

Promise: Essays by readers

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

Readers Write in the [July 31, 2019](#) issue



Photo by Liane Metzler

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

When Michael and I married, the trend was for couples to write their own vows. This was supposed to make them more authentic. Our wise pastor indulged us, but he also encouraged us to look carefully at the promises contained in the traditional rite. They are pretty basic, he said. Those basic promises of “for better or worse, in sickness and in health” became the lodestar that guided me through the ten years of Michael’s journey with Alzheimer’s.

About the time of his diagnosis, our congregation did a study of the book of Job. One of the presenters declared that the main question is not so much “Why do bad

things happen to good people?” but rather, out of the vast range of human experience, “Why should we be blessed with so much good?” Reframing the question, and certain of God’s abiding presence, I could focus on my promises to Michael: How can I keep the promises I made with grace and gratitude? How can I do this well?

We lived into the first years of the illness seizing every possible opportunity for joy. We volunteered, got a dog, traveled, and spent time with our children and grandchildren. We also talked about what was to come and about keeping our promises. Michael did not ask me to promise to keep him at home until his death. Early on he signed a “do not resuscitate” order and other documents to give guidance to physicians and caregivers.

I remember reading an article probing whether those whose partners have Alzheimer’s and are no longer able to keep their promises could ethically enter into new relationships. I understood the question and the exquisitely painful reality that drives it, but I wanted to keep the promises I’d made.

We were able to be collaborating partners through all but the very last months of the illness. We listened to Mozart and Bach and four-part unaccompanied singing that gave voice to our prayers when other language slipped away. We delighted in fresh blueberries, crunchy cucumbers, and sweet sections of clementines. Cutting up his food, helping him to his chair, washing his hands, I wondered: Is this what my promises have come to?

My journal documents plenty of times when, with the psalmist, I asked, “O Lord, how long?” I felt I simply couldn’t do it anymore. Too much pain, too much loss, Michael such a shadow of his former self. When two of our grandchildren faced serious health issues, I felt myself pulled in too many directions. Keeping promises to Michael day in and day out meant I was not available to my children and grandchildren in the way I wanted to be.

Then, 14 months after he was admitted to nursing care, the end came, laced with tears, humor, and music. A steady stream of his friends, family, and former staff coming through to bid him farewell. That I was able to be with him at the moment of his death was the capstone of nearly 43 years of keeping promises, in sickness and in health, sustained by the One who is faithful to us.

Mary Lehman Yoder

Goshen, Indiana

My neighbor Helen brought a large bag of peaches to my door. "The tree is loaded with fruit," she said. "Please, take all you want." Several of the tree's branches were bending low over our fence.

Helen's husband, Earl, had once told me a story about the origins of this peach tree. Earl had had an elderly friend who lived in a nursing home. Fresh fruit is a rarity in many nursing homes, and this man—I'll call him Mr. Garcia—had to settle for canned fruit. One day while eating canned peaches, he bit into a pit. Most people would have complained: How hard is it to strain out pits when serving peaches to elderly people? But Mr. Garcia just requested an empty coffee can from the trash and asked that someone fill it with soil. He pushed his peach pit into the soil and set the can on his window sill.

Amazingly, the pit sprouted and the plant thrived. Eventually it outgrew the can. Mr. Garcia asked Earl to take his little tree and plant it in the ground, which Earl did, in his own backyard. The sprout grew into a spindly tree, and within a couple of years it produced a few peaches. Soon after, a spring hailstorm broke the tree apart and it died. But by then Earl had taken pits from some of the tree's few peaches and planted them by the fence. And one of those pits sprouted into a tree, healthier and taller than the original.

Growing fruit trees in Front Range Colorado is tricky because of late frosts and hail, but the daughter of Mr. Garcia's tree turned out to be a tree that sagged with sweet fruit. We all had so many peaches that even after sharing them widely and canning what we could, dozens of them fell to the ground unused. Thinking of Mr. Garcia, I took three bags of peaches to a nursing home so that the residents could enjoy the fruit Mr. Garcia dreamed of.

Mr. Garcia did not live to see his peach pit grow into the tree that ultimately produced this harvest. But when he looked at that pit years ago he saw the promise of fresh fruit. It didn't matter to him that the pit had already been canned and forgotten, or that he would never see where his gamble would lead. "Who despises the day of small things?" asks the prophet Zechariah. It's in those small things that the promise of the future rests.

It encourages me that Mr. Garcia saw himself as one who had the power to connect the promise of a peach pit with the soil in which it could grow. His story has changed the way I see myself as I age and struggle with health issues. It has changed the way I see other people, who are so often a displaced pit in need of fertile soil. It has helped me see the difference that even small acts of advocacy can make. We often struggle to keep promises. Seeing the promise in what is right in front of us can change the world.

Lila Docken Bauman
Denver, Colorado

From Frederick Buechner, *The Hungering Dark*:

“Matrimony is called holy because this brave and fateful promise . . . looks beyond itself to more fateful promises still and speaks mightily of what human life at its most human and its most alive and most holy must always be.”

When Sam moved from his crib to a twin bed, the new routine for getting him to fall asleep at night was long and specific. After I read several books with him in the red glider chair, he would crawl into bed and demand that I lie next to him. Sam would tuck his stuffed Elmo under his left armpit, then submerge his body under the fluffy comforter. Only his face remained visible, his large brown eyes peering up at the ceiling in the darkness. “Keep you safe, Mama, keep you safe,” he’d whisper earnestly, with his toddler grammar. This meant it was time for me to pull him in close, with my arm securing him like a seatbelt for the journey ahead. Sometimes he’d tug my arm and say, “Moy” (More), which meant I needed to hug him tighter. Only then would he let his eyelids close and his body relax, waiting for sleep to come.

As I lay in the darkness with Sam’s warm body tucked in next to mine, I reflected on the promise of my tight embrace—“Keep you safe, Mama, keep you safe”—and felt the encroaching terror of realizing that this was something I could not give my children. I cannot promise to keep you safe, Sam.

I stood only a few feet away when you fell and knocked your front teeth loose on the coffee table. I was behind you on my bike when you tumbled off of yours, tore open your knee, and needed stitches. When you were six, I felt helpless as they wheeled you away for surgery and then felt the flood of relief when I heard all went well. You've felt the rejection of an angry coach and the heartbreak of teenage first love. I was always right there, but I couldn't keep you safe. It is not a promise I can make.

Cancer took my dad when I was a child, so I sometimes dwell on the possibility that I might leave my children too soon. Or they might leave me. I make them wear a helmet, look both ways, eat vegetables, play outside, get enough sleep, and avoid the dangers I can foresee. And I try to pray. I pray even though I know that God does not, maybe even cannot, keep them safe.

God the Father declared, "This is my beloved Son," and still Jesus walked the road of suffering that led to conflict, loneliness, pain, and death. The Father did not keep His beloved Son safe. It wasn't a promise He could make. Love does not keep us safe. Love gives us hope that our suffering, our longing, our helplessness to protect, is felt and understood by the One who watched His child die.

Today, Sam hugs me so hard his six-foot frame threatens to squeeze the breath out of me. I close my eyes and lean into his crushing embrace. It feels like a seatbelt for this part of the journey. "Thanks for making my lunch . . . love you," he says as he heads out to the garage, grabs his helmet off his handlebars, and snaps it under his chin.

"Keep you safe?" I ask. "Yep," he replies with a grin and a quick roll of his eyes. But I know it isn't a promise he can make.

*Laura Besley
Madison, Wisconsin*

We got married in the church where I was baptized and confirmed and where we led the youth group every Sunday. It was my 23rd birthday. We promised "for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, until we are parted by death." We had started dating the October of my freshman year. He was a senior physics major, worked on the school suicide hotline, lived in the same coed fraternity. We read Leo Buscaglia and Carl Rogers. We liked to golf and camp.

We got our degrees and moved to Chicago. I became a consulting engineer while he did his postdoc and then became an assistant professor. We joined a church, he sang in the choir, we went to Bible study together and worked with the youth.

We had three miscarriages, and then a stillborn baby boy. I discerned my call to ministry, and he brought me home an application for the University of Chicago Divinity School. Five high-risk pregnancies later, we had three beautiful children. He made dinner and took care of the kids so I could complete my degree at Garrett-Evangelical, just two miles from our house.

That was our life until the day he told me the idea of marriage was no longer attractive to him, and he moved out. None of my tears, none of my reminders to him of the promises we made, none of my requests for counseling or working together on our marriage had any impact. I cried in my counselor's office. "I made a promise before God; a sacred covenant. I cannot break that."

"You can't keep a covenant someone else has broken."

It took me four years to understand the truth of those words, to let go of the promise I made, and to move on to divorce a man who no longer wanted to be married to me. Twenty-three and a half years after my 23rd birthday, I stood encircled by my friends in our church on a dark winter evening, placed my wedding ring on the altar, and gave my promise back to God.

*Dianne Tobey Covault
Cleveland Heights, Ohio*

"Do you promise these cherry tomato plants will produce?" I asked. Jeanette replied, "Yes, I promise. Just plant them deep, fertilize, and keep them well watered."

This was my first attempt at a backyard garden, and I trusted Jeanette's years of gardening experience. As promised, Jeanette's plants produced an abundance of cherry tomatoes. With the tomatoes and the leaf lettuce I planted, our family enjoyed salads most of that summer.

I came home one afternoon to find my two sons and the boys from across the street engaged in a cherry tomato battle. Each boy had harvested a handful of cherry tomatoes and was chasing after the others and hurling tomatoes at them. My anger

flared. I sent my sons into the house and told the neighbor boys to go back across the street. Then I set about inspecting the damage. Fortunately, the plants were not injured and in a few days were producing cherry tomatoes once more.

The cherry tomato battle was soon forgotten. Summer turned to fall, which was followed by a wet winter, and then spring. It was a warm spring morning and I was sitting on the back stoop enjoying a cup of coffee when I noticed the tender green sprouts that seemed to have emerged everywhere across the yard. Close inspection revealed these were not dandelions or tufts of crabgrass. They were cherry tomato plants.

There were cherry tomato plants growing in the gravel driveway, and one growing in the fork of a tree. There was a plant in the geranium pot, and one growing in a crack in the cement wall of the house. Like the sower in Jesus' parable, I found that the seed had been scattered in many places other than the fertile soil.

Some of these volunteer plants I carefully transplanted to the garden, where they thrived and contributed to the upcoming summer's salad. But some plants I allowed to grow where they had taken root. I admired their fortitude, and I was curious to see what would happen.

Sure enough, some of these plants reached maturity and produced fruit. Their fruit was not as abundant as the plants that grew in the fertile soil. The fruit of these outliers was smaller and more tart. Yet I appreciated these cherry tomatoes even more because I was aware of their unusual history and their struggle to survive. I was pleased that Jeanette's cherry tomato plants produced as promised. I was delighted, however, to discover once again that we sometimes receive more than we are promised.

Bill Heck

Black Mountain, North Carolina

On a September day I set the grill out in the driveway with the promise of my daughter coming home for the weekend. I was going to grill some shrimp, a dish she and my wife liked. As I was getting ready, I saw a storm in the east. As the sun was getting lower behind me, a glorious double rainbow appeared. It was as full, vibrant, and beautiful a rainbow as I have ever seen. My wife and I were both wonderstruck.

Both parts of the double rainbow stretched completely across the horizon, clear and awe inspiring.

My daughter didn't get home when we expected. Shortly after dark, a state trooper rang the doorbell and told us there had been a bad car accident. Our daughter lay dead in a hospital halfway across the state. As a military chaplain, I had many times been the one to knock on the outside of a door and bring that kind of news. I had never been the one behind the door. As difficult as those times were, being on the inside is much worse.

Pretty much everyone can tell the story of Noah and the ark and the animals going in two by two. Many don't remember the promise. As God placed the bow in the sky, the promise was to never again destroy all flesh with a flood. About the time I saw the rainbow that evening, my flesh was destroyed, though I didn't know it till later. My tears have flooded ever since.

Now the beautiful bow in the sky still shoots a dart through my soul. The promise of no destruction seems hollow to me. The feeling of abandonment by family and friends who do not speak her name brings a further hollowness to my being. Where is God's promise? It is here: "I am with you always." God's child died, too. God knows, and weeps with me.

Thomas Unrath
Melbourne, Florida

"But I promised I would marry him already in eighth grade," Susie wailed between choking sobs. Her curly black hair bobbed around as she sat in my office one February morning. She had skipped college classes and poked her head into my office with a pleading, "Are you busy?" look.

I knew already how she and Bill had grown up together, been best buddies in elementary school, and boyfriend and girlfriend in junior high. In ninth grade a promise ring was given. A diamond engagement ring had been given a year ago, and a wedding date set for June.

"I made a promise to him and to my parents and to everyone. But I don't think I should marry him. What am I going to do?" Her eyes filled with tears. "I'm so sorry

to bother you, but you are the only one I could talk to.”

She and Bill had been in premarriage counseling with me for several weeks. It was clear that the two of them were great friends. They were also different. She was a bubbly extrovert—bright, talented, creative, musical, and maturing in her first year of college. He was a nonchalant, good-looking, friendly guy who wasn’t interested in college or anything more than sports. But the differences were not insurmountable. Aren’t all marriages made up of a host of differences?

I encouraged her to talk to her parents and to Bill, and to come to our next premarital conversation prepared for some truth telling.

I prepared for a heart-wrenching discussion. How could I keep my professional training and pastoral heart in tune? Could I be honest about my own hesitations? I had officiated at more than one wedding with sincere doubts about the couple’s viability, but most of those couples were still together. Meanwhile, some couples whom I thought were perfect for each other were now divorced.

Bill and Susie showed up for the meeting on time and looking composed. “It’s good to see you again,” I said. “I’m wondering how you two are doing as you prepare for your wedding just four months away.”

“I have something to say,” Susie blurted out. “I told Bill last night that I’m not ready to be married, and he said he wasn’t going to marry me if I didn’t want to be married.”

“Bill,” I slowly began, “what does this mean for you?”

“Well, I guess, if she doesn’t want to get married, we better not get married.” He took a deep breath, looked down, and then looked at Susie. “But you promised a long time ago. What’s going on?”

For nearly an hour I guided a discussion filled with hard questions and moments of painful silence. Finally, I asked, “Are you ready to break the engagement?” With tears, but no sobbing, Susie simply said, “I do not want to get married.” Bill said, “I think we should break the engagement.”

With that, I invited Susie to take off her diamond ring and hand it to me. I asked for their right hands. I prayed over the clasped hands and then gently separated them as I closed the prayer: “Great God of love and God of compassion: bless this

separation. Grant Susie and Bill peace as they go their separate ways knowing that you will not leave them on their differing journeys. Amen.” I handed the ring to Bill, who held it and then put it into his pocket. The promise was broken. Honesty in covenant making may mean promise breaking.

Dorothy Nickel Friesen
Newton, Kansas

My wife, Teresa, and I were driving to Battle Creek, Michigan, for the Thanksgiving holiday when our friend Courtney called and asked us to meet her and her husband, Brian, at a hospital in Grand Rapids. I reeled upon hearing the words “It’s cancer.” Brian and I had been business partners for years, framing houses all over western Michigan before I went into ministry full time. Brian was roughly my age, in good health, and a proud dad. The markers hit close to home.

Brian had a blanket over him when we arrived, which struck me, because the man was so infernally hot all of the time. Even in winter he hardly wore anything more than a Carhartt sweatshirt and some ratty overalls to the job site. It was apparent that he was planning on going to work that day. His clothes showed the wear of carpentry and a life out-of-doors, with trappings of sawdust, subfloor adhesive, and red chalk set into the fabric. I hugged him. He smelled of pine.

In seminary you learn to steer some conversations toward the pain. But this was the first time steering toward the pain meant steering myself toward the reality that we are never promised another day. No words were necessary at that point or warranted. Presence is what matters. To sit in the ash next to someone is one of the deepest ways we can love one another. I’ve learned that the silence born out of such encounters will give birth to something. In my case, that something was a promise.

Brian spoke first. “Will you promise me something?”

“Anything,” I said.

“Promise me that when I’m gone, you will be here for my kids.”

“Of course,” I said. A nurse stepped between us to take his vitals. She turned to tell her counterpart something and Brian looked at me and said, “I want you to come back to Michigan after I die and talk to them, because I don’t want my kids to hate

God. I want to see them again.”

Turning back toward Brian, the nurse asked him if he needed water. That allowed me just enough time to breathe and resist the temptation to offer a counter to his theology.

To think that somehow his children being mad at God would nullify their chance to experience union with their dad after his death was a direct contradiction of the God who draws the whole world to himself. It seemed to me that God would be even more present to his kids in such anger.

I've thought quite a bit about this exchange and about what my friend's request and the response in my head implies of God's nature, death and judgment, and the afterlife. It seems we live in that space between death and resurrection, holding on to the promise that nothing can separate us from the love of one who loved us first, even if sometimes we don't believe it. It's not that such a promise is untrue but that sometimes grief renders the promise unreal, even for someone as faithful as my friend. But that was not the last word.

When it came time for us to leave, I asked Brian if there was a piece of scripture that he had been holding close to his heart. He closed his eyes and quoted Romans 8:38-39. His shoulders relaxed as he spoke. Teresa and Courtney stopped to listen. I felt in awe of his conviction, which as he expressed it drew everyone in that room together and spoke directly to the longing of our hearts. “Will you come?” he asked. I promised.

Nick Phares
Pensacola, Florida

In 1968 I made a promise I fully intended to keep. I promised on that bright day in June to love, honor, and obey the man who had recently asked me to be his wife and to be faithful to him “for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live.”

In time we had three children, and I did my best to support all of us as they were growing up. Their father was highly skilled in math and computer software, and he had graduated from law school. He pondered ideas in journals, but he made no

attempt to publish anything, find a job, participate in society, or provide food for his family. We lived for many years on pinto beans, vegetables from my garden, and the bread I baked every week. We filled up on popcorn. I remained faithful to my promises to him.

After nearly 25 years of marriage, however, I discovered that he had committed a crime. The authorities put him in prison and took the children away. I spent a night in jail after the prosecutor wanted me turn against my husband and reveal information about him—information which I did not possess. They found it hard to believe that he had hidden his actions from me. They underestimated his cleverness and cunning and failed to comprehend the struggle I had been facing as I worked full time, prepared meals, kept house, and looked after the children.

As time passed, my children and I renewed our relationships without his presence, and I slowly began to uncover more about my husband. I learned that his father had been diagnosed with schizophrenia. I discovered from my husband's mother that as a boy of seven he had been abused by the family's pastor. Neither he nor his family had received any counseling following the incident.

I realized that although I had married him in good faith, he was not really able to make the same commitment to me, although he went through all the formalities. He needed someone to take care of him because he was hurting.

After praying, talking to my pastor, and searching the scriptures, I realized that my promises to God and my responsibility to protect and provide for my children outweighed any other promises I had made. I learned that when you keep your promises to a promise breaker, you put the innocent, including yourself, at risk. I learned that you do not have the right or the power to change someone else, but you have the right, the power, and the responsibility to change yourself to protect those you love.

*Mary Carolle
Katy, Texas*

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Promise."