

In the Midst of Miracle

by Donne Hayden

In the Worship Sharing group, we've been reading a section in the Gospel of Matthew that focuses on the miraculous healing attributed to Jesus, like this one:

¹⁸ While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, 'My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.' ¹⁹ And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. ²⁰ Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, ²¹ for she said to herself, 'If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.' ²² Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, 'Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.' And instantly the woman was made well. ²³ When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute-players and the crowd making a commotion, ²⁴ he said, 'Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping.' And they laughed at him. ²⁵ But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. ²⁶ And the report of this spread throughout that district.

—Matthew 9:18-26

And last Tuesday night, in the group I'm part of at Community Friends studying Quaker mystical experience, we talked about similar miraculous healing attributed to George Fox. A book titled *George Fox's 'Book of Miracles'* first published in 1947, was recently reprinted by a group called Quakers Uniting in Publishing. In the Foreword, Rufus Jones writes that retrieval of the notes that produced the book "makes it possible for us to follow George Fox as he went about his seventeenth-century world, not only preaching his fresh messages of life and power, but as a remarkable healer of diseases with the undoubted reputation of miracle-worker."

Here is one example:

And after I went to a meeting at Arnside where there was a many people, and I was moved of the Lord to say to Richard Myers amongst all the people, 'Prophet Myers, stand up upon thy legs,' for he was sitting down. And he stood up and stretched out his arm which had been lame a long time, and said, "Be in known unto you all people and to all nations that this day I am healed."

And after the meeting was done, his father and mother could hardly believe it was made whole, and had him into an house and took off his doublet, and then they saw it was true. And he came to Swarthmore meeting and there declared how the Lord had healed him.

—George Fox's 'Book of Miracles'

Even as early as the 18th century, apparently, Friends were aware that miraculous cures were difficult to prove; acknowledging Fox's miraculous healings risked ridicule and thus a general dismissal of George Fox and his teachings. So they left them out of the published writings. As Jones explains it, "The early editors of his writings saw fit to tone down this aspect of the great founder of Quakerism and the *Book of Miracles* was not printed with the *Journal* and the other writings that have come down to us."¹

As 21st-century people of faith, what are we to do with miracles? First, let's define them. And being 21st-century people, let us refer to the scientists. For instance, John Edensor Littlewood, a mathematician at Cambridge University, made a study of improbable events and the odds of their happening. He defined a miracle as "an event that has special significance when it occurs, but occurs with a probability of one in a million."

*Littlewood's Law of Miracles states that in the course of any normal person's life, miracles happen at a rate of roughly one per month. The proof of the law is simple. During the time that we are awake and actively engaged in living our lives, roughly for eight hours each day, we see and hear things happening at a rate of about one per second. So the total number of events that happen to us is about thirty thousand per day, or about a million per month. With few exceptions, these events are not miracles because they are insignificant. The chance of a miracle is about one per million events. Therefore we should expect about one miracle to happen, on the average, every month.*²

Along these lines, according to an article in *Scientific American*, "The Law of Large Numbers guarantees that one-in-a-million miracles happen 295 times a day in America."³ And another

¹ Rufus Jones in "Foreword," *George Fox's 'Book of Miracles,'* Ed. Henry J. Cadbury (Philadelphia: Friends General Conference, 2000), v.

² "Littlewood's Law," *Wikipedia* <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Littlewood's_law> and *Skeptic.com* website <<http://www.skepdic.com/littlewood.html>>

³ Michael Shermer, "Miracle on Probability Street," *Scientific American*, 26 August, 2004. Accessed online at <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=miracle-on-probability-st>

mathematical law (perhaps tongue-in-cheek), the Law of Truly Large Numbers, states that “with a sample size large enough, any outrageous thing is likely to happen.”⁴ Here is one example. True story.

Choir practice at the West Side Baptist Church in Beatrice, Nebraska, always began at 7:20 on Wednesday evening. At 7:25 p.m. on Wednesday, March 1, 1950, an explosion demolished the church. The blast forced a nearby radio station off the air and shattered windows in surrounding homes.

But every one of the choir's fifteen members escaped injury, saved by a fortuitous coincidence: All were late for practice that night. Considering the sanctified site of the explosion, it was not surprising that some attributed the near miss to divine intervention.

They supposed rightly that the odds of unanimous tardiness were slim indeed, especially when the reasons were examined. Car trouble delayed two women. The minister and his wife and daughter were delayed by a dress that needed ironing at the last minute. Others were late because they paused to complete homework, finish a letter, or hear the end of a favorite radio show. One awoke late from a nap. Some could think of no special reason; they were just late.

It is impossible to calculate precise odds for all these events occurring at once. But past performance indicated that each person would be late for practice one time in four - producing a one-in-a-million chance that the entire choir would be late that night.⁵

We are impressed by those one-in-a-million miracles because they are unusual, but we live in the middle of far greater miracles without even noticing them. We are *surrounded* by the miraculous, so much so that we are blind to it, like a fish that can't see the water for the ocean.

For instance, the odds against your being here this morning are stunningly incalculable, far beyond the one-in-a-million criteria to qualify as a miracle.

Leaving aside self-determination, free will, and the many choices that brought you to be sitting where you are in the meetinghouse this morning, let's consider the likelihood of your physical presence on the planet. First, life-on-earth itself exists against inconceivable odds, and intelligent, conscious life (like you) is even more improbable. Science writer Stephen J. Gould puts it this way: humanity is “a *tiny* twig on an *improbable* branch of a *contingent* limb on a *fortunate*

⁴ Law of Truly Large Numbers” *Wikipedia* < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law_of_Truly_Large_Numbers>

⁵ Barbara Mikkelson, Snopes.com website <http://www.snopes.com/luck/choir.asp>. Urban Legends Reference Pages © 1995-2007. (Sources: Edeal, George. “Why the Choir Was Late.” *Life*. 27 March 1950 (pp. 19-23) and *A World of Luck*. Library of Curious and Unusual Facts. Virginia: Time-Life Books, 1991. ISBN 0-8094-7711-4 (p. 59).

tree." Using another metaphor, he makes the point that humanity is "a small bud that would almost surely not appear a second time if we could replant the bush from seed and let it grow again."⁶

Acknowledging the incredible luck that made life and the evolution of intelligent life possible on earth, let's examine the odds against you personally being here. Even the great atheist Richard Dawkins is impressed with the odds against your very existence. He writes: "the instant at which a particular spermatozoon penetrated a particular egg was, in your private hindsight, a moment of dizzying singularity. It was then that the odds against your becoming a person dropped from astronomical to single figures."

To understand the astronomical odds against your conception, here are some statistics that will give you a further sense of how unlikely a creature you are, and indeed, how stunningly miraculous it is that you exist at all.

Between puberty and age 50, on average, a man produces from 300 million to 230 million sperm *per day*, and each sperm has a unique set of DNA. On average, in a man's lifetime, 2 to 3 sperm will result in the fertilization of eggs resulting in 2 or 3 reproducing individuals—the rest of the sperm are doomed. On the other side of the equation, each woman has from two to four million ova, or eggs, present in her body from birth. From puberty to menopause, only about 400 to 500 will be capable of being fertilized. So somehow, one of the millions of your father's sperm reached one of the millions of your mother's eggs, and it just happened to be a viable sperm and a viable egg.⁷

In an article titled "The Chances of You Existing," Canadian humanist Orland Hooge comments on the odds against the sperm that fertilized the egg that produced you. "Right now you do exist," he says, "so the actual chance is 100%, but the predicted likelihood in the past of

⁶ Stephen J. Gould, "The Evolution of Life on Earth," *Scientific American*, 1994, 271 (4): 91.

⁷ Robin Baker, *Sperm Wars*

you being born would be essentially zero.”⁸ Calculating the likelihood of your birth using the figures on numbers of sperm produced over a period of time, he says, “tend[s] to overestimate your chances of being.” Focusing on the sperm includes only the numbers in the direct male line—your father, his father, his grandfather, etc. They do NOT include the following factors that would make the chances of your existence even less, such as the contribution from your mother and the direct female line, or the men and women in your ancestry who died without producing any offspring. (In some generations, those who died in war, or from famine or disease accounted for 50% of humanity.) Considering only the direct male line, Hooge continues: “You are the result of many generations of survivors. One of the people that died prematurely could have been your Dad or your Dad's Dad and so on. Somehow, none of your forefathers died before passing on his genes to the next man in your lineage. Because of the deaths mentioned most human lineages died out, while luckily yours survived.”

The sheer physical improbability against your being born is beyond imagining. Once you are here, however, the enormity of factors influencing your existence is staggering. To the physical odds against your existence, let's add the factors of free will, self-determination, chance and choice—not just your own, but those of all your ancestors. If your mother and father had never met, there would have been no you. If they had changed plans the night or day you were conceived, there would be no you. As Richard Dawkins puts it, “The lottery starts before we are conceived. Your parents had to meet, and the conception of each was as improbable as your own. And so on back, through your four grandparents and eight great grandparents, back to where it doesn't bear thinking about.” An example of this occurs in the novel *Time and Again* by Jack Finney. To change a gnarly problem in the present, a man goes back to the past and simply distracts a man

⁸ Orland Hooge, “The Chances of You Existing,” *Shaw.ca* website
<http://members.shaw.ca/omjhooge/Unusual%20Numbers/chances_of_you_existing.htm>

so that he never notices a certain woman who goes past him and into the theater. Thus, they never marry; they never have the child who becomes the father of the man who makes time travel possible and creates the problems in the book's present. So here, a man's *grandparents* never meet, and thus he never exists.

As for being *who* you are today, that is complicated by your will, your thoughts, your feelings, and all your interactions with your environment and other people. We can barely conceive of the complexity these *interactions* add to the odds against our being who we are and where we are. *Your very existence, in fact, qualifies as a miracle.*

Unfortunately, we are "anesthetized" to the miraculous by our familiarity with it. Some of us recognize the miraculous in ordinary life, however, like the poet Walt Whitman (1819-1892). I will end today with his poem titled "Miracles."

*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 the rest,
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,
Or birds, or the wonderfulness of insects in the air,
Or the wonderfulness of the sundown, or of stars shining so quiet
and bright,
Or the exquisite delicate thin curve of the new moon in spring;
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.*

*To me the sea 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?*