

## A Discourse on Miracles

There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle.  
The other is as though everything is a miracle.  
Albert Einstein

In case you are think that religious speech is controversial only among Unitarian Universalists, I commend to your reading the comments on many blogs about the prayers delivered during the presidential inauguration. One anonymous blogger responding to Bishop Gene Robinson's Inaugural Invocation on the *Concord* [New Hampshire] *Monitor* website offered, "This is a really nice political speech, but it asks nothing of God except that God give the president wisdom. He's just asking for people to behave themselves. It would be better if he asked God for a few miracles. As the saying goes, you don't receive from God unless you ask" ([www.concordmonitorarticle/20090119/FRONTPAGE/901190386](http://www.concordmonitorarticle/20090119/FRONTPAGE/901190386)).

I thought Robinson asked for quite a few miracles, both for the nation and for the president. "Bless us," he said, "with tears...with anger...with discomfort...with patience...with humility...with freedom from 'mere' tolerance...with compassion and generosity" (January 19, 2009, opening the We Are One Concert). It's a petition for the transformation of the human heart, and the blogger is right, all he is asking is that we behave ourselves.

Robinson went on to ask God to give our new president many gifts: wisdom... inspiration...a quiet heart...safety...time management skills so he can be a good father...joy... (ibid). These sound like miracles to me. Funny how different people can read the same words and hear such different things.

Religious speech is always open to interpretation here at the fellowship. I know it makes some of you uneasy even to hear these words in this place. And I assure you again that we have no orthodoxy, no creed, no right answers. I can't tell you what to believe. I don't know what you should believe. Each of you is here to figure it out for yourself with the support and encouragement of the community.

Last Sunday I attended an ordination at the Community Unitarian Church in White Plains, and the preacher said the mission of liberal religion is to free your mind, grow your soul, and change the world (Rev. Dr. W. Frederick Wooden, "Double or Nothing," at the ordination of Jef Gamblee, January 25, 2009). I like this formulation, it pretty much covers the bases for me, and I like the progression, the suggestion that the first thing comes first. Free your mind. Grow your soul. Change the world.

Seeking, then to free our minds, let us turn to the question of miracles. Albert Einstein said, "There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle." By these lights, what happened on the Hudson River a couple of weeks ago is a miracle. The lilac branches I brought in covered

with ice and put in water in my living room that have come alive and bloomed in the middle of winter are a miracle. You are a miracle. I am a miracle.

My favorite therapist, the one I worked with the longest and loved the best, told me once that she believed in two miracles: the coming of spring and the birth of a child. This is a more nuanced view, more selective, only a few precious phenomena make the cut. *Miracle* is reserved for the deepest and most profound wonders of our life and the natural world.

To call everything a miracle seems to debase the term, to make it meaningless. The word *miracle* comes from a Latin root that means “to wonder at,” and can we really be filled with wonder at everything? Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist master, teaches mindfulness, a practice in which every moment is a miracle. “The present moment,” he wrote, “is where life can be found, and if you don’t live there, you miss your appointment with life” (*The Present Moment*). But who among us can be present every moment?

As we commonly use the word *miracle* isn’t about all events or everyday events. The dictionary says a miracle is either “an extremely outstanding or unusual event, thing, or accomplishment” [such as landing a plane in the Hudson River with no fatalities] or “an extraordinary event manifesting divine intervention in human affairs” [such as the healing of cancer by prayer] (Webster’s *Collegiate*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed).

If you believe, as I do, that God is everywhere and in everything, then there's not that much difference between the two definitions: the ordinary is extraordinary; everything is a miracle. But that's not what most people mean when they say something is a miracle. At the very least, they mean it's something good and unusual and special. And often they mean that it's brought about not by accident or by good luck but by God, by what we call "divine intervention."

In the Five Questions curriculum I'll be teaching starting later this month, this is the third question: Who or what is in charge? (Charles Ortman, *Five Questions: A Theological Process for Discovery and Growth*). Mary Oliver, our Transcendentalist poet, asks, "Who made the world?/Who made the swan, and the black bear?" ("The Summer Day"). Questions about miracles are questions about agency, about who made the world, about who's in charge, about the power and efficacy of forces we cannot see.

For Mary Oliver all of these powers are played out in the natural world in front of our eyes. In her book-length poem *The Leaf and the Cloud*, the poet struggles with faith and doubt, celebrating the sacred beauty of everything in the natural world, including death. She writes, in a section of the poem called "Evening Star" about a snake and a mouse.

[Read stanzas 1—9]

One of my theology professors used to say that he did not believe in the god who gives us parking spaces. How about the god who lands a

plane on the Hudson River? A god who created the snake and the mouse and the hole in the ground?

Claiming divine intervention when good things happen is problematic in many ways. The philosopher James Keller, among many others, points out, “The claim that God has worked a miracle implies that God has singled out certain persons for some benefit which many others do not receive implies that God is unfair...If God intervenes to save your life in a car crash, then what was He doing in Auschwitz?” (Wikipedia, *miracle*, 4). Questions about miracles are questions about agency, about the nature of the divine and also about the problem of evil. In his play about Job called *J.B.*, Archibald McLeish writes, “If God is God, He is not good. If God is good, He is not God.”

The miracles in religious stories often provide a lesson and function as a kind of teaching narrative. In the Hebrew scripture in 1<sup>st</sup> Kings, for example, is a story about Elijah, a prophet of the Lord, and the priests of Baal, the pagan god of the Canaanites. The children of Israel had screwed up once again and were worshipping false gods, and Elijah was sent to straighten them out. He proposed a contest between his God, the God of Abraham and Jacob and Isaac, and Baal. Two altars were set up, each with wood and a fatted bullock for sacrifice, but no fire.

Then Elijah issued a challenge to the priests of Baal. “Pray to your god,” he said, “Ask him to send you fire.” They prayed all day, no fire. Then Elijah called for water to be poured on the other altar and when the

wood and the bullock were thoroughly soaked, he called upon the God of Israel to light the sacrifice. “Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people say it, they fell on their faces; and they said, “The Lord, he is the God...”(1<sup>st</sup> Kings 38- 39).

Some miracles are demonstrations of power, proof that my God is better than your God, proof that a prophet has been sent by God. In the Gospels, Jesus is said to perform many miracles: he turns water into wine, heals the blind and the crippled, raises people from the dead, multiplies a small amount of food to feed a large crowd. David Hume, the eighteenth- century Scottish Enlightenment philosopher said a miracle is “a transgression of the law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity” (quoted in the *Skeptic’s Dictionary*, [www.akepdic.com/miracles.html](http://www.akepdic.com/miracles.html)).

On February 11, 1858, a fourteen- year- old girl named Bernadette Soubirous was gathering firewood in a grotto near the small market town of Lourdes in France when she saw “a beautiful lady” who later identified herself as the Blessed Virgin Mary. Bernadette went home and told her parents, who punished her and told not to return to the grotto, but she went anyway and saw the beautiful lady 17 more times over the next five months. People began to believe that what Bernadette had seen marked the grotto as a special place for healing, and since then thousands of people have claimed to be healed by visiting the site. Millions of pilgrims

visit Lourdes each year. The Roman Catholic Church has verified many miracles of healing there, and Bernadette has been canonized as a saint.

According to the 1996 video, *Miracles and Visions: Fact or Fiction* by Kivati Productions, “The biggest worldwide miracle in the previous decade happened when Hindu statues drank milk on 21. 9. 1995. Never before in history has a simultaneous miracles occurred on such a global scale. Television stations (among them CNN and BBC), radio and newspapers (among them Washington post [*sic*], New York Times, The Guardian, and Daily Express) eagerly covered this unique phenomenon, and even skeptical Journalists held their milk- filled spoons to the statues of the gods—and watched as the milk disappeared.

“The media coverage was extensive all over the world, and although some scientists and ‘experts’ [denied the miracle]...some of them witnessed it themselves and reported ‘an authentic miracle’...it was happening in different places of the world simultaneously, to believers and skeptics...the milk, as a physical substance, was disappearing and... the event was not foretold by some charismatic prophet...the overwhelming evidence and conclusion was that an unexplainable miracle had occurred” (Religious miracles, [html://www.edk.si/grz/relig\\_ic\\_e.htm](http://www.edk.si/grz/relig_ic_e.htm)).

Wait a minute. I don’t want to live in a world where statues drink milk or beautiful ladies appear to French schoolgirls and then hundreds of people are cured. I may live in such a world, but I prefer a world that is

more orderly and predictable, a world in which the laws of nature are inviolable.

When I read about what happened at Lourdes, I roll my eyes. My skeptical, intellectual, rational, Unitarian Universalist mind rebels. Recoils, really. How can anyone believe this? It doesn't make sense. I can easily lapse into ridicule, contempt, and disrespect. Now I know that my religion is not the only religion or the best religion. The people who bring their suffering to Lourdes are sincere believers, and many of them find relief and comfort and healing. Who am I to question this? Yet in the face of these miracles, I become closed- minded, intolerant, and arrogant. I need to free my mind so that I can grow my soul before I can change the world.

Baruch Spinoza, the seventeenth- century philosopher, argued that the laws of nature always applied, and miracles seen as violations of the laws of nature were impossible. "According to Spinoza, there was no real difference between God and the world and so speaking of God's entering into the world through miracles would be illogical. One can speak of a miracle only as a fact, the causes of which we cannot recognize or relate to already known phenomena" (Jakub Pawlikowski, "The History of Thinking About Miracles in the West," 3- 4). Spinoza was saying we don't know.

Columnist George Wills, in a commencement address at the University of Miami, tried to humble the graduating seniors, to help them

feel less self-important. “The more [we] appreciate the complexity and improbability of everyday things—including [ourselves]—the more [we] can understand the role that accidents, contingencies, and luck have played in bringing the human story to its current chapter. And the more [we] understand the vast and mysterious indeterminacy of things, the more suited [we] will be to participate in writing the next chapter...the greatest threat to civility—and ultimately to civilization—is an excess of certitude...It has been well said that the spirit of liberty is the spirit of not being too sure you are right. One way to immunize ourselves against misplaced certitude is to contemplate—even to savor—the unfathomable strangeness of everything, including ourselves” (quoted in *Context*, August 2005, Part B, 3-4).

In the end, I feel at home with the theology of our great teacher Ralph Waldo Emerson, nineteenth-century Unitarian Transcendentalist minister, who scandalized the proper Boston Unitarian clergy in his 1838 commencement address at Harvard Divinity School. In the midst of what came to be called the Miracles Controversy, Emerson declared that “the word Miracles, as pronounced by Christian churches, gives a false impression: it is Monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain.”

For Emerson and the other Transcendentalists, God’s truth and love were revealed in everything around us, not just in Christ and the miracles recorded in the Gospels. “The heresy of the Transcendentalists

(for which the early Puritans had hanged people) was to countenance mysticism and pantheism, or the beliefs in the potential of the human mind to commune with God and in a God who is present in all of nature, rather than unequivocally distinct from it” (Ian Frderick Finseth, “American Transcendentalism” [www.thoreau.eserver.org/amertran.html](http://www.thoreau.eserver.org/amertran.html)).

You are a miracle. I am a miracle. Let us rejoice and give thanks for the blessings we have been given. And keep us from arrogance and judgment. Amen.

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Preached in Mohegan Lake, NY

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