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Soul Seeing



Michael and Vickie Leach's son Chris, 47, whizzes his mother around Mill River Park in downtown Stamford, Connecticut. (Provided photo)

by Michael Leach

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Miracles happen.

This past year I could no longer get Vickie up the Golgotha of stairs to the bedroom without herculean effort or the aid of a Simon of Cyrene, who in our case was Maria of the Dominican Republic. Alzheimer's, 15 years of it, had taken away Vickie's ability to walk, talk, remember, hold a spoon, put on a shoe or clean herself. It was time to move from our home of 44 years to a one-floor apartment.

When the need was greatest, Maria told me more about the 15-story condo in the next town over where she cared for 94-year-old Marsha during the day. I had passed it before, a white wedding cake of a building atop Strawberry Hill on the edge of downtown Stamford, Connecticut. Maria heard there was a three-bedroom corner unit available on the seventh floor. I went to see it and knew Vickie and I could spend the rest of our days there. It was feel-good spacious, with a beautiful view all the way to the Sound, a screened-in porch, outdoor pool, underground parking, a gym, 24-hour doorman, and a superintendent living on the premises. The asking price was half the price of a similar condo in the town where we lived. Our son Chris lives five minutes away from it.

I accepted the seller's asking price, put our house on the market and sold it in six days at our asking price. On the seventh day, I rested. That was three months ago. Since then, I've been renovating the place to make it wheelchair friendly and beautiful. This is our last home, and I know that if I go before Vickie, my goal of her never having to go to a nursing home can be realized. She can live right here in a hospital bed if need be with a live-in caregiver at half the cost of a nursing home and with better care. Our kids' burden will be lighter if not light.

Miracles have always happened to us.

Even this crazy Alzheimer's thing has its graces. When we wake up at seven in the morning, Vickie laughs and speaks in tongues until about 9 a.m. when her brain starts to get tired and she slips in and out of some kind of dream. But don't we all go through our days in some kind of dream? How many of us express joy for up to two hours a day? Vickie has years left of having her needs met without having to ask, and I have more time to keep learning what she has taught me and our boys by her example: gratitude, no matter what. She used to say, "How could I not be grateful?

Some people never get a miracle in their lives. I've had two. I got a new eye when I was 22 and got to look like everyone else. And I met my prince."

Truly, I tell you, I was a frog, kissed into royalty by a Cinderella.

Now here is the best thing, the thing we all know and too often forget: Miracles come to everyone, to Vickie, to me, to you, without our earning them or deserving them. They just come. Never on our timetable, and never the way we plan. But we're so preoccupied with thoughts of what we want and how we want it and when we want it that we don't recognize them. They may as well never have happened.

Vickie used to begin many a day by saying, "This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad!" Gratitude is the alchemy that lifts the scales from our eyes and lets us see the spiritual blessedness that is in our sight.

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It has taken me decades of absorbing Vickie's attitude of gratitude like a black hole absorbs light to begin to relax and appreciate the miracles in my life. Worry follows me like a thief in broad daylight. An ingrown toenail makes me feel like Job. In this world, bad things happen to good people. Good things happen to bad people. There's no cure for it. As Clint Eastwood said to Gene Hackman in "Unforgiven" before shooting him in the face with a shotgun: "Deserve's got nothin' to do with it." The sun shines on the good and the bad, but as poet Ogden Nash observes, "The rain, it raineth on the just, and also on the unjust fella; but mostly on the just because the unjust steals the just's umbrella." Thinking about these things can be a one-way ticket to spiritual blindness. "It is only with the heart that one sees rightly," wrote Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. "What is essential is invisible to the eye."

So, the real miracle is not what we get but what we see with the eye of the soul. The "substance of things hoped for" (Hebrews 11:1) is not a spacious apartment at the top of a Golgotha of stairs but the recognition of the good of God. Its evidence, clear as laughter in the morning, is gratitude and joy.

[Michael Leach, publisher emeritus of Orbis Books, has put together the collections *The Way of Gratitude, The Way of Kindness, and The Way of Forgiveness* with his buds James Keane and Doris Goodnough.]

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