

Thy Life's A Miracle. Speak yet again!

First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh

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"Oh dreidel, dreidel, dreidel, I made it out of clay. And when it's dry and ready, my dreidel I will play." Growing up Jewish, I loved the Hanukkah dreidel game, and I *especially* loved ending up with more chocolate coins or pennies or pistachio nuts than my brother did.

We concocted little rhymes to remember the meaning of the Hebrew letters printed on each of the four sides of the spinning top: "*Shin*, shin, put one in. *Nun* means none, now I'm done. *Hay*, hay, half if I may. *Gimel*, gimel, gimme all of your coins!"

The significance of those letters on a religious level rarely crossed our minds as we counted and hoarded our winnings. They represent the phrase, "Nes Gadol Hayah Sham -- a great miracle happened there," a reference to how one day's worth of oil lasted for eight days after a small band of Maccabees reclaimed the Temple from an evil King named Antiochus. Sure, we knew the story of Hanukkah. But, what did we care about miracles? We had milk chocolate!

The theme of miracles, the memory of miracles, the promise of miracles to come flicker around us at this time of year like so many Menorahs, solstice bonfires, and Christmas candles. It is December and we yearn for the miraculous to pierce through the veil of the ordinary and inspire us, lift us, ground us, renew us.

"Miracle" -- from the Latin word *mirari*, that which evokes wonder or awe. We hunger for miracles, for wonder and awe, even as we struggle to define what might qualify as *miraculous* in our modern, rational, disconnected world.

Is it magical oil? a blessed babe born in a manger? the mysteries of nature with its ebbing moons and tides? a parking space in Shadyside? Miracle Whip or the Course in Miracles? Is it the very fact of our millions-of-years-old existence with our evolutionary ears and our opposable thumbs? the very reality of our aliveness in all of its splendor and all its drudgery? Well, yes.

If we were to define a "miracle" in classical terms we'd call it is an event which cannot be explained by the laws of nature that some would attribute to divine intervention. Or, a breach of regularity in the functioning of the world. On the other hand, the Christian theologian Augustine remarked that "Miracles do not happen in contradiction *to* nature, but in contradiction to what *we know* about nature."

We've unlocked many of nature's mysteries over the centuries since Augustine, and yet, miracles remain as much a modern preoccupation as they were an ancient one. They've even infused pop culture, what with TV programs "Touched by An Angel," and "It's a Miracle" and an entire Miracle Network. Humorist Frank Gannon has remarked in the *New York Times* that "one does hear the word "miracle" bandied about in a reckless fashion.

Consider the Miracle Mets of 1969, he notes. Did God really suspend the laws of physical matter 42 years ago? Was that, in the words of Aquinas and my insurance agent, an act of God??" Well, probably not.

Miracles are heralded and hyped with increasing frequency in the media and on a plethora of websites, including one called (I kid you not) "MiraclesRUs (they take paypal).

Many of these miracles are the slightly suspect stepchildren of the incident at Lourdes in 1858, when a young girl with healing powers named Bernadette was declared a saint. Thousands still travel to Lourdes and India, the shrine of Fatima and other well-known miraculous sites around the world in a quest for healing.

The more recent tabloid miracle Meccas send up some troubling red flags for me, though, as they replace the sense of awe that miracles once embodied with a bizarre banality.

For example, an image of the Virgin Mary supposedly appeared on the rear fender of a Mr. Dario Mendoza's 1981 Chevrolet Camero in Elsa, Texas. Even after washing his car, the image grew larger, causing people to flock there to pray at the blessed bumper. With his car engulfed by round-the-clock supplicants, Senor M had to resort to hitchhiking to work!

Hundreds of people made a pilgrimage to a "hotel art" landscape painting purchased at an Oregon yard sale that was believed to harbor a living image of Our Lady of Guadeloupe. Holy apparitions are said to appear in flour tortillas, forkfuls of spaghetti, in the bark of a New Jersey blue spruce tree, and on the anterior fur of a dog named Mr. Frisky. The popular TV show, "Glee," focused on this phenomenon in a recent episode called "Grilled Cheesus."

My personal favorite, though, is the so-called *Nun Bun*, a cinnamon roll allegedly bearing the likeness of Mother Teresa discovered in a Nashville Bongo Java coffee shop.

"I was horrified because I almost ate this religious piece of dough," confessed Ryan Finney, the employee who discovered it. The bun has been the subject of a nine-minute documentary film, showed up on Leno and Letterman, and was eventually purchased for a mid-boggling sum of money! The pious pastry now resides in a freezer.

The Rev. James Gill, a priest and psychiatrist who helps the Catholic church investigate reported folk miracles, views the majority of these claims as "either outright hoaxes or a pathetic bid for attention by the religiously confused."

So, what's all of this about anyway? The phenomenon seems to point to a collective yearning for the sacred that is so great, a hunger for meaning that is so unmet, and a disenchantment with mere rationalism that is so profound that some folks resort to exalting pastries and paintings.

It suggests to me that while we keep busy trying to locate the miraculous outside of nature, separate from ourselves, and beyond our everyday existence, we end up missing evidence of the Holy and the magical in "every cubic inch of space" as Walt Whitman put it.

And it begs the question: Is life (the very life of life) itself the miracle we overlook or undervalue while we're gazing hopefully into fenders? Maybe so.

"I know of nothing else *but* miracles," Whitman proclaimed with his liberal sensibilities. Many of us UU- mystical humanist types may readily agree. The ancients believed differently, though, as we can see in the miracle stories found in nearly all of the world religions. Buddha, Lao-Tzu, and Confucius have all been credited with extraordinary powers, while miraculous occurrences figure quite prominently in the Jewish and Christian stories.

The parting of the Red Sea, the burning bush, Daniel in the lion's den, the walls of Jericho, the Hanukkah story. The Hebrew word for miracle is *nes*, or sign; and the Jewish miracles I just listed are, indeed, signs for believers of a higher reality breaking into the ordinary.

Ancients believed these miracles to be factual events, the hand of God intervening on behalf of his chosen people. Eliezer Shore, an Israeli teacher of Jewish spirituality, holds a modern view that in classic Jewish sources, a miracle is more significant for what it teaches than what it accomplishes. Miracle as metaphor rather than cure-all.

The entire story of Exodus, for instance, is considered a miracle by the Jews, but the Egyptians deny it ever occurred. There is nothing about it in their histories or sacred writings. Nonetheless, the miraculous resides in the perception and in faith rather than in the authenticity of the event itself.

This reminds me of the Bible reader and the skeptic waiting for the bus together, and every now and then the Bible reader would exclaim, "Alleluia, Praise the Lord, Amen."

The skeptic asked what he was reading. He answered "I am reading how God parted the Red Sea and let the Israelites go through-- that is a miracle!" The skeptic quipped, "Do not believe everything the Bible tells you. The truth of the matter is that that body of water was only really 6 inches deep-- so it was not miracle." The convert nodded but kept on reading and all of a sudden let out a big "Alleluia, Praise the Lord!" "What is it this time?" asked the skeptic. The Bible reader said excitedly in one breath, "This one is a real miracle, God drowned the whole Egyptian army in 6 inches of water!!!" What can I say? - perception and faith.

In Christianity, miracles are taken more literally. The New Testament is a veritable books of miracles. Jesus performs 34 of them all by his lonesome in the Gospels, attesting to the power of God believed to be uniquely at work through him. They are legendary - Changing water into wine, stilling the storm, Lazarus raised from the dead, the loaves and the fishes, the exorcism of demons, and numerous accounts of miraculous healings. To this day, true or false, these stories provide a narrative structure for the devout Christian.

With the rise of natural sciences in the 17th and 18th centuries and a new view of nature as a machine operating according to immutable laws, the traditional idea of miracles came under sharp attack. Liberals rejected the idea that faith needed miraculous proofs.

This skepticism about miracles was one of the defining marks in 19th century Unitarianism, landing us in hot water, yet again, with our orthodox brethren. In his famed Divinity School address of 1838, Ralph Waldo Emerson

suggested that "miracle" as pronounced by Christian churches sounded like the word "monster" to him, inciting the so-called "Miracles Controversy."

Emerson, being a Transcendentalist, perceived revelation as on-going and the self in *continuous* communion with the Divine. He embodied the inward search for the sacred and promoted the now-popular notion that the Universe is infused throughout with spirit, with Divinity, with miracles.

The controversy arose from Emerson's claim that Jesus proclaimed not his *own* divinity, but that of the human soul. In other words, though Christ spoke of and may have even performed miracles, he meant only that all life is a miracle. The Christian church, in Emerson's view, had not only fostered false doctrines, but had failed to preach Jesus' real message, namely humanity's direct access to spiritual laws and to the miraculous in our everyday world. Radical stuff for 1838!

I agree with my colleague, the Rev. Marilyn Sewall who adds that "the miraculous comes to us as a marvel and a wonder in our everyday worlds (through what Annie Lamott calls "little dusty red wagon miracles.") It challenges our complacency and wakes us up to new possibilities. Rather than fixing things or fixing us, miracles let us comprehend the true nature of things. They serve as "organic signs of a world restored to its original harmony when humanity was at one with the sacred and all creation."

How does that sit with us as we sit this morning, shoulder to shoulder and heart to heart in this sanctuary, awaiting Hanukkah, the Solstice, Christmas, perhaps awaiting union with loved ones, with humanity, with Creation itself? Do we buy it? Perhaps, we are awaiting many different miracles, large and small...reconciliation or peaceful parting, forgiveness, a favorable medical diagnosis, new employment, a new awareness or path.

Later this week, in our homes, some of us will cluster in intimate circles around the menorah candles or the Advent wreath or gather around a Solstice bonfire, drawing together in what Dylan Thomas called "the close and Holy darkness."

Who knows what evidence of the sacred, what sense of union, what window into Paradise, what moments of genuine feeling or insight, what jingle bells and fresh evergreen scents might be glimpsed or felt or heard if we keep our eyes and our minds and our ears and our hearts and our spirits open to the miraculous?

"Nes Gadol Hayah Sham - A great miracle happened there." And it happens *here*, too. And who know where? The whole enterprise is a lot like hunting for the hidden pictures in an I Spy or a Where's Waldo? book.

Mystery, miracles, wonder...they are around us, hidden in plain sight, part of our work-a-day lives, part of creation itself. We just need to look to this day, get out the way, and allow these miraculous moments to emerge like three-dimensional images popping out at us from one of those Magic Eye books.

For us to be deeply touched by this wonder, to experience the miraculous, we'll need to loosen our grip on presumed control over the Universe and accept a humble place within the matrix that connects all life in an interdependent web of reason and mystery. It's a tricky balance.

We need to be open to the miraculous and also make some things happen, but we can't special order our miracles and demand express shipping! Perhaps the miracle will come in a form we don't expect (and I'm not talking fenders and pasta bowls here).

Perhaps it will not save us or fix us, although it may redeem us or transform us in some healing or liberating way. A miracle may come to us in the form of greater acceptance of what is unpleasant about ourselves or others. It may be a miracle that empowers us to pursue what's real in our lives, to befriend our fear rather than run from it. It may come through the telling of the Hannukah story as a call to the practice of simple abundance and an acknowledgement of our courage and capacity to endure, in spite of life's challenges.

In the Shakespearean saga of King Lear, the blinded and distraught Earl of Gloucester has all but given up on his life. He stands literally at the precipice, while admonishing his son Edgar (who is there in disguise): "Away, and let me die." And then Edgar, not wanting his father to jump off the cliff, not wanting his voice forever silenced, reaches out to him with these words, "Thy life's a miracle. Speak yet again."

"This is the line that calls Gloucester back -- out of hubris and pride, and the damage and despair that invariably follow -- into a properly balanced life of grief and joy, where change and redemption are possible." (Wendell Berry)

Perceiving our lives as miracles, for better or ill, calls us back, as well -- out of hubris and pride and into balance. It calls us back into the miraculousness of Whitman's "honey bees busy around the hive, the wonderfulness of the sundown, the exquisite delicate curve of the new Spring moon, every cubic inch of space."

It pulls us into co-creation with the sacred on this disenchanting planet where people are hungry for inspiration and for meaning that can not be given to them by science or the material world. Let us remember that Jesus himself preached that "the kingdom is within."

In a piece entitled, "One Hundred Things I Know about Miracles," a Connecticut woman named Pat Walton claims that the number one thing she knows about miracles is that "They sneak up on me when I'm not looking."

Number 12: "Miracles are a gift I have to claim. I'm open for deliveries. Put my name on it. Yes." 15: "The miracle of letting go. When I'm holding on too tight or making a fist, it's hard for a miracle to land in the palm of my hand." Number 20: "All the things that don't go wrong." 40: "That I'm able to love." Number 91: "My imagination: it's a miracle collector." 96: "That we can cooperate with the power that makes miracles happen. When it's conceived, it is born."

Miracles are for anyone who chooses to believe. That is the heart of Hannukah and the soul of Christmas. So create and conceive with us, oh Mysterious Presence, oh amazing Universe, oh Spirit of life. You be the potter, we'll be the clay. Fashion us into little dreidels and set us spinning amidst the miracles and the chocolate coins and pistachio nuts and candy canes and manger hay.

Spinning and bumping up against exquisite delight and abject brokenness; spinning along an axis of hope in a star-filled night; spinning ourselves open in wider and wider circles of connection; spinning and spinning and spinning, as we are born into wonder.

Amen.

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