

As most readers of the blog know, I do not believe in miracles. At least in literal miracles as normally understood. I suppose most people think of an actual or literal miracle as an event that cannot be explained through natural causes but requires some kind of supernatural intervention, an act of a divine being who is outside of this nexus of cause and effect, an act of God.

I should stress that this does not necessarily mean that we *do* know the natural causes of everything that we do not consider miraculous - only that in principle they are discoverable. I stress that point because most of us have no clue how *most* of what happens happens. I couldn't explain how my toaster works if my life depended upon it, let alone anything (just about *anything*) having to do with biology, chemistry, or physics, let alone the wonders of the human brain, or the expansion of the universe, or, well, as I said, most things. But that doesn't mean that I need to appeal to a miraculous intervention of God every time I want to cook my breakfast or think about my brain. It just means that there are in principle explicable things that I myself can't explain.

A miracle would involve the violation of what we used to call "natural law. There aren't strictly speaking any laws, since, well, there is no cosmic congressional body to create them and no heavenly judicial branch to enforce them and, in any event, what we used to think of as laws often have exceptions that can be explained. And so, instead of invoking "law" it is it's probably better to talk about nature as acting in *highly* predictable ways when the constants are constant. Some things apparently can't happen.

It can't happen that humans unaided can elevate into the air and fly across town; or that humans can walk on luke warm water in the middle of a lake; or come back to life after being dead for three years; to pick just three out of a billion examples.

I have gotten into long debates with conservative evangelicals over whether it is possible to *prove* whether a miracle has ever happened in the past. Their view, boiled down to its essence, is (a) we should not disallow the possibility of miracle in principle, since that would be bringing an anti-supernaturalist bias into the discussion and one should never allow one's biases to dictate their conclusions, and (b) there is often good evidence for miracles - for example, people we trust who claim they have seen them (e.g., walking on water, or healing the sick with a touch of the hand, or, well, rising from the dead).

When I have these debates I simply bypass point (a) by saying that I'm willing to admit for the purposes of argument that miracles are possible and not allow my bias against them to have any bearing on the argument I make and then point out that however well attested a miracle is, there are always natural explanations that on balance are necessarily *more* probable than the supernatural explanations. (If your neighbor swears that she and ten others saw her pastor walking on the water, I can think of a dozen explanations for her being wrong about that, all of which are more probable than that her pastor was somehow able to suspend the "laws" of physics to make it happen.)

Even though I do not believe in miracles in a *literal* sense, I still think the world we live in is a fantastically, amazingly, unbelievably miraculous place, in a metaphorical sense. I have been captured by the wonder of the world more and more as I grow older. I can't get my mind around how there can be 100 billion stars in our galaxy, and that there are two trillion galaxies in our universe, and that there may be an incalculable number of universes. How does anyone realize this without becoming breathless in awe and marvel?

Or how can we understand that there are also 100 billion neurons in each of our brains?

The brain is an absolute wonder to behold and consider. I have to admit every time I reflect on it the words of the Psalmist come to mind "Oh Lord, I am fearfully and wonderfully made."

I have experienced a vastly increased sense of wonder and awe about the world, and about my brain, and my body, and my life, and the existence of life, and lots of other things over the past four years as I've developed a meditation practice. I spent three years simply meditating on my physical being, my body; now I've spent a year exploring my mind and the life principle that lies beneath/behind it all. Truly awe-inspiring. We are amazing beings.

The closest thing I've actually had to *witnessing* a "miracle," though, was when I was present for the birth of my two children, Kelly in 1980 and Derek in 1982. Absolutely mind-boggling. The appearance of new life. Out of non-life. The coming of new life into the world is one of those things I can't and never will understand. It's not that I think "God did it" - any more than I think that God made it rain yesterday (something else I don't understand). But I think new life is beyond my ability to comprehend and I marvel at it.

This has been brought very close to mind (and heart) this week. Three days ago my grandson was born to my son Derek and his wonderful wife Amanda. Elliot Benjamin Ehrman-Matson. A new life in the world. My third grandchild and first grandson. Life goes on, and on, and on. May it go on forever and may wonders never cease.



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