Dirt: Essays by readers

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

Readers Write in the October 9, 2019 issue

Photo by Skitterphoto (Pexels)

Since I grew up on the high desert of New Mexico, dirt and I were no strangers. But I met dirt most dramatically during the year I lived in Burkina Faso, on the edge of the African Sahel. The harmattan—described in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “a dry parching land-wind, which . . . obscures the air with a red dust-fog”—settled in around November. From then until the rains returned, on most mornings we woke up to find the floor, the bookshelves, and the window louvers caked with dust.

When we traveled to rural locations where teams of water preservation workers lived, we expected to arrive both hot and grimy. On one visit, we encountered a community that was building a dirt dam. It had not rained there for nearly a year. Village leaders took us to see their two wells, which were completely dry, barely charging enough to dampen the soil overnight. They were praying for rain and

hoping that the dam was far along enough that, if the rain came, it would hold some water long enough to recharge the wells.

Our supper that evening was a porridge made of disaster relief cornmeal. The community saw our visit as an opportunity to celebrate. They built a fire, and we took turns singing, dancing, and laughing. One of our workers treated us to a gospel song on his guitar: “Tout dépend de Toi, Seigneur” (It all depends on you, Lord).

When bedtime came, we rolled out our sleeping mats under a lean-to in the courtyard. The stars were shining as we went to sleep. During the night, though, a huge dust storm blew in. I was awakened by the grinding of dirt between my teeth. I tried to shelter by pulling my head under the blanket, but nothing could keep the dirt from sifting into everything: nose, hair, elbows, and our blankets.

By morning, the storm had moved on. We got up, did our best to shake off the dirt, and laughed with each other about our bedraggled appearance. While we were packing up, the courtyard mother came out of the house with a small calabash in her hands. In it was a cup or two of water. “So you can wash,” she said.

My heart lurched and my stomach twisted. Surely, as dirty as I felt, I needed the water far less than she and her courtyard. But would refusing break the protocol of hospitality? “Thank you, Mother,” I said. “Your gift is most gracious. May I return it to you?” She nodded and carried the calabash back into the house.

At the next stop, the village had water, and our truckload of workers all gratefully washed up. Ever since then, both dirt and water have been holy to me.

Nancy R. Heisey
Harrisonburg, Virginia

My father was a cat skinner. He worked most of his life in the logging industry in the Pacific Northwest. He could operate any machine from a small Bobcat to a Caterpillar D8. Along the way he carved the original landscape for a small college, worked on several dams, shaped at least one golf hole, and helped countless friends fashion gardens, lawns, and driveways.

The blade of a bulldozer was the palm of his hand, the claws of a backhoe as delicate as his fingers. He could spread out boulders for a roadbed or fashion sand

as finely as the ocean. If a man was made from the dust of the ground, could he not learn to shape it to his best advantage? My dad knew dirt.

Maggie was a precocious child in our congregation, always ready to help and often underfoot. As Ash Wednesday approached one year, I recruited her to assist with the imposition of ashes. I carefully showed her how to make a small ashen cross on the forehead and recite the words, “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

She was ready. When the first person approached the altar, Maggie stood proudly at my side, artfully drew the cross, and said, “Bill: you’re dirt and you’re gonna be dirt again.” We had many pious penitents that evening. Maggie knew dirt.

My father attempted to shape my life as carefully as he designed any lawn or logging road. Maggie reminded me that no matter how I appear, I’m still dirt and I will be dirt again. And scripture promises: “The First Man was made out of earth, and people since then are earthy; the Second Man was made out of heaven, and people can now be heavenly” (1 Cor. 15:48, *The Message*).

Bill Warren
Hillsboro, Oregon

From Frederick Buechner, *The Clown in the Belfry*:

When I came out of the Lincoln Tunnel, the city was snarled and seething with traffic as usual; but at the same time there was something about it that was not usual. It was gorgeous traffic, it was beautiful traffic—that’s what was not usual. It was a beauty to see, to hear, to smell, even to be part of. It was so dazzlingly alive it all but took my breath away. It rattled and honked and chattered with life. . . . The city was transfigured. I was transfigured. It was a new New York coming down out of heaven adorned like a bride prepared for her husband.

. . . For a moment it was not the world as it is that I saw but the world as it might be, as something deep within the world wants to be and is preparing to be, the way in darkness a seed prepares for

growth, the way leaven works in bread. Buried beneath the surface of all the dirt and noise and crime and poverty and pollution of that terrifying city, I glimpsed the treasure that waits to make it a holy city—a city where human beings dwell in love and peace with each other and with God and where the only tears there are tears of joy and reunion.

It was late. The council meeting lasted longer than expected. I remained behind to finish my pastor's column for the latest edition of our monthly newsletter. Finally, around 10:30 p.m., I left the office and headed for my car. There was about a foot of new snow on the car. The temperature gauge read minus 14 degrees. Just another wintry night in upstate New York.

Fortunately, the car started, and I headed for home. As I drove up the hill toward the center of town, past the cemetery, I noticed four very bright lights stationed in the graveyard. Located in the center of the lights was a backhoe. The bucket was being used to dig a grave. For the life of me, I couldn't understand why the groundskeeper for the cemetery was digging into frozen ground at nearly 11 p.m.

The next morning, I reported my strange sighting to a colleague. He smiled and told me about Bob, the cemetery's groundskeeper.

When Bob was in high school, his older brother was drafted into the Vietnam War. One cold, blustery December afternoon, two military officers came to the door with devastating news. Bob's brother had been killed in a firefight with the Vietcong.

Bob and his parents immediately made funeral and burial plans. But there was a hitch in their planning. The funeral would take place, but the burial could not happen for another four or five months. They would have to wait until the ground thawed. This was the cemetery's standard practice during winter.

The delay was a heavy burden for Bob and his parents. It was then, my colleague told me, that Bob made up his mind. Right after high school, he began working at the cemetery. A few years later, he became the head groundskeeper. From that day forward, it didn't matter if the dirt was frozen solid and it would take all night to dig a grave. Bob promised that no family would to have to wait four or five months to bury their loved one.

Every winter after that, whenever I stood at the side of a freshly dug grave and said the words “ashes to ashes and dust to dust,” I also thought about frozen dirt and a brother’s promise.

Wayne E. Bacus
Clinton, Washington

We’ve all had Emmaus road experiences. Mine began in New Hampshire, where my family has vacationed for years. Dirt roads and paths are the norm there. Some are well groomed with smoothed boulders barely protruding; others are rough, overgrown, and treacherous.

One summer evening I took a walk on one of those paths with my father. It was not an easy walk. We had been arguing about the usual stuff: my boyfriend was not good enough, my life plans were not ambitious enough. The message I heard was that I was not good enough. I shot back that he was hard-hearted and left the cabin.

He followed. We walked in silence. His attempts to talk were met with my stubborn defiance. I stubbed my toe and looked down. There, as though glaring at me, was a dusty stone almost perfectly shaped as a heart.

I picked it up, wiped it off, and handed it to my father. He put it in his pocket. No words were spoken.

Just shy of two years later I married the not good enough guy. We have been married now for almost 43 years, and it is more than enough.

But that isn’t the moral of the story.

As my father and I stood in the narthex of the chapel, waiting to walk down the aisle, he turned to me, reached into his pocket, and pulled out the stone. The same stone. The one he now told me he always carried. The one that caused him to think of me, to consider love and relationships and what was “enough.”

From the dirt, from the complex and messy parts of a father-daughter relationship, from a walk down a path while sorting through difficult emotions, I had come to this sacramental moment. A heart-shaped rock—perhaps because of where and when it was found, and certainly because of how it was kept—became the outward and

visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. Our hearts were burning.

Martha Tucker
Sharon, Connecticut

My reckoning with dirt has been slow and distasteful. I must have been born fastidious. In nursery school I could not finger paint because it was too messy. By kindergarten, my sense of order required me to maintain the objects in my room exactly in their appointed places. By second grade, I was cleaning the house after school. There is no conquering dirt, but I might have been able to hold it at bay if my intestines had cooperated.

I'd had problems with my gut since infancy, but when I was 40 things took a severe turn for the worse. I found myself spending hours each day in the bathroom moaning, "Oh God," half in prayer, half in curse. After a bout of abdominal pain rendered me hardly able to walk, a doctor gave me the diagnosis of irritable bowel disorder and put me on a regimen of laxatives that allowed me to function most of the time. In these years, overexposure to excrement was inevitable. I felt tainted and disgusted by it, even as I knew my ability to move and eat relied on its release.

My uneasy relationship with the basest of dirts held steady until a Sunday evening in February of my 50th year. That night an intense pressure that had been mounting for three days drove me to writhe on the floorboards in agony. Within hours of my arrival at the hospital, doctors were shoving surgery release forms at me. By the next day, my sigmoid colon was eleven inches shorter. It had been so stretched out by years of retained stool that it had twisted into a tight knot. When I reached the emergency room, it was on the verge of bursting open and poisoning me.

For now, it seems a breakthrough drug and continued heavy use of laxatives will stave off the necessity for a colectomy, but the specialist who delivered that news has introduced me to a whole new level of humiliation. He keeps a chart on the wall of his office with graphic pictures of types of stool. At each visit I must choose the one that matches mine. There is no more pretense of hiding from my dirt.

The accretion of humiliations my diseased gut has brought on has changed me. Dust bunnies roaming the house, burned food on the stove top, leaves and birdseed tracked in the back door, clutter on the coffee table—none of these much bothers

me anymore. On good days even my emotional world is looser, and I crave Ash Wednesday, when the priest imposes ashes and reminds me that I'm dust. Entirely against my will, I have looked a dirt-stained yet still living woman in the eyes and seen myself. For that I give reluctant thanks.

Rebecca Browning
Potomac, Maryland

"You want what, Father?" "I'd like a handful of dirt, please," I tell him again. "We usually give the priest this thing," he explains, handing me a hollow silver baton, a rain stick hissing with sanitized grains of sand. He continues, "All you have to do is unscrew the end when you're saying the prayers. It will come out all neat and keep your hands clean."

I see the family members taking their seats under the tent, stepping on Astroturf, holding each other for support in this wilderness tabernacle, a pillar of fire guiding us by night, a pillar of cloud scrolling in the sky above us. "Do me a favor and just get me a handful of dirt," I insist.

The podium wobbles, the sound system barely works, a baby fidgets in her mother's lap and cries. Even at the grave, we adamantly sing: "And when from death I'm free, I'll sing on." I let go of the dirt so that it forms the sign of the cross on the casket and pray: "We commit his body to the ground, ashes to ashes, dust to dust." The pages of my prayer book are stained with dirt.

David Killeen
Tallahassee, Florida

I wrote a doctoral dissertation on dirt. I titled it "The Catalyzed Dissolution of Aluminosilicate Minerals by Hydrofluoric Acid," an academically appropriate description that my children later elevated to iconic status in their backseat tongue twister games. That thesis afforded me the privilege of experiencing beauty and sophistication in a substance that's not generally associated with anything inspirational.

The dirt that I studied consists of small particles of mineral matter, fearfully and wonderfully made. Using electron microscopes and X-ray measurements, I found arrangements of atoms in mathematically precise tetrahedral and octahedral structures. Clay minerals boasted exquisite structures ordered in two- and three-layer combinations of silicon and aluminum.

Studying how minute substitutions of magnesium and iron atoms result in vast differences in properties and appearance taught me that diversity is a strength before that observation became debatable. I came to understand that dirt combined with water creates a science that governs stuck boots, potholes, sinkholes, and the eventual fate of cities.

After graduation I embarked on a career made possible by dirt. I became an expert in the Roman discovery that heating dirt in the presence of limestone yields concrete, the construction material that builds civilizations. An understanding of how dirt particles respond to the tectonic stresses of continents and mountains became my contribution to drilling stable holes into the earth.

Four decades after submitting my dissertation, I retired from my professional relationship with dirt. But like Naaman bidding farewell to Elisha (2 Kings 5:17), I took dirt with me—in the form of 36 acres of sand and red clay in East Texas.

As I write of these things, I think of the Transfiguration, the awe of standing on holy dirt in the presence of the divine. For mortals Peter, James, and John, that experience was temporary, but I am guessing that the sense of awe they experienced was not. It must have been forever renewed by the presence of the dirt under their feet.

William Kline
Houston, Texas

I was driving east up Second Avenue in downtown Los Angeles next to a very large dirt hole that would soon be a theater complex. The hole was bounded by a chain-link fence and a cracked sidewalk. It was midday. There was no one on the street.

As I drove by, I saw a man without legs sitting on a small wooden platform with wheels on it. The film *Trading Places* includes a bit with Eddie Murphy riding on one

of these platforms, pretending to be a paraplegic. But that film hadn't been made yet, and this guy really didn't have any legs. And he was stuck on a piece of broken concrete.

I stopped the car and asked the man if he needed any help. He nodded, so I got out and moved his platform off the broken piece of sidewalk. Looking down the empty street, I asked him where he was going. He said, "Bell Gardens." He explained that he had just been released from the LA County Jail, and he lived in Bell Gardens.

"Okay," I said. "I can take you." He agreed, so I picked him up and plopped him in the front seat, put his platform in the backseat, and headed south on the Santa Ana Freeway.

As we drove along, the man (we had not exchanged names) seemed anxious. As I took the appropriate exit and drove toward downtown Bell Gardens, though, he sparked to life.

"OK, OK," he said, "now turn right here. OK, slow down. Turn in there." With a questioning face, I pointed to an alley. He responded, "Yes!" We drove down the alley between the back fences of four or five houses until we came to a house without a fence. He pointed to the dirt backyard, and I turned in.

A guy standing in the yard looked up startled, shouted toward the house, and came running toward the car. Three or four other people poured out of the house and ran to the car. One of them opened the passenger door and lifted my passenger out. Someone else saw his platform in the backseat and grabbed it. And then they didn't put the guy down. They stood in a circle, holding him up in a monster group hug, everyone exclaiming and shouting joyously.

I backed the car into the alley and headed home. I haven't been to Bell Gardens since then. But the overwhelming joy that filled that backyard is still a part of my life.

David Corbin
Lopez Island, Washington

My grandmother was a busy woman. After raising six children, she took care of her nine grandchildren every day—and later even a few great-grandchildren. Because

she always had a baby on her hip and several older kids to tend to, she didn’t have time to do anything twice.

This includes rewashing dishes that didn’t get clean on the first run through the dishwasher. If a plate came out with a little morsel of food still stuck to it, she’d ignore it and stack it in the cupboard. When we would complain and wrinkle our noses in protest, she’d say, “It’s clean dirt!” Then she’d pick up a crying baby and rock them to sleep.

My grandmother was always insecure about her intelligence. She’d escaped an abusive home, leaving school and all she’d known at the age of 14. Working as a waitress and seamstress, she spent every penny on room and board. She met and married my grandfather at 18 and quickly determined that what she wanted most was a big family. She knew she wasn’t literate enough to teach her children to read or write, but she could love them with every fiber of her being.

As I went through seminary, I learned from some of the smartest professors in my denomination. And I am grateful for the education they provided me. But I never had a professor teach me more about the sacraments of our church than my grandmother did with her concept of clean dirt.

It wasn’t what she said about it, because she never said more than “clean dirt.” It’s why she said it. She washed dishes because they needed to be clean enough to use again for the next meal. But she didn’t wash them twice because what really mattered to her was getting back to the babies that needed holding, cuddling, changing, and loving. Washing dishes twice would keep her from the relationships she knew she was called to.

Baptism and holy communion work in the same way. We come to the font with smudgy faces and hearts to match. We’re dipped and made clean, but if we’re honest, there’s still some dirt there. But it’s not the sort of dirt that should keep us from approaching the table with Jesus, nor picking up a brother or sister who is hurting.

It’s clean dirt. It’s the kind of dirt that will come off completely in the final rinsing of resurrection through Jesus Christ. We don’t have to approach the font again to get any cleaner; instead, we are freed to approach each other—clean dirt and all.

Candice Wassell
O'Fallon, Illinois

When I was a child, I lived in a dirty house. Cats peed on the floor, and dogs tracked in mud. Spills in the kitchen were left where they fell. And the bathroom was a scandal in a world of 1950s sparkling homes. Our toilet rarely worked well, as the cesspool out back was never drained.

We lived on a rise in land above a swamp. Our house with its white shingled clapboards was situated in such a way that plumbing would run downhill. Down there, skunk cabbage thrived. Next to the swamp was a dump that held unwanted things, including the intentionally drowned kittens my father threw down the hill. I can still see my small brother there on the back step of our house as he looked toward the dump. Tears streaked through dirt on his cheeks when he learned where the babies had gone.

I wish I could ask my brother about that moment when we realized that another new litter had disappeared. But he died of a drug overdose three months ago. His ashes need to be picked up from the crematorium, and I have not pushed myself to collect them yet. I could ask his daughters to do it, but they hadn't seen him in decades. He never met his granddaughters, who are as old now as we were that day at the top of the dump hill.

This is what addiction will do. Did my brother's need for strength stem from the moment he learned that the kitten bodies he'd held in his small hand and stroked with one finger were lying wet, fur drenched with water, rolled in dirt? I know because we climbed down the hill and found one of them.

Our mother's paycheck only stretched so far. My father spent some of the meager funds on a bottle or two, stashed under the kitchen counter in a cubbyhole so dirty that I would never willingly open up the door. A child can't understand the economics of it all. Desperation and poverty will bring a parent to make hard choices: food for 20 mewing cat mouths cost dollars, and that money was needed to feed humans in the house. Plus, it turns out, the bottles that I chose not to acknowledge.

The smell of our dirty house was discussed at school. I was asked nasty questions from the back of the school bus, voices thrown over straight vinyl and steel seats, questions about the reason for the stench of my house. I looked out the bus window and pretended I did not hear.

Escape. I ran and allowed my brother to follow. A pine wood waited in the other direction from the swamp. Tree trunks separated to make a room with a pine needle carpet. We brought our stuffed animals to this room, hidden up a rise from a sandpit. We were the parents, and our wayward children—a teddy bear with fur worn down to nothing and a vinyl-headed cat named Alvin—needed guidance. They clambered for whiskey. Instead, we served them moss on pine bark plates.

Half a century later, I am making excuses for my father. Perhaps a higher force would have guided him. He could have kept his hands clean and allowed the mother cat to catch mice to feed the kittens. How arrogant of me, how easy to step in after the fact and pretend to know the correct way to do things. We do not know answers but can only guess.

And here is the question that I ask. If I—not my brother, as I can't speak for him—came out of a tunnel, alive and safe, then how did I survive, and my brother did not?

A mole one must become. Burrow through the necessary soil to emerge from the tunnel.

Jeanne DeLarm-Neri
Mystic, Connecticut

On a hot day in June, my neighbor Linda and I drove to a small country cemetery to bury her partner, Jerry. The usual tent and chairs were in place. A small hole had been dug for the box containing Jerry's ashes to be placed between his parents' graves. The funeral home director arrived, carrying a stand for my Bible and a cooler of bottled water. God bless him!

Linda opened the box of ashes and several family members added things: the letter from his football jacket, a cooking utensil, woodworking tools, and the ashes of his first Bichon. It was summer in the South, and the morning heat was growing. I

concluded the service of committal with prayer, stepped aside, and waited for the guests to greet each other and leave. Jerry's work was over, and he was at peace.

Two workers from the cemetery had been standing by, unnoticed. Slowly they stepped forward to start their work. They lowered the beautiful small wooden box into the ground. Then in a rhythmic pattern they shoveled the dirt, first one, then the other, back and forth in a rhythm no one could have choreographed. The dirt slowly covered the box.

I sat down when I realized no one was moving from their seats. Watching the rhythm of these two workers was mesmerizing. After they covered the box, they got out a tool and stamped the dirt down flat. Thump, thump, thump. Then they put back in place the grass that had been so carefully removed around the graveside.

One of the men silently lifted up the boards that had held the grass and carried them to the truck. The other man walked over to a bag, picked it up, and started sprinkling grass seed on the bare ground over the place where Jerry's ashes were buried. He was in no hurry. Then he watered the seed. He picked up his tools and slowly walked away.

Then I understood. It's the South. You are not in a hurry, so you stay. You watch, you remember, you sweat a bit, you pray, you cry, you listen, you smile with a memory, you drink from your water bottle, you rejoice in a life well lived, you give thanks, all of this and more. You don't leave until it's all complete. You don't leave until the last piece of dirt is perfectly in place. You don't leave until the ground that now holds the ashes of God's beloved child is pressed down, prepared to receive the new life that will come forth from the seeds.

Elizabeth Caldwell
Nashville, Tennessee

For years, I wished every spring that I'd planted daffodils the previous autumn so I could reproduce William Wordsworth's vision: "A host, of golden daffodils; / Beside the lake, beneath the trees, / Fluttering and dancing in the breeze."

I happened to be walking through a garden store one Saturday morning in October when I saw a cardboard bin full of bags of daffodil bulbs—50 bulbs to a bag. I was

ecstatic! I bought two bags and couldn’t wait to get home to plant them.

I spent the rest of the day trying to dig four-inch holes for the bulbs. Our dirt is very hard, clay-like, and dry. I rely on a cane to keep me upright because of a stroke, and I found that working with my cane in one hand and a spade in the other was very difficult.

At dusk that day, I attempted to soften the soil by pouring water on a certain plot. Then I turned to set the hose aside, and my cane slipped in the mud. I spun around and fell backward into a big mud puddle. For a moment I lay there stunned, my limbs and head splayed out.

I began to move to see if anything was broken. I seemed to be intact, but my stiff and arthritic limbs felt useless as I lay there. I felt like a large Kafkaesque dung beetle, tossed on its back in the mud, arms and feet limply flailing the air, perfectly ineffectual.

I knew I needed to turn over and get my feet under me. The mud was slick, and I struggled to get traction. After several tries, I was able to dig one elbow into solid dirt beneath the mud so that I could turn over. My shoulders flipped quickly, and my face bobbed once in the mud. I snorted and blew wet dirt and was able to hold my head up. From there, I worked to get onto my knees. Successful with that maneuver, I rested there, suddenly surprised to find myself in a prayer position.

Kneeling in that thick mud, surrounded by gathering darkness, I prayed: “Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord” (Ps. 130:1). I suddenly felt a living connection with the psalmist, whose desperate cry was the perfect expression of my own muddy lips. God was not lurking and laughing in the distant shadows at the edge of the yard. His warm love welled up in my chest. Astonished, I rested there for several minutes, grateful—so profoundly grateful—for the presence of God in my life.

At length I noticed a chill in the autumn air, so I begged God to help me get up fully. I felt around in the mud for my cane. With great effort, leaning on my cane with both hands, I was able to get my feet under me, then straighten up.

Later a dear friend of the family came and planted the bulbs for me. And I was delighted that almost all of them grew in the spring. I was at last able to walk among “a crowd, / a host, of golden daffodils.”

Don Simpson
Colorado Springs, Colorado

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Dirt.”