

Miracle
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UUMSB
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At this time of year, we are surrounded by stories of miracle. There is the Hanukkah miracle of the oil that lasts for eight nights, the miracle of the virgin birth at Christmas, the star that leads the wise men and so on. For solstice, some Unitarian Universalists might speak of the miracle of the interdependent web, that we are here and the earth turns and so on. A miracle is something that happens that we cannot explain with science or reason alone. Well, there are lots of things that we can't explain with science, but most things we can imagine how a scientist could make an explanation. For example, I don't really know the details of how each step of internal combustion, or fission, or proper French pastry work, but I know that there are people who do, and I have heard enough of an explanation that I trust them. Some people believe that eventually everything can be explained by science. Some believe that there are things that can never be fully explained. We don't need to solve that philosophical question today, so for a few minutes I invite you to imagine that you are living in the early 1800s, in the midst of the Enlightenment at the birth of Unitarianism in the United States.

Back then people were trying out the new and shiny scientific method on everything, including the Bible. They were coming to radical conclusions and bringing the birth of modernism as they realized the impact that people, including the original authors, the translators, and historical context had on our interpretations of the Bible, and therefore theology and belief. Miracles especially gave some people pause. Remember the Jefferson Bible? That is the one that Jefferson put together in his retirement with all the miracles removed, around 1819. Do folks remember William Ellery Channing? [Conversation – Boston, famous sermon reclaiming the name in 1819 in Baltimore, applied reason to the Bible]. Channing claimed the previous slur of Unitarian, referring to the heresy that Jesus was no more God than any of us, that he was fully human. This is what Channing and many other contemporaries came to when they studied the Bible with new Enlightenment lenses.

I think that Channing was a pretty serious guy. I don't imagine that he did a lot of skipping or playing jokes on his relatives. Something that has always surprised me about him though is that he felt that miracles were fundamental to his understanding of God and the Bible, because in seeing Jesus as fully human, it would seem to take away the miracle of God coming to earth as a child. As Channing preached against his contemporary Calvinists, who believed in predestination and threat of hellfire, he focused on God's love of humanity, happiness and that “miracles were a way for God to show his love for the world.”¹ Channing believed in a closeness between God and people. In his sermon, “Likeness to God” in 1828, he talks about God in people and throughout creation, and our closeness to nature. He concludes, “True religion thus blends itself with common life. We are thus to draw nigh to God, without forsaking men. We are thus, without parting with our human nature, to clothe ourselves with the divine.”² And in this way, for Unitarian Christians, he gave back the miracle of Jesus—that like all of us,

1 Robert Michael Ruehl, “William Ellery Channing's Theology: God, Christ, Humanity, and Self-Culture”, <http://transcendentalism-legacy.tamu.edu/authors/wechanning/channingtheology.html>

2 <http://www.americanunitarian.org/likeness.htm>

the story of his birth and ministry is an example of the presence of God with and in humanity. Channing was Transcendentalist adjacent. Speaking of transcendentalists, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in 1842, “The Transcendentalist adopts the whole connection of spiritual doctrine. He believes in miracle, in the perpetual openness of the human mind to new influx of light and power; he believes in inspiration, and in ecstasy.”³

Let's travel even a little farther back in time for a moment and consider when Universalism was born in the United States in the mid 18th century. People who had read the Bible and believed in universal salvation were starting to pop up, but there were no organized churches. In about 1760, a man named Thomas Potter in Good Luck, NJ hosted discussions on the new ideas of universalism at his house. He had people from town in his living room regularly, and realized they needed a proper church building to meet in. They did not have a minister, but he built the church anyway had had faith that a universalist minister would come. His wife was grateful to have her house back. Potter's neighbors thought he was crazy for building this church without a minister. He was sure someone would come, and he waited for about 10 years until something amazing happened. Meanwhile, over in England there was a minister with universalist ideas having a very tough time. His name was John Murray. Murray's theology was not appreciated where he lived, and sometimes in those days that meant that the villagers might burn down your house, as happened to the Unitarian and discoverer of carbon dioxide, Joseph Priestly. Murray was under threat of ending up in debtors prison, his wife and daughter died of some terrible disease, and so with no prospects he decided to head to America. He had nothing to lose. Murray traveled in 1770 on a ship called the Hand in Hand. They got all the way to New Jersey and then were stuck on a sandbar. The captain of the ship sent Murray to shore to get provisions, where he met Thomas Potter. They talked about the church building with no minister, Potter discerned that Murray was a universalist, albeit a totally bummed out one, and said, “Preach at my church this Sunday!”. Murray said he would only if the wind hasn't changed, and if the ship was still stuck. Murray thought they would surely be gone by Sunday. But the wind did not change, and Potter's community had to eat their snide comments about Potter being out of his head for building the church. Murray preached that Sunday and he stayed to preach and minister there for 4 years. In 1774 Murray went to Gloucester, MA and established first Universalist church in New England. John Murray wrote the words that are part of many Unitarian Universalist theologies: “You may possess only a small light but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. Give them, not Hell, but hope and courage. Do not push them deeper into their theological despair, but preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.”

Over time, Unitarians, Universalists and then Unitarian Universalists drifted farther from our Christian roots. As modernism moseyed into post-modernism, we worried less about elaborate philosophical proofs about the nature and origin of scripture and came to a more broad understanding of what it means to be faithful, spiritual, and thoughtful people in our tradition.

Stories last when people can find themselves in them. How many of us have felt overwhelmed with grief, angry at injustice, jealous, alone, waiting for guidance, hoped for a miracle, helped a stranger, held a baby with wonder, were afraid, wondered how we got where we are or how we will get to the next place? The Bible is full of human stories, of people trying to order and disorder their worlds and they are interpreted by people. Who here has a story of a

3 Emerson, “The Transcendentalist

miracle in your life? When I say miracle, I mean an event or set of events that happened that we cannot explain only with science or reason. Actually that really is the same language that I use when I describe what is holy to me as well. I have reverence for the interconnections between us all that help us to grow, create, and love better than we can on our own. I have reverence for the power of interconnection that helps me remember my dependence on others and the earth for everything in my life. I don't know how or why our world developed that way. Sometimes when things grow out of these interconnections, I see miracle. When all the people, and will, and care fell into place to build this congregation, to find homes for us to worship, to connect us with amazing partners in the community, and eventually to land here with the goal of growing our community and our interconnection with the people of the larger community, that is something that some might call miracle. Some of it was probably luck, or that old saw, "luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity," but in my heart I feel the glow of love and connection in this place and this work, and that to me feels like miracle.

Our foreparents, at a time when almost everyone preached that those who were saved, were saved, and those that weren't, weren't, that there was no way to know, but that we should behave as if we are, because if we don't then we probably aren't saved (and doesn't that hurt your brain...), in that environment, they took a stand. They preached that God was a being of love and joy, that all were saved, that being in nature was a way to get closer to God, and that God is in everything. They risked their lives, their livelihoods, and their salvation to preach this message, and we are here today. We are here not only because of these theological foreparents, but because of the generations after them who risked saying that actually, they didn't believe in a god outside of the earth at all, or that they believed in a goddess or goddesses, or a spirit of life, or a force that lured us toward good, that they had faith in humanity and our ability to reason our way to an ethical life, that working toward justice and human rights is an ethical imperative of being human.

We are here because our foreparents had faith that people who had faith in different understandings of the whys and hows of our earth, and different languages for faith, but a foundation in ethical living and spiritual seeking, could be in worshipful community together. We became modern Unitarian Universalists with ministers like Nancy Shaffer who wrote:

I have been looking for the words that come
before words: the ones older than silence,
the ones not mine, that can't be found by thought--
the ones that hold the beginning of the world
and are never used up, which arrive loaned,
and make me weep.

And we worship with words like these, words of prophets, words of philosophers, and quiet, and ritual, and love, and sometimes, *that* seems like a miracle to me as well.

Using reason in our faith lives doesn't mean that we lose miracles. But we probably cast a slightly different net than our foreparents did. This matters because miracle, wonder, reverence, and faith, connect us with the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part, and give us language to talk about and share our experience with others. Channing, Emerson, and Murray had different vocabulary and theology, but that thread of the importance of the natural world to understanding ourselves as human beings in relationship to everything is planted in their work, and is so fundamental to so many of us today. We are connected not only

in the present, but stretching through all time. Our actions today, our writing, or choices, and our language will shape the future theologies and faith lives of those who follow us.

If we see miracle in the world, if we see our interconnections, what does that call us toward? Does it invite us to wall ourselves away? To ignore the person we pass on the side of the road? Just as great stories help us to find answers to ethical and philosophical quandaries, when we see our interconnection, and tease out what that means for us, we have some choices to make about how we will be in the world, and what the sources we will turn to help us figure it out. This time of year we northern hemisphere humans tell stories of miracle at a time when our land is going to sleep, when those who are without means, or who live in extreme climates, are preparing to worry about making it through the cold of winter, at time when our ancestors, metaphorically, or perhaps in reality, held festivals and prayers to insure that the sun would eventually make it's way back. I invite us to consider that miracles are still happening all around us. We may not believe there is any outside force doling them out, or holding them back, but perhaps we can hold the wonder, a reverence, for what is such a powerful human experience, our deep connection to and dependence on the earth, and how we do not yet understand all the ways that we are interconnected, that our futures are bound together, and our hearts can be opened. Perhaps old stories can lend us new understandings.

So may it be. Amen.