

Bell: Essays by readers

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

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(Photos: Getty, clockwise from upper left: Martina Braun / ideeone / Uwe Bergwitz / justsolove)

The Buechner Narrative Writing Project honors the life and legacy of writer and theologian Frederick Buechner with the aim of nurturing the art of spiritual writing and reflection. Readers are invited to submit first-person narratives (under 1,000 words). ([Read more.](#))

In the year 1831, it seems, this church was repaired and several new additions were made. One of them was a new steeple with a bell in it, and once it was set in place and painted, apparently, an extraordinary event took place. "When the steeple was added," Howard Mudgett writes in his history, "one agile Lyman Woodard stood on his head in the belfry with his feet toward Heaven."

That's the one and only thing I've been able to find out about Lyman Woodard, whoever he was, but it is enough. I love him for doing what he did. It was a crazy thing to do. It was a risky thing to do. It ran counter to all standards of New England practicality and prudence. It stood the whole idea that you're supposed to be nothing but solemn in church on its head just like Lyman himself standing upside down on his.

—Frederick Buechner, *The Clown in the Belfry*

I can't fully explain why I did it. I thought a lot about those bells. Lying in my dorm room under the open window, I'd listen to their strange, distant music and wonder where it came from. Rarely did I recognize the songs, but their somberness spoke to me with tones so different from the classroom lectures and textbook pages I was falling out of love with. University walls hemmed me in, but the bells sent their sound out with the breeze, over blocks and neighborhoods, singing for people who would never see them. That music sounded wonderful to my ears.

When I learned where the bells were, I went several times to sit in the back of that chapel on Sunday mornings. Waiting for the service to end, I looked for the man standing at the base of the stairs who offered bell tower tours for curious visitors. We'd climb and climb, take a walkway above the vaulted ceiling, and then climb some more to the little cabin with a keyboard connected to the 72-bell carillon. A student of the instrument himself, our tour guide would play a couple of songs for us as I stood by the open windows, listening to bells all around.

After a few tours, I decided I'd ask to be taught how to play. I had a minimal music background, and I didn't know how to explain my impulse to find a way into this music that offered itself on the wind. I could hardly believe it when the powers that be agreed to let me learn.

Not that I was granted much time in the bell tower. The practice instrument sat in the chapel basement, but that didn't discourage me. I made my daily pilgrimage through dark storage areas to a little room with a keyboard identical to the one in the tower. It was hooked up to chimes rather than bells, and they warned me that it wouldn't give me the exact experience of playing the bells. I had plenty to practice, though. I'd rifle through boxes of old music, any piece giving me a chance to practice making my hands and feet work together in such a strange new way.

I don't know why it gladdened me to spend that time in the chapel basement. Perhaps I was hiding from my sneaking awareness that I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. Early classes in my major had disillusioned me. Perhaps I liked spending time in a building with people in the field of study that I'd eventually pursue. (A fair number of divinity students made their way through the chapel.) Perhaps my brain simply enjoyed exercising some long-neglected parts of itself.

Eventually, I left the university without finishing my degree. But not before I'd done something wonderful.

One spring morning, a friend and I climbed the stairs of the bell tower. I sat on the carillonneur's bench, took a deep breath, positioned my hands and feet, and hit the batons of the starting notes. I stopped, stunned.

I'd been warned about this: both the lag time between baton and bell and the minor third overtones that distinguished the bells from the basement chimes. Still, I froze, bewildered. I wondered what I thought I was doing up there.

"Go on," said my friend from behind me.

The tone of his voice held no overtones, but it did hold a warning. He would not be letting me leave that cabin until I did what I'd climbed up there to do.

Heart thumping in my chest, I took another deep breath, positioned myself again, and brought fist and foot down again on the batons. I did wait a little too long, but then I finally hit the next note, and the next, and then I played.

Callie Smith
Noblesville, IN

The bell sat, rim down and silent, in the grass. The size caught my eye—maybe a yardstick across at the flare end—and then the evident age. It wore a patina of pale green, with streaks of rust running down like tear-loosened mascara.

A Presbyterian minister seeking a new call, I was getting the search committee's guided tour of the church and manse next door. "What's the story with the bell?" I asked.

Someone explained that it had hung in the previous church building, but shifting foundations had opened cracks in the roofing, allowing water to infiltrate the bell tower and rot the wooden beams. Since the front entry to the church led through the tower, some became concerned that the bell might suddenly fall on an arriving worshiper. As a precaution, it was taken down and placed in the backyard of the manse, where it had remained ever since.

The tour continued, and over the next few weeks, so did the search process. A call was extended and accepted and blessed, and I became the pastor with a 600-pound bronze bell in his backyard. But not for long. Clearing the way for a new fence, one we hoped would provide a safe play area for our toddler, my wife and I rolled the bell over to a temporary spot beside the church. Time passed, and there it sat.

I learned that the bell was over 100 years old and had rung from the two previous church buildings. The design of the current building made no provision for a bell tower. Still, it didn't seem right to leave a historic bell sitting outside by the back door. What would be the best course? Donate it to the local history museum? Sell it to a collector? Find a way to display it at the church?

Years later an architect who had grown up in the congregation provided a concept that fit with the existing design of the church. Bricks left over from the building's construction were located in a member's barn and donated to the cause. The brother of another church member, a mason, agreed to do the work, and the session gave its blessing to proceed.

The bell received an honored place outside the front corner of the church. It was suspended, chest high, from heavy steel beams supported by three masonry pillars with tops angled to match the pitch of the church roof. The bell remained stationary, but the original clapper, pulled back and given a bit of a shove, could bring the bell to life.

Construction complete, the congregation celebrated with a service of dedication on Easter Sunday. Voiceless for 30 years, the bell spoke again, ringing out into the morning air. It sounded clear, consistent, and a little too loud for comfort, like a person speaking out of a long silence. It was glorious.

Ken Rummer
Ankeny, IA

The bell marked the hours: bong, bong, bong. The wooden clock sat on the buffet in my grandparents' home. The clock was my first introduction to time and place. As a small child, I could hear the bell from the room where I slept. I counted the bells—bong, bong, bong—and knew what time it was. I could not read yet, but in this house I could tell time.

As I got older, I rode the bus to visit Grandma and Grandpa each summer. My parents moved several times to different cities, but this house on Preston Avenue was a sanctuary for me. The familiar bong of the clock helped me keep track of time until I had to return home.

When I was 13, my grandfather died, and that was my last trip to their home. When we left after the funeral the clock came with us, an inheritance for the oldest son. Now the bell resonated through our house each day, but whenever I heard it sound the hours, I was back in my grandparents' house. When my father died, I asked if I might have the old clock. I wanted to hear the bells in my home. I wound it faithfully, like my grandfather and father before me. The sound of the hours took me back to the sanctuary of my grandparents' home.

I have moved at least ten times since the clock came to my home. It is critical to me that each new place has a coffeepot, a special wall calendar, and the clock set and running. These help me feel settled in a new home.

Today we live in a retirement home. All the things we love are here, but last winter the old wooden clock fell silent. I have no idea how old the clock is, but I have listened to it for at least 70 years. No matter how much I wound it, the clock was silent. The house felt empty, and I felt lost.

I found a clock repairman, who warned me that finding the parts would take time. Reluctantly, I left the clock with him. At home I kept looking at the shelf it had been sitting on, hoping it would return soon. The room felt empty without it. After two months, the clock was ready, and I brought it home.

Since 1980, my life has been one of constant transition. So where is home for me? Reflecting on that question, I realized perhaps it is the clock. Then came the bong, bong, bong, the sounding of the hours.

Sheryl Carle Fancher
Charleston, SC

There we stood, thousands of us lining the streets of Worcester, Massachusetts. We stood in absolute silence, save for a few stifled sobs. We stood with hearts full of sadness, spirits depleted, and a stillness unimaginable in a gathering of that size. We stood waiting for the bell: the last alarm bell for the Worcester Six, the six firefighters who died at the Worcester Cold Storage building trying to save civilians they thought were in danger.

The ringing of the bell is a long-standing tradition to announce the death of a firefighter. Most often this consists of five rings followed by five seconds of silence, repeated four times.

The last bell sounded, and the throng of firefighters felt the meaning. Each ring sent shivers to my core, each five seconds of silence caused me to reflect on the power of tradition, the power of being with others at times of mourning, and the power of a bell. Standing there that December day was not the first time I had heard the last bell, nor would it be the last.

Sometimes it was for a smaller gathering, sometimes it was at an annual memorial service or a fire scene where a firefighter had died. For 25 years I served as a fire department chaplain to the community in which I lived and also served a church. I continue to serve in the statewide Corps of Fire Chaplains.

A bell can signify many different occasions. For me, a tolling bell is always time to be present to the moment and to be grateful to all those who serve as chaplains and emergency workers.

Susan Suchocki Brown
Winchendon, MA

I think that bells can speak, as in this nursery rhyme:

“Oranges and lemons,” say the bells of St. Clement’s.
“You owe me five farthings,” say the bells of St. Martin’s.
“When will you pay me?” say the bells at Old Bailey.
“When I grow rich,” say the bells at Shoreditch.
“When will that be?” say the bells of Stepney.
“I do not know,” says the great bell at Bow.

In this old song, we pretend to hear the voices of bells in some of the churches of London. But I know of a bell that was actually intended to speak. It hung in a small Danish church—West Denmark Lutheran Church—in Polk County, Wisconsin, and it was inscribed with a first-person inscription:

Til badet og bordet,
til bønner og ordet,
jeg kalder hver søgende sjæl.

That is:

To the bath and the table,
to the prayer and the word,
I call every seeking soul.

Many people in the community knew of this inscription, so that hearing the bell ring them to church—as is the custom in Danish communities—they knew what it was saying.

I love this inscription. I have used it again and again to teach. I say it so often that I feel like a bell myself. It describes what we come to church for, and it does this in humanly accessible and active terms—in enlarged, not shrunken terms: bath and table, not font and altar, not Holy Baptism and Holy Communion, not sprinkling and wafers. It lists these material things first, before the verbal matters, the words of the Lord’s Prayer and of the Bible and of preaching.

The bell calls “every seeking soul”—not the pastor, the Sunday school teachers, the council, the choir, and the ushers plus every seeking soul, but simply “every seeking soul”—because that is what we all are. It is a little mysterious as to *why* we should come to these things: we will only discover again the living mercy of God in Christ when we are actually all together involved in their doing. Like Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, the bell says, “Come and see.” And the inscription speaks in the voice of a bell, in music, and thus it represents that all of these things to which we come occur musically, the community singing its way through them.

The West Denmark bell faithfully presented to the listening world the remarkable gifts of the 19th-century spirituality of Nikolaj Grundtvig, Danish scholar and feisty bishop, longtime pastor to an old people’s home. For Grundtvig, the living word of God was encountered more surely in being washed over us or given us to eat and drink than in the resurgent biblical literalism of his day. In fact, in one of his many hymns he used a polemic many of us would avoid: “Only at the bath and table do we hear God’s word to us.” For Grundtvig, these resources should be openly available to everybody, especially in the “folk church” of Denmark. The many bells of Danish churches should be seen as a sign of that availability. “Crumbled have spires in every land, bells still are chiming and calling,” sings out another Grundtvig hymn.

I have longed for something of this bell’s inscription to be alive in every Christian assembly, not simply in Danish Lutheran places. Full, un-shrunken symbols, the assembly singing, every seeking soul welcome, bells still ringing. These things are worth attention from all of us.

But in a tragic church fire in 1985, the bell was destroyed. Was its voice destroyed as well?

There are not many active church bells left in North America, bells that people actually ring by pulling ropes. Whenever I hear one, I always wonder what is inscribed on it and if it is meant to be speaking. I also always think of the bell at West Denmark. There are not many occasions anymore to do such wondering. Where bells do exist, they can even become the cause of controversy; neighbors do not want the noise. One faithful pastor I know recently got into trouble by ringing her church’s bell in support of a local Black Lives Matter protest.

There have been other accounts of people hearing bells speak. Pete Seeger sang, with the words of Welsh poet Idris Davies, of village bells speaking for lost miners:

“Oh, what will you give me, say the sad bells of Rhymney?” Edgar Allan Poe, in his poem “The Bells,” found bells speaking of the stages of human mortal life: “Hear the tolling of the bells— / iron bells!”

Will we hear that tolling, speaking honestly of death? Will we remember and act for the lost miners and the lost people everywhere? Will we let such bells as we have left speak out for the acute needs of our time? Will that eloquent broken bell matter? Will it still call to us? Will it affect what we do? And, whether we have bells or not, will we come together in shared humility to that place where bath and table, prayer and word can yet turn such need and loss into life and hope?

“I do not know,” says the great bell at Bow.

Gordon W. Lathrop
Arlington, VA

The first church bell I can recall hearing that held any meaning for me was in the New England Congregational church in which I was reared, located down at the church corner. Its stately spire clanged out on Sunday mornings: *Come! Come! Come and worship!* The occasion of someone’s wedding day was clappered throughout the village. Every July 4 at exactly 2 p.m., all the church bells clamored and gonged their reminders of the day a nation gained its independence. My four siblings and I would stop whatever we were doing and listen for that somber, historical affirmation, straining to hear more than one cascade of chimes, imagining we could hear thousands of bell towers delivering their far-reaching messages.

As an adult on a visit to Italy, I was delighted to learn that the feeling of civic pride and belonging I have experienced at the ringing of bells has a name: *campanilismo*. The word alone rolls off your tongue melodiously. The Italian word for bell tower is *campanile*. It follows, then, that this experience I treasure is a universal communion offered by the chiming bells, which pours out and over the hearer, in a celebration of being. *Campanilismo*.

During my seminary years, never was I more delighted than when I found out that one of the duties available for volunteers was to call the whole community to worship for daily chapel by tolling the bell in the bell tower. I was on it! When the day came for my first gig, I climbed the dusty steps, thrilled and humbled by the

prospect of offering *campanilismo*. While the bell rope and I took a little time to get acquainted, and the first few peals were less than coordinated, I was in *campanilismo* heaven.

In my first pastorate, I was beyond grateful for many things: God's call to me, my journey, my first congregation and church building—with its very own bell tower. Although treacherous to get to, it was not long before I requested a tour of the bell tower just to say I had been up there—and to bless the bell that had been ringing for hundreds of years and all those who had rung it, offering assurances and messages sacred, sorrowful, and celebratory. I eventually mastered the timing of pulling the bell rope in the narthex, and I took great joy in chipping in to offer *campanilismo* when needed.

One day, I felt it was particularly fitting to ring the bells to honor the life of a woman who had died after faithfully serving her country for 70 years: Queen Elizabeth II. It was also a day to honor the miracle of birth—the arrival of my first grandchild just hours after the queen's death. With God's grace, he had made it through a grueling labor and emergency C-section. I rang those bells with all the *campanilismo* I could muster, while the tears rolled down my cheeks.

Nina Barlow Schmid
South Windsor, CT