

Wind: Essays by readers

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

Readers Write in the [August 2023](#) issue



Clockwise from upper left: ShaunL / E+ / Getty; Usukhbayar Gankhuyag, Saad Chaudhry, Vidar Nordli Mathisen (All on Unsplash)

In response to our request for essays on *wind*, we received many compelling reflections. Below is a selection. The next two topics for reader submissions are *stretch* and *gap*. [Read more](#).

It's always windy in this isolated neighborhood in Minneapolis. On a cold May day, leaves and trash tumbled down the street. The hum of the traffic was constant.

I'd just had lunch with a colleague and was walking back to my office in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood. Home of the Lakota, Cedar-Riverside has been a first stop for immigrants since the mid-1800s. Trinity Lutheran Congregation, where I am a pastor, was founded in 1868 and is the only remaining Christian congregation in this community of 8,500. The residents include university students, a few longtime locals, and a remnant of burnt-out hippies. In the early '90s, the number of East Africans began to grow, and today they make up a majority of the community. In fact, Cedar-Riverside, nicknamed Little Mogadishu, is home to the largest concentration of Somalis outside of Somalia. Along with Trinity there are three mosques.

I first heard it as I neared the intersection. In fact, it stopped me in my tracks. As hard as I tried, I couldn't place it. It sounded like a chorus of some kind, an otherworldly harmony somehow woven with the wind.

Then it hit me: it was *adhan*, the Muslim call to prayer. The city council had just approved its outdoor broadcast. From the roof of Dar Al-Hijrah mosque, it was echoing off the surrounding high-rise buildings and blowing freely in the wind. The intersection was filled with the chanted announcement; prayer time was beginning.

When it ended, the sound of the traffic was all that remained. I was surprised that it was still cold and trash was still blowing down the street. I looked around and wondered if any of the people on the street had even heard this amazing thing; they were all so busy going about their business. For a moment, I began to wonder if I had really heard it. But something had changed.

This sound of *adhan* in the wind made me think of the Hebrew Bible's *ruah*, the Spirit. For a few moments the sound echoing off the buildings and the wind blowing through the high-rises had all come together into one heavenly chorus. I like to think it was more than an accident of weather and physics. As has happened so many times before, I was reminded that God is present in Cedar-Riverside, a sometimes chaotic, always complicated and amazing neighborhood where people of all kinds come together to do their best to live good and faithful lives.

On some days, when the wind is just right, I can hear *adhan* in my office. At those moments I am always grateful to be a part of God's world in this windy little corner of Minneapolis.

Jane Buckley-Farlee

Minneapolis, MN

I take both solace and inspiration from an ancient Celtic prayer which, in modern times, has been transformed into a common blessing:

*May the road rise up to meet you.
May the wind be always at your back.
May the sun shine warm upon your face,
The rains fall soft upon your fields.
And until we meet again,
May God hold you in the palm of his hand.*

The wind, the sun, and the rain, each a primary dimension of the wondrous creation in which I find myself, are summoned to nurture me on my journey. The prayer recruits the untamed powers of nature to create an environment in which I can thrive. I am humbled by the magnificence of this all-embracing, otherworldly support on a road that meets me where I am and leads me to destinations beyond my vision. I can almost feel the sunlight warming my countenance and lighting the way ahead. I am gratefully nourished by the abundant growth of the fields upon which the rain has so softly fallen.

And then there is the wind. The shifting, unpredictable, gusting-out-of-nowhere wind. It is sometimes brutally harsh, other times playfully teasing. We see it not but are keenly aware of its presence.

The wind is frequently welcome but just as often a challenging burden. It can clear the air and cool a heated body, but it can also fan the flames of destruction and drive treasures out of sight. It is a physical, almost tangible, expression of uncertainty. We do not know its source or its destination or when it will make its helpful or disruptive presence known.

There are times when the wind is at my back, helping rather than hindering me. But I do not always welcome it. I do not unfailingly want to move forward in the direction the wind seems to be pushing me. I would prefer to slow down, linger, procrastinate—but the wind will not permit me to make that internal downshift.

As I think of the path I take to an awkward apology I must make, or long-overdue amends I must tend to, or a scary confrontation I can no longer avoid, I may need the wind at my back, but I do not necessarily welcome it. I approach these difficulties in ethical living much like Augustine in his *Confessions*: “Oh, Master, make me chaste and celibate—but not yet!” I want to be good, moral, and ethical. I just do not want to be rushed by a wind at my back.

Dale Lee
Denver, CO

A vivid memory: myself, in my 30s, preparing a group of young people for their confirmation, struggling to explain the meaning of the Holy Spirit using metaphors of fire and wind. I remember sensing that wind—with its suggestion of movement, agency—had to be the more meaningful metaphor to the barely teenage, grappling (we hoped) with the invitation to embrace their baptismal Catholic faith in a more active way.

However, I only came to appreciate the more-than-metaphoric attributes of wind in my 50s, when I married a lifelong sailor and began to cruise the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries on a 30-foot sloop. Now, I find nothing more exhilarating than zipping across the bay on a broad reach in late spring or watching the sails swell in early fall when lingering summer heat gives way to more reliable breezes. There’s a special pleasure for me, returning to home port late in the day, with the wind behind us, sailing “wing on wing”: mainsail and jib let out on opposite sides of the mast, billowing with the wind that’s pushing us forward.

The hardest spiritual practice for me over the years has been learning to let go. To yield my will, and any illusion I have of being in control; to put my trust in God, Spirit, *ruach*, especially in moments of crisis or uncertainty. Yet some of my favorite sailing memories involve just that: not planning a route but waiting to discern, day-to-day, where the wind would take us. Once, in late May, we woke to a 15- to 20-knot northwest breeze that carried us across the bay from Maryland to Tangier Island, Virginia, an endangered sea-level island whose singular landscape and culture we may not otherwise have explored. Gift and adventure—the fruit of yielding to the whim of the wind over open waters.

This past summer, after rounding the corner of 70, I found myself above Kavos Bay, Crete, watching from the safety of my balcony as a few small sailboats braved the blustery, unpredictable Mediterranean winds just before dawn. I contemplated the force of wind, the sailors' mastery, and the mystery of those gusts in a poem:

Easier to imagine it
above this wind-battered bay
on Crete: the fiery disruption

that freed the Apostles—
Paraclete descending into the pit
of fear that had paralyzed . . .

kept them bound behind closed
doors.

Then, late last year I returned for a funeral to the parish church in New Jersey where I had led that confirmation prep class so many years ago and caught sight of the sun illuminating a new stained-glass window in the sanctuary, installed in a recent renovation. It depicts a sailboat on the nearby Delaware River, sails full of wind and gleaming white against the stained-glass blue of water and sky.

Kathleen O'Toole
Gaithersburg, MD

Three windy times from youthful days stay fixed in memory. Solo sailing on a northern Michigan lake on an incandescent summer day, the small boat planing downwind and on the cusp of turning turtle crosswind, all afternoon until the wind settled with the sun and I, incandescently sunburned, drifted home. Showing off by standing on a high rock ledge while hiking with the Scouts when a rogue gust nearly took me over the edge—but my friend Bird grabbed a backpack strap to catch me and then looked at me with a grin I'd never seen before and haven't seen since. And singing "Blowin' in the Wind" at an antiwar rally in college and then going to a Bible study on John 3 some days later when the dots started connecting, and I garbled out how that song is sacred *because it's like the Spirit blowing truth where it will . . . you know?*

Later I saw *The English Patient*. A character in the movie uses Herodotus's *The Histories* to guide his pre-World War II explorations of the Egyptian desert. Because I loved the film, I too read Herodotus and, in a derecho of arrogance, decided that choosing him as a historian made about as much sense as choosing Jonathan Swift as a geographer: both are fine storytellers, bearers of truth not always quite factual, not unlike some of the better preachers I know. But like the movie character, I was enthralled by his vivid descriptions of all the kinds of wind, and it seemed clear that a great wind could open a path through a shallow sea or bury a city beneath the sand so thoroughly that millennia would pass before archaeologists found it.

Later still, I stood on Galilean hills above the inland sea and felt the wind surging down the slopes to stir those captive waters as surely and wildly as my grandson conjuring a bathtub storm to sink his plastic ships. And marveled they could ever be stilled.

Not long ago, my dog and I walked late in an autumn evening as a freshening wind rose from the southwest. Next to a great cottonwood, she stopped and stood still for a long time, smelling on the wind what I can only imagine. I leaned against the enormous trunk and looked up at the high branches, already tossing madly as if to free themselves while the trunk against my back moved not at all. The wind blew us home with a touch at once comforting and exhilarating.

If Ram Dass was right that we're all just walking each other home, then I like to think the wind is included in that *all*: that it may be trusted to carry us where we need to go, lifting us out of ourselves and into one another's care.

Lawrence W. Farris
Minneapolis, MN

I've joined the orchestra again. There's a warmer ambience now that the teenagers have moved on. It's a wind band, so we're spared those haughty violins. The priest—the same one you see on his racing bike, paragliding, or cradled in headphones pumping rock—is playing the percussion. Tuned up, together we scratch out cha-cha-cha, fast swing, and “La vie est belle,” and at five minutes to six he bursts out and skips to the 12th-century church to slip on his soutane and celebrate mass. When in France.

The wind is blowing through the community, but not in the way you'd expect. Christ warned us it will blow where it wills. A light breeze meant the fire in the presbytery consumed an outside shed and nothing more; nevertheless, it cremated a stash of the curate's personal souvenirs. At the annual triathlon, a parishioner was winded and then expired from cardiac arrest. Mushroom spores have hitched a ride on the mistral, and *bolets Satan* are multiplying in the walled garden. A whiff of sensuality impregnates the outer courts.

Apropos of nothing, J tells me about his brother, a professional flautist. Slow on the uptake, two years later I google him; hooked, I can't get enough of this particular turbulence. He formed an ensemble, and their first album dropped in 2016—a cold draught of a year that I somehow survived, fresh from a breakup. G, an Italian in Australia, wanted my hand and flew around the world (against or with the jet stream, I can never remember) not once but twice to visit me during our frustrating long-distance relationship. I doubt anyone will do that again.

It's a micro brass band, a combination of instruments unlikely to cohere, but they do. The husky sax, growling tuba, and playful jazz licks are wafting new ideas my way. Funambule is their name: it conjures up a tightrope spanning a void.

Thich Nhat Hanh teaches us to come home to ourselves on the in breath—to the present, to the kingdom of God. Inhaling can take a couple of seconds. I try it. Mine are too hurried, too shallow. G convinced me to drive us to Plum Village in a gale. It broke me, and I howled out of my heavy heart at the side of the road. That night, out of respect to the monks, it didn't feel right to make love, though we both needed comfort. Are these the decisions that please the Lord?

After we performed our flute duets at La Nuit des églises, J said that our styles were quite contrasting. He shouldn't have made a pass at me, but perhaps he's having a domestic crisis; he did apologize, and I forgive him. It shows that a girl (rather, a middle-aged divorcée) can't go to the ballet alone, not in a small town anyway. R wore her *belle robe* and showed off her burnished cleavage. Guess who gave her a backward glance? I don't mean J.

The Ukrainian choir sang exquisitely, and their noble figures inspired us. We offered a standing ovation that didn't seem adequate. His head blocked my line of vision (this time I do mean J). I wonder if he still loves his wife—it's heartbreaking. He wants a flutter, but it's not going to happen.

I read the church newsletter. As usual, there's a sprinkling of exclamation marks with the customary space between the last word and the punctuation—another continental peculiarity. I count them: Are these harmless gusts of enthusiasm, or is this all super-spiritual hot air? This Advent, overstressed or not, we're encouraged to invite someone ("a Christian or non-Christian") to our homes and to our tables. This is so French: they do tables, especially seasonal tables, with an enviable style.

But wait: there's a specific instruction to share the meal *and* the gospel, not either-or. What will transpire if we renege/forget/get tipsy? Who will check on us? What holy typhoon is coming next? There's a Christmassy poster of a Yorkshire pudding awash with gravy and petits pois. I'm reminded of that odd chip shop menu photo that went viral: the peas were upside-down.

Will my hosts endure my tales of tempests? Those north blasts I struggled against, pushing my second baby in her pram up and down the Derbyshire hills so my five-year-old could learn a few words at French club. My life was a series of squalls. I've tried so hard. I'm winded too, did my best—swept the nave floor, baked cakes, hugged the woman who collapsed in front of the Virgin, off-loading her woes in a flurry of Spanish.

He called me at an Easter service in Hampstead Heath. Ever since, I've felt the zephyr, the warm, west wind in my soul. Everyone else glowed with the joy of the resurrection, but I wept openly.

The priest introduces me to Teilhard de Chardin's *La messe sur le monde*. Now, in the present, only this makes sense. "It's not about our little mass . . . this is something cosmic."

There's no movement today, just gentle rain, and the late autumn leaves are yellowing.

Lee Nash
Charente, France

Our church always had an old year's service on the evening of December 31. That afternoon, the wind gradually picked up speed, and the increasing rate of snowfall greatly reduced the visibility. It did not look like a good evening to venture out on

the southwest Michigan roads.

I was a senior in high school then, in 1968. My grandparents, who were both in their 70s, were the custodians in our church and expected to open the building that night to prepare it for the service. As they watched the storm developing, however, they wisely decided to stay home and asked my dad if he could substitute for them. My mother and two sisters also decided to stay home, so that left just Dad and me to make the trip.

Dad edged the car out onto the road as we slowly felt our way forward. The wind and snow were whipping furiously around our car, but we were able to make our way OK as long as we went slowly and carefully. We covered the mile and a half to church and started turning on the lights and unlocking the doors.

As soon as we did so, however, our minister walked across the parking lot from his home to inform us that the service had been canceled. So we shut everything down at church and started back home.

The first half mile of our return trip went okay, but when we turned onto another road it became impossible to see anything. The intensity of the wind and the snow had obviously increased since we had left home. In this storm there were no discernable snowflakes; the wind pulverized the snow into an undifferentiated white mist that permeated everything around us. The snow was moving horizontally rather than down toward the earth. It was an impenetrable nightmare.

After venturing forward a little, Dad stopped the car. Neither of us could see anything. "Can you get out of the car and find out if you can see any better out there?" Dad asked me. So I stepped out, peered into the white abyss, and tried to make out any identifiable features that might determine where we were. After a few minutes I identified some fence posts along the road that indicated we were still in the right place.

Dad drove forward a little farther and once again we were both blinded. We repeated our little experiment. This time I spotted a telephone pole and felt the firm ground of the roadbed under my feet to assure me that we were indeed still on the road.

Blinded for the third time, Dad finally said, "Dan, I hate to do this to you, but I think you have to get out of the car and walk in front of me. You can see better when you

are out there, and I can see you in the headlights.” So I wrapped my coat snugly around me and stepped out of the car again. Soon I identified a tree and some bushes, and I moved slowly forward.

The night was cold and dark and impenetrable. The wind howled menacingly around me. I kept groping to find any post, tree, weed, or bank of snow that might signal the side of the road. I was afraid that Dad might lose sight of me and run me over, but our desperate system of navigation actually worked. Eventually we arrived safely back home. A quiet, warm house had never before felt so welcoming.

The fury of the winter wind can be terrifying and even deadly. But it also reminds us that we are not as independent as we sometimes imagine ourselves to be.

Daniel Boerman
Hudsonville, MI