

Dear Readers,

Today's letter is by Bill Lychack, an editor/ghostwriter at Guideposts magazine. It is the fourth letter in our week-long series of open letters about life at work.

Bill's editor at *Open Letters* is Joel Lovell (who wrote last week about his own recent fainting spell); I asked Joel to write a brief note about Bill, and here's what he sent me:

"Today's writer, Bill Lychack, plays the accordion. And he possesses a black belt in karate.

And he writes honest-to-God fables (his story, or trio of small stories, 'A Stand of Fables,' was chosen by John Edgar Wideman for inclusion in *Best American Short Stories 1996*) of the kind that masterful fiction writer and longtime *New Yorker* editor William Maxwell used to write. It's tough to find anyone who really writes like that anymore, because it's the kind of writing – like today's letter – that requires not only an amazing gift for language but also a refusal to be world-weary and ironic."

The Ghostwriter

A letter from Bill Lychack, on rewriting tales of faith.

New York City • July 27, 2000

Dear Joel,

And the Lord says, *Go to Peoria.*

Give away all you possess and go to Peoria.

He says, *If you desire to do my will, if you truly want to be my servants, go to Peoria.*

He says, *I have a place for you there.*

And so what do you do? I suppose – if the word really comes and comes clear enough – you don't have much choice; you have to listen and do what God tells you. You have to divest yourself of every single thing you own, break the news to your friends, your family, mother-in-law, neighbors; turn off the gas and electric, stop the mail, quit your jobs, pull your kids out of school, pack up a van, leave everything and everyone you know and head off to Peoria. You drive all day and

night and reach, at long last, the outskirts of town. You cross the town line and pull off by the side of the highway, the fields lying flat and covered with dirty snow. And you wait and pray, pray and wait.

I spent all morning on the phone with the man who did this, just gave away everything and led his family to Peoria and sat at the outskirts of town as the light faded, his wife and kids shivering in the cold, the trucks and cars rushing past. (God had only directed him as far as Peoria, which is why they waited for the next directive at the town line.) It all sounds crazy to him, too, he says, which makes me respect him. He knows that this is beyond reason. He knows that it's a thing no one could understand, the fact that he and his wife both received word from God like this, that God would be so specific, and that

they would actually do it, give away everything and follow this voice to Illinois.

The story was sent to *Guideposts*, a religious-minded monthly where my job is to rewrite these "true stories of hope and inspiration." It's not sold on newsstands, but the magazine has more than three million subscribers, and the somewhat slippery mathematics of "pass-alongs" raises our readership to twelve million or so. For more than fifty years, *Guideposts* has been rolling out its brand of good news to the world: first-person accounts, taken from actual events, that are testaments to faith of some sort. As the magazine's mission statement says, our "articles present tested methods for developing courage, strength and positive attitudes through faith in God."

Most of my days at work are filled with people who talk to God – help this, rescue these, give us that, thank you for those – though God's corresponding silence becomes, usually, part Rorschach test, part sphinx-like oracle, part expression of what the narrator needs or fears or wants from his or her life and circumstance. What made the Peoria story so fascinating was that God not only spoke back to these people, but that he got back to them in such a specific, puckish way.

I love the image of them on the side of that highway, wondering what to do next. They're all cold and hungry and scared and disheartened, and dispirited in the dark they drive to the first cheap motel they see. The five of them stay until they're down to their last twelve dollars. Again, their prayers are answered and they find a church, and so on. It's a crazy, miracle-laden story, which barely makes sense, really.

Yet talking to this man, he isn't the unquestioning fanatic that I had imagined. In fact, by the middle of our conversation – which ranges from the grace of Tiger Woods to why pride is the last possession we release – I'm convinced that something extraordinary has happened to this man. I'm convinced that, in his own way, he heard the voice of God. And I'm convinced he made a cold-sweat leap of faith, that he had doubts,

and that he has a deeper faith now because of this test. And whether you call it religious or not, no one goes through any kind of trial without having something spiritual happen to them.

My job is to make sure that the story becomes a *Guideposts* story, make sure that it conforms to the expectations of our readers: the story needs to have its all-walks-of-life beginning, its crisis or test of faith, its dark night of the soul, and its triumph of spirit, its turnaround. God's goodness, whatever that means, must shine through somewhere, somehow, someday. My job is to make the true story fit into this unalterable template, and to shepherd the author through the process to the point where he or she signs off on it, attests that it's real and true.

In other words, I set up the pay-off: everything works out; they find their home in Peoria; even better, they find their home wherever God wants them to be. A guy rescues manatees in Florida; the cropduster or beekeeper or fisherman survives some great accident or addiction or loss; someone finds an unopened letter from WWII and forwards it to the widow; a man goes to Peoria – the variations are endless for us line-workers at the epiphany plant. In the epiphany business, each epiphanic moment goes by the more durable, in-house name of "the take-away." Takeaways need to be short, sweet, and positive – variations of the "I trusted in God and that has made all the difference" theme. Amen.

I feel like a whistle-blower telling you this. These inner workings of the ghostwriter, the anonymous content provider, the humble commodifier of insight and faith: the sad truth is that I spend a couple of days on the Peoria story, then it's gone and the next thing is on my desk, roughly one story per week. Next week is wedding lady. The week after is Iwo Jima guy. And I know we rarely do justice to the stories that deserve it, and do too much justice to others. Yet still, there are worse ways to make a living. I work three days a week, get full benefits, the hours are good, the work strangely interesting, the people in the office nice, and the product

really does seem to help a great number of people, mostly elderly people (you should see the sacks of letters lined up by the elevators every day).

So what bothers me about all this? The fact is that I hear commandments as well – vague and small-voiced; everyone I know hears them. And what, really, is the difference between "Go to Peoria" and "Make the film"? Or "Write the book"? Or "Become a Sumo wrestler"? Or any of the countless passions that guide our days? These are all things my friends expend great amounts of energy

working for and dreaming about. And they're all acts of faith, in one way or another, all the urges that carry us through our lives and give us meaning and help us make sense of the accidents that befall us. Maybe I'm not so bothered when I think of it this way, when I think that we have to admit that the best in us is utterly mad, or started out utterly mad, a dim voice urging us on to our own kinds of Peoria.

As ever,

Bill



Dear Readers,

Today's letter is by Alivia Zivich, a programmer at an internet publishing company in Los Angeles.

Sharp-eyed readers of *Open Letters* might remember Alivia as the reader who wrote me an email a couple of weeks ago explaining that she preferred voyeuristic open letters to those that felt more like essays in letter form. I quoted her email in my editor's letter the next day, and used it as an occasion to write about the ongoing debate between readers who think of *Open Letters* as being about first-person writing of all types, and those who think about this as a magazine of letters, and letters alone.

After I quoted her letter, she and I began an email correspondence, which developed into today's letter, about a contretemps at her office.

In other *Open Letters* news: *NOW Magazine*, in Toronto, published an article on *Open Letters* this week. (You can read it on the web at <http://www.nowtoronto.com/issues/current/next.html>.) The reporter, Matt Galloway, emphasized the medium, as much as the message; he wrote that the heart of *Open Letters* is "a page called The Delivery," which is our mini-manifesto about our PDF subscription and the future of content-delivery on the Internet.

Seats of Power

A letter from Alivia Zivich, on dot-com office politics.

Los Angeles, California • July 28, 2000

Dear Paul,

I was really irritable yesterday and spent the day lashing out and writing angry emails. I feel silly today. My mood from yesterday is distilled, and I feel schizophrenic. Have you ever had your temperament swivel like an office chair? And in fact, hardy-har-har, office chair is all too appropriate a metaphor, since it was an office chair that was the partial stem of my irritability.

When I first began working at my office (I program at an uber-hip company that publishes online magazines) I was pleased to see the higher-ups were shelling out the dough so that everyone could have a beautiful Aeron office chair. The Aeron is, of course, the Porsche of the dot-com world, ergonomically designed by Herman Miller. I was told I

would receive a chair as soon as funding came through to order more. The ETA for the chairs was one month after my arrival. In the meantime, recent hires had to make do with the kind of chairs usually seen in office lobbies: not terrible to look at, but certainly not meant for sitting on for anything longer than fifteen minutes.

Of course, this being a hip young company, things are "fluid" at best, and the chairs were not forthcoming. I am not a silent employee – I am not Milton from *Office Space* – so I set about complaining, in a totally appropriate manner. First I approached the office manager. She's my age, twenty-four, perhaps a bit younger, and a big fan of indie-rock and oversized hooded sweatshirts. We get along well;

I update her on my favorite TV shows, which she catches sometimes but not often enough. So about two months into the job, I talked to her about the chairs. She informed me, in her super-nice manner, that the thirty-something business types that run the company had decided that they didn't want to spend \$600 apiece on chairs, which is how much the Aeron costs. They wanted to spend about \$200, so they were looking for new types of chairs. She said if they gave her the O.K., she'd just order me a chair, but as it is they have to approve that type of expenditure.

I realized what a sneaking, conniving ploy it was to hire her as office manager. How can I yell at her? She's my age, she's my friend, we're in this job together.

So I moved on to my "direct supervisor." Quotation marks are necessary because he too is my friend, and although he sometimes tells me what to do, it's never in a bossy way; it's more like a student-body president delegating duties. He also says I can leave whenever, and when I can't get something to work quite right, he's the first to say, "Oh well, who cares, go home and try again tomorrow." So I talked to him and he talked to "them" and of course "they" said everyone would get the same kind of chair, to avoid evil glares and shanks in the back. It was just a matter of waiting until proper funding can come through.

So time passed, no word on chairs, but people started leaving the company – people who had Aeron chairs. I began to think, "I'll definitely get a chair, I'm first in line!" because when I started, everyone except me had one. So our Manager of Information Systems (MIS) guy left, and I waited. The next night, when leaving work late, my boyfriend, my cool friendly supervisor, and I noticed that the MIS guy's Aeron was now parked at the desk of a young blond CONTENT girl! The nerve of this girl, whose job consists of surfing the web, checking out promotional material, and listening to promo CDs in order to gather content for our sites, and who resembles an ugly Britney Spears, no less, to just TAKE that chair! AGH! I spent all night seething.

The next day I told on her to the office-manager girl, who rectified the sitch, and by mid-afternoon the chair had become mine. My ass, my legs, my back – all finally unwound. I was at ease. Finally the great chair fiasco was solved.

But for my boyfriend, who started working here just after I did, it had just begun. Soon thereafter another person with a chair left. My boyfriend took it, began sitting in it, and made a nameplate for it (which we must do to avoid having our chairs commandeered). The next day he informed the office manager that he had taken what was rightfully his. She said, very apologetically (she felt terrible), that she had promised the content girl she could have the next free chair because the content girl said she had a bad back. (Sure, that's why she wears huge platform sandals.) My boyfriend is the suffering-in-silence type, so he surrendered his chair. He was promised the next one.

So today our cool boss is leaving to take a job in Chicago. On Monday, he had told my boyfriend to make sure to grab his chair when he left. My boyfriend replied that the office-manager girl had already emailed him that the chair would be his. We all smiled, relieved. It had been a long, arduous battle.

The next day, the office-manager girl emailed him again. The woman taking over for our cool boss, a web-site producer (i.e., acts like everyone's boss) who sits on the other side of the building and happens to know a bit about HTML programming, had been making moves for the chair.

The cool boss and I plotted. My boyfriend, we decided, will take the chair on Friday, before cool boss leaves. He'll quickly nameplate it, sit in it, adjust it, make it his.

Then, yesterday, Thursday, another email from the office-manager girl. A higher-up had decided the new woman will get the chair. Two other employees with chairs are leaving next week, so she asked that my boyfriend be patient for another week and get one of those.

It was just disgusting. If this is how they're going to dole out chairs, why did they even pretend that it would happen by seniority?

My boyfriend and I went on a walk in the afternoon, and I began to cry. I began to think about how we programmers do the majority of the work on the sites, and yet producers and designers treat us like we work for them because they're often in a position to tell us what needs to get done. And our only protector, our cool supervisor who knows more about web programming than anyone I've ever met, he was leaving us. We were cubs left to fend for ourselves against co-workers who know nothing, who fear us because of our know-how, and so treat us like lepers. It was too much.

The long walk helped, plus we found a bunch of old darkroom equipment someone was throwing out. We went back to work for a bit, then left about an hour early. My boyfriend decided he couldn't care about it, that he'd get a chair eventually, and I felt I didn't have to care as much if he wasn't going to.

They're serving pizza in the kitchen here at work, a going-away party for our cool boss and a few other people who are leaving, so I'm going to go eat. The one way in which we're treated "right" is that we are constantly offered junk food. We're all Hansels and Gretels!

Alivia



Go Ahead and Click Here

A conversation between Deirdre Dolan and Invisibyl Ninja,
on life, love, and tech support

July 29, 2000

[Deirdre Dolan is a journalist in Los Angeles and a contributing editor of *Open Letters*; her interview with Sarah Jones, the most popular girl in the sixth grade, appeared in issue # 1. "Invisibyl Ninja" is the pseudonym of a tech-support worker at Earthlink. Deirdre interviewed Ninja on the phone, which is also where she first encountered him, while calling to get help with her Earthlink account. She subsequently abandoned Earthlink, since their software kept crashing her computer.]

Deirdre Dolan: What's your name, how old are you, and where do you work?

Invisibyl Ninja: My name is Invisybl Ninja. I'm nineteen. I work in tech support for Earthlink.

Deirdre: Are you the youngest tech guy who works there?

Ninja: On my team, yes. On the floor, no. There's a sixteen-year-old.

Deirdre: How many people in a team?

Ninja: Our team is thirteen people.

Deirdre: How much space does each team take up?

Ninja: We have a small section of cubicles, around the size of a one-room apartment. Actually, more like a studio.

Deirdre: What do you do all day?

Ninja: If Earthlink customers are having trouble connecting to the Internet, they call customer support, and if they get transferred to me then I fix the problem as best I can.

Deirdre: What are people like on the phone?

Ninja: Most people are all right, but some people completely tear you down or act like they know everything. It's just not cool. You don't see people yelling at a fireman when he's trying to pull them out of a burning building.

Deirdre: If someone starts to swear at you are you allowed to hang up?

Ninja: You can't hang up. If they're swearing you try to do your best to calm them down.

Deirdre: How?

Ninja: You say, "Sir, if you continue to swear at me I can't work." They tell us to let them vent for a little bit. You just put them on mute.

Deirdre: What if they don't stop?

Ninja: You say, "Sir, I would like to help you." Eventually you have to go to a supervisor and ask for their assistance. There are times when a person is completely yelling at you and there's no way you're going to get a word in edgewise. I've heard of people hanging up then.

Deirdre: Does it bother you when you're being yelled at?

Ninja: No. I think it's funny,

Deirdre: You never get mad back?

Ninja: I generally don't get upset on the phone. I have patience but at the same time I don't have patience. It's kind of an oxymoron-type thing. The thing that gets to me is when they go, "I'm so stupid, I don't get anything." I don't want to hear them say that, because they're opening themselves up to some kind of attack.

Deirdre: From who?

Ninja: Some techs might say, Yeah, you *are* stupid. And then they could treat them like a kid. But in a way, sometimes you do have to treat them like a five-year-old kid. Some people don't even know what the Apple menu is, or how to click on their mouse. I had a woman call who was having some problems and I said, "Okay, ma'am. I want you to double-click on this." And it wasn't working. It turns out she was tapping the mouse against her screen.

Deirdre: That's pretty funny.

Ninja: Yeah, that's pretty funny. There was one at Intel, I think it was on the news. This guy calls up for help and says, "Well, my computer's not turning on." The tech says, "Is everything plugged in?" And the guy looks and says, "Yeah, everything is plugged in." And the tech goes, "I'm going to ask you to look behind your computer," but everything was plugged in. So finally he says, "Sir, has there been a power shortage?" The guy says, yeah, the power is out, and the tech says, "You, sir, are too fucking stupid for your computer," and he was being recorded, so he got fired.

Deirdre: Do they tell tech guys to preface sentences with phrases like "I'm going to ask you to..." and "Go ahead and..."?

Ninja: No. But most techs do say "Go ahead and click here" and "Go ahead and open this." I think it's something where they're trying to be polite. I don't say that, though. I usually say "I want you to do this." I believe in treating a person like they're a person and not some royalty.

Deirdre: How many calls do you get a day?

Ninja: The average is thirty. The most I ever got was thirty-six, and the day flew by. I loved it.

Deirdre: What's the average length of a call?

Ninja: You're only supposed to be on for thirteen minutes. Then, technically, you're supposed to pass it on to a senior technician. They get as much time as they want.

Deirdre: How long do you have to stay at your level before you can become a senior technician?

Ninja: Six months. Then you take a test and if you pass it and there's a slot available you can move up.

Deirdre: How much more would you make?

Ninja: A couple of extra dollars.

Deirdre: What do you think you'll be doing a year from now?

Ninja: I don't think I'll be at the same job, because when you learn to do something and apply yourself for seven months, you become an item. People want your ability.

Deirdre: So where would you go work?

Ninja: Maybe Intel. I think it would be very hard there, but you can make twenty dollars an hour and after a year another company will be willing to offer you twenty-five dollars an hour or more.

Deirdre: How much do you make now?

Ninja: Ten dollars an hour, which is pretty damn good, I would say. Close to twenty thousand a year, and I'm only nineteen.

Deirdre: Do you live with your parents?

Ninja: Yeah, but I could afford an apartment if I wanted. I'm trying to save up for a better car.

Deirdre: What do you drive?

Ninja: An '83 Toyota Camry.

Deirdre: What do you want?

Ninja: A '96 Subaru Legacy.

Deirdre: How much?

Ninja: \$11,000.

Deirdre: What's the average age of the people working in tech support?

Ninja: Fifteen to thirty. There are a couple of guys who are forty and there's a guy who's seventy, but I think he's just doing it for fun.

Deirdre: Do they have anything in common?

Ninja: The one thing they have in common is I can tell these people would not be able to function in a normal retail-type job where they had to deal with people face to face.

Deirdre: Why not?

Ninja: They're more of the introvert type of personality. They're more or less stereotypical nerds.

Deirdre: How?

Ninja: Thirty, a little overweight, maybe glasses. I wear glasses, but I'm nowhere near a nerd. After your average guy's done working here he goes home and sits on the Internet, maybe does a little programming.

Deirdre: What do you do after work?

Ninja: I go home, play video games, and go to bed. But if it's a Friday night, I try to do something. Even if I get off at 10:30, I try to find friends who are out. I tend to go back to my old job.

Deirdre: What was that?

Ninja: A laser-tag place.

Deirdre: Cool.

Ninja: People always say it's cool, but I didn't think it was. It's cool if you're not working there.

Deirdre: What else do you do?

Ninja: I go dancing.

Deirdre: Where?

Ninja: A club or a rave or somewhere where I can have freedom. I'm not the best dancer, but I get a lot of compliments. I'm not white. I mean, I am, skin-wise, but I don't believe

how they say white guys can't dance. Music is my life. I want to produce and DJ, and do this Internet thing on the side.

Deirdre: What do you play?

Ninja: I have no musical ability as far as playing, but I do plan to take some classes. Have you ever had the experience where you can't sleep at night because you have so much music and voices in your head? I'm constantly thinking of stuff that's cool. Especially if I think it's funny, I'll write it down or I'll draw it if I have to.

Deirdre: What was your last cool thought?

Ninja: I get this magazine called *Toy Fair*. Besides the pricing of the toys they have a fairly funny magazine. They take pictures of toys and put quotes above them. Yesterday I was sitting around and I had my old Star Wars toys out, and I actually started to play with all my toys and it brought back so many memories and I was thinking about an idea. I thought it would be funny to take pictures and submit them. So that was my last cool idea.

Deirdre: What are your other ideas like?

Ninja: Mostly lyrics for songs or raps. Mentally I don't store them, that's why I write them down, because I've got to keep my mind open for other things. I did write a poem recently. I met one girl who was kind of messed up in the head, and the first thing that caught my eye was her red hair. Are you a redhead?

Deirdre: Sort of reddish.

Ninja: I started talking to her for a little bit, and my friend gave me props for talking to her, even though everyone was there for the same reason, which isn't a very good reason to go to a club.

Deirdre: What's that?

Ninja: Sex. But I was just there to have fun. Then when I went home I was thinking she reminds me of a rose. It seems like it's

becoming harder and harder these days to be romantic. But a woman is like a rose, sometimes deadly, sometimes elegant. So this phrase came to me, the only phrase to describe her, "Striking resemblance to a rose." So I wrote a poem. It's been a while since I've been able to write poetry. In high school it was all I ever used to do. Hold on, there's a millipede and I want to pick it up. I live out in the woods.

Deirdre: Where do you live?

Ninja: Sacramento. Oh, no, it's a caterpillar. It's one of those ones that if you squeeze it green stuff comes out.

Deirdre: How big is the building where you work?

Ninja: Six stories. We take up four.

Deirdre: Where is it?

Ninja: It's in a business park. There's a bank building near it. It's a normal business-district-type place. There are restaurants everywhere around it. It's close to downtown Sacramento.

Deirdre: Are you going to go to college?

Ninja: Not yet. I took a year off after high school, but I generally don't like school. In fact I hate school. I have a very big authority complex and I can't stand the structure of school. I'm pretty chaotic.

Deirdre: What do you mean, "chaotic"?

Ninja: There are times when I like structure and there are times when I'd rather be given a toothpick and glue and be told to make a bomb. I'd rather have that challenge than not have it. Not to get it throws me off and makes me less of a person, 'cause I live for living. I'm very much an individual.

Deirdre: Do you have a girlfriend?

Ninja: Not currently.

Deirdre: Have you ever been in love?

Ninja: Very much so, with my old girlfriend.

Deirdre: How did it end?

Ninja: She went to college in San Francisco. After she left, she came to see me every weekend, but things weren't the same. We could never get the same intimacy again. When I visited we could never really be alone, and all I missed was just holding her and just being with her. The fact is that when December came around I broke up with her.

Deirdre: Do you think you'll ever leave Sacramento?

Ninja: I plan to go to New York.

Deirdre: What's there?

Ninja: My life.

