

Indulgence: Essays by readers

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

Readers Write in the [June 6, 2018](#) issue



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

One look at me will tell you that I love my indulgences. Ice cream, cookies, caramel, chocolate: these are a few of my favorite things. I carry my extra pounds fairly well, but both my doctor and I know that it's not good for me in the long run. I must consider giving up my indulgences. Sigh.

My indulgences aren't without their reasons. For too much of my life, I was altogether too good at delayed gratification. Long hours of hard study and very little play, long years of scrimping and saving, depriving myself of wanted pleasures—these sacrifices gave me the possibility of indulging now. Now in my autumn years, I am letting myself have some immediate gratifications, even to my long-term detriment. I give generously to others, but I also try to break the habit of never spending on myself. I do not live to eat, but I also do not deprive myself. I eat!

That brings me to another reason: I watched my mother starve herself to death when she was tired of living. Ever since, the idea of not eating has been anathema to me. I've watched others also refuse food as their end comes near. In my mind, not eating means life is ending.

My time will come. When it does, will I also starve myself to death? Will chocolate and caramel and cookies and ice cream hold no charms for me then? Perhaps so. They certainly held no charms when my chemotherapy drugs made everything taste like metal. Perhaps my end will be like that.

But in the meantime, I am happy to be alive and to taste my food. I choose for now to live boldly and fully. I choose to embrace all the goodness that life offers. If that is indulgent, then I choose to think that God accepts some indulgences.

*Karen Lebacqz
Claremont, California*

In the summer of 1968, I was selling books door to door on the outskirts of Chicago. It was a long way from the hills of North Carolina for this college sophomore. Lured

by the promise of making enough money to pay for all my college expenses for the next year or two, I had planted myself for the summer in a world of flashing lights and blaring sirens. Chicago, like many other cities, was experiencing rioting following the slayings of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy. To add to the chaotic atmosphere, the Democratic National Convention was being held in the city, and it had become a riot in itself.

It was a tension-filled time for door-to-door solicitations, and the heat was merciless as I dragged myself to yet another door with my wares. Behind the door was an elderly woman with watery blue eyes. I was puzzled by the expression on her face. Was it fear? Suspicion of a stranger at her door? Weighing just over 125 pounds and having made hardly enough money from my sales to eat, I wondered if I looked so emaciated that she might be afraid I would fall exhausted upon her doorstep. Or maybe she would have pity and buy one of my books, I thought.

As I began my sales pitch, it became apparent that this white-haired, gentle soul spoke not a word of English. I noticed a crucifix around her neck, and I heard a word that I guessed might be Polish. She motioned for me to sit on the metal porch glider while she disappeared into the house. I was glad for a rest in the porch shade. That was enough, even if she did not buy one of my books. I just hoped she would not return with a large Doberman.

Her return to the porch was announced only with a smile and a large bowl of icy blackberries, glistening with a sprinkle of sugar. Her hands cupped the bowl as she offered it to me. She motioned to me to stay seated. I smiled, accepted the freezing bowl in my hands, and dug into the berries. My unnamed friend stood over me, smiling with pleasure at every bite I took.

I savored the cold berries and the shade as long as I could. And I savored being in the presence of this gentle soul. I did not make a sale, but neither was I chased away. In the gracious reception of one whose language, culture, faith, age, and circumstances were so different from my own, I felt I had been given a special gift: a bowl of blackberries for a hot day and a story for the rest of my life.

Dennis Herman

Raleigh, North Carolina

Toys everywhere. Fifteen buckets disguised as Easter baskets, stacked upon each other. Not one bag of cookies, but all four kinds, just in case. More pairs of socks than there are days of the month. I try to be gracious as I receive these gifts. I know that he means well: he's just looking out for me. But so much of this I can't use. It's just going to clutter my house. Why can't he just show up and be present? Or let's just go grab a cup of coffee and talk. That's really all I need.

I try to understand. Maybe some of it is atonement for sins. Indulgences. He feels sadness over what happened, even though it wasn't his fault. He carries the grief with him. He wants to pay off his guilt, thinking that maybe if he takes care of me now it will make up for the time he felt he didn't—couldn't—take care of me.

His atoning for these sins becomes an overindulgence of stuff. Piled up in his car, yellow bags of kindness waiting to be released. Shirts, pants, shoes. Some of it is practical. Some of it I need, and I show gratitude. Some of it just piles up. How do I accept such gifts? Do I indulge him by accepting them, or do I say that I want for nothing? Do I take the items and give them away to someone who could use them?

I can't possibly keep all these gifts. My house would be stacked to the ceiling with mementos of his love. I would be reminded of his existence at every turn, at every inch of my vision. I'd see that cookbook he gave me in the kitchen: there's his love. I'd see that bowl he gave me: love. The cup: love.

Instead, the opposite happens. I see the guilt, the pain, and the grief, and I begin to experience guilt by association. Rather than seeing him in these items, I am reminded of my own sins. I want to throw them all out, to cleanse, to purge.

No objects can change time, alter past events, or make up for innocence lost. But presence and love could be the salve to heal the wound. The balm is buried underneath all the pain and all the stuff. It's locked in deep, hidden away from guests and friends. To dig it out will hurt. But I cannot stack anything else on top, lest it all come crashing down.

Katrina Pekich-Bundy
Hanover, Indiana

March 1965. Selma, Alabama. The week after the first attempted voting rights march from Selma to Montgomery and the orgy of violence that ensued on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, Martin Luther King issued a call for white people, particularly white clergy, to join the marchers. Six of us students from Evangelical Theological Seminary in Naperville, Illinois, responded.

We arrived on a Tuesday afternoon, just in time for another attempt to march to the courthouse. We marched to the edge of the white section of town, where we were turned back. When we returned to Brown Chapel AME Church, the locals were asked who could take us in. A little woman, perhaps in her midsixties, raised her hand. A friend and I introduced ourselves, and she asked us to follow her to her house. As we got better acquainted, she told us: “Jesus done sent you, so I gotta take care of you.”

Her name was Nina Johnson, and we could tell that she was a bit flustered, and that she was hurting. She told us that we were the first white folks who had ever been in her home, that she had been clubbed on an earlier march, and that now she spent as much of her time at Brown Chapel helping out as she could. She provided us with hot dogs and beans for supper, and she worried over our comfort, whether we’d be warm enough and if we needed anything.

The following morning, after reporting in at Brown Chapel, my friend and I pooled our resources and went to the community grocery store. When we returned to Nina’s house with our purchases, she cried. She had not known what she would feed us that evening. Later, as we thanked her and said our goodbyes, she cried again. We hugged her, told her how grateful we were for her hospitality, and left to return to our churches.

Two things I shall never forget about that trip. First, how palpable and all-consuming the hate was when we finally successfully marched to the local courthouse to state our case. And second, Nina Johnson. Our contribution to the cause was minuscule, but—like the widow in the temple (Mark 12:44)—she gave it everything she had. She also gave us everything she had. As a child, I’d been blessed with grandparents and aunts who indulged me shamelessly, but never before had I been indulged so richly by one who had so little.

Herb Evert

Cottage Grove, Wisconsin

Buttery moisture infuses the large slice of pound cake handed to me. I top it with warm caramel sauce and flakes of coconut, as instructed by those who seem to be in the know. My first bite disintegrates in my mouth as only decadence can. I am enjoying myself.

One year ago, I sat in this very same church basement and could barely eat. My food never reached my mouth as I prattled on in nervous energy to those at my table. Just a few weeks before, on a beautiful summer day, my husband, Tony, died. The river's swift undertow stole him away as our children escaped and I bore witness.

I became a compliant griever. A pastor friend told me to give all my anxieties over to God every evening. I did so between tears and sighs. My somatic movement therapist gave me exercises to eradicate the flow of adrenaline in my body. My talk therapist reminded me to slowly breathe in for five seconds and out for another five seconds. I also took long walks with friends, soaked my feet in warm lavender water, went for pedicures, highlighted my hair, slathered on facial masks, lunched with more friends than I knew I had, ate dark chocolate in bed for breakfast, and bought fresh flowers each week.

But as the months crept along, I felt stuck. Stuck in grief, flashbacks, anxiety attacks, and an overriding inability to think or plan or do. Stuck in the many acts of daily self-care which now seemed necessary for my day-to-day survival. I told a friend I was bored with caring for myself. But that wasn't the entire truth. All this self-care felt selfish and indulgent. Why should I receive these small joys? They didn't bring Tony back. They didn't change the way he died or the trauma it filled us with. They just kept me propped up like a manikin pretending to inhale.

Around the first anniversary of Tony's death, I experienced a sweeping sense of forgiveness—for what I'd done during this time of pain and for what I'd left undone. I indulged now in a lovely sense of grace and forgiveness. I could see God's love freely given through the acts of others. But it was also given through my own acts of self-care, which moved me gently through trauma and grief into recovery. These small joys were both necessary and defiant as I forged forward, dragging our children with me, choosing life.

Jennifer Ohman-Rodriguez

North Liberty, Iowa

It starts with rainbows in the morning. When the sun hits the crystal in the window and spatters tiny rainbows on ceiling and walls, I smile. God is indulging me before I even get out of bed.

Later I gather my 84-year-old body to go outside for my walk around the parking lot. I pull my walker through the door and bump it down one step, then the other step, and now we're off.

The sun sparkles, reminding me of the rainbows in my waking moments. I pay attention to the other objects of creation that God has gifted me with. I almost bump into the lily—it is a little taller than I am, and it ranges from four shades of pink to a deep red. The flowers proclaim! The pepper plant seems to chatter from orange to red, arguing with the lily about who came first this summer (and knowing all along that it was the lily).

I pause by the skyscraper sunflower, look up at its massive head of seeds, and say out loud: "You are definitely one of God's indulgences. Not only that, but you have exceeded expectations." The rose of Sharon bush seems to brag a little, with its multiple flowers and its rich, deep green foliage. The weed at its base struggles for its bloom to be seen, but through the thick of green, I spy the flower.

I turn, lifting up the seat of my walker to retrieve the small Bible that rests inside the storage space. I lower the seat and sit down. I turn to the first chapter of Genesis, skip to the third day, and read to the growing things around me:

Then God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation; plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it." And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

I take a deep breath, smile as I look again at their gathered glory, and whisper to them: "Some of you are magnificent, and all of you are beautiful."

I wrestle the walker back into the house. I sit inside, remembering the colors, and I think: "God has spread indulgence all over this world, creating plants and trees, flowers and weeds, and beauty beyond. The description in Genesis doesn't do it

justice. But this part is true: that it is evening, and it is morning, and it is good.”

Ann Freeman Price
Newton, New Jersey

From Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*:

“Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”

My wife and I used to live next door to a man who was originally from South Carolina. Sam was rough around the edges, but I got along fairly well with him. We would have neighborly conversations, I would loan him tools, and when Sam’s wife broke her arm, my wife and I took over a pot of chili.

Shortly after an African American man moved into one of the nearby apartments, Sam put up a flag on his apartment porch. It was a Confederate flag. I sensed that Sam was sending a message to the new neighbor. The sight of the flag annoyed me at first, and soon I was filled with righteous indignation. I tried to put myself in the place of the new neighbor and how he must have felt each time he walked by. The flag kept gnawing away at me. Do I just indulge Sam and let it go? Or do I go over during the dark of night and tear the flag down?

After a few days, I saw Sam talking to another neighbor outside. I went over and said, “Hi, guys, how ya doin’?” “OK.” “Sam. I’ve got a problem.” “Oh?” “Yeah, your flag,” I said. “It upsets me. It reminds me of the Ku Klux Klan.”

Sam said, “Oh, I don’t like the Klan either.”

I replied, “Well, several years ago back in southeastern Ohio, I had a personal encounter with the Klan, and that Confederate flag is their flag. It makes me think of the Civil War, which, by the way, you guys lost!” (Don’t ask me why I said that—guess the devil made me say it!) I continued, “That flag reminds me of slavery and segregation and racism and hate, and that’s not what America is all about.”

Silence. Then I said, “I’ll tell you what, Sam, if I buy you a United States flag, will you fly it instead of that flag?”

Without hesitating, Sam said, “Sure.” I went to one of our local box stores to buy a flag. They happened to be on sale, for about \$5.98 each. Not one to pass up a bargain, I bought three of them: one for Sam, a new one for myself, and another just to have on hand. Sam’s Confederate flag came down and up went the U.S. flag.

A year or so later, however, the Confederate flag went up again. Sam’s wife was sitting on the porch, so I went over and said, “I see the American flag is gone. I noticed it was getting a bit weather worn, so here’s a new one,” and handed her the third flag I had bought on sale. I never saw the Confederate flag flying there again.

Don Shuler

Queensbury, New York

“Only the best for our lady dates!” Jessie proclaimed as we gorged ourselves on her homemade peach scones over morning tea. It was a refrain I’d heard many times before. We often met when things were tough, and Jessie’s remedy for whatever ailed us was to indulge—in good wines, in pear ciders, in cheese platters, in sushi, in cookies, in cakes, in talking, and in laughter.

That day, we were both heartbroken. The abundance of life that we longed for seemed far off. We were strong, intelligent, and passionate women in the grips of pressures to adapt and adjust, to compromise and explain, to apologize and play nice. And that fact disappointed us both.

We didn’t talk directly about these issues that day, but they were there, hovering in the steam above our warm tea. “I am too weak to walk very far,” she’d written in her text message. “Why don’t you come over here for tea instead? I’ll make you a treat.”

I didn't know that the peach scones would be the last things we would eat together. Now I wish we had lingered longer over our morning feast, gathering strength from our sisterhood of shared gastronomic pleasure.

When Jessie's body stopped taking up any space at all in the world, mine started taking up more. My grief took the form of an insatiable appetite, and indulgence seemed a fitting remedy. Luckily, as my stomach and thighs grew, so did my hunger for the freedom we'd both longed for that day.

I've often heard it said in Christian circles that self-control—one of the fruits of the spirit—is the remedy for the sin of indulgence. From Jessie, I learned that when it comes to hunger born of yearning to experience the fullness of life, the opposite is also true. In a world where the values associated with self-control are touted as a way of circumscribing women's power, expression, and joy, indulgence can be a radical act of love.

Cemented in my memory as the taste of butter and ripe fruit, Jessie's final extravagant gesture of consumption and friendship was a powerful statement of resistance mixed with generosity and love of life. In the midst of her own struggles, she invited me to feast and be filled. The peach scones were a poignant reminder of the possibility of another reality, one in which no woman will be expected to go hungry.

Emily Hill

Toronto, Ontario

I refuse to go into details, even decades after the ridiculousness, but I will say that poetry played a pivotal role. Everything, by necessity, had become prose: the measured conversations, the late-into-the-night explanations, the making the best of an untenable conundrum that might as well be called by its truest name of *sin*.

Somehow, though, news made it through all the prose that the poet Galway Kinnell would be giving a reading at the local university. And for reasons that continue to elude me to this hour, I managed to give myself permission to drive the necessary miles and find a chair in the back of a cavernous classroom.

Give myself permission: such an interesting turn of phrase and not quite right. Was I really giving *myself* permission to be there? Or had it been given to me in some way I'll never be able to fully explain? Had I been given permission to let Kinnell's burly voice enter my ear, travel to the brain, and tell truths that could only be conveyed by the sonic delicacies and irresistible nuance of poetry?

Who knows? In some small way, perhaps it was like the permission King David had been granted after Nathan metronomed a finger in his face and shouted, "You are the man." That same permission had caused him to sit down minutes later and write an unforgettable poem with lines like "create in me a clean heart" and "the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit."

And now, thanks to that same kindness of God that leads to repentance, I knew it wouldn't have made an iamb of difference if one of *my* Nathans had barged through the doors to call me out. Not at that moment. Not in that cave of a classroom. Not while the Pulitzer-toting poet had begun reciting "Saint Francis and the Sow."

Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight. Fact is, nothing in earth or elsewhere could have kept me from enjoying every syllable in that poem—from "the bud / stands for all things, / even for those things that don't flower" and past "the spiritual curl of the tail," all the joyous, delicious, surprising way to "the long, perfect loveliness of sow."

To my ears, it all sounded like forgiveness.

Bill Stadick

Watertown, Wisconsin

As a child of the 1950s and the oldest of four, I was expected to be a role model for my younger siblings and eat what was put in front of me. Desserts were for special occasions. Snacks were forbidden. My mother was strict. I can't complain, because I never lacked food. But I also didn't particularly enjoy food.

My grandmother visited often and sat with us children at the Formica kitchen breakfast table where she drank her coffee with PET evaporated milk. With her spoon, she would take a large scoop of sugar from the sugar bowl. Then she would carefully set the spoon on top of the milky coffee in her cup, letting the coffee soak

into the scoop of sugar, being careful not to let it slide into her cup. Next, she would spread what we called the “coffee sugar” onto a piece of buttered white toast and offer it to us to eat. Pure heaven! Naturally, my mother disapproved.

When I stayed over at my Great Aunt Ida and Uncle Ed’s house, they doted on me. They gave me Coca-Cola in a frosty green glass bottle, heavy homemade pound cake with caramel icing mixed with chopped pecans, and vanilla ice cream covered with maple syrup and sprinkled with salted peanuts. I slept on a pullout sofa bed next to a bowl of wrapped coffee-flavored hard candy. I would lie in bed sucking on that rich dark treat and watching the pattern of car headlights cross the ceiling. Bliss!

I’m a grandmother now, and I take pride in how well my daughter is caring for her new baby. While eating nothing but healthy food and going without alcohol of any kind, she has nursed our granddaughter for five months. I can see the handwriting on the wall. The child will likely grow up eating organic vegetables and meat that comes from animals raised without antibiotics or added growth hormones. And good for her.

But I know what I’ll feed her. Something as wonderful as coffee sugar, Cokes, and caramel cake, sticky candy, ice cream with peanuts.

*Laura Walker Dunn
Duxbury, Massachusetts*

It was way too indulgent. The things I was asking for in my application for a sabbatical grant felt like too much. Too much time away, too much travel. I hesitated while filling out the application. But a small voice inside reassured me, saying: “Well, they must really mean for people to ask for such extravagant things, since they made the size of the grant so large.” I heard a tender, tired voice add: “After 33 years of ministry, you deserve a break.” Another voice, the practical side of me (where did it get a New York accent?), stepped in to affirm: “Don’t leave money sitting on the table.” I completed my application and put it in the mail.

After I received word that I had been awarded the grant, my church leaders shared the fantastic news in worship, and then I posted a blog entry which contained more details. I was radiant in my happiness and was certain of everyone else’s shared joy

in my good fortune.

All was well until one of my members, who was extremely unhappy with me about Something Else Entirely, wrote a rant on his Facebook page which included a link to my joyful blog entry. “If she really loved Jesus, she should spend that money on the poor!” Suddenly, a whole bunch of people I had never met were piling on, judging me for being an overindulgent pastor. And part of me agreed with my detractors. Who was I to take a lavish trip that was beyond the means of most of the people I’ve served? What about everyone who would continue to be poor, hungry, and spiritually hurting while I was jaunting around the world with my husband or sunning on the beach with my family? All of my earlier guilt came roaring to life as I imagined condemnation from near and far.

But when the time came, I slipped easily into the time away. For once, I had all the time I needed to do something—or to do nothing. I was at a baseball game when I finally understood the work of sabbatical within my spirit. Somewhere around the fourth inning, I realized that I was thinking about baseball. I wasn’t thinking about my next sermon or newsletter article or situation that needed to be resolved. My brain wasn’t working on a to-do list or worrying about an ill church member. I was inhabiting the moment purely for the sake of the moment.

In the Middle Ages, indulgences were sold to save souls. While I’m as big a fan of the Reformation as any other Protestant, I know without a doubt that the gift of my sabbatical did much to preserve and save my own soul. I am restored and renewed to live out a calling that is both ennobling and exhausting.

Sally Haynes

Blue Springs, Missouri

I carefully licked the cool sweetness from the top of my ice cream cone, then lifted it up. A quick snip with my teeth and the corner was gone. Taking my time, I continued to delight in my special treat. A melted trickle dripped upon my clean frock. Suddenly Mum, noticing, scolded me. “Joyce, how many times do I have to tell you not to eat the bottom off your ice cream cone?” She glared at my dress. “That’s the last ice cream I will ever buy you again.”

And it was. But Mum had nothing to do with the fulfillment of that threat. It was Adolf Hitler who managed to deprive me of such a treat by marching into Poland, forcing England into war in September 1939.

Soon the digging of our air-raid shelter in the small backyard banished ideas of ice cream. The wail of sirens, the blasts of bombs, the smell of acrid smoke, and the flares of fire against a blackened sky darkened my life. The nearest indulgences were rough chunks of ice begged from the local fishmonger. As he presided over the slab of glassy-eyed fish lying limp among broken ice, we would plead for a piece of frozen pleasure to suck on. The cheeky boys sometime stole a chunk while he wasn't looking. It smelled and tasted fishy, but it was relished by those of us lucky enough to secure a piece.

There was no refrigeration, and ice cream became a faint memory. My mother, though, longed for such an indulgence. "Oh, it was such a heavenly sweet to have," she would recall. "It came served in a large tall glass, with a sliced banana at the bottom." A pause, as she thought about that bygone luxury called bananas, something I had no recollection of. "On top lay two big scoops of vanilla ice cream, with sinful hot chocolate sauce poured over the top, topped with real whipped cream—not that synthetic stuff we suffer nowadays—and to finish it off, a red cherry." Silence would hang between us, my Mum lost in nostalgia. Then she'd slide me off her knee and proceed to the kitchen to rustle up a meal from our rations.

The war dragged on. I began school, fell in love with reading, hated my gas mask, and played hide-and-seek in the local bombed-out houses. Despite the war, we lived and found joy in life, as children do under difficult circumstances.

When the war ended in the summer of 1945, we rejoiced. No more air raids, no more sleeping in the shelter, and above all, no more gas masks. To add to our zest, a school party was announced. Excitement filled the air, and our teacher resorted to rapping the knuckles of several overexuberant boys the morning of the party. That afternoon, all 54 of us sat at our desks as our teacher whispered that there was a special treat. I fidgeted with great hope.

A man trudged into our classroom carrying a large cardboard box, slightly steamy. Our teacher placed a small, wrapped, rectangular bar upon each desk. I picked mine up. The cold stung my fingers slightly. Gingerly, I peeled back the layer of paper. A tantalizing, frozen substance peeped from the wrapper. Hesitantly I took a nibble,

just as a wave of shouts filled the air. "It's ice cream, it's ice cream!"

Sure enough, I closed my eyes as the pleasurable smooth sweet taste melted on my tongue and slid slowly down my throat, leaving its chilled trail behind. As creamy drips stickied my hand, I realized I would need to eat faster. Finally, the last traces were gone. I couldn't wait to run home and boast to Mum.

The years have passed, but no exotic flavored ice cream has ever tasted so good as that palm-sized briquette we enjoyed as children to celebrate the end of World War II.

Joyce M. Lovely

St. Petersburg, Florida