

The Miracle Collectors

UNCOVERING
STORIES
OF WONDER,
JOY, AND MYSTERY

JOAN LUISE HILL
AND KATIE MAHON



WORTHY®

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*To all the soul sisters and miracle misters
who graced us with their stories.*

*To Shiloh, Ronán, Rory, and Finn:
May you never lose your sense of wonder,
or your ability to find joy in the moment.
As you grow in wisdom and grace, may you always
find the miracles that life holds.*

—Katie Mahon

*With thanks for the abundance of miracles in my life:
most especially my husband, Gene, our three children,
David, Alyssa, and Gregory, and their growing families,
all of whom bring wonder, joy, and mystery.*

—Joan Luise Hill

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Foreword

If you picked up this book, it is likely that you are someone who wants to believe that miracles can happen. You want to feel that when you are in the foxhole of life, something or someone greater than you will hold you, safely guide your way through a desperate situation, and answer your fervent, if silent, prayer.

Chances are you've entertained the possibility of divine intervention because of an experience: Perhaps, at just the right time, a song on the radio spoke to you with a message you knew was meant for you. You felt a sense that your deceased loved one had an arm around your shoulders, guiding your next step. Or maybe it was something much more dramatic. These are luminous moments when the known and rational world trembles at the edge of the divine world. At first you may label these moments as "unreal." You may mentally dismiss or ignore them, struggle to make sense of them, or wish you could return to the unknowing place of your former sense of reality. But you cannot: once you have a miracle experience, big or small, you are never the same. You are changed by your miracle.

Embracing your miracle story is not for the faint of heart, though it does have transformational power as the authors of this book and I came to understand. Two decades ago, Katie, Joan, and I, friends through our children, met one morning in a coffee shop in the small provincial town where we lived. Unexpectedly, we discovered over cups of coffee that we had each experienced a miracle, times when death had been diverted and tragedy had

been overcome. As incredulous as this seems, we quickly learned once you enter the world of the miracle, once you acknowledge to yourself and others that you have experienced your miracle, your journey becomes deeply personal but not just for you alone. Others are changed by your miracle.

Miracles impact the world far beyond the scope of the receiver. In our case, when we acknowledged our individual miracles together, we were catapulted into an unknown world. This is how we became miracle seekers. By exploring our own stories, searching out religious texts, and collecting stories shared by the many people we encountered along the way, we tried to compile the truest meaning of miracles.

To help us understand how miracles work, we were insatiable in looking for answers to questions like, “Why me and not them?” “What if you prayed for one miracle and got another?” “Can a miracle be experienced even if it is not asked for?” Or, like Einstein asked, “Does God play dice?” We sought answers by reaching deep within religious history, which, no matter how wise the philosophers, scientists, and theologians seemed at the outset, never felt completely satisfying.

Engaging with the transformational potential of every miracle we “met” to the best of our individual abilities, we learned so much more than we anticipated. What we learned became much more meaningful when we worked and shared that knowledge collaboratively. For over ten years, we followed this path, which led us deeper toward miracles, life, friendship, and an increased understanding of how the Divine works within our lives. In 2010, through some sort of miracle of its own, our book, *The Miracle Chase*, was published. While Katie and Joan continued on the path of miracles conducting seminars and workshops across the country, God had a different plan for me.

The miracles in my life, including what I learned from writing *The Miracle Chase*, have taken me on a path I never planned for, nor expected. I

write this foreword from my hotel balcony, looking toward Waikiki Beach and the beautiful Pacific Ocean. I am here to support the people of the state of Hawaii as they work to improve their childcare systems. Chasing miracles has led me here. It reminds me that miracles ripple through time and space like waves upon the shore, returning to the source to ripple time and time again.

My journey—the journey that began when a neighbor’s nanny shook my six-month-old baby, leaving her with seemingly little hope for survival—has now taken me into the fields of childcare, child abuse prevention, and supporting families with children who have special needs. One of the most amazing synchronicities of my life is that the advocacy for legislation we did long ago has come full circle and now funds states and territories to improve the quality and accessibility of childcare for all families.

Creating meaning from our family’s tragedy became my personal mission statement: to support others less fortunate, to understand the impact of trauma on families—the homeless, families who are very low income, families with children with special needs, and families experiencing violence or addiction—that they may find support through quality childcare and early education as well. I know that through divine grace my daughter, Liz, not only lived, but thrived. I will never say that what happened to her and to our family was good: we endured too much suffering for that. However, there were miracles to guide our way, helping us as we raised our voices to make sure what happened to Liz as a baby didn’t happen to another family. While my miracle led me to this specific field of work, Katie and Joan have continued to carry the message of *The Miracle Chase* to countless groups across the country. The result of their efforts and ongoing journey is this book, *The Miracle Collectors: Uncovering Stories of Wonder, Joy, and Mystery*.

I believe that you picking up this book is no accident, that it is another

wave of grace and it is part of the miracle journey the three of us started when we wrote *The Miracle Chase* together. Like Hawaii's waves that begin far beyond the horizon, there is an illusionary line I can see from my balcony where the infinite sky meets the blue, blue sea. To let a miracle guide you, to choose to make the most of any life experience, good or bad, is like focusing on the horizon and trusting that even if we cannot see them, waves of grace are surely forming and moving forward toward our shore.

My wish for you is that you find within these pages connection and camaraderie with others who have had a luminous experience and are trying to make sense of it. May you honor the miracle(s) in your life with courage, and follow the path you are given with hope, faith, and inspiration. And most importantly, I hope you share the miracle stories you uncover with others. We need to celebrate these gifts of grace with gratitude and open hearts. Welcome to the world of miracles!

Happy to have you on the journey.

—*Mary Beth (Meb) Phillips, Honolulu, Hawaii*

September 2019

The Miracle Collectors

Prologue

When the question “What is a miracle?” is posed, people don’t wait to hear the answer before they want to hear or tell the stories.

It is stories that carry the power as they have for millennia.

*—The Miracle Chase: Three Women, Three Miracles,
and a Ten Year Journey of Discovery and Friendship*

What if you had been given a miracle and didn’t know it? Or, you knew you had experienced one but never told anyone about it? There are plenty of reasons to distance yourself from miracles. For some, miracles conjure up ideas of magical thinking, falling outside the limits of what is possible. Others are leery of miracles because they fear being ridiculed or thought to be odd, too religious, or just plain crazy. And yet, 80 percent of Americans say they believe in miracles, a statistic that has remained steady for decades.¹

The question of what constitutes a miracle is one the two of us have been contemplating for the better part of two decades, and the answer has been a moving target. Is a miracle biblical in proportion, which arrives like a crackling thunderbolt from the sky? Is it a personal sign that only you can recognize, or a coincidence that changes your outlook or your life? Miracles can be big and bold, immediately having consequences for the whole world, or nuanced and personal, having consequences for one person at a time.

There are those who instantly recognize a divine hand at play wherever

they look. “Hallelujah!” and “Amen!” We were not those people, at least not back then. That was twenty years ago, when an ordinary meeting among friends sparked a spiritual journey, one we wholeheartedly embarked on, but with no idea where it would lead.

The three of us (Katie, Meb, and Joan) were meeting at the local coffee shop, having made the morning drop-offs at school, eight children among us. Busy mothers, professional careers on hold, we had our hands in every volunteer pot you could imagine, from women’s health to childcare advocacy, from classroom helping to fundraising for ballot measures supporting the local public schools. We were more “doings” than “beings,” Catholics by varying degrees, and certainly with no time to become spiritual seekers.

Joan and Meb knew each other through their sons, Katie and Joan through their daughters. As the common denominator, Joan saw how much the three of us had in common: Jesuit universities, nonprofit passions for the underdog and underserved, and a burning desire to make the world a better place. Joan was determined to find a cause we could all embrace. A spiritual odyssey was not on the list of options she imagined. And yet, we each had our story.

Meb was well known in our small town just east of San Francisco. Her oldest child, Liz, six months old at the time, had been shaken so violently by a neighbor’s nanny that one doctor said it was equivalent to being thrown out of a second-story window onto concrete. If she survived, she would likely be “a vegetable,” he said. One night in the hospital, when Meb was at her lowest point and felt that Liz was losing her battle to survive, she was approached by a kind man in a white coat. He told Meb that though Liz suffered from shaken baby syndrome, she would be fine. Despite Meb’s efforts to locate the man later, no one seemed to know who he was, and she was never able to find him. Liz became Meb’s miracle. She not only survived but flourished, though the assault had caused retinal detachment in both

eyes and Liz was irreversibly blinded. In spite of the severity of her injuries, Liz worked to regain her body function, learned braille, and with her PhD in hand, works to open the world to others with disabilities. When the nanny was given a slap on the wrist by the courts and a green light to be a nanny again, Meb sprang into action, fostering new legislation in California, creating the TrustLine Registry, so that what happened to her family would not happen to another. Meb was subsequently honored at the White House for changing the face of childcare in her own state and creating a blueprint for other states to follow.

Our meeting that morning was to get an update on the remarkable survival of Joan's eighth grade son, David.

We knew what had transpired over the past few months. Joan just happened to be at the middle school for a meeting at the exact time David was struck by crushing chest pain during his physical education class as he tried to break his own running record. Had Joan not been there, she would have chalked it up to too many push-ups at swim team practice the day before, as the on-call pediatrician she took him to had done. Instead, she was on high alert and scheduled a follow-up visit with his regular doctor, who insisted on a cardiac workup. The tests uncovered a lethal cardiac anomaly, usually discovered upon autopsy when someone drops dead, apparently, as David could have done that day.

David's right and left coronary arteries originated on the same side of his heart. That is a problem because his right coronary artery ran directly between his aorta and pulmonary artery. When they engorge with blood, as happens with exercise, the misplaced coronary artery is pinched closed, causing cardiac arrest. David was a walking, ticking time bomb. His diagnosis led to a terrible catch-22. Open-heart surgery could be performed to try and move the artery to its correct position on the other side of his heart, which no one with similar problems had ever survived. Or, bypass surgery

could be performed in the hope that the bypass would work when needed. Unfortunately, it would need to be redone every ten to fifteen years, relegating this athletic, otherwise healthy child to the couch for the rest of his life. The week before surgery, Joan; her husband, Gene; and David had been told the optimal fix, moving the coronary artery, was not an option. There just was not enough room to maneuver between the two arteries, and the surgeon would have to do the less desirable bypass.

On the day of the surgery, David was sprinkled with water from Lourdes by his grandmother. Lourdes, France, represents a place of miracles and has been a shrine and pilgrimage site for Catholics for over a century. Bernadette Soubirous, a young girl the same age as David, had encountered the Blessed Mother there and had been directed to uncover a spring that had healing waters. Her story had captured Joan's heart as a child, and *The Song of Bernadette*, an Academy Award-winning movie from 1943, was her favorite.

In the agonizing hours in the waiting room, worrying about whether David would live or die, Joan and Gene made their way to a far corner, well away from the other parents who were crowded around the TV with its tales of the absurdity of life orchestrated by Jerry Springer. After several hours, Joan was called up to the nurses' station for an update. It was a call from the operating room to let them know David was on cardiac bypass, the most dangerous part of the surgery. As she put down the phone, someone called her maiden name, Luise. She searched for the source and noticed that the television, a moment ago as she walked to the phone tuned into inane talk show central, was now playing *The Song of Bernadette*. It turns out Bernadette's mother's name was Louise and someone in the movie had called to her, capturing Joan's attention.

But how had the channel changed? The other parents in the waiting room were confused because no one had touched the TV and they didn't

understand what had happened. As Joan stared at the surreal scene on the television screen and explained the movie to the other parents, she was enveloped in a sense of peace and knew that everything was going to be all right. Just as the movie ended, the renowned surgeon they had tracked down to perform David's surgery came in with miraculous news. He had been able to do the optimal fix. The minimum space he needed to move the artery to its proper place, the width of no more than a nickel, had been there exactly! David could go on to live a normal and active life.

That morning in the coffee shop, Joan didn't seem to want to engage, at least not in the miraculous experience of what we knew had transpired; she was ready to sweep it under the carpet and move on. David was good—no point in dwelling on what might have been. Katie knew better. She could relate to Joan's reticence, but fearing Joan would dismiss something truly extraordinary, Katie finally decided to share her own miracle, an experience that had haunted her for her entire adult life. It was not a story she shared often or particularly willingly. This morning was different. That is the thing about miracles—they stop time, or maybe they open a space in time.

"I have a story," Katie began. Maybe it was the way she said it but the mood at the table shifted. Somehow, Joan and Meb understood this was not going to be any ordinary story.

"It was the summer after my freshman year in college. I worked until three every day near Union Square in San Francisco. I took the first ferry home to Tiburon, but it didn't leave until four. so I always had time to kill. As I window-shopped in front of I. Magnin, a man approached me. He was clean-cut, maybe thirty, a white-button-down-shirt-and-khaki-pants kind of guy. He said he was a stranger in town and that he'd had eye surgery; he needed to look up his best friend's parents in the phone book, and he couldn't do the close-up work, so could I please help him?

"My first reaction was to put to use what I'd learned in childhood—

‘Don’t take candy from a stranger’—and I said no I couldn’t help him and moved to the crosswalk. He followed me and repeated his request. He was so persistent and finally he said, ‘I’m staying up the street at the Hyatt. Won’t you please help me out?’ *Oh, the Hyatt*, I think to myself, *a place that will be crowded with people*. And I have the time and can put to use another mainstay of my childhood: ‘Be a good Samaritan.’

“As you guys know, the Hyatt is built on a hill, and as I recall, we entered the building a floor below the lobby. Sure enough, there were plenty of people around. We got in the elevator, and when it stopped on the lobby level, everyone got out—except for the man. He had pressed the mezzanine button and I thought, *Okay, it will also have people milling about*, but when the doors opened on the mezzanine and we got out, it was deserted. At this point I began to feel uncomfortable and unsure of myself. I followed him down the hall and into a long conference room. In the back, against the wall, was a pay phone with a phone book resting on the metal shelf below it.

“He stood behind me as I began to look down the columns for a Brown family that lived on Marina Boulevard. Maybe a minute went by. Suddenly, I felt a wave of terror wash over me. It’s not like I went down a checklist; it was an instantaneous understanding that none of this made sense: *He has no patch on his eye. Why doesn’t he know the first name of his friend’s parent? Why does he ask me?* I was in a deserted place with a stranger, just what I’d been taught my whole life not to do.

“I turned around to look at him. His face had completely changed; his eyes had darkened. He knew that I knew and that I was terrified. It was part of his sick game, as if he was waiting for me to figure out I was trapped.

“All of a sudden, there was movement at the door. A bellman walked in and said to me, ‘Don’t you think you should be going now?’ I walked out with the bellman into a waiting elevator, the door already open. The man did not follow. We got off on the lobby level and it took me a few seconds

to get my wits about me. I was completely shell-shocked. When I finally looked around to thank the bellman, he was nowhere in sight.”

Meb and Joan looked pretty flabbergasted at this point; Katie felt spent, but there was more to the story.

“About fifteen years went by. I told very few people what had happened because I felt stupid and embarrassed, and I wasn’t looking for, or wanting, a spiritual explanation for what had happened, even though my dear Irish Catholic mother did. ‘The bellman was an angel,’ she told me at the time. But I saw all that religious stuff as hocus-pocus. I was occasionally awakened in the middle of the night by a nightmare that included the man’s face, my heart pounding. But, other than that, I was able to put it out of my mind.

“And then one evening, as Jim [Katie’s husband] and I read the morning newspaper, toddlers tucked into bed, he handed me the front-page section and said, ‘Oh my God, Katie, I think this is your guy.’ There, on the front page, was a photograph of Ted Bundy. He’d been put to death in Florida the day before. The article went on to recount his victim profile: young women between the ages of nineteen and twenty-one, five foot six or five foot seven, thin, and with long blond or brown hair parted in the middle—just as I had looked back then. He lured many of his victims feigning injury and was a frequent visitor to San Francisco in the mid-1970s, when he was at the height of his murder spree. He was even a suspect in two murders in the Bay Area during that time. I felt it in the deepening pit forming in my stomach. Jim was right—this was my guy.”

Meb and Joan had been speechless. If Katie had known it would be the last time in a long time for a moment of such blessed silence, maybe she would have savored it longer. Instead, after Katie shared her story, it was as if a collective light bulb went on in our respective brains. The three of us recognized our common cause: miracles. Defining, chasing, and researching them in religions, faith and wisdom traditions, and in history, philosophy,

and science. All of a sudden, there were burning questions that needed answers. “Why me—why did I get a miracle and not someone else?” “How can we possibly believe in miracles when there is so much suffering in the world, and when so many don’t seem to get one?”

The miracle chase was on. Like most journeys of the spirit, this one also included unexpected twists and turns—some were enlightening and full of wonder, while others were difficult and potentially tragic. Along the way, Joan was diagnosed with invasive breast cancer, Meb’s marriage imploded, and Katie’s husband survived the “widow maker,” a nearly fully blocked main artery to the heart. No doubt, these experiences altered our initial thoughts on *The Miracle Chase*, because God and miracles look very different from the trenches. We discovered that miracles are chameleons and sometimes can be blessings in disguise.

Telling our stories beyond our own threesome took courage. After all, what would people think? Believing a miracle happened to you can be uncomfortable and messy; it may mean revisiting experiences of trauma, fear, and confusion that render you vulnerable. Miracles require a reordering of a seemingly ordered life. For Meb, this meant accepting the miracle she got and not the one she once prayed for. For Katie, it meant spiritual complacency was no longer an option. And Joan was forced to stop moving long enough to contemplate what had happened and the gift her family had been given.

In sharing our miracle stories, we navigated the waters of mystery and mishap together. Faith and friendship was a winning combination that we counted on again and again in order to survive. Before we knew what was happening, we became soul sisters—connecting on a more honest and deeper level—and it felt good. Which is not to say it was always easy.

Looking back, we could see that our miracle project was able to move forward because the three of us had to cultivate our best characteristics,

without which we would have been doomed. We learned early on that our miracle chase was bigger than we were, and we had to check our egos at the door. We each had good ideas, but not surprisingly, some contradicted and clashed, so we had to develop the ability to listen without judgment or agenda. We were all pretty adept at giving help but discovered how hard, though necessary, it is to ask for help. We learned that it is okay to dream big and believe in yourself, and that cultivating a generosity of spirit pays untold dividends for your soul and your relationships. We remained curious, open to where the journey would take us.

In our first book, we share a definition of miracles that we developed through research and our own experience: “A miracle is a sign of divine intervention in the world that creates an unfolding and beneficial connection between God and humankind.”² This notion that miracles *unfold* is unique; they burrow their way into your soul over time and ripple outward into perpetuity. Being open to the possibility of miracles is the first step. Soren Kierkegaard talked about miracles as manifestations of Divine incognito, understanding the concept that God works in anonymous and mysterious ways.

When *The Miracle Chase* was published and we traveled the country to promote it, a remarkable and unexpected consequence began to unfold. Sharing our own stories helped unearth more tales of miracles. Others were inspired to share stories they never had before, stories they didn’t think mattered, stories they had forgotten. We had opened the door for them to tell the stories that in many cases represented defining moments in their lives, as our stories had been in ours. When we created an elixir of vulnerability and spiritual connection, others were willing to partake. Like treasures held close to the heart, we cherished each story we heard and we became aware of our own role in bringing these stories into the light of day. It was an unanticipated gift and it is where our miracle journey comes full circle and

expands. As we continued in our quest, we became miracle collectors too. By sharing miracle stories, not only of our own, but now of others, we are connecting with each other through grace, acknowledging the presence of the Divine in each of our lives. The powerful and wondrous gift of grace encourages all of us to seek to experience the sense of hope and connection we have come to appreciate.

A spiritual path forward emerged in the insights we discovered along the way. First, to recognize a miracle you have to keep an open mind and become more aware of what is around you. This new level of awareness sometimes requires a change in perception or even a full-on paradigm shift. Second, sharing our stories deepens our connections with each other and sparks an understanding of how much we have in common. Finally, by opening ourselves up to a spiritual journey, we can find greater meaning and a sense of fulfillment and purpose in our lives.

Accordingly, this book is organized into three parts, each building upon the other. “Becoming Aware” focuses on how we need to notice and appreciate not only what we see in front of us, but what is beyond or behind what we see, in order to discover the miracles that surround us. While we are reminded of living in the moment and being present at every turn, this is far easier said than done. This section offers insights on how to foster a practice of increasing awareness of ourselves, those around us, and the places and things we encounter every day.

The second part of the book revolves around “Deepening Connection” with each other. It offers a road map for reengaging with one another in ways that peel back the protective layers we have put up over the years, unveiling our authentic selves. When we share our stories with each other, we discover we are far more interconnected with more in common than we could have imagined. By exercising a generosity of spirit, and offering one another a sense of forgiveness and understanding, we can reach a

new level of trust, with deeper connection and faith in the human spirit as the result.

Once we become more aware and engage on a deeper level, our journey takes us to the third part of the book, “Finding Meaning.” Discovering we are where we are meant to be and saying yes to the job we are meant to have take the courage to dream and to be grateful that we are the right person in the right place at the right time. It is empowering to contribute to the world in your own unique way and to perpetuate what we call the ripple effect of miracles.

Einstein once said, “There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.” This notion of “everything” broadens our own definition. For in the center of the miracle debate is always the understanding that much of the time the inexplicable cure does not come, and tragedy and suffering continue to mar the near and far corners of our world. God does not use a magic wand to cure all evils, though we have all wished for that at one time or another. We have no answer to the unanswerable question, “Why?” But, as we came to learn on our own journey, if we can see miracles all around us, then we’re all privy to divine gifts. Think of a sunset streaked with rays of pink and gold, of the collective goodness in a community that lifts lives up, of the unconditional love a parent has for her child. Think of stories of courage, forgiveness, gratitude, faith, hope, and love. If we learn to notice and appreciate the miracles that are available to each one of us, then none of us is left out of God’s embrace.

In the pages that follow, you will find the stories that we have collected from many kind souls and generous spirits who shared them with us, and now with you. As you will see, miracle stories need no embellishment; the stories themselves are alive. These powerful tales illuminate the path before us. Join in as they guide us on our continuing miracle journey.

PART ONE

Becoming Aware

To look at everything always as though you were seeing it either for the first or last time: Thus is your time on earth filled with glory.

—Betty Smith, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*

CHAPTER ONE

Terminal Course

All external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure...fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important...there is no reason not to follow your heart.

—Steve Jobs, Commencement Address, Stanford University

What if you found out you had a week to live? One week. Think about that for a minute. Now, when you look at your calendar, your priorities change, probably drastically. No need to keep that dentist appointment, or make the board meeting, or even show up at work. It is time to call your mom or your best friend, be home for after-school games and snacks, make amends. Maybe it is time for a quick trip to paradise, wherever that may be for you, and maybe you want to write down some words of love, encouragement, and wisdom to leave behind for those you care about most. One thing is for certain: with one week left on earth, it should be easy to separate the wheat from the chaff. The clock is ticking.

What stays, what goes, and what gets added to the mix? For most of us, when facing death, connecting with friends and family will be paramount. The simple things in life that are taken for granted will gain new meaning: the sound of the front door opening, the voice of someone you love, the warmth of the sun on your face, the sound of the leaves rustling in the trees

or crunching beneath your feet, and the birds as they call. Regrets might surface: the dreams never realized, the changes never made, or the time wasted being unfulfilled, unhappy, or less than who you are meant to be.

If you have a week to live, time becomes a precious and scarce commodity. The seconds tick by in precise rhythm, becoming hours past until your seven days are up. You are handed the gift of roughly sixteen hours every morning. The question is, what would you do with it today if you only had a total of 112 hours left? If you are like Joan, you will sleep deprive yourself to the grave and stretch those sixteen-hour days into twenty; if you are like Katie, you will get the recommended daily allotment of sleep and hope one of the mornings you will wake up from the nightmare: reality meets denial.

Besides an acute awareness of diminishing time and the commensurate imperative to focus on the only things that really matter, some would also take a spiritual inventory. The big questions floating around for years would finally need answers. *Is there a God? Do we live on? Have we left the world a better place?* Others would cling to their great faith and certainty that they'll be with the Divine and in a better place.

There are some who identify with what John Lennon said: "I'm not afraid of death because I don't believe in it. It's just getting out of one car and into another."¹ From earth to heaven in one easy ride. Some have no faith at all and think there will be nothingness when the bell tolls at midnight on the seventh day. Although they say there are no atheists in foxholes, if you are dying in a week, you are in one. Will you hedge your bets and pray anyway?

The seventeenth-century mathematician Blaise Pascal had a famous wager about believing in God. "Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is...if you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing."² Well, perhaps you think you will look a fool, but you won't really care

when you are dead. This reminds us of a woman we met who told us of an experience she had after being diagnosed with ovarian cancer. Feeling at her lowest point in a long, scary ordeal, she was lying in bed staring at the ceiling, when all of a sudden she saw the face of Christ in the contours of the chandelier. Later, the same image appeared in the grain of her oak closet door. Although she was not religious, she decided she should pray. Ultimately, she fully recovered and never encountered the strange images again. Though we don't know if she ever changed her mind about religion, she felt the encounter was important enough that years later she wanted to share the experience with us, as if for safekeeping.

A week might seem an eternity to live if you think you only have minutes. Take the gentleman who shared an elevator ride with Katie's daughter Laura the day after the Miracle on the Hudson, when on January 15, 2009, US Airways flight 1549 landed in the Hudson River. Offering a pleasantry, Laura asked, "How are you?" to which he declared, "I'm great! I was on that airplane yesterday and I am so thankful to be alive; my life will never be the same again!"

Not all of us are so instantaneously receptive to reaching the same conclusion. We miracle collectors belong to this group, and so we understand the reticence involved before admitting a miracle. At one book club meeting where Joan had Skyped in, a woman shared a story about a day many years ago as she sat in a London airport. Her flight was boarding but she had the urge to go peruse the nearby bookstore, grab some coffee, and take her time. She approached the desk and asked when the next flight to New York City would be. Informed it was in less than an hour and she could switch to that flight, she made the arrangements and was off to the bookstore. The flight she changed was Pan Am flight 103, the one that blew up over Lockerbie, Scotland. It had never occurred to her to see this event as deliverance until years later, when she was transformed by the response

of her fellow book group members. Overwhelmed by her admission, her friends were shocked that they had never heard this story and immediately challenged her to consider that her life had been touched—saved, in fact—by the Divine. Unlike the wise gentleman who survived the US Airways flight, it takes some of us a while to join the ranks of the forever appreciative and to keep our eye on what is most important.

Katie received an email that had been circulated among her college classmates from their friend Martha who had just been diagnosed with an aggressive cancer. If you want to know what a death sentence feels like, Martha knows, and this is what she said:

I was diagnosed last week with Stage IV pancreatic cancer that has spread to my liver. There it is...in black and white. The worst words you can hear when you are sitting across from the doctor in his office. Outside, the sun is still shining, the traffic is still moving, and inside that room your life has been turned upside down in a flash. You struggle to breathe and take it all in, but at the same moment wish you could pass out!

You walk out of the door and start thinking about how you are going to live your life from that day forward. Everything has changed in an instant, and nothing seems to be the same...

Katie's college friend may have a better sense of the timing of her death, and this must be terrifying. However, we are all going to die—most of us just have the luxury to put it out of our minds from day to day. A Buddhist teacher, Sangye Khadro, suggested we “imagine being on a train, which is always traveling at a steady speed—it never slows down or stops, and there is no way that you can get off. This train is continuously bringing you closer

and closer to its destination: the end of your life.”³ A customized one-way ticket, arrival date unknown.

The good news is it does not have to take a serial killer or a terrorist bombing or a terminal diagnosis or even a practice exercise to remind us of our eventual demise. Becoming more aware of every miracle moment you are alive is about bridging the gap between the death sentence you have been handed and the reprieve you are going to get at the end of the week when you realize it was all a mistake. Turns out you are not going to die in a week after all. Relief! Gratitude! And now, you have a changed outlook, kind of like Scrooge on Christmas morning. Katie can picture Martha, a mother of seven, doing a jig, a somersault—*anything*—if someone told her it was all a mistake.

What might it look like to feel like Scrooge did on Christmas morning, every morning? His profound appreciation when he realizes he hasn’t missed Christmas; his enthusiasm as he imagines he could help Bob Cratchit and cure Tiny Tim; his exuberance as he delights in the faces of children whose very existence once annoyed him. Even the snow seems to sparkle. “Golden sunlight; Heavenly sky; sweet fresh air; merry bells. Oh, glorious. Glorious.”⁴ The Ghost of Christmas past showed him missed opportunities for a different life, the Ghost of Christmas present showed him the error of his ways, and the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come—well, that is when he stared into his own grave and got religion. He sees the world anew through the eyes of one completely transformed.

If you are lucky, like the new and reformed Scrooge, maybe you know exactly what to do with the moments of your life that you have left. Or at least you know what not to do. No more detritus like so much tumbleweed allowed in your door, worry and uncertainty and time wasted on the things that do not matter. Regardless, we all have an opportunity to consider how

to be more deliberate and happier, to find a way to see the world through fresh eyes.

Joan has never forgotten the invasive breast cancer diagnosis she received twenty years ago and the potential death sentence it was.

“Trust me, you don’t have to remind me I could die tomorrow. The feeling has never left me. When I am overwhelmed by my responsibilities and commitments, I remember my cancer diagnosis acting as a free pass to rearrange my life. The busyness of my days should never mask the splendor in having them to live. It completely changed the way I think.”

Mahatma Gandhi, among others, said, “Live as if you were to die tomorrow.” Why? Because it keeps us focused on what is important and all that matters right now, this minute. Hansa Bergwall and Ian Thomas agree. They founded WeCroak, an app designed to notify you five times a day, “Don’t forget, you’re going to die.” This is followed by a life-affirming, or death-affirming, quote, like “Your own positive future begins in this moment. All you have is right now” (Lao-tzu), or, “You could leave life right now. Let that determine what you do and say and think” (Marcus Aurelius). The app is based on the Bhutanese philosophy that to be a happy person, we must contemplate death five times a day. At recent count, nearly thirty thousand people had paid ninety-nine cents for the privilege, average age thirty-five. Those of us meaningfully older than the average do not need to be reminded, though Katie signed up anyway.

No routine reminders are necessary for one Denver hospice nurse who told us about a patient she became especially close to before he died. She asked him to send her a sign from the other side to let her know he was okay. A few days after he passed away, she was strolling down a random downtown sidewalk when a beautiful dragonfly, its translucent greens and blues sparkling in the sun, began buzzing around her purse. She thought it was odd, a dragonfly in the city. She gently tried to shoo it away, but

it seemed intent on sticking around until it landed on the sidewalk just in front of her, forcing her to stop for fear of stepping on it. And then, the dragonfly flew away, revealing something etched into the sidewalk. She leaned down for a closer look and recognized the initials of her patient who in life had been a cement contractor. Even though it was against the rules, he had told her he always signed and dated the last concrete square he poured on any major project.

This hospice nurse embodies her mission to minister to the dying and believes she was where she was meant to be that day. She believes death is a transition, not an ending, to something else that allows for leaving a mark, or a clue. Being a constant witness to death must change you. In her case, it softens the hard edge between life and death, making her a spiritual seeker and an explorer of the in-between and the mystery beyond it.

Death is the great equalizer. There is no way out for any of us. Once death has come for someone you love, and you have had a front-row preview to its difficult possibilities—the gasping for air, the unrelenting pain, the bodies and minds no longer recognizable—it is not difficult to remember that we are all mortal and our time is limited. After the seeming finality of death, it is a gift when those who have passed away reach us with a message, a sign, or even a hug.

Katie describes her own experience with her father's untimely death at age fifty-four.

“At some point in the six short weeks after his cancer diagnosis, I remember my mother telling me that ‘nothing prepares you’ for the finality of it. She was right, of course. And, at the time, I was so black and white, dead and gone, which didn’t help. Fortunately, I have evolved since then. I used to scoff at ‘passing away’ or ‘lost,’ and I now embrace the euphemisms. I realized eventually that he gave us a gift at the moment he left.”

As Katie describes in *The Miracle Chase*, her father was in a coma, his

eyes open and rolled back. For hours his breathing had not changed, a rhythmic, rattling gasp for air that made her want to run fast and far away.

“Each breath made me squirm and squeezed some hollow pit in my stomach into an ever-smaller space.”

Suddenly, and for no reason, for her father’s breathing had not changed, her mother leaned down to say a prayer over him, a traditional Catholic blessing for the dead. “May your soul and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.” As her mother spoke, his eyes came down to meet hers with recognition and peace.

Katie continued, “I braced myself for another breath, but it never came. His death was truly a passing, ‘out of one car and into another,’ lost around a corner to those of us left behind.”

Witnessing the untimely death of someone Katie loved had an effect much like suffocation. “The spirit of life was sucked out of me for a time. Years.

“I eventually came to see the gift in my father’s dying, of seeing him there for one last moment to say a proper and loving goodbye to those of us gathered around him. I remarked recently to a friend that until that day I walked around like many people do with the unconscious and irrational notion that death and destruction are always something out there. It happens to other people. And in spite of being so sure that it won’t happen to you, when it does, the effect can be profound.”

Death is a hard lesson, and yet, the seeds of awakening can be found in acceptance of its inevitability. Because we have only so much time, and we don’t know how much, we need to let those closest to us know how much we love them each day. Our best selves should start right now. The gift of the moment is often what we learn from the death of someone we love.

Cherishing the moment is all we have, yet each moment brings with it

constant options. Kind of like multiple-choice test questions, some answers are sort of right, but one answer is the best fit. The whole exercise of living with the awareness that you are going to die is about choices.

Fred Rogers understood this: “You rarely have time for everything you want in this life, so you need to make choices. And hopefully your choices can come from a deep sense of who you are.”⁵ How do you spend your time? What is your job? Who are your friends? Who is your life partner? What do you have faith in? What are the choices that confront and define you every day? Not the mundane ones, like soup or salad, but the constant water-torture drip of the things you know you should be doing and are not. Sometimes choices involve things you shouldn’t be doing but are, because they fill time and keep you from making any choice at all, the nonchoice default position of most of us.

“Don’t forget, you’re going to die.” It has a ring to it.

Death is hard to contemplate, complete guesswork since none of us have experienced it, though there are plenty of accounts of near-death experiences (NDEs) that offer up some heavenly possibilities and leave us with a picture of what it is like for our loved ones who have passed. We’ve heard over and over from people we’ve met about signs they received from those who have died. One young woman approached us after a presentation we gave to her college alumni group. She asked a question at the end of our talk: “Can dreams really be miracles in disguise?” We responded that we thought so, especially since we have had more than one such experience ourselves. She seemed satisfied and afterward pulled us aside to ask if she could share her dream story. (This is like asking a chocolate lover if she would like a Hershey’s Kiss.)

She shared that her beloved grandfather had died over the past summer of ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or Lou Gehrig’s disease). She visited

him frequently while she was home from school and felt she was a spiritual listener for him. They had many deep conversations as his health continued to fail until he could no longer move or communicate, and finally, he slipped into a coma. On her last visit before she returned to school, she told him how much he meant to her, even though she believed he could not hear her. To her shock, he reached out and touched her hand. Hours after she left, he took his last breath.

She worried that she would not remember him the way he once had been and felt a constant anxiety about where he had gone and if he was okay. Months after he died, she had a dream. She was in a large outdoor plaza crowded with people and suddenly recognized her grandfather in the crowd at the opposite end of the plaza. He looked healthy and happy and was engaged in a lively conversation with others. She knew he did not know she was there and felt such relief and love as she observed him. But then, as if he had known all along, he slowly turned, found her across the crowd, and looked at her with unconditional love. The encounter startled her awake.

She did not need our blessing to know her grandfather was in a good place. And this young woman had done everything in her power to make her last days with her grandfather count. She had taken advantage of the moments they had left.

The mother of Katie's friend Andrea, the remarkable Mary Higgins, gave us another glimpse into life beyond. One evening just after finishing up her favorite meal, Mary suffered a stroke. Some fast action by Andrea and her husband, who had just come to town to help with a move, meant that Andrea's mother was treated rapidly, and her stroke did not appear to be life-threatening or debilitating in the long term. In fact, after a few days in the hospital, Mrs. Higgins planned to go home. Andrea and her husband left the hospital feeling relieved and excited that Mom could be released in

a matter of days. It was good news that Andrea could share with her four siblings spread across the country.

Andrea was shocked when the next morning she received a call from the doctor saying that her mom was suddenly much worse. The medical staff now told them Mrs. Higgins was unresponsive and not going to make it. The siblings were called to come quickly and began to gather, saying prayers together at her bedside. They kept telling her to hold on, the others were on their way. Prior to their arrival, Mrs. Higgins was pronounced dead by the doctor and nurses in attendance. They told Andrea they were sorry for her loss as she, her one sister, and their niece began to cry by the bedside. Suddenly, Mrs. Higgins sat upright, took an enormous breath, and said, “I have been to the most amazing place! You have no idea how beautiful, peaceful, and colorful it all is. The sounds were so comforting, and it was like nothing I have ever experienced.”

Mrs. Higgins explained that she asked the Lord if she could return because all her children were not there to say goodbye. She wanted to make sure they would be all right after her passing. The medical staff had no explanation for what had happened, and Mrs. Higgins was released from the hospital the next day. When she died after living for another year, all of her children were gathered around her.

What a gift to die with no regrets. A palliative care nurse from Australia, Bronnie Ware, realized in her eight years working with the terminally ill that death was a perfect tool for the living. Ironically enough, the dying hold the key to living well. “If only I had...” is the lament of so many of those whose time has run out. And almost every regret came down to a lack of courage. “The courage to live a life true to myself” was the number one regret Ms. Ware heard.⁶ Busyness, addiction, working too hard all get in the way, suppressing the ability to make considered choices and find happiness. As poet J. Greenleaf Whittier wrote:

*Of all sad words of tongue or pen,
The saddest are these: "it might have been!"*⁷

Miracles, like death, have a way of shaking us out of our stupor. We can't help but see the world in a new way. Outside, the sun is still shining, the traffic is still moving, and you are not going to die; at least, likely not today. Slow down, look around, maybe go outside, and breathe in and out. It is the first day of the rest of your life.



TAKE A MIRACLE MOMENT

Life Saver: If you found out you had a week to live, what are the first three things you would do? When the reprieve comes, is there anything you would now change?

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