



Readers Write

BLESSINGS IN DISGUISE

MY TWELVE-YEAR-OLD SON ALEX was born with Down syndrome, an unfortunate name for his condition, for if there's one thing my son is not, it's down. He begins each day by rushing into our bedroom and joyfully hollering, "Good morning!" He greets his teachers with the same excitement and never fails to give them a hug. In fact, he hugs just about everyone he meets, seeming to sense which people are most in need of one.

You would be hard-pressed to find a less-threatening hugger than my diminutive, bespectacled boy, yet I am an outcast in the Down-syndrome community because I do not aggressively discourage Alex's hugging. He will fall prey to a child molester, I am told. He must learn to behave like regular children, they say.

But he's *not* a regular child. And child molesters don't seem to have any trouble preying on regular children. Why should I deny him one of the greatest pleasures in his life? The best thing he has to give the world is his boundless, unprejudiced affection.

One afternoon, my two boys and I were walking downtown. A young man

was coming toward us on the sidewalk. He was covered in tattoos and projected a fierce attitude to match. I went to pull my children out of his path, but Alex got ahead of me. I watched in horror as my son bellowed, "Hi!" and wrapped his arms around the young man's legs. I waited for the man to push him away, or perhaps even strike him.

But the man, not much more than a boy himself, instead gave Alex a gentle pat on the head. His attitude softened, and he quietly replied, "Hi." With a sweet, sad smile, he moved to the edge of the sidewalk so we could pass.

*Cindy Fabricius-Segal
Upland, California*

AS A BLACK MAN IN AMERICA, I'VE been blessed. Really, I have no complaints.

I didn't always feel this way. Hell, I used to complain about everything, though I had absolutely nothing to complain about. The only child of educated, well-to-do parents, I grew up in an upper-middle-class neighborhood, attended good schools, went to college, and landed one great job after another. But

something was missing, and I can't tell you what it was. Maybe things just came too easy for me. For whatever reason, I destroyed, ruined, or abused everything good that crossed my path.

Now, at the age of forty-five, I'm a prisoner of the Florida Department of Corrections. Getting locked up was the best thing that ever happened to me. It saved me from myself.

No, I didn't find religion behind bars. And I didn't get scared straight. All I did was get enough rest to clear the drug-and-alcohol-induced fog that clouded my brain. I remembered how much I had loved reading, writing, fishing, animals, architecture.

I'm in my fifth year of an eight-year sentence, and I feel better than I ever did on the outside. I read three or four books a week. I write poetry and have even had some of my work published. I've completed a computer-drafting-and-design course and become a literacy tutor. I hope to get in about eighteen months of Spanish before I get out. I even have a relationship with my soon-to-be-seventeen-year-old son, whom I've never met in person.

Unfortunately, most inmates never see the light. In fact, many get worse. But I'm OK. I'm more than OK. Prison didn't just save my life; it gave me a life to look forward to.

Roger Gorley
Miami, Florida

AT FORTY-TWO, I WOKE IN THE MIDDLE of the night to find my hand resting on a one-inch lump in my breast. The family doctor said it was most likely a cyst. The biopsy said otherwise. Six months later, after surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy, the oncologist told me there was a 90 percent chance the cancer was gone for good.

All my life I had felt vaguely unhappy and restless. Despite my success in school and work, all the good things that happened to me were never quite enough, and real happiness lay just beyond my grasp. Cancer seemed like confirmation that I was destined to be unhappy.

Nevertheless, I took the cancer as a sign that I needed to make some changes. I reduced the pressures in my life, volunteered for worthy causes, searched for someone new to love. Still I felt unsatisfied. Always the question lingered in the back of my mind: Is this all there is?

At my two-year checkup, my oncologist told me that the cancer had returned and spread rapidly throughout my liver. It was inoperable. "I can't cure you," he said, "but with chemotherapy you might live a little longer."

So this is it, I thought. This is the way it's going to be. I felt completely humbled.

Now, two years later, I'm beating the odds. I've given up my secure job, traveled the world, become a teacher of the self-healing practice *qigong*, and found love with a man who has never left my side, even when death seemed imminent. I couldn't be happier.

Jan Lively
Kettering, Ohio

THE LOCAL MASTERS TRACK MEET was scheduled for a few weeks after my fortieth birthday. At recent meets, I'd been struggling to compete with younger runners. Turning forty would usher me into a new age group, where I could once again dominate.

My daily training regimen took precedence over everything, even my first child, born only months earlier. I was so wrapped up in my quest for accomplishment that I missed out on my daughter's earliest stages of development. I rationalized that, in the big picture, what I was doing was good for the baby. After all, I didn't want them wheeling me across the stage at her high-school graduation.

The pain in my left foot started as a dull ache between the toes. Within weeks it had become a red-hot poker in the ball of my foot. I went to a local podiatrist, who diagnosed me with Morton's neuroma. A surgical procedure would cure the problem. Recovery time was fairly short: about six weeks.

Six weeks. It wasn't much to ask in the grand scheme of things, but I would miss the race for which I had trained so religiously.

I had the surgery, and several weeks later I was on my feet again and walking without a cane. I put the baby in her carrier and headed out the door. I walked

slowly with her around a local lake, stopping occasionally to admire the ducks.

That was ten years ago. I have not trained for a race since. My daughter and I still take walks around the lake.

Tom Painting
Rochester, New York

ONE MINUTE I WAS CROSSING THE street in Notting Hill; the next, I was lying on the pavement, having been hit by a delivery truck. I knew right away that my leg was broken below the knee.

I was rushed to a hospital in downtown London, where doctors stabilized the leg and kept me sedated. The next day they inserted metal rods and screws and told me it was fixed. My leg was bent at a strange angle, though. When I asked to see the postoperative x-ray, they told me there wasn't one.

Back home in the Bronx, I arrived at Saint Barnabas Hospital with a high fever, a definite infection, and a leg that was totally out of alignment. I was soon sporting five metal rods, like tinkertoys, through

READERS WRITE asks readers to address subjects on which they're the only authorities. Topics are intentionally broad in order to give room for expression. Writing style isn't as important as thoughtfulness and sincerity.

Because of space limitations, we're unable to print all the submissions we receive. We edit pieces, often quite heavily, but contributors have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication. (If you don't want to be contacted regarding the editing of your work, please let us know.)

Feel free to submit your work under "Name Withheld" if it allows you to be more honest, but be sure to include your mailing address so we can give you a complimentary six-month subscription if we use your work, as a way of saying thanks. Occasionally we will choose not to publish an author's name, or will use only a first name and last initial. While we don't question the truthfulness of the writing, we must be sensitive to considerations of libel or invasion of privacy. If you've already changed the names of the people involved, please say so.

Send your typed, double-spaced submissions to Readers Write, The Sun, 107 North Roberson Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516. If you cannot type, please print clearly. We're sorry, but we can't respond to or return your work, so don't send your only copy unless you don't want it back. Because we must wait until the last minute to make our final selections, we are unable to answer questions regarding the status of submissions. If your work is going to appear, you'll hear from us prior to publication.

UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Deception	October 1	March 2004
Out Of Reach	November 1	April 2004
Second Chances	December 1	May 2004
Lessons	January 1	June 2004
Stepfamilies	February 1	July 2004
Hard Work	March 1	August 2004

the bone and skin of my right leg.

After a failed attempt at rehab, I was moved to a nursing home to recuperate among the elderly, the feeble, and the forgotten. Before my accident, I had been an ordained interfaith minister and a rabbinical student. Now I was a patient, unable to walk, unable to go home, unable to go to work, but very much alive in that place for the dying. I used the time to finish my rabbinical studies and was ordained.

There was a priest who came to the nursing home. There was a minister who came to the home. But there was no rabbi. I lit Shabbat candles in my room (an electric set, as candles were forbidden) and said my prayers silently to myself. One Friday night, a man in a wheelchair noticed my candles and came in to talk.

That's how it started.

I am now mostly recovered from my accident, and I am the rabbi of Temple Orah, whose entire congregation lives in that nursing home. For me, returning there for services each Friday is like coming home. Everyone admires how well I am walking. I get to hug my old roommate and sing "Peg of My Heart" to her. Armed with a challah, a bottle of Kedem grape juice, and a Torah, I am answering God's promise for me.

Raine Teller

West Caldwell, New Jersey

TOWARD THE END OF MY THREE YEARS in seminary, I joined a support group that helped people with same-sex attractions to reclaim their God-given heterosexual identity. I'd just had a brief, barely sexual affair with a man (my first), and I was terrified. I had a wonderful wife, two hearty sons, and a beautiful daughter. I didn't want to lose everything just because I was attracted to men.

I devoted myself to group meetings, received training as a leader, and coached other men with similar temptations. In public, I practiced being attracted to women, although that seemed a bit off base, since I shouldn't be lusting after anyone but my wife. My wife was aware of my problem and even came with me to a few group meetings, where we shared with others what it was like to live with this dilemma as a married couple.

After I'd been with the group for three years, my twelve-year-old son's hockey team entered a tournament in Colorado. I suggested that my sports-loving wife accompany him and even arranged for her to travel with another parent-son pair. The other parent was a father. I reasoned that my wife and son would be safer with a man along.

When my wife returned, she seemed oddly distant. *She's just tired*, I thought. The next morning I asked about the tournament. Again she was strangely quiet. Finally I said, "I don't know how to communicate with you. Sometimes I feel like you're a can, and I've lost the can opener."

"Why is it always me?" she snapped. Then she said quietly, "It's over. I can't go on."

The marriage ended. I spent the next two years in a deep depression. What had happened? I had worked so hard.

A friend who had also gone through the ex-gay program offered to spend a few days with me, to help me deal with my depression. We wound up in bed together. I realized then how right my wife had been to end our relationship.

Name Withheld

MY MOTHER IS A LIVELY, INTELLIGENT woman who plays the piano, studies ancient Greek, writes fiction, and volunteers at the local elementary school. Though she is not wealthy, she gives away thousands of dollars a year to charity, and once, when my husband lost his job, she wrote us a check for ten thousand dollars, no questions asked.

She is quick to anger, though, when people don't conform to her high standards of behavior. I have incurred her wrath for hesitating to drive her places, for not inviting her out often enough, for being reluctant to print her e-mail on a weekly basis and mail it to her because she is too technophobic to learn to use her computer.

My mother shows her displeasure with cold shoulders and nasty remarks. Once, after several straight months of this treatment, I complained that she had hurt me deeply.

"Good," she replied. "That was my intention."

After each new infraction I committed,

I would kick myself for being so thoughtless. How could I have let my poor mother down? Her requests weren't many. What was wrong with me? I went out of my way to include her on shopping trips, dinners, concerts, and vacations. But even when things seemed to be going well, I knew that I was doomed to make a fatal mistake and prove to my mother once and for all that I was a selfish daughter.

Last summer, on a particularly hot day, she asked me to drive her to her piano lesson. (She usually takes the train.) I balked and snapped at her. I realized I was wrong, and of course ended up driving her, her silent anger filling the car. Afterward, I called to apologize, ready to endure half a year's punishment for my lousy behavior: *Pile on the guilt, Ma. I'm ready.*

But nothing could have prepared me for her response. "You've hurt me too many times," she said coldly. "I've decided that our relationship is now over."

I was incredulous. Over? Just like that? Like flicking off a light?

She stood her ground. She didn't want to be my mother anymore.

I was distraught. How would I cope? This was worse than having her die, because she was voluntarily removing herself from my life. Apparently, I was more awful than I'd ever dreamed.

After the initial shock wore off, though, I felt lighter and freer than I had in years. Her punishment was so ludicrous, so incredibly out of proportion to my crime, that I saw our relationship in a whole new light. All those years I'd thought it was I who needed to change.

Name Withheld

MY PARENTS ARE HOLOCAUST SURVI-vors who lost many family members, and the experience left them melancholic and overprotective. When I was a child, they would tell me stories about entire families reduced to ashes. It didn't make sense to me that God would sit back and allow such vast numbers of people to perish in such a horrible way.

When I asked my teachers at my religious school about this, most dismissed my questions as immature. "You'll understand when you're older," they said. One kind teacher, however, gently reminded me that it was impossible for mere mor-

tals to understand God's plan. But, with the proper amount of prayer, study, and acts of charity, he said, one might get a glimpse of the Almighty's intentions. So every night before bed, I would pray for the souls of my dead relatives and ask God to allow me the barest glimpse of his master plan.

One day I came home after school to find my mother weeping quietly. In her arms was the only thing of value she had managed to salvage from her family home in Hungary after the war: a photo album. At the sight of my mother's tears, my anger at the injustice of the world rose in me. I was losing faith in the idea of God's plan.

I looked over my mother's shoulder at a frayed black-and-white photo of a man I didn't recognize. Composing herself, she told me how her first husband had been gunned down and thrown into the Danube while searching for her during the last days of the war. My father's first wife, she said, had been shot because, being five months pregnant, she couldn't keep up with the rest on the forced march to Auschwitz.

My mother wiped her eyes, hugged me, and with a sad smile said, "Imagine, if there had been no Hitler, you would never have been born."

*J.H. Korda
Toronto, Ontario
Canada*

AT THE REHAB HOSPITAL, I WENT TO sleep early to escape the unrelenting noise of my roommate's television. I never requested that she turn it off, because her family hoped it would help her regain her speech.

Like my roommate, I'd had a stroke in my early thirties. My speech and cognitive processes weren't much affected, but I couldn't walk to the bathroom alone. I had plenty of time to dream, though, and I reexamined my past and looked into my heart.

Because I went to sleep so early, I got up at two or three in the morning. I thought this a perfectly reasonable time to rise, given the circumstances. The nurses didn't see it that way. They wrote in my chart, "Steroid-induced mania."

I'd read about artists and writers who

woke before dawn to create. They were sometimes called manic. I prayed that I, too, would receive early-morning inspiration. I lay awake in my hospital bed, eyes open and mind expectant, simply feeling what it is to be alive. Every so often, I would look expectantly out the window, waiting for first light. It was so beautiful, I wished everyone could see it.

I sipped ice water from the pitcher the nurses brought to my bed, and I ate dulse — a kind of seaweed — that friends had brought me. As I let the dulse soften in my mouth, I thought of the farmers in Maine going out early in their boats to harvest the flowing seaweed. I felt the bobbing of the boat, heard the sound of the waves, and the splashing and dripping as they lifted the shimmering deep red plants from the ocean.

One such morning, I woke up and found the room glowing, as if light were coming from all around. The air was heavy with something I can only describe as nectar. I sat up — quietly, so that the kind nurses would not worry about my "mania" — and breathed it in. It tasted sweet and a little damp, like the steam from boiling maple syrup. Everything vibrated, and I felt what I guessed a bee might feel flying among plants in full bloom: a heady, wild joy. I didn't want it to end.

*Jennifer Spencer
Tunbridge, Vermont*

TWO YEARS OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL, I married my first real boyfriend, a Vietnam vet. The early years together were full of fun. I took pleasure in doting on my husband and keeping a clean house. As we got to know each other, though, it became apparent that our personalities were quite different. He was outgoing, aggressive, and adventurous. I remained shy. He liked cars, motorcycles, and toys. I just wanted living-room furniture. Still, I let him control me. I was a good, complacent wife.

Then he lost his job. I worked all day at an office while he woke at noon, played handball, and indulged in expensive hobbies, adding marijuana to the household budget. Marriage was no longer fun. He was verbally abusive and sometimes pushed and shoved me. I could not live this way, but I kept making excuses, wait-

ing for a time when I'd be brave enough and could financially afford to leave him. I no longer loved him, if indeed I ever had.

One day, we were arguing over some silly thing, and he hit me in the face with a right hook. The pain was even more emotional than physical. I would not forget it.

It took another two years for me actually to leave him. In the meantime, I became an expert liar. I opened a bank account in my name, using my mother's address. I lied about the size of my Christmas bonus, told him gifts from my family were only half the actual amount, and inflated my grocery bills. The excess money I stashed away.

One cold day in February, I sat in my bedroom looking through the iron bars of the first-floor window, fourteen inches of snow piled against them, and I knew the time had arrived. I had to get out.

My husband came in and did his best to dispel my sullen mood, offering me food, or a walk in the snow. When he asked what was wrong, instead of giving him my usual lie (PMS), I responded, "I'm just not happy here."

He flew into a rage and tried his intimidation routine. When that didn't work, he picked up the phone and called my father: "Come and get your daughter. She's 'not happy here.'" I did not interrupt, as I would have in the past. I just sat quietly and hoped my father would get there soon.

By the time my dad arrived, my husband was threatening to kill me. Terrified, I ran to the car as soon as it pulled up. My dad told me to wait there while he went inside to talk to my husband.

Minutes later, my dad came out and asked me what I'd done to *him*. "I left him crying on the floor like a baby," he said. "He's begging me to talk to you." I wondered what I should do.

It was the memory of that punch that gave me the courage to leave. Verbal abuse and shoves would have kept me with him forever, but that punch was with me every day.

*Tina P.
Brooklyn, New York*

(end of excerpt)