

Hinge: Essays by readers

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

Readers Write

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

The word *hinge* brings to mind the ancient wardrobe door swinging open on its creaky hinges in a forgotten room, the perfect place for Lucy Pevensie to hide in a game of hide-and-seek. Instead of burying herself amid the furs and faded dresses, she finds herself at a lamppost, a forlorn faun crying beneath it. So begin her adventures, along with her siblings, in the magical land of Narnia.

God finds all kinds of ways, I have learned, to swing open a door that can lead to real-life surprises.

Almost 60 years ago, it was raining hard in the small village of Farnhill, tucked into the hills of Yorkshire, England. Our 18-month-old son was crawling around while his three-year-old sister trailed me into the study of the chilly manse, where the black telephone was ringing, jarring and insistent. It was my husband, calling from London. “Well, we are going to America!” I sat down, staring at the rivulets of rain running down the drafty windows. It was the hinge that changed the trajectory of our lives.

Almost two years later, in 1966, we embarked upon the *Sylvania* for the journey from my hometown of Liverpool across the Atlantic to Boston. Twelve cardboard boxes carried all that we had for our family of four. Several days into the trip, another hinge moment: we couldn’t find our now three-year-old son. After searching the deck I decided to make my way back to our cabin, on the off chance he may have tried to go back there.

Partway along the downstairs corridor, I noticed a heavy door had slid open, leading into a spacious, empty cargo hold. As I passed, I glanced in. There I saw that the sliding door to the outside was also wide open. The crashing waves slapped against the side of the ship. There he stood, on the edge, looking down at the white-crested swells.

With my heart in my mouth, hardly daring to speak for fear I would frighten him and he’d stumble into the water, I gently called his name. “Chris, let’s go.” I held out my hand toward him, holding my breath. He turned and toddled back toward me on his still unsteady legs, turning his back on death.

With the door to the cargo hold firmly secured, we returned to our cabin. After arriving in Boston we were driven to Maine, where our family began our new life.

Joyce M. Lovely
St. Petersburg, FL

I needed a ride to New York City. On a dreary, late November Friday morning, the Amtrak train from Hartford would have been a hassle and a Peter Pan bus insufferable. When a college dormmate—I don’t remember his name—said he and

his girlfriend would take me, I rejoiced. Nevermind that his Dodge Dart felt suspiciously like a coffin when I folded myself into the passenger side of the front bench seat.

He drove fast, and despite the heavy raindrops smacking the car, we cut a quick path through Connecticut. Three warm bodies inside and cold rain out created a slick haze on the windshield, and the ineffective defroster offered no assistance. My new friend had a pile of white napkins on the dash, presumably pilfered from the cafeteria. Now and then, he grabbed one and vigorously wiped a portal in the windshield.

When we crossed into New York State, the traffic thickened, but he kept his foot on the pedal as we neared the old New Rochelle toll plaza. Suddenly, the front left tire sunk into a pothole, and everything changed.

In *On the Road with the Archangel*, Frederick Buechner's character Tobit observes, "If was the hinge that the fate of the whole world hung on." My friend could have avoided the pothole if the car had been built with a better defroster, or if he had slowed down sooner, or if he had not been in the far-left lane. Then again, if the vehicle had been built better and if my friend had been a careful driver, I would not have encountered an angel.

The moment the wheel met the pothole, the car spun furiously. Like a cat chasing a fly, my friend inexplicably snatched at the napkins as they slid from the dash. He didn't grab a single one, nor did he grab the wheel. Who was driving?

That question has hung in my memory all the years since. The car whirled between other vehicles, a large dump truck with angry headlights, and a Greyhound bus with "New York" ablaze above its driver. Our vehicle spun from the far-left lane until it reached the shoulder on the opposite side. Not a scratch. We were even facing the right direction. How did that happen? By serendipity or an angel's hand? By rights, we should have been hit, sent tumbling and ricocheting off other vehicles, and our deaths splashed across tabloid front pages.

What if the truck had been closer or the bus faster? What if another vehicle had been next to us? There are a thousand ifs to consider, a limitless dark hole of possibilities, conditions, and outcomes. But I let the hole be. In the end, it comes down to interpretation: serendipity or angelic intervention. The two hang like parts of a hinge pinned together by a tire's encounter with a pothole. The event is either

sublime or surreal, heavenly or insignificant, sacred or ordinary. Perhaps both, the way most of life is.

A rain-soaked angel guided fragile, feeble humans through the maze of physics and reality to safety. No one saw the angel, but its perfume still comes upon me every once and again.

Bob Flanagan
Bridgewater, CT

Having lived and worked on an old farm for 40-some-odd years, I came in contact with a lot of hinges. Some were old and rusty but still doing their job on the old sheds and barns we'd inherited with the land. They squealed when their doors swung open or closed, but most of them held. They moved; they allowed entry and exit. The doors depended on them, and so did we.

A few of the hinges had failed, tearing loose at the doorframe. The fault was most often with the old wood having rotted or dried out rather than with the hinge itself. But occasionally a hinge had rusted or bent. It remained attached but failed to move.

When my husband and I undertook new construction on the land, we found that installing doors was the hardest part. Since these doors were attached to rustic outbuildings, they were relatively forgiving of our lack of expertise. Doors for a house would require a tighter fit, with narrow margins of error far beyond our skill. But hanging shed doors was hard enough.

The secret of success or failure always came down to the application of the hinges. The word *hinge* derives from the Middle English word for "hang," and as a noun it refers to a two-piece contraption that connects a door to a frame. A hinge provides connection but allows movement. Both the door and its frame require a hinge to join them, thus "to hinge" depicts a relationship.

Wholeness and functionality almost always come with relationship, with connection to something or someone else. Spiritual transformation involves an opening and a growing awareness that, truly, we are not separate from all that is. Our very being does not end at the outer edge of this sack of skin but is expansive and moving.

Wholeness is an overlapping of me with the source and substance of all reality. We can open and close to this awareness, like a hinged door swinging wide.

Who'd have thought that those rusty hinges back at my farm could signify so much? There's a lesson in their holding, in their moving, and even in their letting go—when things become unhinged.

Susan Gladin
Hillsborough, NC

I knocked on her door, and when she invited me in I accepted the offer of tea and took a seat on the plush leather couch for the first therapy session of my adult life. One shaky word at a time, I attempted to sum up the joy and pain of the last decade. Who meets their future husband at 15 years old?

After listening intently for some time, she asked, "What if you requested that he move out?" My eyes widened, and my heart plummeted. Images of our homes together over the years flashed quickly through my mind. I could barely conceive of it. In all our togetherness, the possibility of separateness was a forbidden one. What would it mean to consider such a shift to the most certain and unquestioned aspect of our lives? Was it okay to want this?

For the next month I wrestled with the questions each night as I fell asleep next to him. I was both afraid to open the door presented to me and afraid I'd never know what lay beyond if it remained closed. I knew the rest of my life hinged on it.

In the context of our faith, separation was not an option. My parents met in high school; his met in college. Both couples were still married. Single life was only temporary; family life was viewed as the pinnacle of obedience to God. But I was thousands of miles away from my small-town midwestern evangelical past, embraced by a new mountainous landscape and an invitation to reimagine myself. Perhaps there was another possibility for my life, and for his. We were both exhausted from the endless turmoil within and between us but had never been given permission to look beyond it. Though we hadn't yet articulated it, we both knew it was becoming impossible to sustain.

Months later, as we sat on the stoop of our A-frame cabin on a crisp fall morning, I finally said the words that invited us into a new reality. That night, my first alone in over a decade, was cold enough for a fire. I tossed and turned in the silent darkness, rising to stoke the fire, feeling the lightning bolt of anxious energy in my chest and falling back asleep. Though it was just me in that cabin, I wasn't alone. I was accompanied by voices of the church about the selfishness of a woman. I was accompanied by the loss of the life we lived, the loss of his family and of our imagined future together. But I was also accompanied by so many I knew and have never known, who were able to open and step through the door toward themselves.

The next morning, I arose differently. I put on the leather jacket I'd bought a few weeks ago, looked in the mirror at my newly lightened hair, reached for the door, turned the knob, and stepped out into the cold to make my way to the communal kitchen for my morning coffee. I swayed. I glided. I felt lighter. I was tired but emerging.

Amanda Thrasher
Indianapolis, IN

I was finally going through boxes of treasures emptied from my desk at the church. Pictures of new babies, cards for special occasions with "for the pastor" in careful script across the cover. Memories. Props. The brass hinge I'd used for a sermon illustration, how long ago?

It's a polished brass hinge I found in a hardware store, big enough for most of the congregation to see. Its two pieces of metal open and close like a book. A hinge makes a door possible, giving privacy and opening traverse between rooms. The church, I said in my sermon, shows us all the life of faith—two things, joined together for a purpose. The worship side—where my cup is filled with the enormity of God's love, for me, against all expectation. The witness side—where my cup is poured out into the life of the world, offering caring or presence to a hurting world, or just one soul.

I wondered, not for the first time, if I had gotten my message through. Could it really be that simple?

Was the life change called retirement also a hinge? The work life and then the retired life. Doing what the job and the church required and then doing what I choose.

I remember my father talking about retirement. How more than one of his colleagues, businessmen and women, had retired full of big dreams and plans, only to die soon, felled by heart attack or illness. Yet when he retired, it was to take care of my mother, a diabetic. His retirement was filled with charts of her medications, her blood sugar, her blood pressure. He left the work life, doing what was required by his job, for the retired life, doing what was required by her health.

This or that. Before and after. Retirement began for me with chores put aside until later. For instance, the brown cardboard box filled with years of photos taken by my father, who died in 2018. One day, as his Alzheimer's was ramping up, he'd decided they were of no use to anyone and put boxes filled with slides out with the trash. I was determined to save and categorize what I had. This was the work of the first few months of my retirement.

Lives played out in fragile, decaying pictures and vivid Kodachrome masterpieces. Were they magic in a bottle—a moment in time saved to share in years to come? Were they past or present? My father's life or mine? Is there only this moment and the next? This busyness and the one after?

As satisfying a metaphor as the hinge is for me, it limits me now. There is a nuance missing in the image. Surely the love of God enters my existence in so many ways and is spent again and again, sometimes even before I fill my cup. Open and closed, a hinge making a door possible—can we live our lives less focused on the right and the left, instead having faith in our connectedness? In one moment and the next, all joined together in God's purpose?

Patricia Wolf Hughes
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