

Wilderness: Essays by readers

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

Readers Write in the [November 8, 2017](#) issue



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

Years of being single took a toll on my spirit. In my twenties I watched as friend after friend became engaged, married, and had children. I watched my little sister get married. The man I thought I would marry became engaged to someone else eight months after we separated. “What’s wrong with me?” I would lament to God. “How long, O Lord?”

What made my wilderness even more arid was my experience in churches. When I attended worship, I was pretty much the only single person of my generation. When I attended a church’s singles group and asked why the couples were in a different group, I was told that it was to keep the single people from tempting the married

ones. One Sunday morning a pastor preached on the value of traditional marriage and implied that singlehood was an inferior status. I left in tears. I visited more progressive churches. They didn't exclude single people, but they didn't make them a priority.

Finally I began to hear God's call in the silence. I started writing about being a single person in the mainline church. I concentrated on stories about the single Jesus. I noticed how he affirmed and spent time with people of all family structures. I embraced his belief that chosen family was greater than blood and marital relatives. Jesus' brothers and sisters included those who walked with him in the faith.

As a pastor, I look for ways to minister to unmarried sisters and brothers. I ask, How can we make sure congregants without families are connected to families in the church? How can we care for two spouses as they dissolve their marriage and move into a new chapter in their lives? How do we care for the widow not only in the days after her spouse has died but also in the months to follow?

On any given Sunday there are people in our sanctuaries whose hearts are breaking as they experience marital status exile. I pray that I can help them find hope.

Michelle L. Torigian
Cincinnati, Ohio

When I was 22 I received a fellowship that allowed me to travel to 12 developing countries. I decided to begin with the Philippines. Once off the plane, I found myself in a hostile area of Manila in a hostel that had 30 beds jammed together in a room meant to hold eight or ten. My first mission was to find a safer hostel, one with walls, doors, and lockers. My next mission was to find companionship.

The loneliness and culture shock were heavy. I was suspicious of everyone around me, more wary than I'd ever been, and alone. I wanted to go home.

At the second hostel, I met a young man from Australia and a young woman from Germany. Soon afterward I met several Filipinos who demonstrated faith and joy even as they described the recent devastating effects of Mount Pinatubo's eruption. In the midst of their suffering, they showed me hospitality.

In Thailand I met a Buddhist monk who had opened an AIDS hospice so that people could die with dignity, and I met a patient there who told me, "My family kicked me out for having HIV because they thought they'd catch it. Now I'm around people who speak to me and touch me and listen to me."

Wherever I went, life was better and more fulfilling when I was sharing it with others and focused on something besides me. People who embodied Christ's teachings and the Spirit's leading turned my wilderness of self-absorption into the promised land of community.

Will Malambri
Florence, S.C.

One year during Lent I felt an emptiness that did not bode well for a celebration of the resurrection. I could already feel my nose itching from the smell of Easter lilies and my annoyance growing at the people whom I would see only on that one day of the year. I needed an attitude adjustment. I decided to visit the wilderness of a prison setting and made a plan to lead worship at a prison on Easter morning.

I walked through layers of security into a classroom that served as the worship space. When the men filed in, instead of seeing the composed expressions I usually saw, I saw faces that revealed arrogance, sadness, joy, rage, hopelessness, excitement, and suspicion. The barely controlled emotion was unnerving. As they filled the seats, I thought I could see the longing for freedom behind each face.

Music was provided by Liz, a recovering alcoholic and nightclub singer who wore a purple boa, purple earrings, and boots that came above her knees. She sang in a sweet, deep voice and stopped between songs to talk about her faith. She reported that God regularly told her, "You love 'em, I'll judge 'em," which led her to visit prisons and sing to inmates. It seemed like something God would say, with Jesus demonstrating how to do it.

Knowing I would have to preach with an interpreter, I had planned the sermon in short phrases. The Spanish translator was Juan, another volunteer at the prison. He wore leather and chains, stood about 18 inches taller than me, and was as wide as a refrigerator and as gentle as a gerbil. I spoke, Juan translated, and we fell into a cadence that became like lobbing love back and forth.

There were two baptisms. Carlos brought a gray, worn towel so that he could keep it as a reminder that he was reborn. John's face split in two with the broadest smile I've ever seen. The room erupted with shouts and song for the baptized, a wild chorus drunk with grace.

We concluded by celebrating communion, and I knew that I was standing on holy linoleum. The love and new life of the resurrected Christ rocked me and marked me as it passed through my hands. It was transfiguring the men who received it, and it was transfiguring me. The voices and longings of the men had cleaned out a dusty corner of my spirit. Jesus was there, reminding me of the new life of his resurrection and nudging me into it.

Margaret Gatter Payne
Shelburne Falls, Mass.

My husband and I were driving through the wilderness between Denali National Park and Fairbanks, Alaska. The last time I had been in this area, I was 30 years old. Now I was 65. I wondered if the cabin we once lived in was still there and what kind of shape it was in.

This trip back was a sort of spiritual pilgrimage. A landscape of grief and disappointment had made my life flat and joyless. God seemed as cold and remote as the mountains we were driving through. My throat was too dry for prayer. I was hoping this trip would help take away some of the sad longing I felt.

We were riding on a lonely stretch of road with no gas stations or stores and not even another car. The road had been gradually ascending for several miles, and my ears were popping. The tundra spread out for miles. Nameless mountains rose up in the distance. The trees had disappeared—the winters were too cold and the winds too fierce for them to live.

It hadn't seemed so lonely to me when I was younger. I was raised on Davy Crockett and *Wagon Train* and *Little House on the Prairie*, and I loved stoking the stove with split logs and sitting by the light of the kerosene lamp. It was novel to plug in the oil pan heater on the Jeep every night so the motor oil wouldn't turn to Jell-O. Life seemed all opportunity; I could be a waitress or a college professor or a poet. My grandparents, my parents, and my sister were all alive. I imagined I'd have a big

family that would sit around a long table at Thanksgiving.

Now my mother had been gone ten years. My dad, sister, aunts, uncles, and many friends were dead too. I had regrets. I never became a waitress or poet or college professor. I left Alaska and ended up in a middle-sized city in Iowa. I didn't have a big family, and my children lived far away. The past year my husband and I had eaten Thanksgiving dinner at a Perkins restaurant.

Suddenly I saw a small spruce tree. From our vehicle it looked about two feet high. I don't know how the tree got there or how it had managed to survive, but there it was, a spike of green in an arctic desert. I stared at it, turning in my seat to keep it in sight. Then a clump of four or five trees appeared, clinging together in what must have been a warmer spot of ground. An old spruce leaned sideways onto a hearty tree as if the old one was putting its head on the younger one's shoulder.

A few miles further on, several families of black spruce stood close together as if posing for a family picture. Now the evergreens filled the slopes with a deep green—descendants of other spruce and fir trees. I felt a hopeful quickening. I was surrounded by kinfolk. I took a breath and inhaled a prayer.

Rita Waggoner
Waterloo, Iowa

It was time for the Thursday men's Bible study. I was the first female pastor at a small church in rural East Texas, and the transition had not been easy. For example, I had not been asked to lead the men's Bible study even though the previous pastor had led it. Still, I attended faithfully and deeply appreciated the man who worked so hard on each week's lesson.

On this Thursday we were discussing the Gospel of Matthew, and one of the men went off on a rabbit trail. "I was flipping through the channels and somehow landed on MSNBC," he exclaimed. "No Christian would ever watch that channel!" I sat with my hand over my mouth to keep from saying words I might regret. I had been watching MSNBC just before coming to Bible study! As others agreed with him, I prayed that the leader would get us back on topic.

The community is dominated by the Tea Party, a political ideology that spills over into people's theology. I understood when I came here that I would be breaking ground and that I would hold different views from other folks.

But I didn't expect to feel so alone and isolated. As well as being the only clergywoman in the community, I was unmarried and lived by myself. While this was not exactly new territory for me, it was starker than anything I'd experienced.

I found myself questioning my beliefs and values. Was I wrong and the others right? Was I on the right path or had I wandered off? If I wasn't lost, how could I navigate through this place, staying in relationship with my flock and keeping my sense of self intact?

I named where I was "wilderness." There were days when, like the Israelites fleeing slavery, I longed for the fleshpots of Egypt and seriously thought of doing anything but pastoring a church.

But just as the wilderness shaped the Israelites, this place began to shape me. I liked the challenge of preaching the good news of Jesus in a way that was heard and had a chance to find good soil. I learned that the temptation to rely on myself and my resources was deadly. Trying to survive without the guidance of the Spirit and the help of my friends was hubris.

The greatest gift came in a Disciple Bible study, an in-depth study spanning nine months which has been a core part of ministry in many Methodist churches. We met for two hours every week and journeyed through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. We built trust and respect. When we disagreed politically or theologically, our discussions were holy and lively.

Slowly the wilderness revealed itself as less barren than I first thought. Here and there, fragments of color appeared in unexpected places. I met fellow travelers, some of whom watched MSNBC. Relationships blossomed. I caught glimpses of holiness when we truly listened to each other, when we sorted and weighed rice at the East Texas Food Bank, when a soprano's voice soared as she praised God in worship. Living the two great commandments—loving God and neighbor—transformed the wilderness into a foretaste of the heavenly banquet.

"Can you do another year here?" my district superintendent asked one day. With the help of God.

Allison Byerley
Mariposa, Calif.

From Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life*:

“The words ‘You shall love the Lord your God’ become in the end less a command than a promise. And the promise is that, yes, on the weary feet of faith and the fragile wings of hope, we will come to love him at last as from the first he has loved us—loved us even in the wilderness, especially in the wilderness, because he has been in the wilderness with us. He has been in the wilderness for us. . . . And rise we shall, out of the wilderness, every last one of us, even as out of the wilderness Christ rose before us.”

It was 1959, and spring was just making its appearance across the South. Dusk was turning into night. My feet were screaming from having walked to the courthouse in a small southwestern Alabama town and stood during the speeches. The black community had staged a demonstration in defiance of a Klan threat to punish anyone who dared to vote in the upcoming primary. I was visiting a colleague in a nearby town that weekend and decided to attend the demonstration.

Now I was hitchhiking my way back up U.S. Route 11 toward Birmingham, Chattanooga, and Virginia. I hoped to be back for my college classes on Monday morning.

But my previous ride had not turned out well. The white farmer who picked me up was seething with disgust about all the “agitators” in the state. I told him that I had been visiting my girlfriend, but he became belligerent. My answers did not suit him. When we came to a four-way stop in the middle of nowhere, I grabbed my duffel and bolted from the car.

It was so dark I could barely see across the road. No cars were in sight, but I thought surely I’d find someone traveling north. A couple of cars stopped but were not going north. I was beginning to think I might have to spend the night on the side of the road.

Then a dilapidated pickup truck came by. The driver was a middle-aged black man, friendly and inquisitive. He said, "Come on, boy. Ain't nobody going to come by here this time of night, and I can get you as far as Eutaw—you might be able to catch a ride from there." That sounded good to me, and we settled into easy conversation.

As we approached Eutaw he said, "Look, you ain't going to get any ride here tonight. If you want, you can come home with me and sleep on a mattress with my kids. My wife will fix you breakfast in the morning, and I'll take you up to the highway where you'll catch a ride up to Tuscaloosa in no time." I agreed right away.

Fifteen minutes later, he turned off the road and then turned again onto a rutted one-lane dirt track. The headlights barely penetrated the dark pine forest.

Finally we came to a clearing in the forest, and I saw a cabin. Inside, two small children were sleeping on mattresses by the woodstove in the main room. They barely stirred when he moved the little one to make space for me. I settled under a blanket as he went into the next room to join his wife.

At daybreak, the kids woke me. Surprised by a white boy in the room, they scurried into the bedroom. Samuel came out, poured some water in a basin for me, and pointed me toward the outhouse.

His wife made grits and fried some fatback for our breakfast. Samuel took me outside and showed me his walkway out into a swamp filled with alligators. He told me that he earned a living delivering alligator meat to a market. He threw some chickens over a retaining spiked fence, and we watched a feeding fight.

"Come on," he said, "I'll get you up to the crossing on the highway so you can get a ride. Then I've got to get back here and do some butchering."

E. Maynard Moore

Bethesda, Md.

My mother died of cancer when I was 12 after battling it for five years. She had wanted to see my older brother and me through our growing-up years because of Dad's drinking.

Sometimes at night, when Dad came home drunk, Mom would put us in the car and drive around until Dad fell asleep. It was fun to be taken out of my bed in the middle of the night. But sometimes it would be scary. The police would come, see that Mom was badly bruised, and get Dad into bed. The police would tell my mother that “a man’s home is his castle” and then leave.

Now it was just my dad and me living in an apartment just off the highway. One night he returned home drunk and mean and came after me. I slammed and locked my bedroom door. After what seemed like a very long time, he went to bed. I lay awake for hours, knowing in some visceral way that this situation was not right. I should not be hit and living in fear of being hit. Didn’t the Bible say something about this? Didn’t my Sunday school teachers tell me that my body was “a temple of God”?

Somehow I put together all these jumbled-up thoughts and pleas and got up and packed my bags. I headed out the door into the sunshine, but there was no sunshine in my heart. I had keys to the Fanny Farmer Candy Shop in my pocket, and it was my Saturday to open up and work alone until noon. I had been invited to sleep over at my friend Sally’s house that night. That’s all I knew about my life going forward. I knew that I was going into the wilderness of an unknown future. My cheeks were wet with tears.

I thought of a Bible verse that I had liked when I heard it and began saying it over and over. It gave me comfort and courage and was my companion in this wilderness: “If God be for us, who can be against us?”

*Linda “Meg” Brown
Ann Arbor, Mich.*

When I was a child my family took a two-week camping trip every August. I can still hear the awe and excitement in my mother’s voice when she told me that we would soon see Thunder Hole in Acadia National Park. I would huddle with my family, the cliffs and rocks surrounding and supporting us, as the tide crashed into the hole. The rock, the air, the power, the wildness, and I were connected.

In childhood, a curved spine kept me from my full height, and a fast metabolism kept me ridiculously skinny. In the sand dunes along Lake Michigan I would bury my

Twiggy-ish legs into the warm sand. I would jump my way down the dunes, hanging in the air until gravity pulled me back, feeling myself connecting physically and emotionally and gaining confidence.

Later, when my parents died, I relied on the wilderness for remembrance and solace. My father loved sailing on Lake Huron with its rocky blue-green depths and strong currents. My mother loved Lake Michigan, where you can see stunning sunsets over beautiful blue water.

These touchstones do not fail me. I go into the wilderness, no matter its size or locale, and find there some deliverance, a revelation, a knowing, or a joy. The wilderness of our earth and the wilderness at soul's depth communicate. When I am in need or searching for answers, untrammelled wilderness of place and untrammelled places of my soul reach out to each other.

B. L. Newell
Pine Grove Mills, Pa.

In the summer of 1977 my wife told me she loved someone else and wanted a divorce. I suggested we go to see someone for help and we did. Once. Then she left while I was out of town. At one point she and her boyfriend cleaned out our apartment. (I managed later to convince her to return a few pots and pans, plates, forks and spoons.) Yet no matter how often and how cruelly she rejected me, I believed that we could work it out. My shock and denial were powerful. Finally an attorney convinced me that there was no way to stop the divorce.

I lived in an emotional desert. I began pouring a tall glass of whiskey each night when I came home from the hospital. Fortunately, the patients in the hospital saved me because they needed me. I had a supportive peer group in my chaplain residency and excellent supervisors. I also worked part-time at a church whose members cared about me. I found a therapist who challenged me to look at my part in the failed relationship.

Several years later I accepted a call to a church in Virginia, where I met Sally. She sang in the church choir and helped with the youth group. We began to spend time together and fell in love. One night I was at her apartment and we had an argument. I did what I had learned to do—I started toward the door. But Sally got in front of the

door and said, “You’re not leaving. It may not be me, but you have to learn to trust another woman.”

My life was changed after that moment. She was the lifeline. She rescued me from my wilderness.

Cary Speaker
Birmingham, Ala.

I didn’t expect many people in church on Sunday because it was Christmas morning. I planned a simple service. We’d sing a few carols, tell the holy story, pray for hope and peace in the world, and celebrate communion.

When the kids came forward for children’s time, I let them share their excitement about Santa and told them that we must be grateful and generous with the many things we have.

When I was halfway through my remarks, a little boy I’ll call Jake, who must have been seven or eight, suddenly stood up, clenched his fists, and said in a loud voice, “I hate my dad!”

The congregation gasped. His older brother tried to pull him back down and shush him, but Jake pulled violently away. His brother abandoned him and went to sit with his mother.

“He promised to come for Christmas,” cried Jake, “but we woke up and he wasn’t there. He made my mom cry, and I hate him. He is one big, fat liar!”

With some panic-inspired instinct of grace, I grabbed Jake and pulled him into my lap. He wailed, his small body shaking in spasms against my chest. I swallowed hard, wiping away my own tears with my free hand. Then, when I felt I could trust my voice again, I stammered, “So, you know what, Jake?” Then I realized that whatever I was going to say was for Jake alone. So I placed my cheek against his hot, wet cheek.

I whispered something about knowing Jake well and believing that he actually didn’t hate his dad. He was angry, sure, and had every right to be, because his dad disappointed him and his mom and brother and hurt all their feelings and made a

big mistake. “But, Jake, Jake, Jake,” I whispered fiercely, “You’re so upset because you love him so much.”

Exactly at the word *love*, he became very still, and I felt his muscles relax. His arms came free from hugging his chest and he held on to me. I mumbled something to the congregation about helping little boys disappointed by love’s promises to still find some holy Christmas. Then his mom came to the altar to reclaim her son. The rest of us left the church haunted by a little boy’s broken heart.

Rodolph Rowe
Seattle, Wash.

For knowledge, too, is itself a power,” says Francis Bacon, and I agree. When I was uncertain, anxious, or brooding, I always found salvation in knowledge. Give me enough knowledge and I could control most any situation and solve any problem.

I got married, and we promptly had four kids. I put up the white picket fence myself. Ozzie Nelson and Ward Cleaver had nothing on me. It was all planned out. I believed I could take care of any glitch in the plan.

Then at age nine one of our daughters was diagnosed with severe obsessive compulsive disorder. I spent 15 years traveling from one psychiatric hospital or residential treatment program to another. It ripped me apart. So I studied. I built up what must have been one of the greatest lay libraries on OCD. As I learned, I began to feel myself regaining a measure of control where none had existed.

Then doctors told us, “We were wrong. She doesn’t have OCD. She’s autistic.” I gave my OCD library away and compiled a library on autism. What I didn’t realize was that I was becoming lost in the middle of a wilderness of my own making. It became painfully obvious that I was not in charge and never had been. The illusion was over.

I sensed that something beyond science, something beyond reason, held all the answers. Someone else had to be in charge, because I sure wasn’t. I came to realize that there was only one book I needed: the Bible, the repository of all knowledge and wisdom. I started to appreciate that the someone else in charge was God.

When the same daughter went flying off the freeway at 70 miles per hour, broke her neck, and nearly bled to death, I didn’t need a new library of texts on orthopedics

and neurology. I already had scripture, the church fathers, and thinkers who bravely built the church universal. My study of the revealed word of God had nothing to do with saving my daughter and everything to do with saving me.

*Roland Wrinkle
Newhall, Calif.*