



MILDRED JOYNER LONG

# Readers Write

## STEALING

I'M AN ENGLISH AND SCIENCE INSTRUCTOR, but today I've been asked to teach Christian religious education. My ten-by-ten-foot tin-walled classroom is packed with Kenyan fourth-graders who are overexcited to have me, a white person, as their teacher. "Tea-CHA! Tea-CHA!" the kids call, raising their hands. They want to be called on even before there is a question for them to answer.

I open the tattered textbook — more of a booklet, really — to chapter six, "Stealing," and we read a few Scriptures and a story about a man who steals a car and gets caught. Only about one in five students has a book, and the kids in each row scoot to the middle of the bench to peek at the pictures. I ask a few simple questions: What do people steal? Why do people steal? What is wrong about stealing?

Huxley says that people steal money. He is the class prefect (a student who helps the teacher keep the other kids in line), and I have been to his house: one room with five people living in it. His father is unemployed, like nearly everyone

else around here. I tell Huxley he is right. Stealing money is common.

Basil raises his hand and says that people steal food. His father has just died, leaving Basil orphaned. He never has any lunch, and sometimes I bring him an avocado to eat. His toes stick out of his pink high-top shoes, and his eyes reveal quiet suffering. "Yes, Basil," I say, "people do steal food."

Betinah, the star pupil, tells me that God never wants you to steal, no matter what. The booklet heavily emphasizes this point. Yesterday I went to Betinah's house and gave her a copy of *Huckleberry Finn*. Her father has a job, and her family is considered lucky.

I want to tell the class about moral relativity. I want to explain to them the impracticality of the eighth commandment. I want to tell them to steal lunch, pencils, textbooks — everything they need and deserve but don't have.

"Yes, Betinah," I say. "Stealing is wrong, no matter what."

*Emily Davis  
Wayne, Pennsylvania*

I TOOK THE BUS TO SUMMER SCHOOL every weekday, dragging along my nylon-string guitar for lessons. My goal was to get good enough to play at folk Mass with my dad on Saturday evenings. I was an eight-year-old left-hander learning to play right-handed, angry that my brother had gotten all the rhythm genes. Every night my father pressured me to practice "Go Tell Aunt Rhody," with its upbeat that I just couldn't get. I developed calluses and cried and wanted to quit, but I couldn't disappoint my dad. If I could just learn to play a simple C chord progression, I'd be allowed to join him.

The best part of summer school was the snack bar. My mother always gave me a dime for a treat, and I'd discovered Red Vines: eight ropes of licorice in a cellophane package. Every day I bought Red Vines and sucked on all eight pieces at once.

One morning my lust for candy got the better of me. I helped myself to some change from my father's dresser and bought five packs of Red Vines that day.

"Where'd you get all those?" my brother asked when he saw them, and I cursed myself for not being more careful.

Later that day my father said, "I'm missing some change. I understand you bought extra candy."

I confessed and promised I wouldn't do it again.

"Go to your room."

I went, shaking with fear. My dad had been raised to believe that a little whipping was good for kids and kept them in line. I'd witnessed my brothers and sisters getting whipped with Dad's belt, but I'd always been a good girl and avoided it — until today.

My dad entered my bedroom and shut the door behind him. "Take off your clothes," he ordered. I did as I was told and waited. He dropped the belt and sat on my bed. "Lie down," he said. He began to massage my chest. "These are going to grow larger soon," he told me. He moved his hand to between my legs. "You'll grow hair here."

I was speechless and frightened. I felt like throwing up.

"Does it feel good?" he asked.

"No," I whispered, wanting a whipping, the belt — anything but this.

"It will someday," he said. "You'll be asking for this someday."

After a few minutes, he allowed me to get dressed. As he left the room, he told me to help myself to the change on his dresser whenever I wanted.

For the next decade, every time he came into my room at night, I thought it was my fault: if only I hadn't stolen that change, I could have had a normal childhood.

K.F.

Colorado Springs, Colorado

**WHEN I WORKED AS A COOK FOR A** meditation center in North Carolina, I was responsible for buying the food. Without telling my employers, I convinced the local store to give me a nonprofit discount. Then I pocketed the savings. I knew it was wrong, but I found ways of justifying it to myself.

I tried to meditate for a couple of hours a day, but I was having trouble. At first I'd had many revelations; now it just felt

like work. When I told the head monk that I had stopped meditating every day, he asked me why.

"I don't know," I said.

"Well, why don't you meditate on that," he suggested.

So I did. I was sitting and thinking about the question when it dawned on me that I had stopped because, now that the revelations weren't coming, meditation no longer seemed worth it. Then I thought about my stealing from the monastery, and when I put the two together, I had a revelation: I was greedy! The insight was so powerful that I started crying. I didn't want to be greedy, but there it was.

Well, I thought, *that was worth it!* And I started to laugh.

*Name Withheld*

**IT WAS 1970, AND MY FRIENDS AND I** had a communal apartment whose balcony overlooked the gravel parking lot of a small grocery store called Uncle Wiggily's Garden Patch. We practically lived on beer, and since our flower-decaled vw

van was kaput and our driver's licenses were suspended or nonexistent, you might expect that we bought our alcohol from Uncle Wiggily. Contrary to the image on his sign, however, he was not a cute, furry bunny rabbit with a cane and top hat, but a Pakistani with a loud voice and a violent dislike for men with long hair. He sometimes ran us out of his store with a broom. So we bought beer by the keg from the tavern across the street.

One time around midnight, we had dropped some acid and were discussing the spiritual significance of Frank Zappa's music when someone got the idea to pay Uncle Wiggily's Garden Patch an after-hours visit. We jumped down from the balcony into the parking lot and stumbled, beers in hand, to the rear of the store, where a shed leaned against the building. Inside we found a mess of flattened cardboard boxes and empty gunnysacks, and behind them a gap in the siding that revealed the exposed studs of the store's outside wall. I pushed against the thin wallboard between the studs and, with

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| UPCOMING TOPICS  | DEADLINE    | PUBLICATION DATE |
|------------------|-------------|------------------|
| Immigrants       | May 1       | November 2008    |
| Blood            | June 1      | December 2008    |
| Saying Yes       | July 1      | January 2009     |
| Instructions     | August 1    | February 2009    |
| The Dinner Table | September 1 | March 2009       |
| Faith            | October 1   | April 2009       |

just a bit more force, muscled my way into the store.

We stole the food — *all of it* — filling the gunnysacks, lifting them up to the balcony on a rope, then returning with the empty bags. In two hours our apartment was packed five feet deep with everything from avocados to ziti. We didn't leave a single jelly bean.

At sunrise we watched through the curtains with barely concealed mirth as Uncle Wiggily unlocked the store. A faint cry of anguish carried across the lot, and the store owner staggered forth, pulling his hair and shouting in his native tongue. He whirled about as if expecting to spot the thieves, then fell to his knees in the dust and sobbed.

We never saw him again, and the store never reopened.

I've spent more than thirty years of my life in prison, and people often ask me if there is anything I would do differently, were I given the chance. Yes, I would wish to be shooed that night from Uncle Wiggily's Garden Patch with a broom and some harmless shouting.

*G.W. Dash  
Coleman, Florida*

**IN 1943, WHEN I WAS NINE YEARS OLD,** my friend Ronnie and I lived in Buckinghamshire, England. Our families were evacuees who'd fled London to escape the Blitz and were being housed in cottages on the Rothschild estate. One day Ronnie suggested that he and I run away from home. We weren't particularly unhappy; it just seemed like an exciting thing to do, and Ronnie said we could follow the railway lines all the way to Scotland, where his granny lived. (We didn't stop to think how long it would take us or how we'd find his granny when we got there.)

"I bet my mother will be happy I've run away," I told Ronnie. "She has to pay half a crown for my dancing lesson at Miss Cook's every Saturday, and I know she'll be glad of the money."

To prepare for our adventure, Ronnie and I hid our bikes in a nearby wood (we planned to cycle beside the railway lines) and secreted scraps of food in our bags. "We mustn't forget our gas masks," I said. Even in our moment of rebellion, we remembered the rule: Take your gas

mask with you wherever you go.

We'd need money for our trip, so we came up with a plan: Wartime had reduced the estate's once-large gardening staff to two elderly men. Ronnie and I easily evaded them and picked bunches of alpine flowers that peeked out between the dandelions, sow thistle, and hogweed. Then we went from house to house selling the flowers for sixpence a bunch, telling people we were raising money for the Red Cross.

That evening, when my mother returned from her job at a nearby munitions factory, our neighbor Mrs. Maynard commented to her about our "fundraising" efforts. I held my breath and stared at a knot in the floorboards. My mother said nothing. Later, in a rare display of warmth, she took me on her knee and gently explained that what Ronnie and I had done was wrong. I cried with shame and embarrassment, but I didn't tell her about our plan to run away the next Saturday, which was still on.

Saturday arrived, sunny and warm, and Ronnie and I wheeled our bikes up the estate driveway and past the cricket field, where a team from the nearby airfield was playing a village team from Wing. Ronnie wanted to watch, so we sat down on the grass. An hour later we both felt hungry. "Shall we go home for lunch?" Ronnie suggested. "We'll run away tomorrow instead." I agreed.

The next day we said nothing to each other about running away, nor the day after that. The plan was forgotten. But I still have a weakness for picking flowers that don't belong to me.

*Clare Cooper Marcus  
Berkeley, California*

**FOR ME IT STARTED AS A KIND OF** sport, changing price tags or emptying a bottle of shampoo, filling it with water, and returning it to the drugstore. I was a rebel, taking from the Establishment to give to someone more deserving: myself.

By the time I got to college, I was amazed that people actually paid for pens, chocolate, or aspirin. I collected quotes from Karl Marx and Jean Jacques Rousseau, elevating my theft to an act of political rebellion. I had principles, though: I never shoplifted from mom-and-pop

stores or small boutiques. In fact, stealing books from a big chain was my way of supporting the local independent bookshop.

My boyfriend found my habit endearing. "Been liberating things again?" he'd ask when I dumped my catch of the day on the kitchen table. I became more daring, taking loaves of artisan bread and quart bottles of olive oil, just because I could. I wanted the adrenaline rush more than I did the items, which I often gave away.

After many years it occurred to me that I might be hooked. I had broken my code long before and was stealing from small stores. Though I'd gone up in income and had a family and a graduate degree, I was still ducking into the shadows every chance I got.

One afternoon in a chain bookstore, a dreadlocked detective caught me stashing Maya Angelou's autobiography in the pocket of my raincoat. She let me go with only a reprimand. Her disgust left me feeling small and petty, but my compulsion remained. I felt I *had* to take advantage of shoplifting opportunities, and there were dozens of them every day. Finally I saw that I was stealing from myself: my time, my energy, my sense of righteousness.

It took me a long time to break my little habit. There are still days when I have to talk myself into paying for a pack of gum.

*Name Withheld*

**I GOT MY FIRST LESSON IN RACE RELATIONS** when I was five. I was waiting in line with my mother at the grocery store, and a white woman in front of us looked down at me and pulled her bag closer to her.

"Don't stand so close," my mother whispered. I looked up at her for an explanation, but she only stared into the distance.

Her unspoken lesson has stayed with me: even if I'm innocent, I can be presumed guilty merely because my skin is dark. I still don't stand too close to strangers, for fear of being thought a thief.

*Nicole Gardner Neblett  
Alexandria, Virginia*

**MY UNCLE WAS A RURAL DOCTOR** in eastern India who saw patients from more than twenty villages. He had sil-

ver hair and a walrus mustache, and his eyes would mist over as women or children told him of their pain. He treated many of his poor patients for free.

When some farmers found a man named Ram dying of bullet wounds at the edge of their field, they carried him to my uncle's clinic. Ram said he had been robbed and shot by hoodlums. He teetered on the verge of death for weeks before he recovered. Because he now walked with a limp and could not return to work as a day laborer, my uncle hired him as a domestic. The children liked him, and he became a part of the family.

One day Ram disappeared without a word. When people commented on Ram's ingratitude, my uncle said, "We don't know why he left so suddenly. We shouldn't guess, and we shouldn't judge till we know."

The answer came in less than a month: It turned out Ram was no day laborer but the leader of a gang of outlaws, and he had been shot not by hoodlums, as he had claimed, but by police. Worse, when he'd left, he had stolen my uncle's hunting rifle. Since rejoining his gang, Ram had shot and killed two policemen with the gun. Now my uncle was implicated, because the police presumed that he had allowed Ram to use his gun or had at least been negligent about keeping it locked up.

After grilling him for three days in the district court, the authorities let my uncle go but canceled his gun license. The public humiliation was the worst punishment.

Two years later a police car came and fetched my uncle to the bedside of a dying man who'd requested no doctor but him. When my uncle got there, he saw it was Ram. My uncle removed the two bullets the police had used to take Ram down, but there was nothing more he could do. Before he died, Ram thanked my uncle for having saved his life before, apologized for stealing from him, and begged his forgiveness.

*Manish Nandy  
Reston, Virginia*

**ONE DAY MY FRIEND JOAN GAVE ME** a handful of white capsules before English class. They came from an orange prescription bottle with her father's name on

the label. She said he'd been prescribed them for pain after he'd broken his back. I put two of the pills on my tongue. They tasted like chalk and made my mouth feel thick, but I swallowed them at the drinking fountain and went into class.

After that I became obsessed with prescription medicines. I began to look through people's bathroom cabinets — casually at first, then compulsively. I collected pills, hiding them in boxes and drawers at home. I never took any, though. I just spread them out and looked at them: thin shells holding colorful powders and thick liquids. All of them together could have cured anything.

*Holly L.  
Salt Lake City, Utah*

**IN 1952, WHEN I WAS SIX YEARS OLD,** my Irish Catholic mother decided it was time to begin my religious instruction and enrolled me in a two-week summer catechism school. I was excited because I had seen the school's playground, with its merry-go-round and jungle gym and swings, and my mother had told me I'd hear wonderful stories in class.

Recess flew by, however, and we spent most of our class time memorizing the answers to questions I didn't understand, like "Who is God the Father?" and "What is the Holy Trinity?" Sister Mary Magdalene would stroll up and down the rows with a ruler in her hand, and if she caught anyone so much as whispering to a neighbor, she would rap the offender's knuckles. I was afraid of her and did my best to behave.

The wonderful stories my mother had promised turned out to be terrible tales of saints who'd died for their faith: boiled in oil, shot with a hundred arrows, torn to pieces, hanged, drowned, beheaded. When Sister Mary Magdalene told these stories, I would escape in my head to the woods behind our house, where I spent my afternoons chasing water bugs and tadpoles in the creek.

In the second week Sister Mary Magdalene told the story of the Crucifixion. She started with the scourging, the crown of thorns, and the pulling of the heavy cross through the streets and up the steep hill. The bloody details gave me a stomachache.

During recess that day I had a strange urge to steal a beautiful pink rosary from my classmate Gina. So I did, and after school I went to the woods and buried it next to the creek.

The next day Sister Mary Magdalene said Gina had lost her rosary, and if any of us found it, we should bring it to her. Then she told us the rest of the Crucifixion story: the pounding of the nails through hands and feet, the spear in the side, the prolonged suffocation on the cross. That day I stole two more rosaries and took them home and buried them in the woods.

Sister Mary Magdalene was angry the next morning, because it was clear that one of us was a thief. She threatened us with divine wrath as she went from one child to the next, asking if he or she had stolen the rosaries. When she got to me, I shook my head no, and she passed by. She couldn't tell! That day I stole my fourth and final rosary.

For a long time I didn't understand why I had taken the rosaries; I never used them or told anyone I had them. Now, at the age of sixty, I think I know: that nun had taken something from me with those terrible stories, and I wanted it back.

*Ellen Specht  
Sunnyvale, California*

*(end of excerpt)*