

Enemy: Essays by readers

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

Readers Write in the [March 1, 2017](#) issue



Photo by Daniel Richardson

In response to our request for essays on enemy, we received many compelling reflections. Below is a selection.

I had boarded the plane and was settling in my seat when I heard voices from several rows behind me. The dialogue was emphatic, even explosive. Were the words being thrown back and forth in anger or frustration? The language they were speaking sounded foreign. Was the flight attendant aware? Were these two people

plotting something?

When we reached cruising altitude I couldn't stand it anymore—I had to know what was going on. I stood up and moved down the aisle as if headed for the restroom.

About five rows back was an elderly couple, still speaking loudly and emphatically in a Slavic language. They supplemented their conversation with hand gestures. Clearly both of them needed hearing aids. The woman had a scarf covering her gray hair, the man wore a black suit with a collarless white shirt that had seen more than its share of washings. They were holding hands and smiling.

It's so easy to misunderstand each other. I had prematurely decided that someone who was a stranger to me was my enemy.

Kay Ward

Watertown, Wisconsin

In my elementary school days, I liked to think of myself as a bully slayer. The school seemed to have a high ratio of bullies. As I became physically stronger, I found myself toe to toe with the bullies on a regular basis. One of them was Justin Anders.

Justin and I never saw eye to eye. He was at least a year older than I (I think he had been held back) and was in eighth grade when I was in seventh. He was dating a friend of mine who had an affinity for bad boys, and I was envious. That dose of jealousy combined with a hunger for revenge led me to fight him at recess. Soon the two of us were sitting outside the principal's office glaring at each other, me with a venomous stare and him with a swollen eye and a fractured eye socket. I didn't feel any pity for him.

Years later, I think about the enmity that I had for Justin. I'm fully aware that I was far from innocent. Justin didn't have an easy life. His parents were divorced, his dad didn't have much to do with him, his mother was mentally unstable, and his stepdad had accidentally killed Justin's sister in a tractor accident. I see now how rough life was for him.

There are a lot of things in my life that I would do over. If I came across another Justin Anders, I know I'd probably be angry and quick to judgment at first. But I'd do things better. I'd extend an open hand of peace toward him instead of a clenched

fist of hate. I'd take his hand in mine, look him in the eye, and say, "Yeah, life sucks sometimes, brother. But it gets better when we face it together."

Brandyn Simmons

Chicago, Illinois

In 1983 I was an observer at the Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Vancouver, British Columbia. One afternoon a resolution was brought to the floor calling for an end to the practice of apartheid in South Africa. Before a vote could be taken, a diminutive man wearing a magenta clerical shirt stepped quickly up to a floor microphone. Following protocol, he introduced himself. "My name is Desmond Tutu," he said. He lauded the motion and thanked the resolutions committee for its work.

Then in a soft-spoken voice he said (here I paraphrase): "I have only one concern about the declaration. I note the absence of any expression of love for our white South African brothers and sisters, even those who support the existing unjust policy that's so destructive to my people and our nation. We, of course, want change; indeed, we must have change. But we want our oppressors to know that though we oppose their policies, we wish them no ill. Fairness and just treatment for all people in South Africa is all that we want, and when this policy is eventually overturned, we want to work side by side with all South Africans toward peace and reconciliation in our nation."

It was an electric moment. A hush fell over the assembly, and we sensed the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in our midst. Bishop Tutu moved that the resolution be sent back to committee for the inclusion of these sentiments. The motion received unanimous approval.

Craig E. Anderson

Plantation, Florida

The congregation I served was planning to build a new building. When lay leaders noticed an undercurrent of discontent among the people, they initially tried to minimize it by calling the dissension "differences of opinions and personalities." I

sensed that more was afoot. Anxiety was high, and some were introducing their concerns by saying, "I can't tell you who said this but . . ." Clandestine meetings were held to "get rid of the pastor," who was seen as the source of all the problems. It was an excruciatingly difficult time, and two of the primary antagonists were parents of one of our son's closest friends.

On Sunday mornings the antagonists would glare at me. During the sharing of the peace they would refuse my outstretched hand. It became exceedingly difficult not to see them as enemies. Each time they came forward to receive the bread of Holy Communion, I wanted to say, "The body of Christ, except for you!"

But I found that my "enemies" gave me a gift at the Lord's Table, for I placed the bread in their hands and heard my voice say, "The body of Christ, given for you." Then I felt the truth of those words reach into the core of my being. It's true!

No matter how we see one another and feel about one another, the objective truth is that Christ died for both of us. When my hand lightly touched their hands, I could feel anger and hurt drain from my body, and a flood of compassion, forgiveness, and peace move in. In that moment the word *enemy* was replaced with "forgiven brother, forgiven sister in Christ."

William A. Hartfelder
Westerville, Ohio

From Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark*:

Jesus says we are to love our enemies and pray for them, meaning love not in an emotional sense but in the sense of willing their good, which is the sense in which we love ourselves. It is a tall order even so. African Americans love white supremacists? The mother of the molested child love the molester?

But when you see as clearly as that who your enemies are, at least you see your enemies clearly too. Seeing what is hateful about them, you may catch a glimpse also of where the hatefulness comes from. Seeing the hurt they cause you, you may see also the hurt they cause themselves. You're still light-years

away from loving them, to be sure, but at least you see how they are human even as you are human. It's possible that you may even get to where you can pray for them a little. In the long run, it may be easier to love the ones we look in the eye and hate, the enemies, than the ones whom—because we're as afraid of ourselves as we are of them—we choose not to look at at all.

It was after the birth of my brother that Mom had her first psychotic breakdown. Dad took a month off work to care for her, while my brother Roger and I were sent away to relatives. Mom got better but then crashed again. Soon we were in a pattern of ups and downs. We would visit Mom in state hospitals, sometimes finding her in a medicated stupor or in a haze from an electroconvulsive therapy treatment. Eventually, she would return home.

Mom's illness was an unwelcome presence, an enemy among us. We learned to watch for signs of a crash, and we got used to not visiting her when she'd been newly admitted to a hospital. Visits from family upset her when she was in such a tender state. And I was glad to avoid the trauma.

As I grew older it was helpful to learn that mental illness is caused by a disruption of brain chemistry. Disorders are often genetic in origin and are complicated by life circumstances and stress. Those afflicted may try to ease the discomfort with alcohol and other substances. Profound fear and paranoia are real and disturbing experiences. That's why Mom would see spiders on the ceiling, and why one day she tried to chase down a passing fire truck—she thought the house was on fire.

One day when I was in college and working as an EKG technician in the community hospital, I learned that Mom had been admitted. I was grateful that she was getting help but didn't plan to visit her. Then I got a call from the psych unit to do an immediate EKG. The patient was my mother. I thought about handing the order over to another technician, but for some reason I decided to just go.

When I told the clerk, "I'm here to do a stat EKG on Margaret," he said, "You're going to have real fun with this one. She's bouncing off the walls in the quiet room." I paused, but then a force came shooting up through me—up through the soles of my feet, through my body, and out through my mouth. I decided to be present to a situation that I would usually avoid and put out of sight. "I don't think I'll have a

problem,” I said. “Margaret is my mother.” I’ll never forget the sight of the clerk’s jaw dropping open.

I found Mom heavily sedated and lying down. I said, “Hi, Mom, I’m here to do your EKG.” And that’s what I did.

Dianne Andrews

Port Townsend, Washington

He was a vigorous 92 when I met him, and an icon, a veritable “father in Israel,” as one colleague put it. He had served a series of churches throughout a career spanning four decades. He’d outlived two wives and traveled the world on missionary journeys. In retirement he’d become minister of visitation at one of the denomination’s grand old churches, then retired again 25 years later. I was the pastor of that grand old church.

A gallery of ministerial photographs hung in the hallway near the narthex. My photo was last in the lineup. His photo, more than twice the size of the others, hung in a more prominent spot. A church meeting room and a handicapped access ramp were named for him. If something had his blessing, it flourished. If someone had his blessing, they prospered. I, unfortunately, did not.

We worked together well enough in public. As his pastor I had his official respect. As my elder and celebrated colleague, he had my respect. We officiated at funerals together and shared polite meals. We greeted parishioners together after worship.

But at church council meetings our relationship was contentious, revealing different understandings of the nature of church in general and ministry in particular. I spoke of present maladies and the need to embrace the issues with repentance and a willingness to make changes. He emphasized the error of my thinking and my lack of wisdom and ability in pastoral leadership.

If things had remained at this level, I wouldn’t have called him my enemy. But he enlisted others in resisting my leadership, and a coalition circulated rumors about me that festered and thrived as gossip. He wrote letters to the bishop and district superintendent criticizing me and encouraged others to do likewise.

Still, when I heard that he'd been hospitalized, I visited him immediately. Like everyone else I'd come to believe that he was immortal, so I may have overlooked the signs that his illness was serious. We spoke briefly. I prayed with him and left.

A couple of days later he was so weak that he did not feel like talking. I prayed with him again, but this time I placed my hand on his head, as if to confer a blessing. I rarely take such a liberty. The gesture simply happened.

He looked up at me with uncertainty, searching my eyes for the motivation behind them. But then a hint of gratitude appeared in his expression, which took us both by surprise. How had we come to this? his expression seemed to ask.

"Do you know that you are going to be OK?" I heard myself saying. "OK no matter what?" He shook his head slowly back and forth and said softly, "I don't know. Not this time."

I repeated my words more emphatically, and he understood my meaning. He nodded that he did indeed know. I removed my hand from his forehead and waved good-bye as I left him, my enemy, the icon, for the last time. The oil of repentance, forgiveness, love, and resurrection had been poured over both our heads. For those few seconds we were neither icon nor beleaguered pastor, just two earthen vessels wondering if we'd even begun to comprehend the treasure toward which we were laboring.

*Michael Lyle
Purcellville, Virginia*

I was in first grade in North Georgia in 1951 when one of my classmates announced with great certainty and disdain that our first grade teacher was a "Yankee." I could hardly wait to talk about this with my older sister, Peggy. She was not only my roommate but my chief consultant and confidante.

"Peggy," I whispered as soon as the light went off, "how can you tell if a person is a Yankee?" After some thought, Peggy explained that people who live in the South are called not only southerners but also rebels. Northerners, the people who live on the other side of the Mason-Dixon Line are called Yankees.

“I don’t see what all the fuss is about where people live,” I replied. “Besides, it would just be too crowded if everybody lived in the South.”

Then Peggy told me that many southerners (not all, but those like the girl in my class) thought of Yankees as the enemy because of the war. Even at age six, I knew about war. I knew that on one side there was Uncle Sam—U.S. of A. (us)—and on the other side there was the enemy (them). I knew that Daddy’s brother Hugh had been killed and was buried somewhere in France with lots of other soldiers known as “the Allies.” But I didn’t know which war Peggy meant, so I asked. She thought for what seemed an endlessly long time, then she asked me if I noticed that the black children didn’t ride the same bus as we did.

“Sure,” I said. “They ride the red bus and we ride the yellow bus.”

Before I could ask why, Peggy continued: “The war was called the War between the States, because the states north of the Mason-Dixon Line and the states in the South were fighting over whether black people could have the same rights and freedoms as white people.”

“Like freedom to ride the yellow bus?” I asked.

“Well, it’s a lot more complicated than that,” she said cautiously. “But, for now, let’s just say freedom to ride the yellow bus—and live, eat, work, and go to school wherever they want.”

With great glee I said, “So that’s why the Yankees don’t like southerners—because we want black folks to have what white folks have!”

My sister jumped out of bed, turned on the light, came to the side of my bed, and looked deep into my eyes. Then she told me something that broke my heart. “No, Sammie!” she said with a firm voice. “The Yankees were the good guys. For the most part it was southerners who didn’t want the black people to be free.” Then she turned out the light as quickly as she had turned it on.

After a long time, I whispered, “Peggy, are you awake?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t want to be the enemy!” I said, more aloud than in a whisper, as if I needed to shout it.

“Then don’t be! Go to sleep,” she said.

Later, when I tried to bring up the subject again, she hugged me and said wearily, “The very idea of an enemy makes about as much sense as hen’s teeth”—a southern expression. “Besides, nobody has to have enemies. You can forgive anybody anything. And you’re safe, because you’ve already told me you don’t want to be an enemy.”

We never spoke of Yankees or enemies again. It was not until Peggy died that I realized how much she had encouraged and contributed to my fascination with life’s important questions. Some days, when I hear someone talk about their enemies, I imagine Peggy stomping around heaven and registering a complaint: “My little sister and I think this whole enemy thing is stupid!” And God replies, “So do I, so do I.”

Sammie Maxwell

Bethlehem, Pennsylvania

Among my earliest memories is a recurrent dream in which a tiger about the size of two houses stands watching me. The terror I felt has always epitomized for me the hell of my childhood. Blamed for everything, denigrated as selfish and immature, I knew subconsciously that my mother did not love me. But I was an adult before I understood that as a psychotic she loved no one and wanted children only to serve her neediness. I was a possession she would make into what she wanted me to be through lies, tirades, and beatings. My happiness was irrelevant. She regarded suffering as the means to make me compliant and wanted me to be unhappy. One of her friends, on seeing me after I had been away at college, said she had never before seen me smile.

I was frequently beaten for things I hadn’t done or couldn’t have helped doing. In grade school, I usually got As but was always beaten for Bs, no questions asked. I didn’t care about the physical pain of a beating, but I never got over the implication that something was wrong with me.

All through school, I was made to feel that I had no rights. Raging, my mother tore a slip off me that I had painstakingly sewn myself. When I objected to her carelessly damaging a book I had bought with my own money, she retorted that I owned nothing. When I refused to support her opposition to my father, she knocked me

down, kicked me, and screamed that she would treat her disobedient daughter as a slave.

Alone in my misery, I cried all the time. In a world that had not come to grips with the fact of child abuse, there was no one I could talk to, except for my father. But I was aware that he, like others of his generation, regarded children as woman's work, and I never thought of confiding in him. The reason child abuse is so cruel, apart from the physical abuse, is that children, lacking mental maturity, have no means of dealing with a situation they cannot understand.

Ultimately I got a tenure-track teaching position at a major university. More than anything I wanted to write, and I worked extremely hard, but I could not conquer the diffidence that was a formula for failure. I was fired because I couldn't get published, and I lived in extreme poverty until my mother died. Then, freed from unconsciously acting out the failure that would please my mother, I could publish.

Aged now, I worry about my soul. I can't be accused of not forgiving my mother, if forgiveness means forswearing revenge, as Bishop Tutu writes. I want only that, "delivered from the fear of all enemies, [I] may live in peace and quietness." But "thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." What does this mean? That I should love one who, dying unrepentant, ruined my life? God help me!

June Skye

Champaign, Illinois

On the first day of my summer assignment in Clinical Pastoral Education, I was given an official Massachusetts General Hospital badge with "chaplain" on it in bold letters. I would have preferred "chaplain intern" or "chaplain in training," but my supervisors told me that I couldn't hide behind such a title. I was assigned to two surgical floors where I'd be the only chaplain available for people who every day would be facing matters of life and death.

Each day I received a list of the patients and some basic information about them. Armed with that list, I'd set out to do my rounds. I saw people in all stages of anguish and relief. Though I was young and unsure of myself, most of the people I visited that summer let me into their lives and allowed me to share their pain, their joy, and their faith.

There was a glaring exception. I was given the name of a woman who was Greek Orthodox. I stopped at the door to her room and saw that she was sleeping, but her husband came to the door. I asked, "Is there anything I can do?" Without hesitation he said, "You can stay away from my wife and not bother either of us." I was taken back but nodded my head and moved on down the hall.

As I thought about his reaction to me, I realized I was probably on the receiving end of some bad experience that he had had with the clergy. It wasn't me who was banned from visiting, I told myself, but what I represented.

As I made my daily rounds, I'd look in on them as I slowly walked by their room. I did this for a week, and one day I saw the husband sitting in the hallway outside his wife's room. A nurse told me that his wife had died and the man's daughters were on the way.

I gently approached him and asked him if I could sit down beside him. As he looked up to nod acceptance, tears were rolling down his face. I sat down, and tears came to my eyes too. He might still consider me the enemy, but I couldn't leave him to sit alone. After about 20 minutes I asked him if he wanted to pray. To my surprise, he nodded yes and bowed his head. I prayed out loud. "Lord and Maker of us all," I began. To my surprise he repeated my words. He must have been following a tradition from his faith experience. I chose my words of prayer carefully, knowing that I would hear them back again. When the prayer was finished he reached over and shook my hand. We didn't say anything else but continued to sit together.

*David Walter Lauer
Elkhart Lake, Wisconsin*

I left the bank frustrated with the banker who told me he could do nothing to help me reduce some credit card fees. Now I was late for work and knew I would not find a parking space at my university office. I decided to leave my car and walk. Still thinking about the conversation at the bank, I thoughtlessly took a shortcut through the dark alley to the back entrance of my office. I walked up the steps and reached for the doorknob.

Suddenly I felt a hand against my back pushing me forward. At first I laughed, thinking my husband, whose office was nearby, had slipped up behind me as a joke.

But the push became a shove as the person jerked my purse from under my left arm. This was no friend! The thief ran away with my purse.

I screamed in a voice I had never heard before: "You goddamned son of a bitch, I'm going to kill you!" The thief spun around to see if I had a weapon and for an instant we were face to face. I chased him and almost caught up with him when he slipped and fell on the snow-covered walk. What would I do if I caught him? I wondered. Finally I flagged down a motorist who drove me to a gas station.

When the police took my statement they asked if I had money in the purse. "No money," I said, "only a credit card and a roll of film that's important to me."

That same day I got a call from a man who had found my purse along the street next to his house. He offered to bring it to my home that evening. Everything was in the purse except my credit card.

That night I could not sleep but kept reliving the incident over and over in my mind. I kept getting stuck on the angry voice. "I'm going to kill you!" Why would I say such a thing? I was a longtime peace activist, social justice advocate, and minister's wife! What was there in my purse that I was going to kill for? Yes, the family photos could not have been replaced. In stealing the roll of film, the thief was stealing precious moments that I wanted to hold onto. In that moment he became my enemy. He was taking something that was mine!

Two days after my encounter, my pastor talked about enemies. Who are our enemies? Why are they our enemies? Jesus preached compassion even though he had his share of enemies. The pastor asked, "Could you see enemies differently? Could you see the face of Christ in your enemy?"

The words stopped my self-righteous feelings of injustice. Why would a young man attempt a theft in broad daylight? What desperation drove him? I remembered the fear on his face when I threatened him.

The next week I received a call from the credit card bureau asking if I had purchased a one-way airline ticket to Kansas City. The thief has left town, I thought with relief. I won't run into him again.

While our paths have not crossed again, I continue to see the man's face. It was not the face of the enemy; it was the face of desperation and despair. I thought I had

seen an enemy; now I wonder if the real enemy is the hate and vengeance I saw in myself.

Sheryl Carle Fancher

Charleston, South Carolina

“Do you enjoy Lily?” My friend’s question blindsided me. I had been sharing the latest episodes in my experience of being a parent to Lily. The question made me blush. I realized that at some point in the conversation I had crossed over the line from sharing to whining.

My husband and I adopted Lily when she was 11 years old. By the time we looked into her eyes and fell in love with her, Lily had already experienced more pain than most of us endure in a lifetime. She had been abandoned by her birth father, neglected by her birth mother, sexually abused by a trusted family member, and removed from her home by the state at age five. She lived in seven foster homes in three years. Finally she was placed in a home along with two half-brothers, but things had not worked out there.

We were contacted about Lily and told that if someone did not take her by the weekend, she would be sent to a group home. Our discussion of what to do lasted five seconds. “I’ll go clean out the middle bedroom,” my husband said. Suddenly, after having made peace with the fact that we’d never have a child, we were fiftysomething parents of a vivacious, precocious, and headstrong preteen.

It wasn’t easy. Lily had been betrayed by nearly every adult in her life, and at times I feared I’d never break through her defenses. That’s when I was venting to my friend, and she responded, “Do you enjoy Lily?”

I was still head over heels in love with that child. She is the bravest, most resilient human being I have ever met. That’s not really what was bothering me—it was the people from her past who’d come along as part of our hastily constructed extended “family.” Some of them manipulated Lily to compensate for an unmet need for acceptance. Others told Lily that they had never loved her and hoped she would not go to heaven. One relative threw her against a wall.

These people had become my enemies. They had each done something that in my eyes was an unforgivable sin—they had harmed a child. My child. I take literally the Bible verse about causing a little one to stumble: “It would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matt. 18:6).

Then one Sunday I was leading a reflection on “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” Carol, one of the participants, talked about the four-year-old granddaughter whom she’s raising. She’s had to initiate a lengthy court battle to remove Sadie from the drug-addicted mother’s home and win custody. Carol confessed that forgiving Sadie’s mother was the hardest thing she had ever done and that praying for Sadie’s mother was the only thing that had made it possible to forgive her. “You cannot pray for someone every day and continue to hate that person,” she declared.

So I’ve begun praying for my enemies. So far no luck. I haven’t forgiven them. On my best days, I take my hands off the millstone. On other days I’m reminded that each of these enemies has been failed by a parent and become part of a cycle of pain and dysfunction. “Try to remember,” a friend reminds me, “that they are doing the best they can.”

But try as I might to minimize and even eliminate the influence of these people on my child’s future, they continue to crash the party. Perhaps that’s what troubles me the most—the comfortable middle-class Christian community that I’ve so carefully constructed to keep out the riffraff has been invaded by unwanted strangers. I don’t know yet if loving and forgiving these enemies is going to save them. But I’m pretty sure it is going to save me.

Margaret Morgan Maat
Kingwood, Texas

We five kids knew better than to wake up Dad suddenly. If he was asleep in his living room chair, we approached him slowly. If he was startled out of sleep, he’d wake up back in service aboard a navy warship off the coasts of Iwo Jima, Okinawa, and the Philippines. The Japanese kamikaze bombers would aim for the ship’s smokestack, trying to find the fuel and ammunition storage that would destroy everything in a flash. The crew bunks were below the waterline: the men could be drowned in

minutes with a torpedo hit. The cry of “General Quarters” meant that they had seconds to jump down from their bunks, climb up the ladders and get on deck to their battle stations, all while pulling on their fatigues.

My mother met Dad in Seattle after the ships were decommissioned. They boarded the train back to Illinois and found their seats, and Dad fell asleep. But when the porter called out “All aboard,” Dad jumped up and ran down the aisle and off the train. This was what the encounter with the enemy had done to my father—given him a startle response that would shadow him the rest of his life.

Yet my Dad also told us about another side to the enemy, one that we rarely hear even today. The Japanese airmen and sailors he saw fished out of the waters of Iwo Jima and Okinawa were not fearless warriors but young men uprooted from their native villages and pressed into service. My dad told of men who jumped out of their plane as it approached its target and cried out for help. Others held onto flotsam from their sunken ship, hoping to be rescued by Americans. Dad’s fear of the enemy became mixed with compassion for those caught up in a conflict that they had not created.

Dad married, had children, served a church in Illinois, and eventually went to Yale Divinity School. There he and my mother met some Japanese pastors who persuaded them that the people of Japan needed the support of the Christian church in healing the wounds of the war. There were people living in cardboard boxes by the train stations or in caves dug into the nearby mountains. The electric power in many cities was unpredictable, shutting off without warning. Transportation was being rebuilt following Allied firebombing, but it was a slow process.

Compassion for a former enemy overcame fear as our family adjusted to a new urban culture. When we first arrived we were greeted with stares, but after five years our neighbors greeted us on our return from a trip to the States, and after 30 years, my parents were considered part of the community.

Some say that the work of the Christian missionaries in the 1950s made no difference. Japan’s predominant religions, after all, remain Buddhism and Shinto, while Christian churches are small and don’t appear to have much influence. But these churches have been influential in the fields of social welfare and education. In the corporate world, Christians are often seen as reliable and trustworthy negotiators.

Perhaps most important, the Christian churches have had a profound effect on those for whom faith overcame fear. In the shambles of the great Pacific war, in the terror that follows any severe trauma, we can give others the reassurance that God loves them. This is how my father, Robert Rahn, recovered from his encounter with the enemy, and how he would like to be remembered.

David Rahn

Grand Blanc, Michigan

A version of this article appears in the February 15 print edition under the title "Enemy."