



GARY MATSON

Readers Write

CHANGE OF HEART

I ONCE BLOCKED A FEDERAL-COURT doorway to protest the war in Iraq. For my act of civil disobedience, I spent a week in Philadelphia's federal prison. Afterward I brought the newspaper clippings about my arrest to a family reunion in a Tennessee state park and hung them conspicuously on a wall in the main cabin, anticipating that some of my relatives

would disapprove.

Instead everyone threw me a surprise party and presented me with a gift: a large metal file, so I could saw my way out the next time. Those who disagreed with me were as gracious as the rest, and all honored me for standing up for what I believed in. I was both moved and chagrined: I wouldn't have given them such

a warm reception had they been arrested for blocking the door to an abortion clinic.

Back home I attended a morning demonstration to welcome another war protester as she left prison. By noon she still hadn't been released, and a policeman, who seemed tired of watching us and ready to go to lunch, asked me how much longer we would be. We struck up a conversation. He said he'd voted for Bush and supported the war, but also felt that we needed a third, less-corrupt political party. He believed unborn babies were the true innocents. The memory of my gracious relatives still fresh, I listened and kept my peace.

Later, when the protester was let out of prison and we were leaving, the policeman and I shook hands.

*Janeal Turnbull Ravndal
Yellow Springs, Ohio*

WHEN MY SON'S FRIEND JOSH CAME to our door after school one day, I almost turned him away. Though only eleven, Josh made me nervous. His family had recently moved into a rented house near our upper-middle-class neighborhood. His parents drove an old car, and both worked during the day and were often gone in the evening. Josh had shoulder-length hair with dyed highlights and wore jeans that hung down low on his butt. I'd heard he had a "girlfriend," and that they were more serious than sixth-graders should be. I complained to my husband that Josh was encouraging our son Ethan to push the limits of our rules: to ride his bike farther and to stay out later. Ethan thought Josh was cool.

Josh reminded me of many kids I'd known growing up. I, too, had parents who were gone a lot. My older brother and I were used to coming home to an empty house, making a sandwich for dinner, and watching TV or hanging out with friends. After our dad died, our mom worked evenings as a nurse, and my sixteen-year-old brother and his friends filled our house with empty beer cans and drug paraphernalia — which we'd clean up minutes before our mom got home at eleven.

Although I enjoyed the company of my brother's friends and had crushes on

a few of them, I also saw the sadness in their lives. One by one they dropped out of school, or got a girl pregnant, or were sent to jail. I spent more and more time with my own friends, who invited me into their warm, comfortable homes whenever I showed up. I ate supper and did homework there. Their parents always made me feel welcome.

So when Josh knocked on the door that afternoon, I let him come in for a snack while Ethan finished his homework. I asked Josh about school, his family, and what he wanted to do when he grew up. He answered eagerly and seemed happy for the attention.

The next night I invited him to stay for supper. By the middle of the meal, it was obvious Josh hadn't had many family dinners: he picked up rice with his fingers, chewed with an open mouth, and interrupted our conversations to start his own. Even Ethan reminded him to use his fork.

I figured that my behavior at age eleven had probably been no better than Josh's. My family never ate at home, and I'd never been taught table manners. I realized that had my friends' parents been less compassionate and more judgmental, they might have sent me home, and my life might have turned out differently.

I told Josh he could eat with us whenever he wanted.

*Kim Livingston
Oswego, Illinois*

WHEN I LEARNED MY WIFE WAS PREGNANT, I panicked. How could I care for a baby when I could barely take care of myself? What about watching football, sleeping in, and traveling on a moment's notice? Would I have to give up the low-paying job I loved for something soulless in order to afford baby clothes, doctor bills, and a college fund? What would become of our steamy sex life (which is what had brought us to this point in the first place)? I felt resentful.

But from Odin's first few minutes struggling for breaths under an oxygen hood, I was hooked. I hadn't anticipated how deeply I'd fall for him: his long, wide-eyed gazes; his vulnerability. I also hadn't foreseen how Odin would bring me closer to his mother. Though most of our conversations involve his schedule, sleeping

patterns, and stool color, my wife and I share a bond now that transcends words. I watch her while she breast-feeds; she watches me play him songs on the mandolin. We are falling in love all over again.

*Paul Grafton
Santa Barbara, California*

IN SEPTEMBER 1962, MY DAUGHTER entered the afternoon kindergarten program at our neighborhood elementary school. She eagerly went off to school each day, walking the three blocks by herself while I stood on the porch with her baby sister in my arms.

That October, President Kennedy announced that the Soviet Union had built nuclear-missile installations in Cuba. The U.S. would place a naval blockade on the island nation. It seemed as if a war might break out at any moment.

One afternoon my daughter cried and refused to go to school. She told me her class had practiced how to "duck and cover." They'd been instructed to get under the table when the alarm sounded.

And if she saw a bright light as she was walking home, she should go to the nearest house and ring the bell.

I tried to calm her fears, telling her that these things weren't going to happen, though in my heart I wasn't so sure. Then I bundled her up, asked a neighbor to watch the baby, and set out to walk her to kindergarten.

When we reached the crosswalk near the school, my daughter refused to go another step.

"You need to show her who's in control," the crossing guard said to me. "Just get her over here and turn around and go home. I'll see that she goes to school."

I looked at my daughter's once-happy face, now streaked with tears. She'd thought of school as a safe place. (In a few days, she'd think of it that way again.) I couldn't do anything about the missile crisis. But I could do something to make my little girl feel safe. I took her by the hand, and we went home.

*Carole Hotelling
San Diego, California*

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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.)

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| UPCOMING TOPICS | DEADLINE | PUBLICATION DATE |
|-------------------|-------------|------------------|
| The Last Time | September 1 | March 2008 |
| Stealing | October 1 | April 2008 |
| Chance Encounters | November 1 | May 2008 |
| Patriotism | December 1 | June 2008 |
| Now Or Never | January 1 | July 2008 |
| Up All Night | February 1 | August 2008 |

THE LAST TIME I TRIED TO KILL MYSELF, I was thirty-one. I'd recently left my violent husband and moved to Oregon with my dog Beau Beagle. Since the move, I'd found a job and made a few friends, but I still felt hopeless and believed I'd never again be happy.

One night I decided I'd had enough. I opened a bottle of tranquilizers and swallowed them with vodka, then climbed into my sleeping bag in the middle of my bedroom floor. Beau Beagle snuggled up next to me, and I drifted off, relieved to be done with this life.

Thirty hours later I woke up with Beau's head resting on my chest. His eyes gazed into mine, and his tail thumped the floor. I began to cry as I wondered what would have happened to him had I been successful. Lying there stroking his head, I realized I wanted to know what was going to happen next, no matter what it might be. I'm fifty-nine now. I still want to know.

*Mary Zelinka
Albany, Oregon*

MY HUSBAND, PAT, HAD NEVER BEEN more content. He had a faithful dog, a pond full of fish, a property that kept him busy, a job he relished, and a good marriage. I, on the other hand, sensed a void in our life together. Pat had so far rejected all my proposals to fill the void: having a baby, adopting, getting a puppy, keeping bees. He feared my ideas would ultimately become his responsibility. But my true quest was to find something that would bring us closer together.

My latest scheme was raising chickens. I prepared my case by reading a book about urban chicken coops. Then we sat down to talk about it. Pat listened without much comment, but he didn't say no, which I took to be a positive sign.

A few days later, Pat awoke in the middle of the night with a raging pain in his chest, worse than any heartburn he'd ever experienced. He thought he might die. Finally the pain subsided, and he got back into bed. The next morning I heard fear in his voice as he described the ordeal. (I had slept through it.)

Soon after that, Pat and I made a date to look at chickens. I was excited, but Pat seemed tired and reluctant to go. I

thought he should have been in good spirits: an EKG earlier that day had shown that his chest pain wasn't heart related.

We got to the market thirty minutes before it closed and immediately heard the peeps of many chickens. Pat picked a few chicks up and gently held them to his cheek. He was smitten. The woman told us the chicks would be available until summer; no need to rush. After we'd left, Pat casually mentioned that he'd had chickens when he was a boy, and he shared his fond memories with me. I went to bed that night feeling reconnected with him already.

By four o'clock the next day, Pat was gone. The heart attack was sudden. His change of heart had been his last gift to me.

*Susan Regan
Fayetteville, Arkansas*

WHEN MY WIFE, BETH, AND I MOVED from the suburbs to a warehouse loft in the center of a large city, Beth embraced every aspect of urban life — even the sirens, the parking problems, and the car alarms at night. The homeless people made me nervous, but Beth learned their names. The only neighbors who bothered her were the guys who ran the tattoo parlor across the street. They got into traffic-stopping fights, harassed women on the sidewalk, and intimidated men. They were the reason Beth didn't walk on that side of the street. For two years she glared out our window at the row of men sitting in front of the shop and fantasized about shooting out their tires.

Then one day she called me at work to tell me she was getting a tattoo. She'd never wanted a tattoo before and had even taken pride in being one of the few people in our group of friends with no body art. Though surprised, I said OK. Later she called me back and announced, "I did it."

When I got home, Beth excitedly showed me the delicately inscribed words "Love thy neighbor" on her wrist. She explained how she'd marched across the street and gone into the tattoo parlor. The walls were covered with drawings of skulls, bloody knives, naked women, and the Virgin of Guadalupe. Manuel, the proprietor, was working on somebody's

backside. Beth introduced herself as his neighbor and asked if she could watch. He said sure.

After a while, she went outside and sat in front to study the world from their perspective. The guy next to her asked what she was getting done.

"Love thy neighbor," she muttered. "Why?" he asked.

"Well, you guys are my neighbors, and I'm having trouble loving you. You kind of scare me — you know, with the fights that break out over here and all."

He ushered her back into the shop and announced, with complete sincerity, "Manuel, dude, we're scaring our neighbors! We got to stop fighting."

Manuel was defensive — until Beth explained that she didn't want to change him; she just wanted to get this tattoo.

Manuel showed her a picture in a magazine of "Love thy neighbor" tattooed on a man's inner forearm — with bloody knives in the background.

"Not exactly," said Beth.

After they'd settled on a design, Manuel began to do his art on her wrist. Then he stopped. "How do you spell *thy*?" he asked shyly. "I didn't go to school."

The other tattoo artist piped in, "Dude, it's not because you didn't go to school. It's because you don't read the Bible!"

From then on Beth would wave to the tattoo artists as if they were old pals. The music from across the street was not so grating to her nerves. No more fights broke out. The sidewalk felt safe.

Four months later, Beth took our car in for an oil change and saw Manuel talking to the repairman behind the counter. As she began to remind him who she was, he stepped forward and gave her a warm hug. "Hey," he said to his friend behind the counter, "this is my neighbor, the one I was telling you about."

*Joe Slevcove
San Diego, California*

THOUGH I GREW UP IN A GIRL'S BODY, I knew I was really a boy. I thought God was playing a joke on me, and one day he'd tire of it and give me my real body. I believed this until I was thirteen. Hiding in a toilet stall in high school, racked with menstrual cramps, I finally saw the truth: I was a girl and would grow up to

be a woman. I cried.

Luckily, when I got to college in the sixties, women were no longer expected to wear makeup and dresses and tease their hair. I gratefully shucked the bras and pantyhose, got a job working for a large-animal veterinarian, tended bar, and became a university lab technician. I was reasonably happy, made good money, and even had a girlfriend. But still I disliked my female body. My hips were too full. My breasts embarrassed me. Every month I bled my way through another miserable menstrual period.

Then I read an article about a woman who'd become a man. In the accompanying photo, she was grinning the way I imagined I would if I were her. Him.

Wanting to meet people like me, I went to a meeting of a transsexual support group. Seven men, in various stages of transformation into women, sat around the room. A tall, lanky blonde complained about the requirements at the Stanford Gender Reassignment Program: before she could get her surgery, she had to live for three years as a woman. But she didn't have the typing skills to be a secretary and couldn't make enough money waitressing to pay for her hormone treatments. That left prostitution, which was dangerous without her female surgery.

"Is that what being female means to you?" I blurted out. "You can't be a secretary or a waitress, so you have to be a prostitute? Why don't you just do anything you want to, and be a woman while you're at it?" I heard my own words echo back to me. It wasn't the fifties anymore. What did it matter whether I was male or female?

After that, the "girls" and I actually had a good time. I'd never worn a panty girdle in my life, and here was a roomful of men dying to dress like my mother!

As I walked home in the late-afternoon sunlight, I saw my shadow on the sidewalk ahead of me. I realized that my body was healthy, and tough, and had good orgasms. It would be a shame to put it under the knife. Why not learn to love it the way it was?

So I did.

*Charlo Vogt
St. Joe, Arkansas*

WHEN MY HUSBAND AND I SPLIT up after seven years, we said it was just temporary, but I knew it was final. For the first time in years I felt free of anxiety and insomnia, free of my husband's expectations, free to be the passionate bohemian I was born to be.

But our four-year-old son was not impressed. Living equal time with each of us, he became moody and confused. I tried to convince myself he was better off with a happy mother and no fighting at home. My therapist assured me I wasn't a criminal for wanting a divorce.

One night, when my son was asleep at his dad's house, I began fighting with my estranged husband on the phone; then I drove to his place to fight with him in person. After a while, we stopped yelling and talked mournfully about our marriage, reviewing all the reasons we couldn't stay together.

Sometime after midnight, exhausted and defeated, I got up to leave. As I was putting on my coat, my husband said, "For some inexplicable reason, I want to sleep with you tonight." I couldn't find a reason to say no. I took off my coat.

In bed we cried in the darkness and comforted each other. Then we made love, weeping and touching each other's faces. The next morning we awoke to find our son standing by our bed, gazing at us in joyful disbelief.

Nine years later, we're still married and still don't understand what brought us back together.

Name Withheld

I WORKED ON THE MAINTENANCE crew of a local hospital. Sometimes I had to go to the psychiatric ward, usually to repair something a patient had ripped off the wall. The ward was understaffed, and they couldn't always keep patients from accosting me.

Angie was a "302" — involuntarily committed. About my age, she had wild auburn hair, a perpetually runny nose, and fierce dark eyes. A nurse warned me that she might "say stuff."

And she did. She'd pace the halls, swearing and yelling. Although she was never physically violent, she would tell me what she would do to certain parts of my body if she had a sharp object. Some-

times her threats were incoherent. Other times she spoke in a weird "language," as if putting a curse on me. I would sneak into the ward, but it didn't work; she always found me.

Then one day I decided to try a different tack. Instead of ignoring Angie, I'd be kind to her. As she came down the corridor, I waved and said hello.

She got right in my face. "Are you a witch?" she asked.

"Only on weekends," I said with a smile.

After that she eased up on me. Instead of making threats, she'd return my wave, and sometimes even wave first. I actually looked forward to seeing her and began to sense how terrible it must have been for her, suffering such strange delusions.

One day as I was leaving the ward, I waved goodbye to Angie. She broke into a beautiful smile and waved back, then turned to another patient and said, "He's my friend!"

*R.C. Zitzer
Alburtis, Pennsylvania*

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