

Miracles

December 6, 2015

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Unitarian Universalist Society

Music:

Hymns: #221, Light One Candle; #123, Spirit of Life (English & Spanish); #126, Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing. *Solo guitar* (Ross Hammond): Precious Lord, Take My Hand.

Sermon:

'Tis the season... for miracles! In this country, December celebrations call up several miracle stories. As we heard earlier, the New Testament narratives of the Advent season include an angel's annunciation to Mary, an unwed young Jewish woman. She will bear a special son, who will grow up with a special calling from God.

That was a miracle.

And today is the first of the eight days (or tonight is the first of eight nights) of Hanukkah, the Jewish Festival of Lights. Hanukkah begins at sundown. It originates in a Biblical story, also. In the year 167 BCE, Jerusalem was under the control of the Seleucids, or the Syrian empire. The Seleucids had wrested Jerusalem from the Greek empire of Alexander the Great. The Temple in Jerusalem was the ritual center of the Jewish faith. In 167, the Seleucid king ordered his troops to desecrate and loot the temple. He outlawed Jewish practice, and a statue of Zeus was installed—a graven image. For more humiliation the Seleucids would sacrifice pigs on the Jewish altar. A Jewish rebel army known as the Maccabees rose up to fight the Syrians and eventually overthrew them. After victory, they cleaned the walls, floors and altar of their holy place. As part of the ritual purification, they lit the wick in their oil lamp. They had only enough oil to last one day, but at the end of the day, oil remained. The next day, the ritual flame continued, and the oil still was not consumed. It lasted for eight whole days.

The week-long Hanukah holiday commemorates this Maccabean miracle. At sundown on the first night, a Jewish family lights one candle. The second night, two candles, and on and on. By the final night, all eight candles in the Menorah are blazing. A family and its guests enjoy piping hot latkes, or fried potato pancakes, with cool sour cream and applesauce.

Jewish opinion has differed on whether the miracle to be marked on Hanukkah is the long endurance of the lamp's oil, or in having won a battle against an imperial army. In either case, it is the candle flames which commemorate that event of 167 BCE.

Those two amazing events—of Mary and the lamp oil—were unexpected wonders, and I think that is the best kind. I may not believe in the literal truth of every miracle, but still I like the unexpected ones the best. It's good to be prepared for them, open to them, and receptive to whatever in your life--now or later--may seem like a blessing, a surprise, a marvel.

Most of us are used to hearing about the miracles that happen because of a need. The windfalls, healings, blessings or lucky breaks that we specify and hope for and *expect*. The expectations may take the form of a prayer. Asking for a cure for someone's terrible

illness, or waiting for a family member to wake up from a coma, even though medical professionals have concluded the situation is not reversible.

In Mexico and other places, people hang small metal tokens at shrines to Mary and other Christian saints inside Catholic churches. There are little brass hearts, tiny gold legs and arms and symbols of other afflicted parts of the body. In shaky handwriting on paper, they scribble the kind of intercession they seek—new job, healthy baby, safe passage to a safe land, or maybe just a new day of peace and the promise for a way out of oppression.

Some have left notes of gratitude for prayers answered, for miracles delivered. A shrine adorned in this way is a patchwork of so many images of human vulnerability. The display—of metal tokens, rosaries, handwritten notes, and candles—emits waves of desperation, sadness, hope and gratitude.

In India, at stone temples in big cities or countryside villages, Hindu worshipers pay homage to one or more deities to obtain good fortune, ask for a blessing or bring a miracle. Among those deities is Ganesh, the god in the form of an elephant. Ganesh is known as the remover of obstacles. He's a source of good fortune. Depending on how improbable your goal or how challenging your obstacle may be, getting his favor may be a miracle.

It's 12 years ago, and I am walking with a new Indian friend on a street in the Indian capital city of Delhi. We approach a man holding a big elephant leash, at the end of which is... his elephant, not enormous but not a baby either. For a few coins, you can get a blessing from Ganesh... or at least from this very charming substitute for the god who removes obstacles. I watch others come up. They pay, and the man signals the elephant, which curls up its trunk high and gently taps the customer on the head. Then the gentle animal is rewarded with a peanut.

For the local people, for Hindus, this is a moment of expectation. And it is one for the elephant as well. For me, this is a photo opportunity that I am not willing to pay for. Charming but pointless, I think. My friend insists on paying for me to get a blessing, and for Ganesh to get a peanut. Someone later asked me what windfall I might have requested of that elephant, what obstacle I should have asked it to remove. I had no answer. At the time of the experience, there was nothing but the confusing wonder of that encounter. It filled my entire awareness.

Compared to that sweet moment, I feel downright ornery when it comes to the *miracle business* of our current culture here in the United States. I'm not feeling so charmed. New age books and courses, motivational speakers and DVDs promote *getting what you want*. Modern American mantras employ the word *miracle* quite often. All of it appears to sell pretty well. I see people reading the books and talking the talk.

Often packaged and glossy, this approach is a combination of business formulas and spiritual equations. To me, it has the ring of entitlement. *You deserve a miracle*. That mantra or slogan reminds me of an enduring tag line of advertising: *You deserve a Mercedes-Benz*.

I am not a scholar of ancient miracle stories, but they seem to me to reflect a different spirit from the culture of asking for miracles. That is, in those long-treasured stories, nobody was *looking* for a miracle. It just happened to them. In the Annunciation story, young Mary was troubled by the angel's visit, and perplexed by his words. She had questions, as you might imagine for a girl getting such news. Yet she remained open to his news, and she prepared herself for her future. She was present to a new moment.

In the Hanukkah story, the Maccabee rebels cleaned up the temple of their faith, cleared out the desecration, got things back in order. The final step in their purification rituals was to light their sacred flame. The bottom end of the lamp's wick rested in just a little bit of oil, only enough to give a sacred light for one day. That would have been sufficient, nothing wrong with one day. The faithful had done all they knew they should do. Then, a miracle happened. As I know the story, they did not *ask* for the miracle of seven more days of oil, but they remained open to it. They had prepared themselves. They were open. They were present to a new moment.

What is a miracle? In a recent book, Melodie Beattie, the recovery movement author and speaker, defines it this way: "A miracle is when something happens that we couldn't control, create, conceive, or do on our own—whether by using willpower, strength, spirituality, skills, [or] money." Miracles are not supernatural, *and* they are non-denominational, she says. They are a natural part of life.¹

Experiencing them has more to do with how we look at life. It relates to whether we see the reality of every moment for what it is, even if the moment is unpleasant. Miracles are about perception, not about control. Beattie writes that she began a path to finding miracles when her life was a mess. With a new baby and another on the way, her marriage was falling apart. Her family's newly rented house was in terrible condition, not to mention in bad taste and filthy. She jokes that her nightly spiritual practice was to sit in the middle of the floor, since there was no living room furniture, and think about everything she hated about her life.

Her deepening anger made her despair grow. It made her ache. Then she realized how much energy and effort she was putting into making herself miserable. She thought it might be worth a try to put just as much effort now into being thankful.

Every time a bad thing happened, she said "Thank you." Every time she had a negative emotion, even one she was not proud of, she said, "Thank you for that." She says that she wasn't forcing a feeling of gratitude on herself, only saying thank you. It reminds me of what we say when we open a present we didn't want or don't like. Thank you.

If I understand her approach, saying *thank you* was a practice of being present, of accepting reality, especially those moments of unpleasant reality. It was saying, "I see you, you unpleasant thing." *Thank you* was short hand, her own way of saying, I'm not going to waste my time putting you into a narrative about how hopeless I am. I'm not going to devote energy into fleeing from you. I'm not going to fight this bad emotion or this ache or this hole in the wall or this ugly orange shag carpeting.²

Thank you. Of course, she said this at the good things too. Doing so did cultivate feelings of gratitude and appreciation in her. But whatever the present experience, good or bad, her practice of pausing for "thank you" opened her to seeing a possible way forward. Insights occurred to her. "What if I tried *this*?" she would ask. Step by step, she became resourceful.

Little by little, she made connections with other people. Helpful and healthy people emerged, people she could trust. They pitched in, helped her out. Life got better. She did this not by forcing a feeling on herself, but by giving a nod of acknowledgment to whatever came up, a verbal nod: *thank you*. This was her way of being present with what is, being open to possibilities, and open to receiving the good as well as the bad.

This makes me think of that flame in the lamp of the Jewish temple. Nearly every modern Menorah I've seen has individual holes to receive each of the eight candles, plus

the helper candle, which lights the others. Eight candles for eight nights and days—called a candelabrum. Each candle is self-contained with its own wick and the wax around it. Yet the ancient lamp from the original story was not a candelabrum. It was one open vessel of oil with one wick for one flame. Consider the image of that open vessel. It's not the image of *demanding* eight days of light, or demanding anything. The vessel's purpose is clear, and it is prepared and open.

According to the Unitarian Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, for too many people the word *miracle* brings up stories from long ago, like Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding feast, a favor done at his own mother's urging. Yet such a miracle deserves none of the wonder we give to it, compared to "the stupendous fact" of our own existence, our own personality. Emerson asks: "What narrative of wonders coming down from a thousand years ought to charm [your] attention" more than the fact that we are here, and alive, and so complicated? A theme of Emerson's work is an urging to look not in the past for inspiration, but in the present. What is in front of us, he said, is a stupendous fact. Wonder at *that!*

This is a good season to revisit that wisdom. At least for me, it is. Every December seems so impossible to me. It feels overwhelming: so many plans to make, people to acknowledge, events to remember to show up for. For some of you it may be many gifts to wrap and ship, cards to send, and flights to reserve. For some it includes buying presents for the kids amid the endless sea of merchandising, and the fun but time-consuming house preparations, or outings to see Santa, or hosting a party. For others it may be class papers to write or exams to grade, performances to rehearse or shows to see, or a new apartment to move into. Still others may wonder how they will make it *through* the season... because of sadness, separation, or mourning the loss of a loved one. Some people worry about making ends meet, basic needs like food and warmth. Depending on how we feel about our families or loved ones, we may wonder how to make it through the season with more ease and courage and compassion. *That* would be a miracle.

In December for me it would be a blessing to keep the stack of dishes down to a minimum and have my clothes put away and papers and books not spread over every table. Some weeks of the holiday season come over me like a burden. There is so much!

I can forget to be open and present. I want to remember the way the Maccabees were open to watching their lamp's flame shining. They did that one thing with honorable intentions, honoring a simple tradition. They gave their full presence to it, and out of that came a miracle.

This December, as the year speeds toward its conclusion, I hope to take the time to say thank you. Not only for gifts I like a lot and those I like somewhat less, but for whatever it is that every moment has to deliver. Bad luck, bad news, bad reactions on my part: I want to nod and say, "I see you, unpleasant moment." Or I'll just say, "Thank you." Nasty traffic, rude people, and my bad attitude: "Thank you. Next moment, please."

I won't recommend any of this to you, since I just found out about this approach myself and I'm going to try it out. I do not wish to be a miracle seller, but I will tell you about my own intentions and wishes. I seek to hear your experiences perspectives, and of course I hope you will share yours with one another, since there are 300+ of you here but only one of me.

In this busy time of year, I want to remember to be curious, like the puzzled young Mary. She didn't flee from the angel's annunciation, and she didn't clam up either: she asked questions. When a hurdle appears on my path, I want to pause and look at it, ask it a question. After she took in the news, as the Bible's traditional wording goes, Mary "pondered all these things in her heart." I want to take time to ponder. You never know when a miracle is taking place. It was from such pondering that Emerson came to realize the stupendous fact of each and every one of us, the miracle that we live and the wonder of our human complexity in this world of deep complexity. I hope to pause, to be open to the gift of every ordinary moment and every special occasion.

As I notice the moments of stress or pain, I intend also to notice the moments of grace, the happy feelings, and to say "I see you" to those nice visitors as well.

The blessed rain and the sunshine on the morning after it. "Thank you." The words or deeds of kindness, whether I am the receiver or the giver: "I see you. Thank you." By cultivating a little more openness, and more presence to what is in front of me, I hope to experience a less demanding attitude about life and the world.

I will seek to stay curious and open to the stupendous facts of every day as well as the moments of disappointment as the day goes by. I hope to see the blessings that might surround me if I am willing to prepare myself for their presence. "Thank you," I say, "Thank you." So may it be.

¹ Melody Beattie, *Make Miracles in Forty Days* (New York, 2010: Simon & Schuster).

² *Ibid.* My paraphrasing of her story.