

A Hundred Million Miracles
 Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship in Thunder Bay, Ontario
 Sunday, March 27, 2016

Reading #1: “Who Makes Much of a Miracle” Walt Whitman

Why! who makes much of a miracle?

As to me, I know of 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 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 my mother,
 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,

Why! who makes much of a miracle?
 As to me, I know of nothing else but miracles,

Whether I see birds--or the wonderfulness of insects in the air,
 Or the wonderfulness of the sun-down – or of stars shining so quiet and bright,
 Or the exquisite, delicate, thin curve of the new moon in spring;
 Or whether I go among those I like best, and that like me best-- mechanics, boatmen,
 farmers,
 Or among the savants--or to the soiree--or to the opera,
 Or stand a long while looking at the movements of machinery,
 Or behold children at their sports,
 Or the admirable sight of the perfect old man, or the perfect old woman,
 Or the sick in hospitals, or the dead carried to burial,

Or my own eyes and figure in the glass;

These, with the rest, one and all, are to me miracles,
 The whole referring--yet each distinct, and 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;
 Every spear of grass--the frames, limbs, organs, of men and women, and all that concerns
 them,
 All these to me are unspeakably perfect miracles.

All these to me are unspeakably perfect miracles.

To me the water 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?

Why! who makes much of a miracle?

As to me, I know of nothing else but miracles,

Reading #2: “The Bible and Mystery” Peter Gomes in *The Good Book*

Mystery has a bad reputation in religious language as an all-pervading, argument-proof cop-out when something cannot be explained; when there is a problem to which there appears to be no answer, the temptation is to call the entire thing a mystery.

To the impious, or just to the garden-variety secularist, such a device (as miracles) is merely clothing naked ignorance in the fig leaf of mystery, and to the pious and the generally reverent, mystery is not the opposite of knowledge but the opposite of pride or of hubris.

Mystery in this sense is the frontier between what we know and can explain and what we experience and cannot explain.

Mystery can be seen in the [American] sense of a frontier, a place or space that remains to be settled or conquered.

Mystery here – in the secular world – is merely unfinished or unaddressed business, which in the fullness of time and with the inevitable improvements in skills and technologies will be solved.

As might be easily said, a mystery is merely an unsolved problem, and unsolved problems do not provoke awe or devotion. A mystery, in the secular world, merely provokes irritation, intrigue, and persistence.

Peter Gomes, *The Good Book*, 327-328

Sermon: “A Hundred Million Miracles” by the Rev. **Suzanne** Wasilczuk

A miracle – an explanation for an event for which we have no ready explanation. An event that appears inexplicable by the laws of nature.

Miracles. Like a miraculous birth. Or a miraculous resurrection. Events for which we have no ready explanation.

The stories in the Bible were my first introduction to miracles. The Christmas story, with its virgin birth of a God-Child, the magical star, the worshipping shepherds and magi. And the Easter story – a man-God crucified and buried and risen from death.

But is that precisely the Biblical story?

The earliest witness to the Jesus story comes in the letters of **Paul**, [written 20 to 30 years after Jesus’ death]. The epistles contain no miracles. No miraculous birth. No report of miracles.

Miracle stories begin to appear twenty years later, in the Gospel of **Mark** [c 70 CE].

We read in Mark:

And a leper came to him beseeching him, and kneeling said to him, “If you will, you can make me clean.” Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I will; be clean.” And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. (Mark

1: 40-42)

And again:

“...Some people brought to him a blind man, and begged Jesus to touch him. And Jesus took the blind man by the hand, and led him out of the village; and when he had spit on his eyes and laid his hands upon him, he asked him, “Do you see anything?” And he looked up and said, “I see men; but they look like trees, walking.” Then again Jesus laid his hands upon his eyes; and he looked intently and was restored, and saw everything clearly. (Mark 8, 22-25)

In each of these cases, the person healed, and Jesus’ followers, are charged to tell no one.

Yet, in Mark, too, there is no miraculous birth story. And, after Jesus’ crucifixion, the women at the tomb are told by a young man “He has risen, he is not here.” And they leave, and it is written, they “said nothing to anyone.”

In this early part of the Bible healing stories are ways to claim that the divine is present in Jesus’ life, that he indeed has God’s favor. (95)

Karen Armstrong tells us that “for Jews, a ‘son of God’ was a perfectly normal human being who had been raised to special intimacy with God and had been given a divine mandate.” [Case, 85] Prophets, priests, kings and even the Israelites had all been called “sons of God.”

It isn’t until **Luke** [c. 80s CE] that Jesus appears as “a divine figure in human clothing.” (104)

Jesus raises the widow’s son from death. (Luke 7:11-18)

And Jesus himself rises from the dead and, on the third day, ascends bodily into heaven.

By the gospel of **John** [written in the late 90s] Jesus is the Word that emanates from the Father God. Jesus goes on to change water into wine (2:1-11), heals the blind man (9:1-41), and raises Lazarus, who has been dead and buried for three days, and is raised from the dead. (11:1-53).

Miracles in the Bible come to be explanations for events for which there is no ready explanation, or magnified explanations for ordinary events. Maybe something – a miracle story – is made out of nothing.

Karen Armstrong writes that “in the ancient world, ‘miracles’ were quite commonplace and, however remarkable and significant, were not thought to indicate that the miracle worker was in any way superhuman.” [Case, 88] “Until the modern period,” Armstrong tells us, “nobody thought of confining their attention to a literal reading of the plain sense of scripture.” [Case, 96] A literal meaning would reveal the glaring anomalies and inconsistencies in scripture.” Jesus’ resurrection was not in the flesh [Case, 84], but in the continued life of his teachings: to feed the hungry, to care for those folks who were ostracized or ignored, to walk humbly on the earth.

But, in subsequent decades and centuries, these miracle stories are told and altered and expanded.

Unitarians, as did other liberal Christians, moved from a belief in miracles, to a questioning of them, to a dismissal of them. The “age of miracles” is over, they said.

More recently, the retired Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong – as liberal a Christian as they come – writes:

“When people say today... that ‘the age of miracles is over,’ what they mean is not that miracles no longer occur, but that they never did – the age when we perceived events as miraculous is gone. The things that our ancestors called miracles and even magic are explained today without appeal to the supernatural because we understand so much more completely the way the universe operates.

The scientific world no longer sees God in terms of a chain of cause and effect. We once saw God as the prime mover in the issues of sickness and health. Sickness was a reflection of God’s punishment, we used to think, while health was a reflection of God’s favor.

But then we discovered germs and viruses, and we developed antibiotics, surgical procedures, and such things as chemotherapy. With this new knowledge it began to dawn on us that antibiotics, surgery, and chemotherapy are just as effective on sinners as they are on saints. So the realm of sickness as an area in which God operated began to shrink, and medicine joined the modern push toward secularization.” (John Shelby Spong, *A New Christianity for a New World*, 22)

The move away from mystery, and toward scientific explanation.

We now have a ready explanations for all events – science.

Maybe our labeling an event as a miracle is our human attempt to make something out of nothing, to make some meaning out of a life that is more random, yet readily explainable.

I moved to Alaska as a city girl And, in that small town I began to notice things.

One day, I saw some puffy cloud on the surface of the ocean, I asked a friend, “What’s that?” He looked for awhile and said, “That’s a whale blowing! Look! Now you can its tail!”

One night, noticing some odd white streaks in the night sky, I asked a friend, “What’s that?” “Keep looking,” said my friend. “Those are northern lights! You can see them dancing across the sky!”

One day, in our tiny community hospital, I sat with a man in our cardiac care unit. He had had a heart attack, and the wonders of modern medicine had brought him back to almost full functioning.

We sat and listened while a woman in the birthing room, the room just beyond the head of his bed, we listened while a woman was in the end stages of labor.

“Breathe! Breathe!” the doctor would tell her. “Now push! Push!” “Push some more! Harder!” “It’s a girl!” and we heard the baby cry, and her mother sigh. And the murmur of voices as a new life was welcomed.

A moment of wonder and awe. Perfectly explainable. Yet, a tiny miracle – this baby girl in this little town at this moment in time.

And one day, more than a year after her thirteen-year-old daughter had died of leukemia, I participated in a run that Julie's mother had organized in her honor. Carol Hughes might have stayed in her grief forever, for always. But here she was. Carol had started training, had lost fifty pounds, and was ready to celebrate the life of her child. A miracle of healing had occurred, slowly; certainly not inevitably.

This year the 32nd annual Julie Hughes triathlon takes place on May 21st.

Unitarian Universalist minister Richard Gilbert writes:

A tomb is no place to stay,
Be it a cave in the Judaeen hills
Or the dark cavern of the spirit.

A tomb is no place to stay
When fresh grass rolls away the stone of winter cold
And valiant flowers burst their way to warmth and light.

A tomb is no place to stay
When each morning announces our reprieve,
And we know we are granted yet another day of living.

A tomb is no place to stay
When life laughs a welcome
To hearts that have been away too long.

When Peter Gomes writes of mystery he means "neither a hazy abandonment of rationality nor a self-indulgent wallowing in mumbo jumbo" [as Karen Armstrong writes in *The Case for God*, 54]. What is meant by mystery and miracle is "a direct and overwhelming experience of the sacred that... transform[s our] perception of life and death."

The miracle is nature. The miracle is humans – humans shining, persevering.

"Why, who makes much of a miracle
As for me, I know of nothing else."

The 1958 Rogers & Hammerstein musical *Flower Drum Song* is the story of a young woman named Mei Li. Mei Li arrives as an [illegal immigrant](#) from [China](#) with her father to [San Francisco](#) [to enter into an [arranged marriage](#) with the owner of a night club]. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flower_Drum_Song; accessed 21 March 2016.

At one point Mei Li sings of her father's beliefs:

*My father says that children keep growing,
Rivers keep flowing too.
My father says he doesn't know why,
But somehow or other they do.
--They do! somehow or other they do.--*

A hundred million miracles,

*A hundred million miracles are happ'ning ev'ry day,
 And those who say they don't agree
 Are those who do not hear or see.
 A hundred million miracles,
 A hundred million miracles are happ'ning ev'ry day,*

*A swallow in Tasmania is sitting on her eggs,
 And suddenly those eggs have wings and eyes and beaks and legs!
 A hundred million miracles!*

*A little girl in Chungking, just thirty inches tall,
 Decides that she will try to walk and nearly doesn't fall!
 A hundred million miracles!*

*A hundred million miracles,
 A hundred million miracles are happ'ning ev'ry day,
 And those who say they don't agree
 Are those who do not hear or see.
 A hundred million miracles,
 A hundred million miracles are happ'ning ev'ry day,*

“Why! who makes much of a miracle?
 As for me, I know of nothing else.”

We all have different ways of seeing, of framing and making sense of the world. Physics and mathematics, anatomy and physiology, cause and effect. Metaphor and simile, symbols, poetry. Music and dance and art. The intricacies of social interactions. The glories of Mother Earth. Enchantment and miracle.

We may not want to call what we experience a miracle. Maybe we prefer surprise. An admiring awe. Wonderstruck cogitation.

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

For all the miracles, for the wondrous, great and small.
 We give thanks on this Easter Sunday. Thanks. And yet again thanks.

Blessed Be. And Amen.