a few days before, and flew away for six weeks, fueled by courage I found in an unlikely place: a still nascent practice of *lectio divina*.

Two years earlier I had begun to carve out refuge from covert abuse in solitude and silence, undertaking an inward journey toward self-acceptance. When I adopted the *lectio* method to read scripture—along with poetry and biographies of my favorite holy people—I heard for the first time a whisper about what was and was not healthy in my heart, my soul, and the relationships where I had invested both. Meditation gave me the space and the grace to unmute my truest desires and to recognize that authentic love never requires losing the best of who

we are.

So I took flight. My reward for bravery was almost six weeks without emails from attorneys or toxic texts from my almost ex—thanks to spotty cellular coverage. I focused only on praying, reading, writing, and long runs through the winding lanes of the rugged Beara Peninsula in southwest Ireland.

Days before my return flight, in an unexpected moment of internet connectivity, an alert jangled my phone. I stared in disbelief at several messages from my husband. They related, dryly, the horrific news that a week earlier he had deposited our 15-year-old at a Saturday night party hosted by strangers, no questions asked. Not until early the next morning did he see our youngest again, prostrate in a hospital bed. EMTs had transported her after she drank vodka on an empty stomach to the point of becoming unresponsive. Realizing simultaneously her predicament and her father's delay in notifying me, I stifled the urge to keen like a banshee, the mythical Irish spirit who wails to portend disaster. His last text was consistent with his pattern of blame shifting and whitewashing: "She's much wiser for the mistake she made."

I paced around the twin bed in my tiny B&B room, trying to breathe, to think, to figure out what to do next. The window of cell service snapped shut after it launched this nightmare for me—someone who has long defined my self-worth by my ability to rescue those I love. I felt lost, unable to fly to my child's bedside, to lash out at her father, to direct others to do all of the above on my behalf. I was suffocating. So, I took flight again.

I charged out the front door and through the garden, down a steep hill, and past an ancient ruin of a mill. I heard the cascade's cacophony long before I spied its froth, dark as Guinness thanks to tannins from the highlands. Slipping up wooden stairs, I crossed an elevated bridge leading to a familiar refuge: an island. I sat there, in a thin place in the middle of a racing river, and ferns and boughs embraced me.

My eyelids settled shut and my breathing slowed as I focused on what I knew to be true: My darling daughter was no longer in immediate danger. I released the notion that protecting and parenting her was my responsibility alone. I forgave myself for not being there when she needed me most. I prayed.

I returned to awareness knowing I had arrived. There in the land of my ancestors, I returned to myself. I was not lost after all. On that island, tucked inside the island of Ireland, after such a traumatic experience, I was still. While water rushed by, I was stationary, open only to God's spirit and nature flowing in and through me. On that bench, my flight landed in a magical place of self-knowledge, self-acceptance, and self-gift.

—*Jean P. Kelly*
Westerville, OH

I stand at my kitchen sink mesmerized by the sight of a female cardinal on the bird feeder. While cardinals are a common sight where I live, the bird reminds me of Jon, a man from the Pacific Northwest I recently met at banjo camp. As I hurried to catch up to him on the path to breakfast one day, I noticed he was walking slowly, eyes to the trees. "What are you looking for?" I asked.

"Oh, I hope to see a cardinal while I'm here in Indiana," he said. "I have never seen one." There was a mix of hope and wistfulness in his voice as I followed his gaze up and around. I had not expected his answer. A cardinal? The bird I routinely see in my backyard?

I think about Jon now and my eyes fill. I marvel at the wonder of a cardinal, in my backyard, her red crest bobbing as she feeds. This beautiful creature reminds me exactly why we need to hear different voices, to learn

about other places and other lives. For another person's longing and searching can enable me to see with a new perspective, to notice the flight from common to wonder.

—Stephanie Ramer
Madison, WI

Twenty years ago, my father died at age 90. My mother asked my brother Mark and me to speak at his funeral service. I decided to talk about my best memories of my father. He would come home from piloting cargo, spread out a map on the dining room table, and show me where he had flown. I loved poring over maps with him. I remember his description of a black sand beach he saw in Hawaii. One time his flight connected with the navy and he got to ride on a submarine. He traced the sub's route in Hampton Roads, the body of water in Virginia where the Chesapeake Bay flows into the ocean.

Dad was an Air Force pilot. He flew P-51s in North Africa during World War II. After the war and throughout the 1950s he flew cargo planes. When I was a kid we lived for two years on McChord Air Force Base in Tacoma, Washington. On Sunday afternoons, Dad would sometimes take Mark and me to the flight line, the area near the military runway and hangars where planes are parked and serviced. Growing up with a dad who was a pilot, the term "flight line" was an everyday part of conversation.

Before Dad's funeral, Mark and I compared notes about what we were going to say. Mark said he was going to tell a few brief memories, including one about Dad's love of money management.

I asked Mark, "Aren't you going to say anything about him as a pilot?"

"I don't remember him as a pilot," Mark replied.

"What? Really?" I responded. "You were five when he quit flying. [I was nine.] I have a lot of memories from ages four and five. Don't you remember him coming home from trips and showing us where he'd been? Don't you remember him taking us to the flight line to look at cockpits?"

"No."

Psychologists say that siblings grow up in different families. Mark and I illustrate that strange reality. All those maps Dad showed me of his flights made me curious about the world. I spent a year of college in France, and my husband and I have lived in four countries outside the United States for a total of 14 years. Mark didn't feel the need to live anywhere other than the city he moved to in his early 20s. He doesn't remember Dad speaking about the beauty of the skies—the towering clouds, flashes of lightning below him, rainbows that are circular from high above, and vivid red sunsets above gray cloud cover—that helped me see the wonder of God's creation.

—Lynne Baab
Seattle, WA

Convinced is too strong a word. I had a hypothesis borne out of imagination and the fact that I was too smart for my own good. I thought that I could learn to fly—with practice, all of it from the left arm of the living room couch.

This was not the unfortunate delusion of those public service announcements, the ones showing us that Superman flew with the help of wires and blue screens, in light of tragedies where kids my age leapt and fell from rooftops. I knew I couldn't literally fly. Even with my skinny legs bent to provide the thrust, I wasn't able to ascend high enough to graze the ceiling. And my airtime took me at best a quarter of the way to the television.

But surely I could develop the skill. If basketball players could leap high enough to reach the rim and high jumpers could clear the bar, then certainly I could build the muscle and ability to take flight. Maybe not across the country or even the city, but at least to the opposite wall to land atop the console TV.

So, on summer mornings, while the cicadas sang and the sun warmed the plastic runner spread long before the front door, clad in Underoos with an old robe tied around my neck as a cape, I leapt from and climbed back onto the flattened arm of the couch. Never measuring my distance or hang time, I intuitively kept track of my progress in my head. I could tell that sometimes, usually after the first 15 or 20 jumps, I was going a little farther. I could feel the air buoying me up, if only for a moment.

The summer ended, and mornings changed from leaping in my underwear to sitting in stiff new jeans and scratchy shirts for school, eating cereal with sleepy eyes. My robe-cape now spent the morning hours hanging from the foot of my bed. And any flying progress I might have made was lost as the new smell from my folders faded and my lunchbox got its first chips and dents. My experiments were abandoned.

It's rare now that I jump down from anything. Each landing seems to reverberate through my bones to my skull. The impact on my feet tempts my back to retaliate, leaving me walking with a list to the right for the following week, swearing each time I get up not to do something like that again. But every once in a while—after changing a living room lightbulb, for instance—I look around from the elevation provided by one of the dining room chairs. I touch my throat, wondering what I have that could flutter like a cape.

—Jonathan Bennett
Lakeland, TN

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. [The next prompt is "fall."](#)