Opinion
Spirituality
NCR Voices

The sun illuminates the sky June 15 at Marin Headlands, California. (CNS/Chaz Muth)

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One of the problems with miracles is that they are, by definition, rare occurrences. At least they seem like rarities to most people since the term itself suggests a violation of the laws of nature or some other divine intervention that would otherwise be characterized as "impossible."

The healing of a loved one suffering from inoperable cancer or a rare disease; the safe landing of a malfunctioning airplane or a brakeless car; the timing of a gift, pay raise, or new job or form of support just when a family needs it most — all of these might elicit the "M"-word from the mouths of beneficiaries and onlookers alike.

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But recently I have been thinking about what it might mean for us to recognize the miraculous in everyday life. Why is it only when things seem to occur on an

extraordinary scale or during the most-dire situations that we pause to acknowledge the possibility of divine presence at work in our world?

I have written before about the latent "Holy Spirit atheism" that exists in the church among so many otherwise well-meaning Christians. And I think the fact that many people have lost a consistent sense of God's enduring, immanent and sustaining presence among us as spirit contributes to the collective perception that the miraculous happens only in the rarest or scarcest of circumstances, if at all.

This is tied, I believe, to what the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor means when he describes our modern social imaginary, a contemporary way of understanding reality that lacks an inherent sense of or openness to the divine or transcendence. As our societal narratives — and therefore our personal sense of self — shift in our modern age from one informed by the religious to the secular, we lose an intuitive awareness of the divine and transcendent. If we don't think about the Holy Spirit, don't talk about the Holy Spirit and don't pray to the Holy Spirit, then it is entirely sensible that we will find it harder to recognize the presence of God among us and acting in the world in the mundane as much as the exceptional.

Just as I have dedicated columns in the past to the importance of cultivating a sense of gratitude on more than one occasion, I want to propose here that we do a better job cultivating a sense of awe and wonder in the everyday miracles we are often too busy, too distracted or too disillusioned to see and recognize.

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While the inexplicable cure of a terrible illness or terminal cancer may rightly merit astounded responses and gratitude, what about the daily scientific wonders that shape our experience of the world and quality of life today? It is one thing to celebrate the incredible accomplishments of vaccine development at the record pace we've witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic with truly stunning technologies like those developed with mRNA.

And yet there are thousands of medical miracles that most of us take for granted every day and that have created the condition of the possibility for a quality of life that could only have been described as miraculous in centuries and millennia past. For example, think of antibiotics, corrective lenses for our vision, antiviral medications, hearing aids, surgical technologies, MRI and sonograms, dental care, organ transplantation, blood transfusion and so much more.

The next time you cut your finger and reach for a bandage and antibacterial medication, pause and consider what might have happened to an infected wound — even a minor one — in earlier eras of human existence. When I slow down to think about these amazing human achievements and how we benefit from them, I cannot help but find myself captivated by a spirit of awe and wonder at what is truly miraculous.

While avoiding a near plane or car crash is startling enough to elicit the description of miraculous, what about the fact that we live in a world in which human creativity and the laws of nature align to make such forms of travel possible in the first place? Recently, while waiting for my flight to board, I was sitting at an airport terminal watching planes taking off and landing. I started reflecting on the sheer improbability that we could move hundreds of people and thousands of tons of cargo high into the sky and transport it across the globe, and that we do it every moment of every day safely and without too much thought.

The slow normalization of that extraordinary feat had previously prevented me from fully encountering the awe and wonder I experienced in that moment. The same could be said about other forms of transportation, including the increasing efficiency of automobiles (think of the growing number of fully electric vehicles) and forms of public transit that move millions of people a day.

The steeple of St. Mary Catholic Church in Menasha, Wisconsin, is seen below a shining Mars

The steeple of St. Mary Catholic Church in Menasha, Wisconsin, is seen below a shining Mars Sept. 6, 2018. (CNS/Brad Birkholz)

While winning the lottery, coming into an unexpected inheritance or some other monies, or receiving the resources one needs at a critical time may qualify for the traditional description of a miracle, what about all of the other big and small ways we support one another in the often unacknowledged and unspoken miracles of

daily life?

Recently I was visiting some friends and met their beautiful baby daughter for the first time. Babies have a way of signaling the miraculous (we do often describe their arrival as the "miracle of birth" after all), but do we step back enough to consider the larger picture of daily, hourly, momentary miracles that make human life possible at all?

That a mother not only literally gives of herself in the months of pregnancy to sustain and grow a new human person within her is indeed miraculous, but so is the ability to breastfeed, to sacrifice one's time and energy at all hours of the day and night, to put the interests and concerns of a child ahead of one's own, and to do all the things required of parents and caregivers that seem impossible to do and give.

What I am getting at in these reflections is the call to slow down, to see the world anew, to look at what is before us and what we experience everyday as a form of divine intervention, a form of grace, a form of the miraculous. There is, I believe, a spiritual need that calls us to cultivate a better sense of awe and wonder in the world. This is what recognizing everyday miracles means: that God not only intervenes in rare occasions, but is present in a variety of human experiences at all times.

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Perhaps the next time you feel ill or are injured and can be healed by medications or procedures we too often take for granted today, you might reflect on the miracle that is the natural and medical sciences, embrace a feeling of awe and wonder, and give thanks to God.

Perhaps the next time you find yourself delayed in travel, you might reflect on the miracle that is modern travel technologies, embrace a feeling of awe and wonder, and give thanks to God.

Perhaps the next time you get frustrated or feel impatient at the behavior of your fellow citizen in the grocery store line, you might reflect on our interconnectedness and interdependence, embrace a feeling of awe and wonder, and give thanks to God.

Admittedly, this is all easier said than done, but I know that I will strive to take the daily miracles all around us less for granted and better seek to cultivate a disposition of awe and wonder at the marvelous, miraculous world in which we live.

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