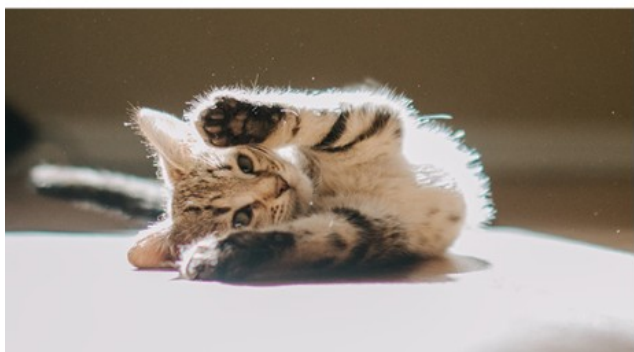


Essays by readers: Stretch

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

Readers Write in the [June 2024](#) issue

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Images: (clockwise from upper left) Giovanni Ayala (Unsplash), peopleimages, azrisuratmin, ryanjlane (istock / Getty)

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.](#)

Moments continue to go up in flames like the bush in Midian to illumine, if only for a moment, a path that stretches before us like no other path. And such moments call out in a voice which, if we only had courage and heart enough, we would follow to the end of time.

—Frederick Buechner, *A Room Called Remember*

In the waning evening light, I stared with awe at the vast expanse of trees surrounding my house. Our electricity had been out for 16 hours, my husband was working out of state, the roads were unsafe for travel, and all of my electronic devices were dead after eight hours of Zoom classes. I'd lived in the Texas Hill Country for 15 years, but this was my first ice storm—one I would weather alone.

Our oaks and cedars were so heavily laden with ice that 300-year-old sky-bound branches grazed the ground. With the power grid crippled by the storm's icy fury, the symphony of modern life was silenced. I felt a strange gray stillness enveloping me as my nervous system found resonance in the relentless creaking of trees stretched to their limits.

Every few minutes, the intensity of the scene was broken by a sound like an echoing gunshot, signaling that another ancient branch had succumbed to its icy burden. Each fracture resounded like a resolute declaration of surrender, as if the trees shed their ice to reclaim their truest essence. It reminded me of the delicate balance between strength and fragility.

The scene began to overwhelm me. My yard brought to light the condition of my heart. I too was frozen, weighted down, and stretched by grief well beyond my capacity. The thaw's aftermath would leave me uncertain what parts of me would endure.

One year earlier, we lost our oldest daughter to suicide after a relentless ten-year battle with mental illness. At her funeral, loved ones shared stories about the ways she had profoundly impacted their lives through her fierce strength and contagious laughter. Tears eluded me, and I confided to my family, "If I don't sob soon, I'm afraid I will break."

Over the next year, I did all the right things: EMDR with my counselor, regular meetings with my spiritual director, exercise, books on grief, and silent retreats. Yet instead of the gift of warm tears, my frozen body expressed its grief through tremors in my hands and legs, sometimes making it difficult to eat or drive.

My self-reflective moment was broken when I noticed a flurry of movement beneath the trees. Curious, I leaned in and saw hundreds of birds carpeting the ground. In stark contrast to the straining trees, they appeared jubilant and free as they consumed some unexpected feast provided by the storm.

With a deep breath, I felt a holy invitation to acceptance. Acceptance that parts of me, stretched by the frozen weight of grief, would be broken away—with the possibility of creating a fiery warmth in the future. Acceptance that being fully present in deeply painful moments can lead to expanded internal capacity and strength. Acceptance that by leaning into the stretch of a weighty storm I might catch glimpses of joy, abundance, and freedom.

Tamara Ramirez
Bulverde, TX

“Make sure you arrive at the barre warmed up and ready to dance,” my ballet teacher said. We only had an hour and 20 minutes twice a week to work on our technique, which meant we didn’t have time to waste on something like stretching that could be done individually. When I could, I arrived 20 minutes early to put on my pointe shoes, do floor stretches, and loosen my hips at the barre. I wanted to do my best because I was definitely not the most talented dancer in the room.

“Point, flex, point, close,” my teacher’s voice would ring out over the piano. “Make sure you are stretching those toes as far as you can, both forward and back.” Even though I had begun dancing at the age of four, danced competitively, and spent nearly every day of my youth in the dance studio, there were always people with more natural talent—those who could point their toes farther and turn out their legs naturally.

“Make sure you’re tucking under your pelvis,” I heard every class, knowing my bottom was sticking out and my back was swaying. I was the weakest link in the class, for sure. I took this class for fun, but others were majoring in dance—they ate,

slept, and breathed dance. If I did happen to arrive early to stretch, I didn't always do it, because I had such precious little time to rehearse with my course schedule that I would end up practicing rather than warming up my muscles.

"Just lightly touch the barre." I had a death grip on the piece of metal attached to the wall, convinced it would save me. It felt like an extension of my body, which did me no good when I was doing the same work in the center of the room without the support of the barre. My torso would tip because my core wasn't strong enough. I didn't have the flexibility because I hadn't spent the time stretching.

"Where are you looking?" the instructor asked. I was never looking in the right direction. When we were supposed to look stage left, I looked stage right. When I was supposed to be warming up, I was jumping in with both feet. When I practiced outside of class, I never warmed up. Years later my body, now nearly 40 years old, reminds me what a poor choice that was, as my hips pop and I have permanent damage in my right heel.

"Keep breathing."

I didn't become a professional dancer. My body changed so much after I had kids that I danced less frequently. I've spent many years unpacking the harm dance did—to my body, to my emotional health, to my understanding of the world. Dance is an extremely competitive art. Thankfully the dance world is becoming more diverse and inclusive of more body types, but it can still be toxic. For me, it wasn't all bad: amid the harms, there were lessons like my teacher's admonition to keep breathing.

Even when I make an unexpected turn, when I forget the dance, when the music stops unexpectedly, when something goes wrong, I keep breathing.

Katrina Pekich-Bundy

Alma, MI

After an urgent hip replacement following an ice-skating accident, I left the hospital with my daughter Abbie, who is a nurse. At home she had me stretch out my arms so she could gird me with a medical device called a BalanceBelt. She held onto it tightly while I clutched the stair rail, grimacing as I took one step after another until

we made it into the house. When she was a toddler and confused her pronouns, she used to say, "I carry you," when she wanted to be held. Now she indeed carried me through this ordeal.

Jesus tells Peter, and all of us, that we will grow old. That we will stretch out our hands and be girded, that we will be taken where we do not want to go (John 21:18). I certainly felt this loss of independence when I wobbled with a walker and then learned to carefully move with a cane. Although at 62 I did not consider myself old, I ended up extending my hands, wearing a belt, and facing months of physical therapy.

At the ice rink, a young boy had raced recklessly across the ice and run into me, knocking me off my feet and into the air. I landed on my left hip. Some of my friends chastised me for pursuing the sport at my age. But they did not know that I grew up with a mother who skated, that my grandmother knit my stocking cap and mittens along with matching pom-poms to attach to the top of my skates, that I loved the feeling of flying.

They did not know that as a teenager I would walk to the lake with my friends, our skate laces tied together and slung over our shoulders. We would sit on a log by the side of the pond to put on our skates in the cold, crisp air that stung our hands and faces. The bare cottonwood branches swayed in the unrelenting wind. We would skate for hours, balancing ourselves on the blades, teetering on an inside or outside edge, doing simple spins and crossovers. We raced from the south end of the lake to the north end, and to escape the blustery breezes for a few minutes we took turns sheltering in the hollow oak tree on the lake's west bank. After hours of skating, we would put on our shoes, sling our skates over our shoulders, and walk to my house, where my mother always offered us hot chocolate and cinnamon toast.

Nor did they know that I raised my own ice-skating children many years ago. I carried my three-year-old daughter across the frozen surface where Sonja Henie won the last of her three Olympic gold medals in Garmisch, Germany. Two of my girls took up the sport when they were young. I loved skating with my mother, my siblings, my own children. I even loved pursuing the sport by myself, which is why I was adventurously gliding across the frozen surface on the fateful day of the accident.

The surgeon put me back together, friends brought meals, and my husband and daughter lovingly took care of me. I have a new hip and a new appreciation for my fearless mother. She extended our horizons as we learned and mastered a new skill. She stretched our imaginations as we experienced God's beautiful world in the rippled ice that formed as the freezing wind roared across the water, in the winter silence joyously interrupted by the laughter of friends across the lake, and in sunlit sparkling snow under a bright blue sky.

Lori Drake

Farmville, NC

It was the penultimate day of 2022, and I was dragging myself to the end of year. It had been a long year, and the years before were not much better. I could get through my days by staying busy, but then night would fall and the darkness would bring me a trio of fear, grief, and sadness. Middle age hit me with all its complexities: parenting my tween and my trans teen, caring for my dad with Alzheimer's, supporting my overwhelmed mom, learning how to trust a new church community again after devastation at the last one, working toward never-ending professional goals, cursing the 20 pounds I just couldn't lose, and living in a body that felt like it was holding my tension and stress in every joint and muscle.

As I was getting ready for bed that night, without a plan or a YouTube instruction video to guide me, I lifted my hands to the sky, then let them fall to the floor. I walked my hands into a downward dog that morphed into a plank, then pressed my forehead to the floor in child's pose. The whole time, I breathed deeply and slowly, centering myself on the only true thing amid my angst. In my head I repeated "God is with me" over and over, calling God to come close and not let me go.

Skeptical of all touchy-feely yoga-like things, I surprised myself. The next night, I repeated the exercise. I threw in a few more stretches and yoga poses. I continued the nightly practice of my mash-up of prayer and stretches and yoga and mindfulness, mixing up the movement but always breathing and connecting with God through my simple prayer.

It's been many months, and I think I'm a bit stronger and more flexible. My sleep comes easier most nights, too. In the turbulence of midlife, this practice has reminded me that God is not here to suddenly clear away every challenge and hurt

in my path. Instead, as I stretch and breathe, I remember that God is always with me, holding me close in the dark.

Elizabeth Dollhopf-Brown

Hanover, NH

I remember the exhaustion, so deep you think it will never leave you. (The truth is, it never really does, it just becomes your constant companion.) I remember touching my daughter's bare skin for the first time and realizing that there was skin that actually did feel like velvet. She smelled like nothing and like everything good all at once. And I remember staring at her for hours on end, my eyes thirsty for just the sight of her. Most of all, I remember the wonder of it all, the feeling that something so much bigger than myself had happened, and I was lucky, so lucky, just to have been a part of it. A new life is holy—our baby girl.

It was late when we were discharged from the hospital. We got home, and the first thing we did was collapse on the couch. We sat shoulder to shoulder and thigh to thigh on that old purple leather couch, held her between us, and just stared at her little sleeping face. I remember whispering, "I can't believe they just *let us take her home.*" Didn't they know how unqualified we were?

My husband gave a tired snicker. "I know, right?"

I didn't know my heart could stretch so wide with so much love.

Two years later, when we welcomed her sister, the exhaustion and joy were the same, though we were a little more confident in our parenting. After all, we had kept her big sister alive for two years! But again I was taken aback by how much my heart could stretch—filled with wonder, awe, and not a small amount of fear, but over it all, love. The love we had for her, this precious second daughter.

To be a parent is to exist with your heart outside your chest. It goes out into the world with your children. It goes to the first day of kindergarten with its attendant tears. It goes with them to their first sleepover while you lie sleepless, wondering if they are OK. It goes on their first solo car drive and their first date. Your heart stretches and stretches as it lives out in the world, away from its home in your chest. How could something stretch so wide and not break? It never does, though, and in

all the stretching, with every day that passes, your love grows stronger still.

Your love would also like to stretch a hedge of protection around them so that no pain can reach them, even though you know pain is often how we grow. It's your love that wants to crush every bully, that wants to make sure they are never left out and never alone, that sometimes makes you deeply irrational about your precious babies.

You find yourself stretching in other ways, too. You start to grow in your patience and kindness. You want to be the best person you can be for them, and so you try to dull your rough edges. You become more than you ever thought you could be.

The most significant stretch of all comes late—after 18 years, in fact. They are tall and strong and so beautiful you still want to stare at them. You have been practicing letting them go in a million small ways over the past few years, knowing you'll never truly be ready. But the day comes when you have to let them go. To take them to their new home in a strange city and set them free.

So much of your life has been about holding them close that it seems impossible you will now be asked to let them go. But you do. Because you love them, and you can't wait to see them grow and flourish. But your heart has to stretch wide to accommodate this leaving. You wonder if you will survive it.

The only thing that brings you comfort is the same thing that has sustained you each day of their lives: the belief that Jesus is with them and for them. In the water of their baptism, they received the sign and seal of God's grace. The truth is that they have been enveloped in Jesus' love and providence in every moment, and they will continue to be. Jesus and his love were at the root of all that wonder when they were born. It was Jesus who walked with them through their first day of kindergarten, past the doors where you could not go. It was Jesus who held them in the palm of his hand when they experienced their first broken heart. It is Jesus who is the bedrock of your life and theirs. You hope they remember that. You are sure you will never forget it.

Tara Bulger
Huntsville, AL

When my wife, Jeanne, had a stroke, the entire right side of her body was affected. And she was right-handed. Thank God she retained the functionality of her left side, as well as her neck, brain, and senses. With those blessings she could understand what her doctors and nurses had to say to her, and she could use her left hand to do some of the things she had done with her right hand, if more awkwardly and imperfectly than she wished.

Jeanne's therapists began working with her while she was still bedridden to regain some of her abilities on her right side. Slowly, feeling returned, including the pain of atrophied muscles and sinews being stretched once again, and with it a bit of strength. How hard she worked, too often with tears in her eyes and her teeth clenched. All I could do was steady her and encourage her as she worked through both her exercises and the shock and emotions generated by a body that no longer worked as it always had. She felt useless at times, and so did I.

In the down times between Jeanne's physical or occupational therapy sessions and her doctor's appointments, the two of us would sit in her room quietly talking as we had throughout our marriage about how far we had come together, where we now found ourselves, and what was in store for us. We planned together and prayed together, and we celebrated both progress and small miracles.

One of those small miracles was stretch bands. These are essentially large rubber bands, three or four feet or more, of various strengths designated by color. To us they were laughably simple—but to our surprise, they worked! From the earliest days after her stroke, Jeanne was given bands and taught how to use them. For example, place one under your foot, hold onto it with both hands, and try to straighten your leg. Try a stronger one with your strong leg. Now try it with your weak leg. Repeat as often as you can. Now try them on your arms. Try them sitting up. Or standing. Wrap them around your back. Pull, relax, pull again. How do you feel?

Jeanne did her due diligence and got much stronger, with ever more use of her right side. Unfortunately an aggressive form of thyroid cancer invaded her lungs before she was deemed strong enough to endure radiation and chemo treatments. She died four and a half months after her stroke. How I miss her! But I sometimes bemusedly think that, had it not been for cancer, stretch bands, of all things, might have been what brought Jeanne home to me.

Herb Evert
Cottage Grove, WI