

How Miracles Happen

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First Parish in Hingham, Old Ship Church
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READINGS

William Ellery Channing, "The Essence of the Christian Religion," sermon in The Perfect Life, in The Works of W.E. Channing, D.D., Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1900, pp. 1001-1002.

...I do not mean to claim for Christianity the exclusive honor of discovering to us God's purpose [1002] of perfecting the human soul. The soul itself – in its powers and affections, in its unquenchable thirst and aspiration for unattained good – gives signs of a nature made for an interminable progress, such as cannot be now conceived. When, too, I contemplate the immensity and wonderful order of the material creation, and the beautiful structure of its minutest parts, I feel sure that mind, the yet nobler work of God, must be destined to a more enlarged and harmonious existence than I now experience or behold. Above all, conscience, in its secret monitions, its promises and forebodings, teaches that there is a futurity for men, where more is to be gained and more endured than is possible or imaginable on earth. But I need a more direct, immediate, explicit testimony to the purpose of God. And such a witness is Christianity. This religion is not a deduction of philosophy, resting on obscure truths, and intelligible but to a few. It is a solemn annunciation from heaven of human immortality, and of a diviner life than this. And it is sealed by miracles, that is, by divine interpositions, which are equally intelligible, striking, and affecting to all. I maintain that miracles are most appropriate proofs of a religion which announces the elevation of man to spiritual perfection. For what are miracles? They are the acts and manifestations of a spiritual power in the universe, superior to the powers and laws of matter. And on the existence of such a power, the triumph of our own spiritual nature over death and material influences must depend.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, by Oliver Wendell Holmes, Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1885, pp. 120-121, From the "Divinity School Address," 1838.

Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul. Drawn by its severe harmony, ravished with its beauty, he lived in it and had his being there. Alone in all history he estimated the

greatness of man. One man was true to what is in you and me. He saw that God incarnates himself in man and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his World. He said in this jubilee of sublime emotion "I am Divine. Through me God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me or see thee when thou also thinkest as I now think." But what a distortion did his doctrine and memory suffer in the same, in the next, and the following ages! There is no doctrine of the Reason which will bear to be taught by the Understanding. The understanding caught this high chant from the poet's lips and said, in the next age, "This was Jehovah come down out of heaven. I will kill you if you say he was a man." The idioms of his language and the figures of his rhetoric have usurped the place of his truth; and churches are not built on his principles, but on his tropes. Christianity became a Mythos as the poetic teaching of Greece and of Egypt, before. He spoke of Miracles; for he felt that man's life was a miracle, and all that man doth, and he knew that this miracle shines as the character ascends. But the word Miracle as pronounced by Christian churches gives a false impression; it is Monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain.

SERMON

In September of 1993, Greg Mortenson and four fellow climbers were attempting to ascend by the most difficult route up K2, the second highest mountain in the world and reputedly the most difficult, when one of his teammates was incapacitated by altitude sickness. He and another teammate rescued their companion, thereby losing their own opportunity for a final assault on the summit; the other two succeeded. During the difficult descent, Greg became separated from his companions and had to spend a night alone on the mountain at altitude in sub-zero weather with nothing more than a lightweight wool army blanket to protect him. He survived, deeply exhausted, and continued his descent of the mountain over the next six days. Some of you will be

recognizing this story by now; it's from Three Cups of Tea, which some of you have undoubtedly read. Although his porter found him the day after his night on the mountain, Greg got lost again a few days later and stumbled into the village of Korphe there in northern Pakistan late one afternoon – a village which was so isolated it didn't appear on any of his maps. Here he was taken to the tribal leader's home and fed and cared for with the best his impoverished hosts had to offer. He managed to get a ride down to the town he had meant to go to, but once there he felt drawn to return to Korphe, where he spent the next weeks recovering his strength and doing whatever he could to repay his generous hosts from his backpack and by using his skills as a trauma nurse. As he was about to leave, he asked to see the village's school; there was no school, nor was there a teacher there; the children met outdoors in the cold, taught half-time by a teacher shared with a neighboring village, reciting their lessons on the frosty ground by themselves when their teacher was at the other village. Greg promised that he would build a school for the village to repay their hospitality.

Not without a great deal of struggle, he managed to raise the \$12,000 needed to build the school and even more to build a bridge over the gorge which isolated its people, but by the time he finished he had been bitten by an enthusiasm to repeat this work in one village after another in northern Pakistan, and then in Afghanistan, until by now 131 schools have been set up by his Central Asia

Institute and more than 58,000 students, among them 40,000 girls, have been educated. His schools are among the most effective ways to change the conditions which breed terrorism in that area, and he received Pakistan's highest civilian honor, the Star of Pakistan, last March.ⁱ

From Greg Mortenson's point of view, all of this came about as a result of a perfectly understandable chain of events; from the point of view of the villagers of Korphe, his appearance out of nowhere, his repeated returns and the transformations that followed, were nothing short of a miracle. There was perhaps one odd thing in Greg's experience: the fact that he felt so drawn to return to Korphe when he could perfectly well have returned to the United States and picked up his life, preparing for the next great peak to conquer as had so many climbers before him. But something drew him back, and whatever it was changed his life and the lives of uncounted other people, children and adults, Americans and Pakistanis and Afghans alike.

Our reading this morning introduced a disagreement between William Ellery Channing and Ralph Waldo Emerson from the first few decades of the founding of our Unitarian tradition in this country in the early 1800's. For Channing, the Bible is a revelation of the divine whose report of the miracles of Jesus "are the most appropriate proofs of a religion which announces the elevation of man to spiritual perfection."ⁱⁱ For Emerson, "...the word Miracle as pronounced by

Christian churches gives a false impression; it is Monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain.”ⁱⁱⁱ For Channing and many of his Liberal Christian colleagues in the founding of Unitarianism, the miracles of Jesus proved his divinity and had to be defended as literally true, failing which Christianity itself would lose its persuasiveness. For Emerson, this reliance on reports of miracles undermines the real message of Jesus; presenting Jesus as a divine miracle worker distracts our attention from his teachings and leaves Christianity as an exotic doctrine set in an ancient time not like our own time at all.

As it turns out, Jesus wasn’t the only religious leader whose followers reported that their teacher could work miracles. There was, for example, Hanina ben Dosa, a teacher during the time of Jesus who also worked in Galilee; the traditions about Hanina describe a miraculous immunity to snake bites, two healings at a distance through prayer, and power over demons.^{iv} In the century before Jesus there were accounts of another Jewish teacher, Honi the Circle-Drawer, whose nature miracles reputedly included the gift of being able to control the rain with his prayers. The Jewish Talmud reports of Honi that “On one occasion when God did not send rain well into the winter (in the geographic regions of Israel, it rains mainly in the winter), he drew a circle in the dust, stood inside it, and informed God that he would not move until it rained. When it began to drizzle, Honi told God that he was not satisfied and expected more rain; it then

began to pour. He explained that he wanted a calm rain, at which point the rain calmed to a normal rain.”^v

Then there was Appolonius of Tyana, a neo-Pythagorean teacher and pagan holy man from the same era as Jesus.

He gathered around him a number of disciples who were amazed by his teaching and his flawless character. They became convinced that he was no ordinary man but was the Son of God. Their faith received striking confirmation in the miraculous things that he did. He could reportedly predict the future, heal the sick, cast out demons, and raise the dead. Not everyone proved friendly, however. At the end of his life, his enemies trumped up charges against him, and he was placed on trial before Roman authorities for crimes against the state.

Even after he departed this realm, however, he did not forsake his devoted followers. Some claimed that he had ascended bodily into heaven; others said that he had appeared to them, alive, afterwards, that they had talked to him and touched him and became convinced that he could not be bound by death...

At a later time, Jesus’ followers argued that Jesus was the miracle-working Son of God, and that Apollonius was an impostor, a magician, and a fraud. Perhaps not surprisingly, Apollonius’s followers made just the opposite claim.^{vi}

I grew up in a religious tradition which claimed that the same sorts of miraculous interventions as are reported in the New Testament could still be accessed today. My father has suffered from asthma all his life, and he would go

expectantly to healing revivals; we would see what appeared to be remarkable recoveries from a distance, but my father still suffered from asthma and there were occasional reports of leg braces thrown out by the healer which were later needed again or of expensive glasses for near-blindness which were thrown in triumph into the crowd in the momentary excitement of an apparent miracle but were needed again the next day – and tragically lost forever.

We had testimony meetings where people would report wonderful divine interventions in their lives which they were sure were straight from God. Over time, however, I began to notice that the same people were reporting these remarkable interventions and that often the same issues arose in their lives over and over again. It began to seem as though the people who most felt the need for such divine intervention did the least to hold their own lives together and solve their own problems. I noticed that my own family never offered such testimonies of divine intervention.

Our tradition believed in speaking in tongues. To a five-year-old looking down from the glassed-in nursery, watching people speaking in tongues was fascinating and, well, a little frightening. Later, I was determined to find some way of proving a case of a real, comprehensible human language being spoken by someone who had never learned the language; if I could have found such an occurrence, it seemed to me that it would prove the truth of the religion I was

struggling to believe if I could. I heard of one such story but couldn't verify it myself. In college and later in graduate school I did extensive research on speaking in tongues, or glossolalia, as it's more formally named. I learned that this phenomenon exists in many cultures around the world and during many eras of history. In every case of the sort I sought that the scholars reported, either some exposure to the supposedly unknown language had occurred, sometimes so early in life as to have been forgotten; or the supposed proof couldn't be tracked down – it turned out to be a report of an instance heard about rather than seen at first hand, something from the town or village just over the next hill. None of this is to dispute the undoubted ecstasy experienced by those who speak in tongues; it appears to occur in a trance-like state which can be very pleasurable. It just doesn't supply proof of divine intervention.

Over time I came to realize that attempts to prove the occurrence of miracles or other sorts of divine intervention always slipped through the nets of the outside investigators who were looking for solid, scientifically verifiable proof. Over time I came to realize that a skeptical observer would never be able to discover proof of divine intervention, of miracles of healing or straightening out lives or of giving the gift of speaking in a known terrestrial language. The lenses of science will never enable us to nail down the hand of God in human affairs; but then, again, if such proof **were** to be found, what would become of free will? We

would no longer have the choice of believing or not; we would be forced to believe and to obey. And, of course, claims of such divine intervention occur in many of our religious traditions to this day; among Christians and Jews, Buddhists and Muslims, Wiccans and tribal shamans. So even if such proof could be found, it would not be confined to one particular tradition to the exclusion of others. As I said earlier, even at the time Jesus, we have reports of miracles attributed to Jewish and Greek wonder workers among many others – so Channing’s claim of uniqueness for Christianity would not hold in any case.

Sometimes in looking for proof to support faith, we lose track of the context in which the miracles Jesus performed occurred. His people of Galilee were suffering horribly under the boot of the Roman Empire, impoverished, lacking any form of health care, hopeless. Jesus brought hope back into lives. He relieved the suffering of the blind, of paralytics, of those possessed by demons, of those who were hungry. Today we would speak of demon possession differently and talk instead about mental illness or epilepsy, but even today we know that there are those who can speak a word and help comfort a tortured soul. Even today there are those whose tender hands can nurse us back to health while others, friendless, wither away and never recover. We can never command God to deliver a miracle of healing, but we can always pray for the presence of the spirit

to comfort us and give us strength; and we can always serve as God’s hands to bring comfort and help and hope.

Today we speak of the miracles of modern medicine, and it is no small thing of which we speak. Many of us are alive and in good health because we have received care of the sort no one in the time of Jesus could find at any price. I broke both of my wrists and my right elbow in a fall when I was 21; had that fall occurred two millennia ago, my right arm would probably be largely unusable and perhaps withered from disuse; I would most likely have been unable to do enough work to support myself, let alone a family. I, too, would have been looking for someone to heal my arm and restore my hope. I would not ever discount the possibility that healings inside and outside occur in answer to prayer; what I do know is that in the absence of hope life loses purpose, and it was hope that Jesus dispensed most freely by his very presence, his willingness to pay attention to those who were suffering and those who were afraid, those who were marginalized and abandoned, those who were shunned and scorned.

So how did our nineteenth century theological forebears hold up over these years? It’s clear to me that Channing’s attempt at proof through miracles falls short; on the other hand, the strength he drew from his religious beliefs sounds along the centuries and inspires us to this day. Emerson is right that Miracle, used to prove religious truth, falls short of plausibility. On the other hand,

Emerson's followers have often gone much farther than he in abandoning the teachings of Jesus as well as the practice of joining congregations. If, as Thoreau had it, we can worship as well in the woods as in our churches, why should we bestir ourselves on a Sunday morning at all? I believe that it is only in the company of others that we are able to find what is best in ourselves. Awe and wonder in nature can certainly be private, separate experiences, but the real miracles only happen when we join hands with others to help and to give hope. And while I recognize that all religious traditions – including religious humanism – have the ability to guide us toward the kind of life we are called to live, I am not therefore called toward a relativism which regards all religions as the same and chooses to sample a little from every religious feast offered, or from none; rather, I am called to rootedness in the deepest truths of the teachings of my own Christian and Jewish traditions as understood through my Unitarian Universalist faith, all the while deeply respectful of others who are equally committed to their own religious traditions.

Greg Mortenson is a very ordinary person who was called to greatness by a chance encounter after a deeply disappointing failure to climb the mountain of his dreams. His life was transformed by a call to serve and he and his associates have worked miracles in one of the most remote and dangerous areas of the world. It is

given to all of us to work miracles like this if we will respond to the call within us to serve. This is what it means to me to be a follower of Jesus.

Amen.

ⁱ Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin, Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Promote Peace... One School at a Time, New York: Penguin Books, 2006, from pp. 7-33, *passim*; and "Greg Mortenson" in Wikipedia, at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greg_Mortenson.

ⁱⁱ William Ellery Channing, "The Essence of the Christian Religion," sermon in The Perfect Life, in The Works of W.E. Channing, D.D., Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1900, pp. 1001-1002.

ⁱⁱⁱ Oliver Wendell Holmes, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1885, pp. 120-121, quoting from the "Divinity School Address," 1838.

^{iv} Gerd Teissen and Annette Merz, The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996, p. 308.

^v "Honi HaM'agel" in Wikipedia at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honi_the_Circle-Maker, citing Mishnah Ta'anit 3:8.

^{vi} Bart D. Ehrman, The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 17, 18.