

My Two Miracles

I grew up in a Catholic family in the 40s in St. Louis, Missouri. My parents, several siblings, and I attended Mass every Sunday in a local church where the pews were full to bursting. Priests were considered friends of the family, we kids went to private Catholic schools, and for several years I was the go-to acolyte for serving weekday Masses at impossible hours—5:30 AM and very often 6:00 AM as well, because other acolytes, not so noble and dependable as I, did not always show up.

Catholicism in that place, time, and family was an immersive experience. I served a priest at Mass (with my mother as steadfast chauffeur), sat in classes run by nuns or lay brothers, and every few weeks entered a dark wooden cabinet where I knelt and quietly admitted to a long list of sins to a priest on the other side of a gauze-covered window.

The result of these multiple experiences and influences is that I became a bone-deep believer in Jesus Christ. I thought about Him all the time. At night, before falling asleep, I dreamed of mounting a ladder and climbing up to feed Jesus scrambled eggs while he hung on the Cross near death. Scrambled eggs because at the age of twelve or thirteen that was the only thing I knew how to cook. In my swoony visions, Jesus's head would loll, but then as the aroma of my plate of scrambled eggs reached his nostrils, his face would come up slowly, his lips would part to receive a small forkful of eggs, and his expression would weakly communicate the gratitude he felt.

When I entered high school, Catholic of course, my dreams of helping Jesus began to fade and, instead, I continually asked Jesus for help. For one thing, I needed money. If you couldn't buy snacks, cigarettes, or 45 rpm records you fell in the estimation of your peers. Because for me that estimation always hung dangerously close to complete rejection for most waking hours, I prayed continuously for cash. It was tiring and boring to create impromptu prayers, so I resorted to the rosary. This was not such a bad strategy, I concluded, because it was common knowledge that the way to Jesus's heart was through his Mother. The rosary became my prayer driver of choice.

I kept a small rosary in my pocket at all times and persistently worked through the decades of Hail Marys and Our Fathers with one hand in my pocket, out of sight, and my lips barely moving. I could rattle off quite a few prayers while waiting in lunch lines or sitting through those interminable assemblies, the topic of which I could not tell you if you'd asked me right afterwards. But were all these praying bouts effective?

You bet they were. Just when I'd be down to my last nickel, my mother would call me to the phone after dinner and a parent needing a babysitter would be on the other end. You could be a male and a babysitter in those days. In fact, hardly a weekend passed without my being hired for two hours here or three hours there and often so late into an evening that I'd be gently wakened from the couch and driven home in a semi-conscious state.

If it was not a babysitting job, it would be a lawn mowing job. There were never enough kids willing to cut a big suburban lawn during a St. Louis summer afternoon of 95 degree heat and 95 degree humidity. Jesus kept the jobs coming and homeowners stricken by the sight of my skinny, drenched body pushing a roaring machine through the hot gelatinous atmosphere would dash out with pint glasses of icy Coke to keep me hydrated long enough to finish the job. I had the grit and Jesus had the connections, so I never fully ran out of the dollars I needed.

But incessant praying was only part of that remarkable chapter. I also built a secret altar to Jesus, which I housed in a generous crawl space under our back porch. The altar consisted of a simple cardboard box where I'd arranged on top two small vases of artificial flowers and two glass votive candles that resembled dark blue tumblers. The flowers and candles I'd fished out of the trash at church; when the wax inside one of those big votive candles burned down, the nuns would toss them in the trash—just as candles, place cards, and unclaimed centerpieces are bulldozed into trash bins after big weddings. There were also the butt-ends of stand-alone candles, which I filched and then affixed to the bottoms of my votive candles to give them a second life. And in the center of my altar was a framed holy card of Jesus Christ that a grateful priest had handed me after the second of my double-duty morning Masses.

There would have been no First Miracle if my father had not discovered that I was lighting candles under the back porch. When he discovered the altar, he didn't scoff that I'd constructed such a silly thing, but he was not happy about the prospect of my burning down the house. He commanded me to move the altar from under the porch and, if I wanted to continue to light the candles and pray, bring it inside the house.

After I received his order, I went outside and slowly pulled the altar out by inching backwards on hands and knees, carefully because it didn't occur to me to dismantle the altar, flip the box over and place the flowers, candles, and framed holy card inside it for easy transport. I didn't even have the sense to take these steps after I'd gotten the altar out into the yard. Instead, I lifted it carefully and walked slowly to the basement steps while balancing the items atop the rickety altar.

The stairs down to the basement door were made of rough concrete cast at a steep angle. At the bottom of the stairs was a concrete pad with a drain in its center. I started down the stairs and on the third step I caught my toe on the previous step and began a slow dive that would surely have propelled me down the hard concrete stairs and leave me in a crumpled, bleeding heap at the bottom. Instead, a strong pressure moved up against my chest like an unseen hand. It lifted me upright and held me until I got both feet beneath me and could stand erect, and without a single item tumbling to the ground.

I stood for a long time, wondering and breathing slowly. Then, I headed back down the stairs, much more slowly and carefully, and brought my altar inside to its new home.

That was the First Miracle, which remains as palpably real to me right now as it did when it happened. The second one was very different from the first. The story of the Second Miracle begins with my propensity for losing important things. I had just landed my first steady job, working on the steam line in Miss Pernie's Cafeteria on the ground floor of a big medical building down the street from my Dad's dental office. I worked there during my sophomore and junior years in high school, on weekends when classes met, and full weeks during school breaks and summers. On my way into work one day, I stopped in the men's room and just before washing my

hands, I slipped off my wrist watch and placed it on the shelf below the mirror. I went into the cafeteria and started in on my tasks and wasn't there for more than twenty minutes before I remembered the watch and rushed back to the men's room to retrieve it. It wasn't there. Nor had it been turned into the building manager, who took the occasion to advise me to slip my watch into my pocket next time.

But there would be no next time, at least I was convinced of that. My father had given me the watch not more than two months before. With some ceremony, he explained that the watch was of very high quality, Swiss made, self-winding and all the rest. His own father had bestowed it upon him when he was eighteen and he'd cherished it ever since. Now, the time had arrived, with my getting my first full-time job and so forth, for the watch to be passed on to me.

I had to own up to the loss of the watch, of course, because eventually my father would ask why I wasn't wearing it anymore. I braced myself and somehow drummed up the courage to tell him. To his credit, he did not double over and grimace and beat his clenched fists against his temples. Instead, he peered at me for a moment, and then nodded, and then looked a bit past me and said, "I wondered if you might be too young." It was kind of him to shift the blame a bit in his direction, but it wasn't lost on me that he'd decided that I was not mature enough to handle a watch. But then again, I wasn't, was I.

So, is the Second Miracle the story of how I got that watch back. I wish. No, this story involves a completely different item, but the same problem. A year or so later, my father decided that maybe now I was mature enough to be entrusted with a precious gift. On my sixteenth birthday, he gave me a fancy leather wallet. It was strangely beautiful, constructed of woven leather bands, like the rush seat of a chair. I loved it. It had the usual dividers inside, but also a central Plasticine window upon which the eye fell as soon as the wallet was opened. My father instructed me to take out the little white card behind the window and write my name and our home telephone number on it. With the card in place, there might be more of a chance of getting the wallet back if I lost it. I wrote my name and number in bold red ink.

I would not lose the wallet, I was sure of that. After the watch debacle, I kept a death-grip on that fine new wallet. The only time I parted from it was during gym,

when I would carefully place it in my locker and secure the door with a fat combination lock. Months went by, and I still had the wallet, and I felt good for both myself and my father and the fact that his trust had been validated. Then one spring day, I headed back to the locker room after gym class and found the padlock on my locker unhinged. There was a slim chance that some clever thief had discovered the combination, but it was more likely that I had let my guard down, just a little and again, and not snapped the lock completely closed. The wallet was gone.

I was stricken, much more for my father's sake than mine. That poor hard-working man had risked yet another time-honored ritual with his eldest son and would now be disappointed again. What could I do? I walked about the halls in a dark funk and tossed and turned, as the saying goes, in my bed that evening.

I awoke the next morning with a flash of inspiration: I would resort again to prayer. In point of fact, I hadn't been praying all that much since getting steady jobs. I worried that going back to Jesus only now that I was in desperate straits would be more than a little insulting to Him. But I could pray to a saint. In fact, I recalled that there was a saint whose job it was to help believers find lost items. As a straight-up altar boy and Catholic school student, I had a pretty good grasp of the saintly roster. St. Blaise could help you swallow without choking, St. Jude could wangle you a second chance at something you'd failed at, the Blessed Virgin was an all-purpose go-to deity, but my Saint du Jour was certainly St. Anthony, the saints whose job it was to help believers retrieve lost items.

It is no exaggeration to report that I prayed to St. Anthony for that wallet's return during most of my waking moments. I prayed during class, I prayed in the lunch line, I prayed as I rode my bike home from school. Summer arrived and I kept at it. I prayed while working at Miss Pernie's, while cutting lawns, and while caddying on Sundays at the Sunset Country Club. I also prayed that my father would not ask to see my wallet.

But several months passed and the wallet had not reappeared and soon I would have to own up to my father that I had lost yet another precious gift that he had given me. As it happened, I had reached the unofficial age when for young males it is not longer cool to ride a bike. You might not have a driver's license, or you might

have a driver's license but no access to a car, but if you had to get a place reasonably nearby you understood that it would be better to be seen walking there than riding a bike. This fact is important, because on the day of the Second Miracle I was walking, not speeding along, to the Sunset Country Club.

Our suburban home was located in the midst of lots of farms that had not yet been turned into subdivisions. The three-mile walk from my house to the country club could be conducted along paved roads, or along narrower roads that cut through farms, or even footpaths that shortcut diagonally between roads that met at square corners.

On the morning of the Second Miracle, I set out along a wide paved road, then cut into former farmland that had been allowed to go fallow for a planned subdivision. The morning was bright and, as usual, hot. I'd chosen a novel route, on a single-lane road with wide ditches on both sides, so I looked about with a bit more curiosity than usual. The sun was glaring down already; the pavement glared back, as did the yellow grasses that rose and sagged in the ditches. At some point my gaze fell on a clump of grass nearly a hundred feet away. Something made of braided leather was peeking out of one of the clumps of grass. I stopped and stared and then stepped off the road and down into the ditch. It was a wallet lying there, tangled up in the grass. I lifted it free.

I turned it over and over in my hands. It looked a bit like my lost wallet--the braided leather, the several dividers--but it was so blanched and crumpled. And my high school was nowhere nearby, miles and miles away in fact. Still disbelieving, I opened the wallet and stared at bleached white card behind the Plasticine window. There was nothing written there, but something made me look more closely. And there, in the most faded pink just this side of white, were the letters of my name.

Stunned, very stunned believe me, I headed on to the country club, where I carried a bag for eighteen holes and carried away not a single memory from the experience. When after a lifetime of traveling back home, and now in the safety of my brother's and my room, I began the rehabilitation of my reclaimed wallet. I cleaned it carefully, working Q-tips along the braids to get out the grime; took out the Plasticine window and wiped it clean on both sides, and finally flipped over the

white card and rewrote my name and telephone number on it, in red ink of course.

I waited for an opportunity to remove the wallet from my pocket in my father's presence, but naturally rather than clumsily. It took a long time for that moment to arrive, and when it did I held the wallet in my hand just a bit longer than necessary until my father did notice it.

“That looks a little worse for wear,” he observed.

“Yeah. I use it a lot,” I replied.

“You can wipe Neat's Foot oil on that, you know. Like on your baseball glove.”

“Oh, okay. That's great idea. Thanks, Dad.”

So what long-term impact have my Two Miracles had on me and, more specifically, my religious convictions. The impact has been lasting, despite a series of direct assaults. During the Vietnam war, I reached draftable age but continued on with college deferments. Those deferments would run out upon my graduation, so my mind focused strongly on the prospect of being commanded to fight in that war. After months of strenuous deliberation, I decided that I could go into battle and be killed—preferably with a single bullet to the forehead—but I could not for the life of me aim a gun at a Vietnamese person and shoot him. It seemed absurd to go to a land half-way around the world and kill someone who meant no harm to me, my loved ones, or my country in general. I just could not find any justification for that. And so, I filed for exemption as a conscientious objector, a citizen who submits a claim that for religious or moral reasons he or she can not participate in warfare.

By this point, I was in graduate school in Providence, Rhode Island, across the country from my draft board. Because I'd turned eighteen while attending college in San Diego, my draft board was in the most conservative district in the country; in fact, that board had never yet granted a conscientious objector status. I would lose my claim.

Because I would lose my claim, I would not be allowed to substitute community service for enlisted time. So, I would have to refuse to go to Vietnam and therefore I would go to jail. I decided that I could do jail time. The conservative pushersback on COs warned that if you were sent to jail you would be raped by hulking lifers on a daily basis. Even the guards would have a go at you. I had done

enough research to realize that I would probably not do my time in a maximum security prison, so I swept those little nightmares from my mind.

I had other extra-legal options open to me. Some of my school friends had gotten family doctors or psychiatrists to write statements claiming that they were too fragile to be involved in warfare. Another friend—and these individuals are no longer friends, separated by values differences that grew in strength and number over the years—got himself outfitted with braces. Some young males whom I was acquainted with took off for Canada, where they hoped to live for the rest of their lives or wait out the war and be repatriated through legal action or a national amnesty. I decided that those options were not “for me” and that I should proceed as if my super-conservative board might agree to grant me the first ever conscientious objector status granted in Southern California.

I doubled-down on my research, availing myself of remarkable resources developed by pacifist religions such as Quakerism and moralists such as Gandhi. But then I recalled that my old friend Jesus Christ had made some very deliberate declarations on the subject. I pored over the New Testament, and there they were, right there in the Sermon on the Mount.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.”

Could it be that my early Catholicism, from which I strayed more out of laziness than anything else, could form the foundation of my CO submission? More research, however, led to some very dark discoveries. Over the centuries, the Catholic Church had supported, even encouraged, the persecution of Jews. The Catholic Church had worked hand in hand with murderous tyrants, such as Franco, and still did so in dozens of countries. The Catholic Church had helped Nazis to

escape from Germany after World War II and arranged for their safe passage to predominantly Catholic countries in South America. All this before the present era of harboring hundreds of pedophile priests and allowing them to continue molesting children.

In the end, I went forward with a CO claim based only the moral principles espoused by Jesus Christ and without the reinforcing claim that I was acting within the validating embrace of an organized religion. I would have lost in court, I have no doubt, but before my court date rolled up the government held a national draft lottery and my number was out of conscription range. The files of my case were sealed and stored away and I was never inducted into the military.

You would think that the complete collapse of my trust in organized religions, a sundering heightened by the prospects of being forced to fight in an unjust war, or do jail time, and reinforced by college and graduate studies of Freud and other highly rational atheists, would have completely obliterated any leanings I might still have towards Christian beliefs. But you would be wrong. My Two Miracles, think about them. I fully tripped on that step and would surely have fallen but something leaned in and lifted me to safety. And think about the journey of that wallet from my gym locker to a clump of grasses that I just happened to be strolling by. Someone had taken it from my locker, taken out the money, driven or walked or biked miles and miles from our high school, and had then thrown it into a ditch. Maybe not that day, maybe weeks or months later, and on a pathway that I had never before traveled.

I just can't let go of my Two Miracles. Something out there is acting according to principles, Christian or similar, and answerable to deeply-felt pleas of poor mortals like me. I want to keep in touch with those forces and it seems to me that the best way to do that is to direct my life, to the best of my modest abilities, in ways that align with them.