

## TOUCHSTONES

*Small Miracles*

AFTER YEARS OF mistreatment and neglect by those who should have protected her, the girl was placed with extended family. Therapy and disciplined structure took time and patience to effect any change, but finally her new guardians felt that—with continuous supervision—she could try public school.

She would catch the bus in front of my grandmother's house, travel to school, and attempt the arduous process of gaining not only an academic education, but also a social one—something that doesn't come easy for a child conditioned to see little value in herself. The girl found herself in a world of children whose unwritten rules and social mores were difficult for her to grasp.

Grandmother occasionally watched her leaving for and arriving from school, but suspected nothing when the girl's guardian knocked on her door.

"Have you noticed things missing?" The neighbor asked. Grandmother couldn't remember if anything of value had been taken.

"Things like soda?" The neighbor asked. And then my grandmother realized that the cooler she kept by the porch and filled with Cokes for outdoor work breaks had been emptying much faster than usual.

The neighbor revealed that in an effort to win friends, the little girl had been sneaking cans each morning to give to other children. And Grandmother hadn't been the only victim: dollar bills and other small items had come up missing.

"We want her to come over to apologize,"

the neighbor said.

"No," Grandmother replied. "I'll come visit her, if that's okay."

Grandmother took two small boxes with her on her visit. Sitting down with the child, she said, "It's sometimes hard to do the right thing. We want so much to have friends and be happy, but we don't always make the best choices." She opened the first box, revealing a Primary CTR ring. "When you think about making a choice that doesn't feel right, I want you to touch your hand."

She continued. "I know what it feels like to be lonely and think no one loves you. But I want you to wear this—" and she opened the second box, containing a small heart on a chain—"and anytime you feel you don't have a friend, I want you to touch this heart hanging around your neck to remember how much God loves you and how much others love you."

She helped the girl put on the ring and chain, and the two exchanged an expression of understanding. The girl didn't know that the woman who sat next to her had grown up under the shadow of a mean-tempered father prone to outbursts and rages, that she had become a mother at a very young age and later suffered several health-shattering miscarriages, that she had battled the nightmares of depression longer than she cared to remember, and that she had undergone a risky brain surgery less than a year before. And she would not know that this woman had questioned her own worth many, many times.

But there are miracles in connections.

With one look, the girl saw someone who knew her, and a woman saw a child who needed gentleness in a world filled with anger and inequity. Empathy draws one soul to another—reaches out and does God's work to heal and strengthen. And it is through people that God's quietest and most meaningful miracles are wrought.

MARY ELLEN GREENWOOD

*American Fork, Utah*

SIX YEARS AGO, my wife Pat and I went to our ward high priests' BBQ social and ate hamburgers. Late that night, something "snapped" in my chest and hurt like blazes. I knew it wasn't good and told Pat to call 9-1-1. Soon several fire trucks and ambulances were lined up in front of our house, and paramedics filled the room. They treated me for a possible heart attack and said they would transport me to the hospital. Pat told them to take me to LDS Hospital, a seemingly insignificant move that may have been the first "small miracle" of the night. It turns out that LDS had the best facilities and personnel at that time of night to do what needed to be done to save my life, which I consider a pretty "big miracle."

Spotting a dissecting aortic aneurysm, the doctors told my wife to call our family together as I needed to undergo immediate, serious, emergency surgery. After receiving a priesthood blessing from anonymous volunteers, I was wheeled into the OR and came out ten hours later with new hardware in my chest. Later the doctor said I had been hours, if not minutes, from death; that 60 percent of victims of aortic aneurysms do not survive, and many who have this surgery, die.

My last conscious thought before going into surgery was that I would either wake up in the recovery room or in an entirely different dimension. I felt no fear (was the morphine part of that?) but rather a sense of wonder. Later a good friend, who had come to see me in the ICU, said I had waved him over to my bed and mainly uttered nonsensical words (not atypical for me in the best of circumstances) but that twice I clearly said "spirit world." I wonder if I had been trying to explain where I had just been, relating my last conscious thoughts before surgery, or attempting to be funny.

During my twelve days in the hospital and a long recovery period, I reflected on what had happened, and what could have happened, to me. Why didn't I die as so many victims have? How much of the reason was the competence and skill of the doctors doing what they're trained to do, and how much was God's intervention? I don't know,

**T**OUCHSTONES is a SUNSTONE section that debuted in the December 2005 issue. It was inspired by "Readers Write" in The SUN magazine. We invite readers to submit their own short memoirs on a pre-selected theme.

TOUCHSTONES topics are intentionally broad in order to give room for personal expression. Writing style is not as important as the contributor's thoughtfulness, humor, and sincerity. SUNSTONE reserves the right to edit pieces, but contributors will have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication.

To submit a reflection, please send it typed and double-spaced to SUNSTONE, 343 North Third West, Salt Lake City, Utah, 84103. Electronic submissions can be sent via email to TOUCHSTONES editor Allen Hill at: allen@sunstoneonline.com. Due to space limitations, submissions should be kept somewhere around 400 words, but we are willing to make exceptions for exceptional pieces.

*Next Topic:* LETTERS HOME

but I happily give all of them credit for the miracle of preserving my life.

After experiencing a very real brush with death, I came to some sobering conclusions—which perhaps represents the biggest miracle of all. I came to understand how fragile life is, that we are not invincible. I became more aware of those who really cared about me and were important in my life. I came to better recognize and appreciate the deep level of love, concern, and caring that my wife, family, and friends had for me and I for them. Not to sound trite, but at least for a while, I learned to stop and smell the roses, to listen to the birds and to the people around me. I had taken far too much for granted, and now that I had been given another chance, I resolved not to repeat that mistake. Oh, and no more hamburgers at ward socials.

CURT BENCH  
*Salt Lake City, Utah*

**W**HEN I WAS a little girl, my brother gave me two quarters so I could buy cotton candy at the fair the next day. I lived on a practical farm and had never had cotton candy before (nor did it seem the type of thing my whole-grain mother was likely to buy me). In great anticipation, I cherished those quarters with my stubby little four-year-old hands and heart.

It wasn't long, of course, before I misplaced them and was completely beside myself about it. I remembered a recent Primary lesson that if I prayed in a private place, God would answer me. I went to the privatest place I knew—the small bathroom—and kneeling over the toilet uttered my first little heartfelt prayer.

After praying, I got up and wandered about, wondering how God would tell me where the quarters were (my teacher hadn't gotten to the part about how prayers are answered, and I didn't know). Mind and heart open, within minutes, I got a picture in my head, clear as day, of the quarters lying under the pillow on my bed. I went directly to the bed and looked under the pillow and, behold! *Quarters!*

I realize that it would be easy to explain away the spiritual significance of that event: I mean, maybe I just needed some focus and time to remember where I had put them. And it would be easy to think that I self-manufactured the idea that God had answered me, simply because I wanted it so badly. But almost all of my "spiritual experiences" to date are similarly simple: a feeling of peace, quiet assurances, wind at the right moment on a mountaintop, a bird stopping by for a

significant moment—things that are un-miraculous and known only to me. Does my wanting such experiences somehow create and therefore invalidate them? Our commonly used definition of faith—"things hoped for but not seen"—inherently implies, by the word "hope," an actual desire, not just willingness. So the very ingredients of faith make it easy to dismiss.

I don't remember the cotton candy I bought with the quarters anymore, nor do I remember the fair. But I have never forgotten my first answer to my first prayer. And while



sometimes I think it's a silly story, I also realize that the desires of our hearts, however simple, are of great interest to God. He lost nothing by reaching out to a four-year-old girl, in a four-year-old mindset, with four-year-old desires. He gained a lifelong friend in me.

SKYE PIXTON ENGSTROM  
*Portland, Oregon*

**D**URING THE YEARS my husband and I lived in the San Francisco Bay area, we usually made our annual trek to visit family in Utah in the summer. But in 1974, we skipped the summer trip and went instead at Christmas time. It was twilight and a light snow was falling as we left Battle Mountain, Nevada, on I-80. We had all-weather tires on our small sedan but no chains. East of Battle Mountain, the road begins a gradual climb, and as the snow increased, the surface became slick. Suddenly we slid off onto the right shoulder beside a considerable drop-off.

By now it was dark, and although we had the flashers on and should have been very visible, the cars that came up behind us just

rushed past. Concerned about our infant and toddler who were awake, but not fussing yet, I didn't think of getting out and trying to flag someone down. Neither did my husband, more an acting than a thinking person. Trying to get traction, he spun and spun the tires. Then frustrated and panicked, he got out of the car and pushed first on the rear and then on the front, trying to free the vehicle.

He'd often told me he didn't believe God answers prayers. But I didn't believe that. And I also didn't believe that my babies and I

would end our lives this way. I sat in the car and prayed.

Of course many kinds of answers can follow prayer—and not always instantly. Simply focusing their thoughts may sometimes prompt people to solve their own problem. Sometimes help comes through another person. And many testify that their rescue was undeniably divine.

Hands numb, my husband got back in the car, and with the engine off, we waited, shivering. Not long afterward, a snowplow scattering sand ground noisily up the mountain behind us. Although he should have been able to see us, the driver didn't stop. But the sand had sprayed out far enough that my husband could let the car roll backwards until the tires got traction. By the time we reached Wendover, the road was dry.

It was a difficult marriage, and my husband's faithless attitude ultimately rubbed off on me. I began to feel like a forgotten child, wondering where God was, thinking there were no miracles in my life. Sometimes, it's just perspective. Or retrospective.

PHYLLIS BAKER  
*Salt Lake City, Utah*