

It's a Miracle!
Rev. Mark Hayes
March 1, 2009

Reading 1 "Miracles" by Walt Whitman

Why, who makes much of a miracle?
As to me I know nothing else but miracles,
Whether I walk the streets of Manhattan,
Or dart my sight over the roofs of houses toward the sky,
Or wade with naked feet along the beach just in the edge of the water,
Or stand under the trees in the woods,
Or talk by day with any one I love, or sleep in the bed at night
 with any one I love,
Or sit at table at dinner with the rest,
Or look at strangers opposite me riding in the car,
Or watch honey-bees busy around the hive of a summer forenoon,
Or animals feeding in the fields,
Or birds, or the wonderfulness of insects in the air,
Or the wonderfulness of the sundown, or of stars shining so
 quiet and bright,
Or the exquisite delicate thin curve of the new moon in spring;
These with the rest, one and all, are to me miracles,
The whole referring, yet each distinct in its place.

To me every hour of the light and dark is a miracle,
Every cubic inch of space is a miracle,
Every square yard of the surface of the earth is spread with the same,
Every foot of the interior swarms with the same.

To me the sea is a continual miracle,
The fishes that swim – the rocks – the motion of the waves –
 the ships with men in them,
What stranger miracles are there?

Reading 2 from *Blessing the World* by Rebecca Ann Parker

Tithing is just as simple as keeping the Sabbath, just as ancient in its wisdom, and even more unfamiliar to Unitarian Universalists. I do not mean tithing in spirit, in principle, or as a metaphor. I mean giving away ten percent of your income. . . I count myself lucky to have been taught to tithe as a child. It is a fundamental spiritual practice that liberal religious people would be wise to follow.

Tithing can be learned. In fact, I don't think that anyone who tithes has come to it by any way other than being taught. In third grade, I was taught by my parents, when they gave me my first allowance of fifty cents. They explained to me that ten percent of fifty cents was five cents, and they gave me a pledge card to the church and an envelope. My first tithe was five cents a week to the church.

One reason tithing is important is that causes we believe in will flourish if we share more of our resources. We need to open our eyes to the fact that the religious Right has gained influence through the help of conservative Christians who tithe. If we want our values to shape our society, we need to generously fund organizations that support them. But there is a deeper, more fundamental spiritual reason to tithe. I realized it listening to a member of the first congregation I served. It was pledge drive Sunday, and people had been asked to talk about why they gave to the church.

One congregation member stood up and said, “I first began to tithe because I was taught to do so by my church and my church taught me to obey its teachings. I tithed because I saw obedience as the heart of faithfulness. But as I matured in my faith, I began to understand that obedience was not all that important and could even be destructive. I continued to tithe, however, because a different reason had come to me. I tithed because the people I most loved and admired tithed: my parents and leaders of the religious community whose lives really challenged me by their goodness. I wanted to be like them so I tithed in imitation of those that I loved.”

He went on, “But as my faith matured further, I came to my own reason for tithing. This is why I do it now: I do it because to tithe is to tell the truth about who I am. If I did not tithe, it would say that I was a person who had nothing to give, a person who had received nothing from life. A person who did not matter to the larger society or whose life’s meaning was in providing for his own needs alone. But in fact, who I am is the opposite of all these things. I am a person who has something to give. I am a person who has received abundantly from life. I am a person whose presence matters in the world, and I am a person whose life has meaning because I am connected to and care about many things larger than myself. If I did not tithe, I would lose track of these truths about who I am.”

Sermon

It’s a miracle! Those are the words of wonder and joy that escape our lips when something hoped for, and yet unexpected, happens. Or something that we didn’t even dream of hoping for. An occurrence beyond explanation by the laws of nature, exciting admiring awe.

But what is a miracle, really? And where does it come from? Are miracles, in fact, evidence of supernatural intervention? Or are they, as Walt Whitman would have us believe, simply those natural everyday experiences that, if we are really paying attention, inspire our wonder and awe continuously?

The Whitman poem has long been a favorite of mine, and I have been inclined to share his view of miracles. But I’d like to try and go beyond that today, to encompass not just those awe-inspiring occurrences that are constantly surrounding us, but particularly those less common occurrences that seem to defy the odds. That go beyond the ordinary, everyday miraculous.

One typical way of understanding miracles is to consider them as interruptions of the laws of nature, that can be explained only as divine intervention, or the result of some supernatural miracle-worker. It’s like magic, not in the sense of sleight-of-hand or illusion, but in the sense of actually doing the impossible. Supernatural. Beyond nature.

In more casual usage, “miracle” often refers to any statistically-unlikely beneficial event, such as surviving a natural disaster or a fatal illness, or in some other way beating the odds. The philosopher Spinoza claimed that miracles are merely fully lawful events whose causes we are ignorant of. Aristotle himself rejected the idea that God could or would intervene in the order of the natural world.

In fact, to attribute miracles to God raises some troubling issues, even if you accept the existence of God. For one, it would seem to imply that God hadn't quite gotten it right the first time when designing natural laws. It's almost as if he has to come along and clean up after himself. One contemporary philosopher [James Keller] goes so far as to suggest that miracles may be immoral, stating that "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, [and that] implies that God is unfair."

One of the most rational, non-supernatural explanations for miracles can be found in Littlewood's Law of Miracles. Mathematician John Littlewood (1885-1977) calculated that a typical person should experience about one miracle a month during his or her lifetime. He defined a miracle as something deemed to have special significance and occurring with very low probability. With the huge number of events and experiences in our lives every day, some of them are bound to be of the low-probability variety, and so seemingly miraculous events are expected to be fairly commonplace.

I consider myself a pretty rational, logical guy, and so Littlewood's approach appeals to me. But even I have to admit that sometimes logical explanations fall short. That reminds me of a story about a magician who entertained on a cruise ship. The ship's captain had a parrot who loved to watch the floor show. Night after night, the magician made a rainbow of silk scarves disappear. And night after night, the parrot blew the trick by squawking, "It's up his sleeve!"

The magician would pluck coins from behind a passenger's ear, and then wave his empty hands before the crowd. Sure enough the parrot cried, "It's up his sleeve!" The crowd picked up the parrot's cry. "It's up his sleeve! It's up his sleeve!" they chanted the minute the poor magician walked on the stage.

Then, as luck would have it, the ship hit an iceberg. The passengers and crew were swept away, and there remained only the magician, clinging for dear life to a floating piece of debris. And across from him, claws embedded in the wood, was . . . the parrot. They stared at each other, magician and bird, until finally the parrot could stand it no longer. "All right, I give up," she demanded. "What did you do with the ship?"

Some magic – some miracles – are too much to be dismissed with a simple explanation. And I would say that if there is no explanation, then perhaps it's a waste of time trying to explain. "It's a trick" is an explanation. "It's the act of a supernatural god" is an explanation. "It's the natural workings of probability" is an explanation. But in the face of an awe-inspiring occurrence, all explanations ultimately fall short of doing it justice. Sometimes the most appropriate response is simply to accept with gratitude those seemingly miraculous experiences of grace that fall into our lives, without even trying to understand or explain.

Another story: A woman was caught in some serious flooding, and was trapped in her house and forced to wait there to be rescued. But she believed in God, and she knew after praying on the matter that her God would come to save her. Well, the floodwaters kept rising, so she moved to the second floor. And outside her window, she saw a canoe come by, and the folks in it yelled for her to get in. She replied, "No, you go ahead. My God is going to save me." The waters kept rising, and soon she had to move up to the attic. She heard a powerboat outside the window, and its occupants encouraged her to get in. "That's okay, really. My God has a plan for me. Go on ahead." Well, she finally had to move onto the roof because the water had gotten so high. A helicopter came along and hovered over her, and began dropping a line. But she waved them off, shouting "Help someone else. My faith is strong and God will rescue me."

Well, the water continued to rise, and she drowned. When she got to heaven and met God, she was angry. “What’s the big idea? You told me you were going to rescue me. Why did you fail me and let me die?” And God replied, “Fail you? First I sent a canoe, then a boat. I even sent a helicopter. But no, you refused. What did you expect, a miracle?”

Here, we see the mistake of expecting a miracle to be bestowed, with no participation on the part of the recipient. I think that is the greatest error in thinking about miracles. Hoping or expecting to be simply the passive recipients of something that happens to us. The best way to see a miracle, is to help to make it happen.

The cover of your Order of Service, if you didn’t figure it out, makes reference to one of the best-known miracles in the New Testament of the Bible. The illustration there depicts five loaves, two fishes, and twelve baskets of leftovers. The story goes that Jesus had been preaching before a large crowd and time got away from him. Evening came, and people were hungry, and so Jesus instructed his disciples to feed them. They replied that they had only five loaves of bread and two fishes, and there were five thousand people to feed. Jesus said to bring the food to him. He blessed and broke the loaves and the fishes and sent the disciples out to distribute them to the crowd. After they all ate and were filled, the disciples collected what was left over, and it was enough to fill twelve baskets.

It was a miracle. As with much scripture, there have been volumes written about this story – many interpretations, including symbolic, metaphorical meanings of the numbers involved, and so on. But my favorite interpretation has to do with the mentality of scarcity versus abundance. Under this interpretation, many in the crowd, expecting a long day and planning ahead, had actually packed in some provisions. But eying the hungry throngs around them, they were reluctant to bring out their food, lest they be forced to share with someone else. That is the mentality of scarcity. If you feel like there is not enough, then that becomes the reality.

The miracle of Jesus on that occasion was to transform the mindset of scarcity to one of abundance. His attitude of taking whatever little we have and sharing it with everyone, released the spirit of generosity in all present. And it turned out that there was more than enough to go around. Sort of like our potluck dinners.

Today’s Miracle Sunday represents the kickoff of our Annual Budget Drive, or Stewardship Campaign. Stewardship means, simply, managing resources. For us as a religious community it means each of us, as individuals, sharing of our resources, contributing to the collective pool of resources, and then using them in such a way as to realize our mission in the world.

So what miracles are we looking for? One is to wrap up this stewardship campaign quickly, to make it short and sweet, rather than have it drag on for months as it sometimes seems to. Another miracle we’re looking for is one similar to that of the loaves and fishes. To have us act out of a sense of abundance, rather than of scarcity. That’s a particular challenge right now, given the difficult economic times we find ourselves in, with messages of scarcity screaming out all around us. But another miracle is that, even as some of us find ourselves unable to increase our levels of giving, or even to maintain present levels, others of us can step up and take up the slack by being even more generous than we have been.

There are different ways of thinking of miracles with respect to our congregation and its financial situation. I sometimes find myself fantasizing about winning the lottery, or going on *Jeopardy* and winning tons of money, which I of course would share generously with this congregation. That would be one form of miracle. But that’s not the most important kind. The

most important kind of miracle is what we can do together, for each other, for our community, and for the world. My colleague, Gary Kowalski puts it like this:

TV game shows may promise you instant wealth as the key to happiness. But I don't really believe that promise. The question for me is: What can we promise to one another? And I think the answer is that we can promise each other hard, honest work – the work of raising caring children in an often uncaring world, the work of trying to live with integrity in a world rife with sham and deception, the work of building a community where each person has dignity because of who they are, not because of what they earn or how much they own. . .

[E]verybody – each one of us – can have a life that means something, that's rich in love, and that makes a difference. So what I'm inviting you to do is not to buy into a fantasy but to consider investing in a dream.

And that is what I am asking of you this morning. To invest in the dream of who we are, of who we can be, and of what positive impact we can have on the world. Financial investment is not the only form of course, but it is one necessary form. Think of what a miracle it would be if all, or even most of us took seriously Rebecca Parker's ideas about tithing. I'm trying to do my part to make that miracle real. One tenth of my family's income goes to charitable donations each year, with about two thirds of that coming directly to UUFCC.

I understand that that's simply not possible for everyone, and I am truly grateful, on behalf of the congregation, for the generosity represented by what you do give. I would simply ask you to think seriously about what the obstacles are to giving more. If it's because there just isn't more to give – that's fine. But if it's because it doesn't seem fair to give more than somebody else, or because you want to be sure to be able to afford the next best whatever, or because of fear of what tomorrow *might* bring, think about which dreams you consider truly worthy of investing in.

For those of you who have not yet turned in your Annual Update Forms, I hope you will do so very soon, so that we won't have to go out looking for them. And I hope you will be as generous as possible in your financial commitments. For those of you who have turned in your forms – thank you! Thank you for being part of the miracle. But if you were hasty, and inadvertently wrote down a smaller number than you really meant to, adjustments can still be made. Wouldn't that be a miracle?

Finally, I want to invite you to two celebrations. On Saturday, March 21, the second annual Spring Follies and Musicales will be held right here, with dinner at 6:00 and entertainment at 7:00, to celebrate the completion of the Annual Budget Drive. And today, after the service, please stay around and share a cake to celebrate the great start that we've gotten off to.

And now, as we end our service, and our consideration of miracles and the miraculous, I'd like to share the following words of my late colleague, the Rev. Elizabeth Tarbox:

Do not live too far in the past or the future. Live now.
In each moment expect a miracle: ten kinds of birds at the feeder, and the tracks of a fox in the snow.

Pick up a magnifying glass and scrutinize that crocus. See the pollen at the center of the daffodil, life's dust, death-defying life. Be astonished at the flower, arrested by its beauty.

Run naked through the garden early in the morning and hope the wild geese fly by.

Get silly and laugh loudly with your grandchildren or your grandparents. Refuse to leave the dead behind, but bring their memory to all your chores and games and corners of quiet, warm tears.

Know always that joy and sorrow are woven together; one cannot be without the other. If you love, know that sometimes your love will bring you tears; if you grieve, know it is because at some time you were willing to love.

Do not be afraid to die today. But expect life!

And make of it a miracle. So may it be.