Power: Essays by readers

We gave our readers a one-word writing prompt: "power."

Readers Write in the January 4, 2017 issue

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

We understand the power of words best when they go missing. My husband, Fritz, was a man of words—big words, scientific words. He understood that to share what he discovered in his lab he needed precise words, words that could lead other scientists to replicate and thus verify his work. During more than 50 years of marriage we shared many thoughts, opinions, concerns, and fears. I never dreamed I would become a witness to his language deconstruction.

The words of Fritz's profession stayed with him the longest, even when everyday words and people's names began to slip away. He could often describe the person he was referring to but could not name her. He would show me with gestures the shape of a vegetable in his garden, but without a label. At times he found exotic words to replace common words, like when he said he didn't want to go for a walk because he wasn't feeling too "spicy." I learned later that substitutions are not uncommon for once nimble, creative minds.

One day he began searching for an object and wanted my help. "Where are all those blue things; we used to have so many of them?" He held his hands about a foot apart. My puzzled look frustrated him. "You know those things I like so much, from the bank!" A bankbook, a ruler, a deposit envelope? I guessed wildly. "Of course not," he eyes seemed to say. Finally, he raced over and grabbed a pen from beside the phone. "Oh! The blue pens we get from the bank!" The word sleuth I'd become had failed me.

Over the course of his dementia, words continued to fly away. Their power and their playfulness no longer combined to build walls of understanding. Now my job was to insert identifiers seamlessly while he spoke so that his narrative was clear to others.

Dying is difficult without words. His gestures and facial expressions were often as incomprehensible as a foreign language. I translated imprecisely. But as long as I remained alongside him, his needs for comfort, freedom from pain, and trust were met.

I'd hoped for a parting blessing, but I knew that Alzheimer's had robbed him of reflection as well as language. Two days before his death, from the depth of his beautiful mind, came his last words recited with his daughter: "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, Thy kingdom come . . ."

Memory runs deep. At times it startles us with the depth of belief, and even precious last words.

Carol J. Rottman
Grand Rapids, Michigan

My seminary group drove into the Hungarian countryside, which was not breathtaking, and stopped at an orphanage. The reality of the children's home shattered any idyllic images we might have conjured. Unpainted cement buildings with brown stains stood upon bare grounds with rivulets of muddy water. Over the entrance was an arch that read, in Hungarian, "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you (Isa. 49:15)."

A plump nurse led us through a labyrinth of dimly lit hallways and sparsely decorated rooms. I tasted bile rising in my throat. A sense of powerlessness pervaded the room where we stopped. I walked away from my group and looked inside one of the cribs. What greeted me was not a cherub-faced orphan with a smile. Rather, it was a child whose body looked like a twisted tree branch or a 50-car pileup. His dark eyes met mine, and he did not blink. I was stunned by the great abnormalities of his body, the absurdity of his form.

I pushed through my initial horror and reached for his little frail hand. The boy held my finger with great resolve, as if he were gripping a lifeline. I tried gracefully to unhinge my hand from his cold, dry fingers. But he would not let go. I tugged hard and ripped myself free. He began flopping around in his crib, coming to rest on his right side. Out of the corner of his left eye he stared at me. His face was wet with saliva and green mucus. I wanted to do something for this child to relieve him of his misery—but I did nothing.

Six hours later I walked with my group into the Budapest Opera House to hear Mozart played by the nimble, controlled hands of Russia's preeminent violinist. The music was dazzling, and I felt drunk with the brilliance of humanity. Surrounded by the grandeur of the baroque architecture and the sublimity of the symphony, I luxuriated in the power that comes from privilege. Intermission arrived, and we made our way to a semiprivate room with curtains woven of crushed velvet, the color of blood. On the table before us was a feast of caviar, lox, Brie, dainty sweets, and champagne. I, along with my fellow seminarians, carried on with great liberality,

our glasses singing as the crystal touched. Each of us drank deeply that evening, trying to forget our morning, or maybe our lives.

Following intermission, I returned to my seat and contemplated the future of the boy who'd held my finger. I thought of how the twisted little frame would never stand in a semiprivate room clutching a crystal glass. I listened to the symphony, and it beat my theology senseless. I remembered Isaiah's words, hoping that they were true: hoping that God does not forget the powerless or judge the powerful without mercy.

W. Hunter Camp II
St. Augustine, Florida

I used to think about Jesus stilling the storm as something like the scene from Disney's *Fantasia* where Mickey, the apprentice, casts a spell while mopping the floor and the mops begin to carry their own buckets of water. The room begins to fill with water, and still the buckets keep coming. As the water rises higher, Mickey tries all sorts of magic spells, but none works. The waves rise higher and begin to toss him about. Just when it looks like he's a goner, the sorcerer appears. Throwing open the door at the top of the steps, he sees what is happening, speaks a word of power, and the water meekly subsides and drains away.

I used to think about Jesus stilling the storm that way—standing up in the boat, arms raised above his head, powerfully rebuking the wind with an almighty word and commanding the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And then I became a mother.

When our son was little, he would occasionally have night terrors—those too powerful, too vivid dreams that children can have. In the middle of the night I would hear his frightened wail. By the time I raced down the hall to his room, Wes would be gasping for breath between cries, his body shaking uncontrollably. He'd appear to be awake, eyes wide open in fear, but actually he was caught in the midst of a powerful nightmare.

I'd pick Wes up, but he'd fight me. He couldn't stop crying, and he'd struggle to get out of my arms, the storm inside him raging beyond his control. The first time it happened, my husband and I tried telling him what to do: "Wake up! Calm down! Be

still!” Our voices were loud, not with anger but to be heard above his wails. It didn’t work.

In time I learned to sit there and wrap Wes in a secure embrace, to talk to him, to soothe him until finally the terror passed and his little heart slowed and his breathing became regular. Then, exhausted, he would sleep in my arms, the storm ended, life on an even keel again.

On one of those nights as I sat rocking my son, I softly started to sing “Jesus Savior, Pilot Me.” I wasn’t sure why that old hymn had come into my mind until I got to the second verse: “*As a mother stills her child, thou canst hush the ocean wild . . .*”

In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus’s words to the wind and waves come with exclamation marks. Peace! Be still! That’s one way to still a storm. But sometimes the power to still a storm is found in an embrace that can hold without hurting, a presence that stays with us through it all, and a word not of *Peace!* but of *peace* . . .

Ann Schmid
McMurray, Pennsylvania

I was officiating at a graveside service for an elderly woman I had never met. I greeted the husband of the deceased woman, who was standing off to the side, his head bowed and his heart broken. We shook hands, and he thanked me for the nice service. Then he asked, “Pastor, can I talk with you for a minute?” I followed him to a quiet area 20 paces away from his beloved’s final resting place. He said he wanted to tell me something that he had only shared with two other people, and his wife wasn’t one of them.

He was a World War II veteran who had served in Europe. One day his unit came under attack, and a mortar round exploded close to him. “I hit the ground,” he said. “I was OK, but I heard another guy screaming. I could tell he was badly hurt. He was lying on the ground. His stomach was ripped open, and there was a lot of blood. I could see his guts. He kept hollering, saying he was in terrible pain. He pleaded with me to kill him.” Tears welled up in the elderly man’s eyes. “And I did,” he said. “I shot him. I didn’t want to, but he was begging me. He would have died anyway.”

There was a quiet pause, then he looked at me and asked, “Do you think God will forgive me?”

For more than 60 years he’d carried that terrible burden with him. I looked at him and said, “You did what you thought was right because you didn’t want him to suffer any longer. God knows that. God also knows that you were in a terrible, no-win situation. So yes, I believe without a doubt that God will forgive you.” He took my hand in both of his and thanked me.

That experience gave me a revelatory perspective on the puzzling words of the risen Jesus in John, when he breathes the Holy Spirit on his disciples and says: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” The power Jesus has given me is not literally to forgive the sins of others but to pronounce God’s forgiveness to them as one of Jesus’ anointed representatives. I am called to tell the good news of God’s mercy and grace through Christ so others can finally let go of their sins, know peace, and live again.

If I had not spoken those words of God’s forgiveness to that tormented veteran, his sins might have been “retained” for the rest of his mortal life. I hope my assurance of God’s forgiveness to him at his wife’s funeral will allow him to die in peace. And I pray that I will utilize the power that Jesus has given me to help release others from their soul-crushing guilt and shame.

Fred Gagnon
Scarborough, Maine

My authority in childhood derived from my mother’s frequent command: “You’re in charge; take care of the younger ones.” Mama also told me to “make sure they behave,” pronouncing the word as if it were two: “Be. Have.” I was not exactly sure what it meant, but I was sure I shouldn’t let my younger siblings do anything that would upset Mama. I knew this because she threatened, “I’ll wear you out,” a threat she often carried out. My childhood experience with physical punishment from my mother taught me that physical force has emotional consequences, although I did not understand that for many years.

For several years I worked as a staff psychologist in the prison system; later I was the superintendent of a prison in North Carolina. I had considerable power delegated from the governor's office. My staff members were issued weapons, and I gave them orders to use lethal force in highly prescribed situations. But I taught them to use the minimum force necessary. Even more successful than using force was a system of rewards administered when inmates cooperated with rules. Well-behaved inmates were given better housing assignments, allowed special privileges, and received recommendations for early release.

Even when control is handled gently and used for good, it is still power. With limited and judicious use of force, and liberal use of rewards, my prison controlled the inmates. In the ten and a half years that I ran the prison, we had very few serious assaults and no one was killed.

Now some years later, with a seminary degree and a decade of experience as a pastor, I occasionally mull over the years when I had that kind of power. All social power is derived: it comes from some place and is bestowed upon an individual for a time. My authority came from the executive branch of government in North Carolina. This kind of derived power is part of what Paul refers to in Romans 13: "All authority comes from God, and those in positions of authority have been placed there by God."

I believe that God used my childhood experiences to prepare me to use the power that was delegated to me as a prison superintendent. I was finally able to "be in charge" and "take care of" people under my supervision. Now I know that I can pick up or put down power as needed.

Leon Morrow
High Point, North Carolina

In our living room, beside my father's chair, sat a magazine stand. It was wooden, stained mahogany, and shaped in a V. It held *Time, Scientific American,* the occasional *Life,* and, if our dog hadn't chewed it up, the evening paper. My father would get home from work a little after 5:00 p.m., take a few minutes to play-wrestle with me, change out of his suit, and sit in that chair to read until supper—which my

mother served promptly at 5:30, religiously.

The chair was just a few feet from the stairs to our second floor, and I would sit on the bottom step and watch him read. He was silent, still, absorbed. He had gone somewhere—but where? Somewhere inside those words on the page. It was as if he had gone but was still present—almost more present. What was this reading that had the power to absorb him so?

I didn't know, because I couldn't read. Written words were a foreign land I had no power to reach. I'd walk over, stand next to his chair and look over his shoulder at what were, to me, just shapes on a page. The pictures and diagrams didn't interest me, because they weren't mysterious; their meaning wasn't hidden. The words were the mystery.

I'd point and ask, "What's that word?" "Wind," he'd say. "That one?" "Fierce." "What's that mean?" And he'd tell me. I could see there was something there, hidden in the squiggles, but I couldn't make it out. "Can you teach me to read?" "No," he'd say. "Wait. Once you start school, they'll teach you the right way."

I ached to read, was mesmerized by the thought of reading. If only I could read, secrets would be revealed, unknowns known, mysteries no longer mysterious. I could find out anything, know everything, discover whatever I wanted. It never dawned on me that those who already knew the magic of reading didn't know everything. I thought if I had their tool in my hands, it would be boundless. I could learn anything.

When the day finally came and I got to first grade, I thought, "Aha!" The teacher walked up and down the aisles, her arms full of primers, placing one on each desk. I thought, "Finally!" When I opened the book the teacher had handed out and, in short order, learned that the words said, "See Jane. See Spot run!" I thought, "What? Are you kidding? What happened to *Scientific American*?"

David Stevens
Santa Fe, New Mexico

When I was seven, most of my weekends were spent with my grandparents in the sleepy mill town of Clinton, South Carolina. On Saturday mornings my grandfather and I ate breakfast at the cafeteria where my grandmother waited tables. After breakfast we stopped by my favorite place in town, Clinton Drugs.

Just inside the door stood a revolving red metal rack of comics. A comic book cost only 15 cents, and my grandfather purchased every issue I handed him. I thrilled to the adventures of Tarzan and Turok, Son of Stone. The illustrated stories fired my imagination and creativity. My mother rolled her eyes when she came to collect me on Sunday. For her, my stash of comics was growing at an alarming rate. She said, “You certainly have your grandfather wrapped around your little finger.” And I did. I held some strange power over my grandfather. The word *no* seemed to be absent from his vocabulary whenever we were together.

By the time comics were 20 cents I had discovered Spider-Man. Here was a guy who swung around an urban jungle with “the proportional strength of a spider,” and he wasn’t much older than me. Quite by accident, Peter Parker was given incredible power and abilities that he had no idea how to use. He flirted with the power of fame and fortune. He harnessed the power of restraint to keep himself from pulverizing the school bully. He felt the power of loss, mastered the power of self-sacrifice, and taught me that “with great power comes great responsibility.”

When comics hit the 25-cent mark, my grandfather died. I wonder today if it was really the loss of life that hit me so hard. It might have been the loss of love. My mother told me, “He worshiped the ground you walked on.” He was my hero for innumerable reasons, but mostly because all I ever saw in his face was love.

I tend to see strength in the power to destroy—in guns and bombs and violence. Or in the almighty dollar (which we use to buy things like comic books). But the Son of God shows us that strength lies in hope, faith, and love.

I look at Christ’s life and teachings and I wonder: Have I been given some incredible power that I have no idea how to use? If it turned out that I had the “proportional strength of God,” would I use it to destroy or create? Could I pulverize old Flash Thompson with love? Can love help in times of great loss? Can love teach me about self-sacrifice? What power lies in the words, “I love you”?

Sometimes love seems to make you weak. My parents certainly thought my grandfather was powerless around me, that I was Kryptonite to his Superman. But

he showed me that there’s more strength than weakness in love.

Owen Druce Robertson
Easley, South Carolina

The church was next door to a group home for adults. One day one of them came in and sat down before worship, uninvited. She was painfully overweight and wearing clothing that didn’t fit. She hadn’t bathed and wasn’t able to breathe or move comfortably. She wouldn’t speak or make eye contact with anyone.

From the beginning, she tried our patience. More than once she forgot where she was and lit up a cigarette right there in the pew. Her medication prevented her from being able to follow the order of worship. She fell asleep during sermons. Her breathing problems escalated and became loud snoring problems.

You can imagine the conversations we had at council meetings: “She doesn’t belong here; she couldn’t possibly be getting anything out of it so heavily medicated.” Some tried financial tactics: “I’m tithing to this church, and she’s just giving pennies . . . she shouldn’t be allowed to ruin it for everyone.” Some observed that she ate too many cookies at coffee hour. They worried that she was a deterrent to other visitors. I worried about everyone.

Finally, an exasperated council member said that she’d had enough of all this talk. She announced that she would make a friend out of our troubled visitor and would hereafter be sitting next to her in church. Gentle Reader, take note: this means that after more than 25 years sitting in one pew, she moved . . . to a *different* pew. When the snoring started, the council member gave a gentle nudge; she helped our visitor find the right hymn to sing; she reminded her to put her cigarettes away and limited her to no more than three cookies in the fellowship hall.

That small act was all our visitor needed. Soon I witnessed her talking to people; she made eye contact and learned to shake my hand at the door after worship; her first words to me were “bless you.”

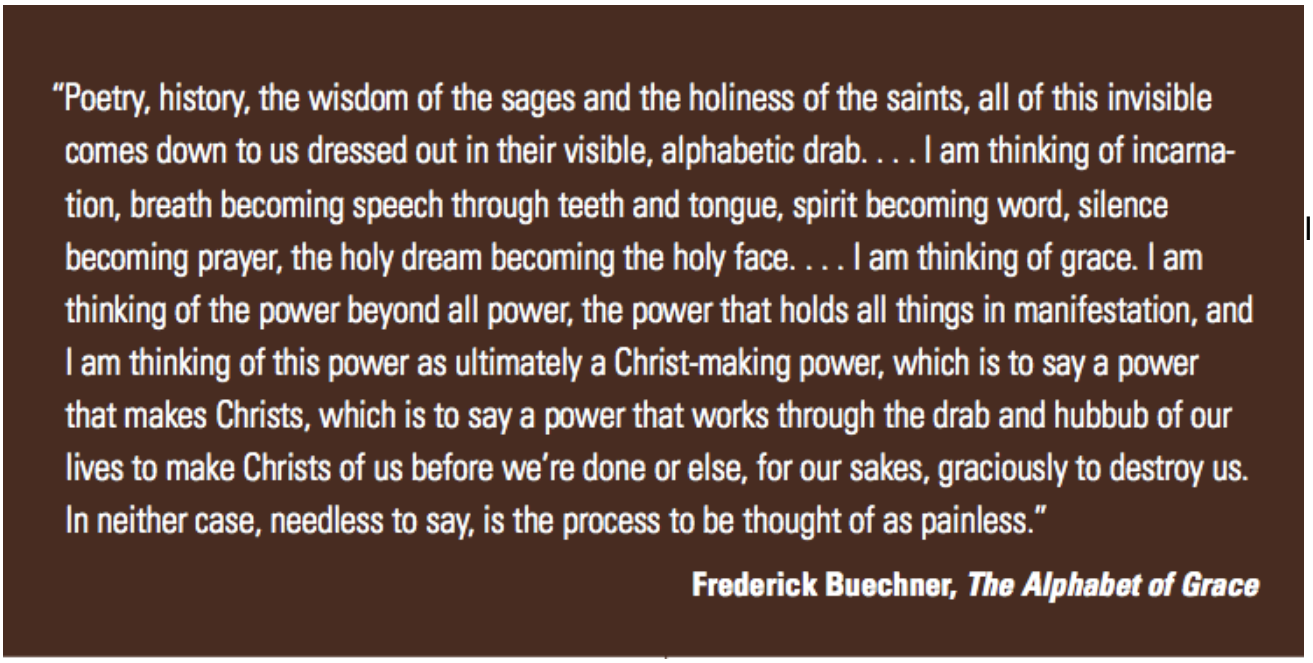
Some months later I received a phone call from the woman’s social worker. He told me that she had never been accepted by any group or able to sustain a single

positive relationship until she started coming to our church. “Thank you for welcoming her,” he said to me. “I have never been to your church, but I know that it is an exceptional place.” After I hung up the phone I sat for a moment. “Exceptional”?

Empowered now, she went on to make friends with the others in her group home and brought them *all* with her to church. She had gained her whole life back, put her demons behind her, and told anyone who would listen what the Lord had done for her.

Who is powerless and who is powerful? Hasn’t God chosen the powerless in the world to be powerful in faith?

Erica Wimber Avena
East Lyme, Connecticut



If a master class on “How to Rule with Anger, Depression, and Intimidation” were offered, my father could be the tenured professor—although he wouldn’t know how to teach it, so unconscious was his skill. His rage would erupt often out of nowhere, triggered by some slight, action, word, or event. The belt flew from his trousers, the words at deafening decibels, the day turned dark and bursting with stomach-turning anxiety. But the silent treatment was worst of all.

If I was the offender in this iteration of his rage, I ceased to exist. I could be sitting right next to him at the dinner table when he'd turn to my mother or my older brother and say, "When you see Bob, tell him he's not allowed to go out to play." My disappearance from his world might last a few hours or seemingly forever. My reappearance depended on either my apology for some unknown sin or a seemingly magical switch in his being that granted me visible status.

In my later years I've wondered what drove this form of frightening banishment. My sister Alice greeted the world in August 1938, two years before I was born. She ceased to exist three months later. This tiny warm infant turned cold one night, taken by SIDS. She was never present in our family's memories or photos. We lived as if she had never existed: she was among us only in silence. Alice's death was a banishment that gripped our family and never let go.

One cool fall day, I was playing in our sandbox while my parents were out shopping. Next to the sandbox was a small pile of leaves gathered by the wind. I ventured into the kitchen and found the matches. Just as the crunchy pile showed flames, my parents returned. Quickly I stomped out the fire and ran to the other side of the house to hide, hoping I had not been seen. I was terrified. Then my father's voice: "Son, go to your room."

Sitting on the bed, I wondered how he would deal with me. Belt? Or some deprivation? Would he even enter the room, or would I cease to exist? And for how long?

He quietly entered, closed the door with care, and sat next to me. There was silence. Then, his arm gently around my shoulder, he spoke with tenderness: "Son, did you notice that you are wearing long pants? As you put out the flames your pants could have caught fire, and you could have been seriously burned. I certainly do not want that to happen to you. I do not want you to be hurt." He paused. "OK? Think about what I said, and when you are ready, come out and join us." He left the room as quietly as he'd entered, closing the door with gentle care.

I was stunned, confused, and pleased. I joined them for lunch. Nothing more was said. It was over. But it's a stunning memory with every detail of color, temperature, touch, voice, and goodness intact . . . a life-giving action of enormous power.

Bob Wohlfort
Grantham, New Hampshire

The East Pearl Street Methodist Church was a hard-knock church in a rough part of town. I was their last-ditch minister, a dual vocation pastor and medical resident working bone-crunching hours. I was a wild-eyed idealist, steeled to the cause of urban ministry.

One of our first challenges was the drug dealers. Across the street in a vacant lot, people were dealing drugs. It was an ideal place to sell: a one-way side street across from an old, mostly vacant church, filled with shadows cast from a maple tree. Cars lingered on the street corners, throttling their engines. People would saunter away after making their trade in plain sight. We found needles on the sidewalk. We called the police. Arrests were made. But the dealers always drifted back. One day I noticed a white Chevy that didn't drive away. We could not see inside because the windows were so darkly tinted. Later I learned that the driver had died of a drug overdose in his car.

Something had to be done. But what could we do? The police knew what was going on, but the problem was everywhere. What could they do? Our neighbors were beleaguered. Everyone was frustrated.

Out of desperation, I channeled Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign. Each week I made a sign and nailed it to the old maple tree for all to see. "Drug dealers please go away." "You are welcome at church, but please do not deal drugs." Every Sunday I stapled a sign to the maple tree. The next day I would find the sign torn off, scuffled in the dirt of the vacant lot.

A parishioner named Bob had another idea. In the large stained-glass window directly across from the vacant lot, he hung the word *joy* in capital letters four feet high. He backlit the letters with a spotlight on a timer. When the sun went down, the spotlight beamed JOY into the dark shadows of the vacant lot.

One day when I parked my car beneath the maple tree, the sign I had hung a few days before—"God is love. Don't do drugs"—was still there. It was wet and crinkled from the rain. But no one had torn it down. The drug dealing had moved on. Nobody wanted to deal drugs in the shadow of joy.

We made no pretense about what we had accomplished. We didn’t solve the drug problem in our city. We didn’t save the man who died in the white Chevy or convert any dealers to the way of Christ. Many in our own congregation still wrestled with addiction. We understood that the problem was complicated.

But we did accomplish something. We became a vibrant, real presence in the neighborhood. The very act of going to church became a powerful witness to a new life, a new way of being in the neighborhood. *The light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it.*

Benjamin Doolittle
New Haven, Connecticut

A version of this article appears in the January 4 print edition under the title “Power.”