

Feast: Essays by readers

## **We asked readers to write on the theme "feast." Here are the most compelling entries.**

Readers Write in the [September 14, 2016](#) issue



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*In response to our request for essays on feast, we received many compelling reflections. Below is a selection. The next two topics for reader submissions are **character** and **wilderness**—[read more](#).*

Things were hectic as we got ready to open the church doors for the dinner crowd of homeless, hungry, marginally employed, and lonely people waiting outside. It was always a scramble to get enough help and get ready on time, and sometimes the

meals seemed just barely pulled together. But tonight was a good night. As people filled their plates and found places to sit, I noticed a tall, thin young man who was sitting on the edge of the stage and watching everything with great interest.

I went over and introduced myself as I sat down next to him. “You new here? I don’t remember seeing you.” He introduced himself as Phillip and told me that he had tagged along with the Catholic church ladies who had come with dessert. “I wanted to see how things worked here and if there was anything that I could do to help.” He mentioned that he had just returned to town after a long absence and was still getting adjusted. He looked worn out but joked around and seemed happy to be with us. I invited him to come back anytime to help or just to eat.

He did return, and he became involved in planning the meals. He replaced the paper place mats and napkins with white tablecloths and linen napkins (which he washed and ironed each time). He set the tables carefully with fresh flowers that he’d convinced florists to donate. At the end of the meal the vases of flowers were offered to guests, so we scrounged more vases for the next meal. He greeted people at the door and escorted them to their table. To him they were honored guests and each meal was a celebration. He encouraged folks to share their stories. We celebrated birthdays and anniversaries and listened to updates on people’s health, housing, and employment struggles.

Eventually I heard Phillip’s story. He was HIV positive and had been struggling for ten years to manage a variety of symptoms. He returned home because his symptoms were worsening. He had hoped to reconnect with his family, but the parents who had kicked out their gay teenage son still wanted no part of him. He was devastated and casting around for connection to his hometown. He decided to help others feel the welcome he hadn’t received.

Phillip kept the meals going during holidays and bad weather, sometimes by himself, because he never wanted anyone to show up and discover a locked door. In the process he transformed those meals into a joyous celebration of our common connection. Each evening was full of laughter and joking as folks drifted from table to table to greet each other.

Phillip died a couple of years ago, but I think of him often. A mass written by Guillermo Cuéllar includes these words, “Let us go now to the banquet, to the feast of the universe. The table’s set and a place is waiting. Come everyone with your

gifts to share.” I imagine being with Phillip at that feast. He’ll be the one greeting each of us with a smile and a bad joke and showing us to our seats.

*Cordelia Burpee*

*South Hero, Vermont*

The holy month of Ramadan was seven days old and the moon was half full outside of my window. Across the city pious Muslims had been fasting since sunrise, some 14 hours earlier. Now they were making their way home for the *iftar* prayer at sunset, when they will break the daylight fast. In Cairo the call to prayer would begin across the city streets just before seven each evening.

I’ve been traveling to Egypt for years to teach at St. Leo’s Coptic Catholic Seminary in the Ma’adi district of Cairo, but this was my first experience of Ramadan. As a Lutheran living among Catholics, my daily habits within the seminary remained unchanged. Outside the seminary, however, I needed to learn new patterns.

My usual habit was to run errands in the early evening, when the heat of the day began to subside. But this holy month broke the routines of all Egyptians as Muslim shopkeepers opened late to preserve energy during the daylight hours and left early to arrive home in time for *iftar*.

I learn this when I set out to run errands with two colleagues. As we turned onto the main street we realized that the shops were likely to be shuttered. The sun would set in 30 minutes. Rather than turn around, we made our way to Road 9 just in case something was open. A walk would feel good. Sure enough—a street that was normally bustling with cars and pedestrian traffic during rush hour was quiet. It was a welcome respite in an otherwise chaotic city.

We made our way to a local grocery that had remained open. We conducted our business quickly so that the workers could break their fast in peace. As we walked back into the street, we saw workers gathered around an enormous, bubbling pot of noodles cooked with meat and creamy cheese sauce. They saw that we were admiring the food and immediately invited us to join them. Neither an English or Arabic “no, thank you” was accepted.

The workers passed paper plates, plastic flatware, and baggies filled with sweet tamarind juice to us in the fading light. The iftar call to prayer began to ring through the quiet street, and we spoke the Ramadan words of greeting:

*Ramadan Kareem  
Alahu Akram  
A generous Ramadan to you!  
God is most generous!*

There on the sidewalk, Americans and Egyptians, men and women, Christians and Muslims, feasted together. We communicated with smiles of pleasure, bright eyes, and cameras offered for an *iftar* selfie.

In this moment, we communed with the most generous God, who had set a table before us and given us a foretaste of the heavenly feast to come.

*Amy Walter Peterson  
Geneva, New York*

**F**east à la Mexico: I was working summers in a boat seat factory, moving from job to job depending on who was on vacation. I frequently found myself in the pressroom, a dirty, smelly, and noisy place filled with bored men. The only redeeming factor was Clem. Clem serenaded us with his Spanish lyrics and tunes. When Clem was around, the rude sexist comments seemed to stop. He was like a kind grandfather or maybe a guardian angel.

Sometimes Clem and I would end up at the same table for lunch. His lunch always smelled of chili peppers. One day he asked if I liked Mexican food. Of course I did—or at least Americanized Mexican food. The next day Clem handed me a small package neatly wrapped in waxed paper. He had brought an extra taco.

The feast began. It was awful. Instead of meat, there was gristly fat. It was so spicy, I'm sure my eyes were turning red and flooding the dirty table with tears. I politely kept eating, and as I watched Clem smile, the special creation tasted better and better.

The Clem taco feast made the long summer of hard, dirty factory work more bearable. It stretched my palate and lengthened my list of neighbors.

Feast à la McDonalds: I was living in a racially mixed neighborhood. I attended a small neighborhood Mennonite church that was struggling to be a faithful group in the changing community. It was hard, even at church, to cross cultural lines.

I began attending a neighborhood women's group that someone from the church had started. We did crafts and chatted. Women shared concerns about drugs, violence, and the neighborhood. We laughed. We cried. Our common humanity gave me hope, but I still knew my place as an outsider.

One day I was leaving my apartment to run errands when a couple of women from the group walked by with a string of kids.

"Hey, we're going to McDonald's to get a cone. You should come."

McDonald's? McDonalds was an evil corporate giant that underpaid its workers. Me support McDonald's? Never!

On the other hand, saying no seemed arrogant. I put my errands on hold and trotted off down the street with my friends. I was aware that including my white skin might ruin their reputation.

Along the way they told me stories about the people whose houses we passed. I heard about the local pimp and a gunfight near our street. (It was more information than this farm girl wanted.) By the time we were eating ice cream cones, I was laughing. Bread and wine don't get any better than this. While feasting at McDonald's, I learned that some of the boarded-up houses in the neighborhood included a community of people who took care of each other.

I still don't stop by McDonald's often, but when I do, I order a cone and think of that neighborhood and a feast that changed my way of seeing neighbors.

*Jane Yoder-Short*

*Kalona, Iowa*

"The Kingdom of Heaven is like a great feast. That's the way of it. The Kingdom of Heaven is a love feast where nobody's a stranger. Like right here. There's strangers everywhere else you can think of. There's strangers was born out of the same womb. There's strangers was raised together in the same town and worked side by side all their life through. There's strangers got married and been climbing in and out of the same four-poster together for thirty-five or forty years and they're strangers still. And Jesus, it's like most of the time he is a stranger too. Even when he's near as the end of your nose, people make like he's nowhere around. They won't talk to him. They won't listen to him. They keep their eye on the ground. But here in this place there's no strangers, and Jesus, he isn't a stranger either. The Kingdom of Heaven's like this.

. . . Folks, I've eaten my way 'round the known world. I've eaten snails out of their own shells in Paris, France. I've eaten octopus in Spain and curry in India so hot it makes your eyes water and the skin on your head go cold as ice. I've eaten hamburgs pitiful and grey like the sole of your shoe in greasy spoons from here to Saint Joe. I've eaten the bread of affliction, all of us has. We got to eat, but all the food in the world, all the turkey and fixings plus your ice cream the shape of hats, it's not life enough to keep you alive without you eat it with love in the heart. Dear hearts, we got to love one another and Jesus or die guessing."

**Leo Bebb in Frederick Buechner's novel *Love Feast*, part of his tetralogy *The Book of Bebb***

Jesus said that when you host a dinner, you should invite "the poor, the maimed, the lame and the blind." In the 1990s, when I was pastor at Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas, we began a weekly meal with and for the homeless community. We called it our "agape meal." Sixteen years later it's still going strong—100 to 200 homeless friends come every Thursday for a meal, worship, and communion.

Broadway Baptist Church is a center-city church that provides social ministries to the homeless and poor. Inspired by the Church of the Saviour in Washington, D.C., we decided to provide a delicious dinner with tablecloths, cut flowers, and dinnerware. We served the meals family-style, and our members sat down with our homeless guests. Friendships were formed. A regular guest told me one night: "We know the food will be good because you sit down and eat it with us." More than a few people told me that the hour or so at the meal was the safest they felt all week. They could relax and breathe freely. A young woman who was estranged from her family came to a meal and was so touched by the love of the congregation that she called her mother and said, "Mom, I'm coming home."

We began each meal with a welcome and then passed bread around at each table. Each person passed the bread to the next person and said, "God wants you to have this bread." Then we'd say the Lord's Prayer and begin the meal. One night, when it was time to pray, a man said to his friend, "Here it comes!" It meant a great deal to him to be praying the Lord's Prayer in community.

After the meal we held a 30-minute worship service. About half of our guests usually stayed. One regular guest said to me about the nonrequirement of worship: "Thanks for giving us our freedom of religion!"

During the worship, we sang and listened to scripture and a short sermon. During an intercessory prayer, people were invited to voice their prayer concerns. One of the regulars, a man named Tree, was a mountain of a man with a bushy black beard, a red bandanna on his head, and a voice that sounded like a tree splitting down the middle. When he stood to pray he called God "the Head Dude." During that time of prayer, we learned intimately the travails, the joys, and the sorrows of our homeless neighbors, including a guilt-ridden Vietnam vet and a woman having trouble maintaining her meds for schizophrenia. Our prayer together was a holy time.

After worship we invited those present to adjourn to the chapel next door for communion. Usually ten or 20 people came to share the Lord's Table. Some would begin crying—it'd been so long since they had taken communion. When you lose your home, after all, you lose your church too. One night a man thanked me, and I breezily said something about how good the dinner was. He corrected me: "That's not why I come," he said, then pointed to the Lord's Table. "This is why I come."

One night a transsexual woman came forward during communion. She had "graduated" slowly from attending the meal to staying for worship, and now she was taking communion. As she took the bread and cup, she said to me: "All my life, I've been told this was the last place in the world that would accept me, but here I feel the most welcome I've ever felt."

Over the years we've had baptisms, weddings, and baby dedications. One Thursday before Christmas we held our annual Christmas dinner. Tree came in with his red bandanna and black bushy beard, looking like some bizarre Santa and hauling a big black plastic bag filled with mistletoe. We placed some on each table. The party was on!

In 1 Corinthians, Paul invited all worshipers to bring a spiritual gift to the church in worship. Our homeless friends bring gifts—a song, a prayer, or some word that God had placed on their hearts. One man, an excellent pianist, would play as we assembled. In one service, a young Hispanic man came forward and crooned his love song to God in Spanish. Señor was the only word I knew, but we all understood the meaning of his song.

One of our homeless guests has become a regular and beloved member of the congregation. The first year Mary scarcely said a word and seldom made eye contact with anyone. Gradually she felt more safe and made friends. On my last Sunday at Broadway, she stood and spoke to the congregation.

Jesus said people will come from north and south, east and west, and sit at table in the kingdom of God. Every Thursday afternoon—I can see them now—they come streaming from north and south, east and west to the meal. Every week felt like a drawing near of the kingdom, and, as Jesus promised, we have been blessed.

*H. Stephen Shoemaker*  
*Charlotte, North Carolina*

**T**he year was 1964 and the place was the Atallah family home in Ramallah, then a territory of Jordan. I was on a junior year abroad at the American University of Beirut, Lebanon, when my roommate Hala Atallah invited me and two other American students to her home for Easter weekend.

When we arrived on Good Friday evening, the Atallah kitchen was buzzing with activity. Mrs. Atallah and her two older daughters, Siham and Hiam, were kneading dough for Easter pastries. The Atallah women showed us how to use a fork to mark the Ma'amoul pastries with a crown of thorns. We dyed eggs by boiling them with the outer layers of onion skin, producing a deep red brown color to represent Jesus' blood and Mary's tears. Every item we made related to the Passion story. There were no cute bunnies or chicks.

On Saturday we Americans went off to explore Jerusalem with a guide provided by Hala's father, Lutfi, who worked for a large tourist agency in Jerusalem. At noon we



feasted on bag lunches of cheese and bread under ancient trees on the Mount of Olives, absorbing the view of the Holy City. Later in the day, when other tourists had gone home, we walked the ancient Via Dolorosa.

Sunday we attended the sunrise service at the Garden Tomb, then worshiped at St. George's Cathedral. By the time we got back to the Atallahs' home, the Easter feast was waiting. The table overflowed with traditional Arab delicacies, many prepared just for the American guests.

Two weeks later Hala asked me if I'd like to join her Beirut family (an aunt and uncle lived there) for Easter dinner. It was only then that I learned that the Atallah family was Orthodox Christian—and that our weekend with them had not been their family's Easter celebration! The lavish Easter dinner I had enjoyed in Ramallah had been prepared solely for us three American students. To this day I am humbled by their extravagant welcome and radical hospitality.

*Heather McLaughlin Sigler  
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania*

**T**he idea was old and simple: take the church committee meetings scattered throughout the week and gather them into a single meeting night. We picked Wednesday and built a little program. We planned to begin with a short service of evening prayer, move to the parish hall for a bring-your-own supper, and then disperse to our various committees.

The part I was looking forward to most was dinner. In my mind the parish hall would be buzzing like a start-of-term feast at Hogwarts. And like the story of the loaves and fishes, those who came with plenty would share with those who had no food. I told our sexton to set up enough tables for 50 people. If it grew beyond that, I was prepared to offer child care and hire someone to wash dishes. Excitement was in the air.

A dozen folks ate dinner on the first Wednesday: four staff members, seven parishioners, and a gregarious child from the neighborhood who noticed the lights were on and wandered in. We opened glass containers of kale-based salads. One

person brought a single serving of rice and beans, another person brought a serving of quinoa. Proteins included pecans and chopped avocados sprinkled with lemon juice so they wouldn't turn black. The child, of course, came without anything to eat, and she was not tempted by our fare. Some frantic searching led to the discovery of an ancient package of microwaveable frozen pizza pockets. We silently noted the freezer burn, but the girl wasn't concerned. She ate it all. We called the evening a modest success and promised to bring some of our own family members next time to shore up the numbers.

A week later the girl brought a couple of her friends, and the week after that there were as many children as adults. Someone did a Costco run for a jumbo box of pizza pockets. The children started to join us at evening prayer. They weren't familiar with our church and didn't have parents there to hush them. Many had names that sounded altogether unlike the names of our children. They didn't know rules like "don't play the piano" or "the kitchen is for grown-ups." After dinner they would roam the halls and poke their heads into our meetings.

We managed for a few months, but gradually the church members quit coming to dinner. Tension about the children's presence was growing, and there were heated conversations at our otherwise genteel staff meetings. I struggled to hide my disappointment with the end of the suppers, something I don't do well. Not only had our primary objective failed, but we were spending hours cooking for and cleaning up after a passel of ravenous kids.

One Wednesday evening I told the kids that we weren't going to do the dinners anymore. The very next week I heard the telltale stomping in the hallway above my office that always alerted me to their presence in the building. I made my way upstairs to the kitchen, where I found two eight-year-olds cooking ramen noodles on a stove. They smiled at me and blurted out, "We brought our own food! Would you like some?"

The next week I found the children outside the locked door to the kitchen, happily munching uncooked ramen noodles straight from the package. Again, they offered to share.

I don't remember the exact moment when I figured out the extent of my shortsightedness, but when it finally hit me, I could hardly breathe. Even years later, when talk in a meeting turns to "reaching out to the neighborhood," I catch the eye

of someone who remembers when the neighborhood reached in to us.

I'm not exactly sure what the menu will be like at the eternal banquet, but I hope it includes ramen. Or pizza pockets. I also hope I'm there to help keep the feast.

*Clarke French*

*Chapel Hill, North Carolina*

**W**hen I pulled into the driveway of the basement apartment that my wife and I were renting, our landlord was standing in the garden. Otis was 87, and the only stipulation to our rental was that I would help him with the yard as much as possible when I was home.

If he was outside, it usually meant he was ready to work, and even more ready to talk. Otis was a raconteur extraordinaire, and most of his stories sprang from his youthful adventures.

"Let me tell you about the grandest meal I ever ate," he announced one afternoon, after dispensing with the usual pleasantries. "A peanut butter and banana sandwich." His orator's confidence in my surprise was not disappointed. How could peanut butter sandwiches be anyone's favorite meal?

Otis had grown up in a large, poor, rural family, and this story came from a time when his family was especially hungry and desperate. They were so desperate, in fact, that he and his younger brother left home early one morning committed to returning home only when they had some money for food.

The two youths scoured the countryside, going house to house asking for any kind of work that might be available, only to discover that everyone within walking distance was as impoverished as they were. At nightfall they were too far from home to return and spent the night under the stars, shivering and hungry.

The next morning, true to their quest, they soldiered on until just past noon, when they knocked on the door of a widow who agreed to pay them a respectable wage for clearing the weeds from her sizable garden. They set to work immediately, but after a couple of hours they ran out of energy with the job only half complete.

They were sitting in the middle of the sunbaked garden, summoning the strength to keep going, when the woman came walking toward them across the yard with a jug of water and two peanut butter and banana sandwiches. "I can still see, smell, and taste that sandwich," says Otis, who calls it "the dearest, most delicious nourishment" he'd taken in all his life.

Otis told me that story 43 years ago. Then, as now, it helps me discern the nature of a feast.

*Michael Lyle  
Purcellville, Virginia*

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