

Road: Essays by readers

Readers Write in the [April 27, 2016](#) issue



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*In response to our request for essays on the subject **road**, we received many compelling reflections. Here is a selection. This series is supported by a grant from the Frederick Buechner Center, which celebrates the work and concerns of the essayist, novelist, and pastor. The next topics for reader submissions are **power and enemy**—[read more](#).*

My road journey began in 2011 but its genesis was 50 years earlier, when my mother committed suicide in Sasebo, Japan. I was six when I found her body. For the next 50 years, my family kept silent about what happened. I struggled in many ways with what I witnessed, and I never knew my mother as more than someone in the worst moment of her life. But in the spring of 2011, the Lord nudged me to get to know who she was during the 33 years before her death. My wife and I spent six

months researching her life and traveled thousands of miles to places where she loved, worked, and grew to be the person I came to know, belatedly, as my mom.

State route 51 in upstate New York winds south from Ilion through a beautiful gorge. My mother grew up here on a small farm, and this road led me to family photographs of her as a young girl and woman who loved the outdoors and travel.

Crittenden Boulevard is the address of the University of Rochester School of Nursing. My mother lived here for three years in nursing school. I interviewed surviving members of the class of 1949 and heard about a college woman who was pretty, serious about her studies, and at times fun-loving and other times depressed.

Route 40 winds west out of Denver, Colorado. When my parents were dating, they would travel this road to Berthoud Pass in the afternoon or early evening and ski down its slopes. They married in 1952.

Routes 54 and 66 connect the Midwest to the West Coast, and my mother made numerous 5,800-mile round trips from our home in California to my father's hometown of Polo, Illinois, and on to her hometown of Ilion, New York. I followed these routes and met a daughter, daughter-in-law, wife, and mother who was committed to maintaining family connections and independent enough to travel without my father when his naval career led to deployments.

I visited a house in Long Beach, California, that rekindled memories of neighborhood friends, birthday and Christmas celebrations, a first bicycle, and my mother's care and love. Linking this visit to discussions with my father and my mother's letters, I also learned of her frustration with my father's overseas deployments, her deepening depression, and to her failed suicide attempts.

We moved to Sasebo, Japan, to be together during my father's extended tour there in 1960. As my mother and I sat on our porch on a steamy summer day, an old Japanese man struggled up the road bearing a heavy burden on his shoulder yoke. Without saying a word, my mother got up, went inside, and returned with a cup of cool water for the stranger. They could not communicate with words, but they connected with smiles.

Jordanville Road leads to the cemetery in upstate New York where my mother is buried. In 1961, I traveled it as a bewildered six-year-old in a funeral car. In 2011, I was with 15 family members on the 50th anniversary of her death. This time we

gathered to say hello. We welcomed my mother back into the family by breaking the silence about her death and the silence about her life. This time I honored the complex woman who loved me as her son. This time I celebrated my mom.

*Steven C. Messer
Upland, Indiana*

I'm an on-call overnight chaplain who's summoned when there's an emergency at the local hospital. Several times a month I'm awakened, and I stumble through the motions of becoming presentable. Then I travel the dark road from my house to the hospital, working to stay alert.

In those moments the road takes on a new meaning. It's not simply a route from point A to B, but a way to arrive where I'm needed. At the other end of this road a family waits—a mother, father, and others who may be having the worst day of their lives. The streamlined road will give way to the noise and confusion of the emergency room. The orderly traffic patterns will disappear when families must make difficult decisions about a loved one.

As I move toward my destination, I find the road filled with grace and peace. I don't know what I'll find when I arrive; each situation is unique. But I trust that at some point on my short journey, God will give me the grace to address whatever I find.

Sometimes I just need to be present and to stand and wait patiently with family members. Sometimes I help bring a sense of peace and closure by praying at the end of a life. Sometimes I listen or help someone navigate the confusing medical facility.

After a few minutes or many hours, I reverse course and take that same road home. I give thanks that God has helped me with my task. And I'm thankful that the road runs two ways—to ministry and to home.

*Adam Blagg
Harrisonburg, Virginia*

“To journey for the sake of saving our own lives is little by little to cease to live in any sense that really matters, even to ourselves, because it is only by journeying for the world’s sake—even when the world bores and sickens and scares you half to death—that little by little we start to come alive. It was not a conclusion that I came to in time. It was a conclusion from beyond time that came to me. God knows I have never been any good at following the road it pointed me to, but at least, by grace, I glimpsed the road and saw that it is the only one worth traveling.”

Frederick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey*

For most of eight decades I’ve had little trouble getting around. I’ve never been a runner, but I’ve walked across many places on the earth’s surface and done so without much difficulty.

That changed a few years ago. I began to have trouble with balance and fell several times. “Try tai chi,” my internist counseled. But the class didn’t help with my balance. Eventually I learned that I had normal pressure hydrocephalus. Fluid that normally circulates through the body had come to a standstill and was accumulating in my brain, putting me off balance.

The doctor proposed that I have a tube or shunt inserted in the brain. But the surgery doesn’t always work. And it seemed daunting. Did I really want to risk it?

After praying about my challenge, I decided that I needed to take the risk. When the surgeon asked what I wanted for an outcome, I said that I wanted to be able to walk in our woods with my wife—something I had not been able to do for more than a year.

The surgery went well. After therapy, I no longer shuffled, my feet splayed, stepping side to side, and barely moving forward. I learned to walk with a normal gait.

Today I walk rough paths in the woods with my wife or by myself with our dog. With a clear head and a high heart, I sing: “O Lord . . . You have turned my mourning into dancing . . . and clothed me with joy” (Ps. 30:11).

*Hays Rockwell
West Kingston, Rhode Island*

Every summer my wife and I go to Spain to visit family, and to walk for three or four days on the Camino de Santiago. And every year we overhear fellow travelers debating, “Who is a true pilgrim?” In the Middle Ages pilgrims braved bandits and faced hunger to reach the bones of St. James buried in the crypt of the cathedral in Santiago. They sought the apostle’s blessing for their heroic act of penance and devotion. Once they reached Santiago, they had to retrace their steps and do the pilgrimage in reverse.

But what is a pilgrim today? Is it the person who crosses the Pyrenees from France and walks all 791 kilometers across northern Spain? Does it count if that person hires a car service to carry his or her backpack to each night’s lodging? Does a true pilgrim stay only in hostels where dozens of people sleep in the same room, or can a pilgrim stay in a hotel room with private bath? Does bicycling count? Do motives matter? Some walk it as an act of Christian devotion. Some walk it because they are at a crossroads in life.

Usually the debate is settled when someone says, “You make your own Camino.” That permission to make of the Camino whatever you want has contributed to its increasing popularity. (So did the 2010 movie *The Way*, starring Martin Sheen.)

Pilgrimage implies a destination, a movement toward a goal. The ostensible goal of the Camino is Santiago. But much of the appeal is the walk itself. The road lets us

try on other aspects of our identity and engage thoughts and relationships that we wouldn't engage back home.

As someone who carries the Camino with me from year to year unfinished, I may not be a true pilgrim to Santiago. But I am a pilgrim to Zion, and the Camino shapes the way I walk that road. Each year I find that there is still more in my life to do, more challenges and blessings to encounter. And there are those who walk my life's road with me and remind me of these things if I forget.

*Steve Lytch
Lancaster, Pennsylvania*

In 1988 I took a sabbatical from my ministry as parish rector and rode my bicycle from my small town in Vermont to Seattle. The memories of the landscapes and people I met along the way are still sharp in my mind.

Each evening on that trip I'd spend the night in a campground or seek out sanctuary in a town church. A pew with cushions and a kitchen and bathroom were ideal. Even better was the outpouring of hospitality that came my way. A family in Michigan, for instance, took me in on the day of their four-year-old's birthday party. An undertaker in Wisconsin set me up in his camper by the lake. Families in Ohio and Montana treated me to steak and spaghetti dinners. In Idaho a neighboring camper took me to an outdoor symphony concert.

On a bicycle I experienced the world close-up with all the senses of body and soul. In Ohio the temperature topped 100. In the San Juan Islands I picked roadside blackberries bigger than my thumb. As I rode, the cadence of pedal and wheel pounded out a relentless rhythm during both the wearisome moments and the indescribable moments of exhilaration.

After three or four weeks I began to recognize a new rhythm in my prayers. In the morning my prayers would be full of thanksgiving for the unexpected graces of hospitality from the night before. But as the afternoon wore on, a fretful anxiety would begin. How far should I push? What if there was no one around in the next town to help me? Would it storm before I found shelter? My morning's song of thankfulness and praise would slip into a litany of less-than-prayerful worries.

I realized that introverted and controlling insecurities were affecting my prayer life and eating away at any trusting openness and hopeful spirit. Was my morning thankfulness genuine? Did I truly believe that God had more grace to give for the evening, or was it really up to me? I came home that summer with a sharper awareness of that balance and interconnectedness between thanksgiving and petition. Gratitude is never sincere without faithful trust.

*Timothy C. Eberhardt
Braintree, Vermont*

The streets of heaven may be paved with gold, but the road to Empire Grove in East Poland, Maine, is paved with silver. Founded in the 1830s, the United Methodist campground welcomed families who arrived by train or horse and buggy and set up tents. They came for camp meetings or to hear a circuit rider at the Preacher's Stand. Later, automobiles brought travelers to small wooden cottages built so close together that kids hopped from porch to porch.

For me the road to Empire Grove is more than the entrance to summer camp; I lived there for 21 years. When I was in kindergarten, I would run down the road to catch the bus. When I fell while learning to ride a bike, the gravel would skin my knees, while the harmless mica dust would leave its glitter on my skin and in my wounds.

Every December, my grandmother and I would hang Christmas bows on the tree limb canopy that hung over the icy road (a Christmas tradition). As the weather warmed and the snow melted, I'd create small dams with my bucket and shovel. I'd trap the water cascading down the road and watch the small silver flecks floating along on the tiny rapids.

The road is where I practiced my driving skills, had my first kiss, and walked my beloved dog. The road was where my husband proposed. That day, the silver beneath our feet made me feel as if I were walking on a cloud.

When my father was diagnosed with ALS he could no longer walk the road, a mere half-mile round trip. Before the illness he had carried heavy buckets to water the flowers. During his last year he made that trip in his electric wheelchair, the bucket balanced between his feet and a grandson on his lap.

Over the years the road to Empire Grove has been traveled by foot, horses, automobiles, bicycles, and golf carts; by individuals, young couples in love, by families, and by evangelists eager to share a message from God. The beloved road is a memory lane, and the source of memories for generations to come.

*Kristabeth E. Atwood
South Burlington, Vermont*

My wife and I climbed into the car early in the morning. It was going to be a 50-mile drive, so I figured two hours to get there and hoped that our old Taurus would hang in there and that we would actually find the place. I was in my Sunday best and not in the mood to have to wait in the heat for a tow truck or to be late. I am never late.

“Here’s the exit, and there’s the turn.” We turned and drove until we ran out of road, and then we drove on an old farm road with deep grooves milled into the dry Texas dirt. I began to sweat. Rocks were clanging against the Taurus’s oil pan. We really didn’t have the money to have an oil pan fixed. The tracks narrowed, and I squeezed the car between a line of wooden fences cordoning off chicken and turkey farms. We could hear the birds.

All of a sudden we found ourselves in a clover field. Sure enough, in the far corner there was a small white country church that had seen better days.

We got out of the car, and I rolled up my shirtsleeves. It was getting warmer by the minute. We walked over to a cemetery next to the church. The headstones were weathered and the inscriptions faint.

I heard the sound of a car engine, and soon an old Bronco pulled up. An old man and a much older woman got out. I straightened my tie and put on my jacket. The old man came over, and we shook hands. He put his hand on my shoulder.

“Son, we ain’t that formal here.”

I took off my coat and lost the tie.

“Better. Let me introduce you to Ada.” Ada? Now I was really sweating. I’d heard stories about Ada.

“Pleased to meet you, young man,” she said. “I am looking forward to what you might have to say to us this morning.”

Her nephew unlocked the church, and we all went inside. Ada went straight to the first pew and sat down in front of the pulpit.

“You’ll have to speak up. She doesn’t hear that well anymore.”

“I will do my best.”

I arranged my notes and grabbed a hymnal. A woman in a lovely dress came in with two men in overalls and work boots. A few more arrived, and I counted nine, including my wife and me.

Ada never picked up a hymnal. She knew all the hymns by heart.

After the service, she approached me. “What you said was very interesting, young man. Gave me a lot to think about. You’ll come back, won’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am. I would be honored to come back.”

“Good. Well then, have a blessed day.”

Ada and her nephew got in the truck and drove off. My wife and I waited a few minutes, then got into our car and drove onto the farm road. A cow was standing in the middle of the road. I honked, and it lay down. I honked again, and it looked at me. I got out of the car and tried to coax her to move.

“You might as well sit back down,” my wife said. “This could take a while.”

*Dieter U. Heinzl
St. Louis, Missouri*

My pastor called me one Saturday. A woman had called the church office wanting to come to worship on Sunday, but she had no transportation. Would I be willing to pick this woman up and bring her to church? Well, of course I would. The pastor gave me detailed directions to the mental health facility near the edge of town and then to the woman’s room.

The next morning I set off with a good deal of uncertainty. I made my way to the facility, through a maze of buildings, and up the stairs to the woman's room. I had no notion of her, nor she of me. But she was waiting and greeted me with a question. "Do you love Jesus?" she asked. "Indeed, I do," I responded without thinking. I marveled at how her simple question went to the heart of the matter and evaporated any fear. We walked together without words, in a bond of trust, linked by love of Jesus and our common destination. I often return to that experience to remind myself that announcing love for the Lord is a firm first step down an unmarked path.

*Joan C. Anderson
Gainesville, Florida*

A dirt road extends from the back door of our sanctuary down to the cemetery. If you are helping to carry a coffin, the journey lasts about ten minutes. That still gives plenty of time for people to share their memories of the recently deceased. Here are a few of the stories I've heard.

- He was always searching the church kitchen for a cookie or something. You reckon he didn't get enough sweets at home? I can picture that old man peering hopefully into the top cabinet like a wrinkly, bald four-year-old.
- When she played the piano, she'd make a point to play the final Amen on each hymn. How come the new hymnal doesn't have the Amens? I bet she's rolling over in her grave.
- She shot a ten-point buck through her bedroom window when she was sick in bed.
- I remember when she was just a little bony thing, all skinned elbows and knees. Her daddy raised her, and he would dress her for church only to find her looking like a rag doll by the end of the day. But he'd take one look at his girl and laugh anyway. She was all smiles, too.
- He'd come home from church, and I'd ask him what your sermon was about. He always said, "About 15 minutes."

- She always said she was cooking for the man in the woods, which meant no one was ever turned away hungry. If you sat down at her table and were cross or sore at someone sitting beside you, you'd have forgotten all about it by the time she cleared the plates away.
- I once asked him how come he did what he did, volunteering so much of his time. "God gives us a heart large enough to tuck people inside," he said.

I walk this dirt road most mornings, following in the footsteps of the saints, and surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.

*Andrew Taylor-Troutman
Dublin, Virginia*