

**St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Fairfield, Connecticut**  
**Week of September 6, 2006**

**Unwelcome Gift**

They come upon us, uninvited and usually unexpected. We really wish they hadn't appeared. We'd like to turn back the clock and re-do the moment of their arrival, or at least postpone the meeting for a century or two—these life events that in a twinkling of an eye make us feel as though the world is coming to an end.

Huge events, like the death of someone we love. Or receiving the diagnosis of an illness that will likely result in our own death. Or experiencing a catastrophic accident or an incapacitating illness or a physical disability. Or slightly—but only slightly—down the scale, enduring a divorce, or the loss of a job, or the failure of plans into which much hope had been invested. Or realizing that through inattention, oversight, accident, or deliberate wrongdoing we have been responsible for someone else's pain or loss.

These are visitors that any normal human being would want to turn away from the door. Yet come they must, and though uninvited, they will enter our lives.

With them these unwelcome guests bring a gift. Not a gift that makes the pain of their arrival go away, or one that ever balances the loss endured. But a gift nonetheless, and one that is worthy of notice and, eventually, even of gratitude.

I think I first really noticed someone who had received that gift when I was twenty-one, working with my brother on a ranch in eastern Washington, and staying in a boarding house owned by (true, I swear) Mrs. Murphy. She had been a pioneer in Montana—she was ninety when we met her in 1963—and she told us about her first year there. The wheat harvest was destroyed by hail and during the bitter winter her baby died, livestock died, and the surviving family almost starved. She said, "I would never want to go through that again. But I wouldn't take anything for it."

I think she understood the gift. Jeffrey Boyd, M.D., an Episcopal priest and physician, describes a host of remarkable people who understand and live out the gift, in a book called [Being Sick Well: Joyful Living Despite Chronic Illness](#). Dr. Boyd spoke at one of our Sunday Forums last winter.

What people like Mrs. Murphy and the people Dr. Boyd interviews have in common is that they have accepted the unwelcome gift. Not cutting themselves off from life in bitterness or cynicism, they have drawn closer to friends and become more loving to a wider circle of people. Not withdrawing into misery, they have responded with deepened compassion to others who are suffering. Their heightened sense of the fragility of life propels them not into isolation, but more deeply and passionately into life, with humor and gusto and unflinching kindness and astonishing generosity.

The ancients had a phrase for it, *magna anima*, 'great soul.' An unwelcome gift, but a very great one indeed.

—Rev. Ben Brockman

St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Fairfield, Connecticut  
Week of September 16, 2006

### **Little Miracles**

If you're that favorite subject of the cartoonist, the poor guy crawling across the desert, ragged and dying of thirst, you'd probably notice and be immensely grateful for a single raindrop. If we lived in the desert, we'd be a lot more mindful of water, and notice when we consumed it, bathed in it, or washed the dishes. After a rainy summer in the temperate zone we inhabit, who's grateful for water?

I suspect it's the same way with miracles. It takes being jobless for a while to appreciate the miraculous aspect of working for a less than brilliant boss. It takes a visit to the doctor, or walking out of the hospital, to appreciate the miracle that the body is so constituted, in the ordinary course of things, to heal. It all too often takes the loss of a relationship to awaken us to the routine blessings of those relationships we have.

One of the astonishing moments in the teachings of Jesus occurred as he watched the most prosperous citizens of Jerusalem pour immense gifts into the temple treasury. What he called attention to was the drop in the bucket, when a poor widow gave a coin that wouldn't purchase a loaf of bread (the story is in Mark 12 and Luke 21).

The usual lessons taken from the story of the poor widow have to do with generosity—she gave literally all she had—and proportional giving: it's not the absolute size of the gift that matters in God's eyes, but its relative size in proportion to our net worth. Those are important lessons indeed. But the lesson I want to take from the story is that Jesus noticed what was beneath everyone else's notice. Seen this way, this is another miracle story, and what Jesus noticed was the miracle of faithfulness. It was a miracle that someone else performed. He just called attention to it. Sometimes big miracles blind us to the constancy of little ones—and how truly important they are.

Little miracles of faithfulness surround us and call us to see as Jesus saw, what things really mean. To know that little acts of generosity and compassion matter as much as the grandest and most noble ones. To notice that little acts of love mirror the great love that St. Paul knows holds the universe together and moves the planets in their courses (Colossians 3: 12-17). Maude's cinnamon buns, and Bill's Christmas photos. Kevin's devotion the grocery card effort. The big choir kids helping the little ones. The moms and dads who love even reluctant kids enough to get them to church. Julie and Matthew and Peter giving folks rides to church or wherever. The eighth-graders shepherding the Church school students. The Gap Committee making sure we are utilizing every nickel.

In King Lear old Gloucester suffers such consequences of his own folly that he is reduced to suicidal despair. Believing he is hurling himself from the cliff at Dover, he pitches forward and faints. When he comes to he hears, "Thy life's a miracle." And he gets it.

Sometimes the hardest miracle to notice is our own life. And the hardest to be grateful for. And to attend to. For when we are mindful, the question becomes, "Now, what are you going to do with your miracle?"

—Rev. Ben Brockman