

Miracle-challenged

Rich Heffern | Dec. 29, 2009 NCR Today

Miracle-challenged, I guess you could call me. A devout nonbeliever in the tooth fairy, winning the lottery, the accuracy of ouija boards, *A Course in Miracles*, Medjugorje, personally I have never beheld a vision, seen a statue weep, been dealt a royal flush in poker, witnessed a UFO or even a spoon-bending. As a Catholic kid I heard, and didn't buy, the Fatima tales that included the sun spinning in the sky overhead like the ultimate Texas baton twirl. To me, "miracles" seem to say more about human sociology than about theology.

Ignoring the laughable astronomical misunderstanding, the Fatima story, for example, may validate your faith ticket with a hefty punch, but at heart shows the spirituality of a bully or terrorist. The Source of Life and the Universe spun the sun like a top to confound some two-bit Portuguese communists but refuses to nudge nature's laws a millimeter when an innocent child is slain by random shrapnel in one of the world's many wars or beaten to a raw bloody death by Rwandan thugs? Given a choice, in which scenario would you root for some divine breaking of the laws of physics? And what do such attributed behaviors say about God?

Which is not to say that one cannot be a gawking eyewitness at a bona-fide miracle.

As a hospice volunteer in the 1980s, my first patient was a western Kansas farmer dying from stomach cancer. His name was Tony. Afternoons I would cross the windswept flatlands along the Smoky Hill River out to his frame bungalow surrounded by crow-infested wheat stubble. I'd sit with him while his wife shopped and his sons did chores. His face sunburned and wind-creased Tony was German -- tough and more stoic than a tenpenny nail, with a life behind him full of backbreaking work, never-ending duty and few breaks. Cancer-ravaged to a skeleton and confined to a cheerless room decorated only by a dime-store print and a plain crucifix, his last chore, it seemed, was to find a soft place inside from which to shuffle off his mortal coil, to locate some bouquets among the rusty barbed wire tangle of his life, a few feathers of grace lying in the flinty prairie soil.

A few days before he died, I sat bedside regarding his wasted frame wrapped in a thin blanket. Eyes shut, he was remote, withdrawn and preoccupied, with just a flicker of life's current left in him. His skin was yellow from jaundice and taut across his bones. After a long while Tony's emaciated hand crept from beneath the cover and grasped mine tightly. His skin felt like barely warm parchment. My throat lumped in a choke hold. I have rarely been so deeply touched. The day before he had wept the afternoon away wrestling with demons. That evening his voice was frail, trembling, not just from cancer but from grief and gratitude, as he told his wife of 40 years over and over again how much he loved her, even calling her by a fond nickname she hadn't heard since courtship days.

Miracle enough for me, folks. For my money, love and mercy and forgiveness, not to mention the taste of fresh sweet corn or the laughter of little kids, are more excellent and satisfying than a loop-the-loop sun or a hotline to some arcane New Age wisdom.

A foursquare fundamental Christian proposition is that the journey to God is a trek into reality. Why else did God come to us as a dirt-poor woodbutcher rather than Napoleon or George Soros? We must find God in the world as it comes to us, and it's often a down and dirty, take no prisoners kind of place. Nevertheless, common

miracles happen in it every day.

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