

Science or divinity: Miracles come in many forms



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

Have you ever seen a miracle? I have. Many of them. No dramatic healings. No messages in the night. No visions in a sanctuary. No voices from the sky. I've seen a glacier calving in an Alaskan bay, and students surprised by a new insight; I've heard the sound of a mysterious bird in the forest, and my daughter's first cry; I've touched the hand of someone in a jail cell, and another dying alone in a hospital; I've smelled the fresh scent of greening life after a spring rain, and a wood stove warming a cabin in winter; I've tasted a carrot pulled straight from the earth, and "broken bread" among people of many faiths and no faith.

As you can tell, each of these "miracles" was experienced through my five senses. Each an intensely meaningful moment when I felt most alive, appreciating the goodness of living and making connections to relationships with others, human and non-human.

Millions of people say they have experienced miracles, convinced that a Deity has done something that defies rational explanation. They believe that God has done something amazing, wonderful and extraordinary. Usually these divine actions are understood as a special communication between a person and a deity. Naturally, they want to tell others so they will believe too.

Astronomer Carl Sagan was fascinated by the stories people believe about the "paranormal." He said, "[It] always strikes me how unimaginative most of these stories are; how, compared with the unexpected findings of science, [people] imagine that what pops into

their heads can be more stunning than what Nature provides us with every day." (Skeptical Inquirer, January/February, 1995)

Yet Sagan also cautioned skeptics not to be condescending or arrogant. "People are not stupid. They believe things for reasons. Let us not dismiss pseudoscience or even superstition with contempt."

In my Pentecostal days, we heard of many miracles, and believed all of the stories. We thought: Why would someone say they saw an angel, heard a heavenly voice or were saved from an accident, if it wasn't true? God "could" do those things, we felt, so why question it?

This isn't just a Christian phenomenon. Experiences beyond the senses, outside "ordinary" experience, are claimed by a spectrum of believers.

There's another way to understand this slippery, catch-all word "miracle."

Poets can be helpful and one of my favorites, Walt Whitman, had quite a bit to say about miracles.

In "Song of the Open Road," he writes, "Nature is rude and incomprehensible at first; Be not discouraged, keep on . . . I swear to you there are divine things more beautiful than words can tell."

What are those "divine things"? When you read Whitman, there is nothing that is not divine, in the universal sense. In "Miracles" he says it plainly:

"Why, who makes much of a miracle? As to me I know of nothing else but miracles. . . . To me every hour of the light and dark is a miracle. Every cubic inch of space is a miracle. . . . To me the sea is a continual miracle. . . . What stranger miracles are there?"

Do you see what the poet has done? He's taken the extra-ordinary, the super-natural, the singular and particular

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