

Drenched in the (possibly) miraculous

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What's a miracle? How can we (frail human creatures that we are!) separate contingency—what's possible but unpredictable, an event that seems unlikely or unintended—from miracle?

I think of the generous heart of my friend Charles Kelly, longtime member of St. Mary's Episcopal Church in West Harlem, who died from cancer in 2012.

Charles grew up in Queens, studied briefly in Florida, and later worked for New York City's Board of Education as a drug counselor. But things fell apart. His family broke up. He lost his job. There were drugs—perhaps self-medication. I don't know which came first. I only know that by the mid-'80s Charles wound up homeless.

I also know this. When, after accepting placement in East New York in 2009, he finally had his own apartment again, Charles befriended street people—because, he said, he knew how hard the street was. That meant he sometimes took them in, no questions asked. As a result Charles spent the last winter of his life in jail at New York's notorious Rikers Island after friends, perhaps exploiting him, may have engaged in ID and credit-card fraud.

Charles later told me no one should ever have to go to Rikers. He shook his head when he said it. Exactly what happened that led to his being rousted out of bed at 6 a.m. and arrested is unclear, but his priest wrote to the judge saying Charles was sometimes too trusting. Charges against him were dropped when he pled guilty to a lesser offense ten days before he died.

Charles welcomed strangers and suffered for it. It was an uncommon degree of compassion. But an encounter five days after his death in August 2012 astonishes even more. We understand people acting on faith, hope, and love, even in harrowing circumstances, even over reasonable objections. But some things defy comprehension. Maybe it was a miracle—if you believe in miracles. To me it's a

mystery.

Charles died on a Sunday. The next Friday a woman followed Janet, the choir director at Charles's church, off the subway at 34th and Broadway, wondering if she might have recognized Janet as someone she met years before when she visited her father's church. The woman wanted to ask about something that had been disturbing her all week: a feeling that she needed to see her father again.

"Do you do music?" the woman began. Startled, Janet said yes. "My father does too," the woman said.

This was how Charles's daughter Ayana learned of her father's death.

Luck? Providence? Fate? For Ayana it was a godsend. She got to participate in her father's funeral. She got two keepsakes: his Bible and an Ethiopian cross I'd given him for strength and comfort in court.

The two women had met five years earlier at St. Mary's, where Charles sang in Janet's choir for some 25 years—beginning in the '80s, before losing his apartment in Harlem and becoming homeless, until his death in 2012.

After his death the church tried to find Ayana. But Brooklyn, where Ayana lives, and the Upper West Side, where Janet lives, are worlds apart. Among eight million people, paths don't cross.

Until they do. What's really a miracle? Do we know it when we see it? Does it matter?

I can't say with certainty what happened that Friday. Contingencies occur within unforeseen, uncontrollable circumstances—what's possible though uncertain and unexpected, not necessarily chance. I call Charles's compassion faith, not chance. Janet's and Ayana's meeting remains mysterious. Since absolute proof of miracles is beyond our capacity as human beings, it's necessary to leave the door open to all possibilities.

Can I do that? (My doubting heart!) Perhaps I'm not satisfied. Perhaps I can't be.

Despite my doubt—or because of it—I've got bigger fish to fry in the miracle-proving department. God, for instance. Who can prove the reality of God? I can't. Wouldn't it be a miracle if we could?

“Love your neighbor as yourself,” says Leviticus 19. “Love the stranger as yourself.” But as the world appears now, if love should come to prevail it would be the one indisputable, perhaps inexplicable, miracle—the greatest of all. I hope it can. Let’s see that it does.