

This is Real. This is Real.

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Earlier in this morning's service, we heard two accounts of healing miracles, one from a Gospel (Luke 5:17-26) and one from the book of Acts (3:1-10). Naturally, we have questions. Is this material legendary, or did such things happen in the first century? If such miracles happened then, do they still happen, or are there rational explanations for what appear to be healings? When we share "prayers, joys, and concerns" in the worship service, are we merely expressing of care for people who are afflicted, or are we asking God to intervene and fix their ailments?

For the record, there are seventeen separate stories in the Gospels of individuals being healed of physical ailments, only six in Acts, none in later New Testament books, and very few in post-New Testament early Church writings. Of course, stories of miraculous healings persist throughout history, many of them undoubtedly fabricated to enhance someone's power or line their pockets. But in terms of the healing stories in the New Testament, if the explanation is that people were gullible then, prone to believe such tales, you have to ask, first, why the miracles didn't continue in frequency after the mid-first century, since presumably people were just as gullible in the second century, or the third, and such tales would help validate the movement in the absence of its charismatic founder. Secondly, you have to ask, if first century folks were so gullible, why did they make a huge deal out of the healings recorded, as if these were surprising occurrences requiring witnesses and verification, much as they would today? Of course, they didn't understand modern medicine, but they weren't stupid, either. I expect they asked exactly the same questions we ask: is this real, what role does faith play, what should we pray for, and what does it mean when we don't get what we pray for?

Fast forward from the first century to the twenty-first. In 2012, I received a group email asking me to pray for healing for Lee Phillips, a close friend in college and grad school, who had been diagnosed with Stage IV pancreatic cancer. Lee was a family therapist; the author of the email, her husband, Ken, was an MD and a professor of psychiatry at a major university. When Ken wrote, Lee was bald, down to 90 lbs., unable to walk, riddled with tumors, and the cancer was in her liver. Prayers for healing? When I read the words "Stage IV pancreatic," I thought, "As people of faith, you should accept death instead of trying to extend life." Of course I didn't

express that. I sent the standard empathetic response; but instead of praying for healing, I prayed that my friend would experience a peaceful passing. Nevertheless, people other than me sent up a barrage of prayers for Lee's recovery, while I watched my inbox for a death announcement. Instead, after six months, Ken wrote that Lee's tumors had shrunk, her blood counts were near normal, there was hope, we should keep praying. After ten months, Lee's tumors were gone, and her dumbfounded doctors pronounced her cancer free—not just in remission, *cancer free*. Her oncologist declared it the only medical miracle he has ever witnessed. Twelve years later, Lee is still active as a therapist and doing just fine.

Three years after Lee's healing, my former colleague, theology professor Jonathan Wilson, sent a group email announcing that he had Stage IV prostate cancer, with half a dozen metastases. He did not ask for healing prayers; he expressed acceptance of whatever time he had remaining. Once again, I assumed it was the end, responded empathetically, and prayed for his peace. Six months later, however, Jonathan sent another group email announcing—a little sheepishly—that, sometime after his church had anointed him with oil and prayed for his healing, his metastases had disappeared, and the gobsmacked director of the British Columbia Cancer Center pronounced him *healed*. Jonathan and I exchanged emails last week; he technically still has prostate cancer, but no metastases, and a normal PSA count. Now 71, he has retired from teaching but practices radical hospitality: he and his wife open their Vancouver home to an average of six guests per week.

You'd think, with medical miracles happening twice to people I know and trust, I would re-think my approach to prayers for healing. But I tend to take a scientific view of things, and percentages are what they are. So, until last year, if the diagnosis was as dire as Lee's or Jonathan's, I would offer my reasonable, realistic prayers for the person's peace, and freedom from pain, in whatever time remains to them.

“Until last year,” I just said. It took a third, even more dramatic incident to nudge me in another direction. Last May, I traveled to Michigan for my mother's burial in the family plot. My sister and I spoke at the graveside service, then the family gathered in the big basement of my cousin's farmhouse nearby for the classic potluck lunch, featuring Midwestern delights like meaty make-your-own sandwiches, giant homemade cookies, and red Jello with fruit cocktail suspended inside.

As we loaded up our paper plates, my sister took me aside and pointed to a smiling, chubby couple sitting on the other side of the room. “That’s Dani,” she said, indicating Danielle Laurion, the wife of my brother-in-law’s brother. “You need to hear her story.” So, I sat down across the table from Dani and heard, for the first time in person, from someone thoroughly credible, yet another healing story—this one topping them all.

A few background details. Dani met my brother-in-law’s brother in 2018 while Doug was a nurse working with disabled adults. Dani’s health problems were severe, and worsening. Recurrently hospitalized and wheelchair bound since 2010 due to postural orthostatic tachycardia—a heart condition preventing standing upright—Dani also experienced severe respiratory decline [tracheobronchomalacia] and in 2017 had a tracheostomy: a hole made in her neck to attach a breathing apparatus. Despite her ailments, Doug was charmed by Dani’s joyful personality, and they married in 2020. Dani’s health, however, continued to decline. Due to lung infections and airway collapse, she lost the ability to breathe on her own and went on a ventilator in January 2022. On March 11, her doctor announced that her lungs had collapsed; she had no independent air flow. Failure of her ventilator, even for a moment, was likely to be fatal.

Four days later, on March 15, 2022, Doug was wheeling Dani and her portable breathing apparatus down a Lansing street when a well-dressed stranger approached them and told them he had no idea why he was doing this, he was in town for business travel, but he felt compelled to invite them to a healing service that night at St. Mary’s Catholic Church. They were highly skeptical, believing that faith healing is a gimmick, but they went, and even invited Dani’s elderly mother to join them.

The speaker at the service was Dr. Mary Healy, a biblical studies professor at a seminary in nearby Detroit. Dr. Healy makes it clear that she is not a faith healer, but she teaches that healing sometimes occurs when we turn to God in faith, which she openly invites people to do. That night, she invited attendees in need of healing to put their arms up to God, like children asking to be lifted into a parent’s arms. At this point I will quote Dani’s words:

“I just took my hands, and I put them up and I asked God to hold me, told him I needed him and to please take care of me. It was the first time in my life. I had always been a person of faith, but nothing compared to that moment, when there was nothing in between us, and it was just him and me. It felt like water was running over me.”

An important aside: At precisely that moment, Dani and Doug report—and a church full of witnesses corroborated later—Dr. Healy announced that God had just revealed to her that someone’s lungs were being inflated.

Back to Dani’s account. “I took a breath,” she said, “and it *worked*. Then I took another breath. I turned to Doug and said I think we should unhook the ventilator. He was worried, but we did it, and nothing happened. I could breathe. My mother was there with me, and we were all crying. Then they had an altar call to say if anybody had experienced anything miraculous, to come forward. I stood up, and Doug offered me the wheelchair, but I took his hand and said, ‘We can just walk.’”

And Dani walked. Up to that moment, she had only been able to stand for seconds at a time and take a few assisted steps. Now she stood up from a wheelchair, with her rubber-balloon-thin respiratory tract suddenly firm, her breathing apparatus unhooked, and she walked down that aisle, at first on Doug’s arm, then unassisted. She’s been walking ever since. The next day, she started going up and down stairs—simple enough for us, but something Doug had never seen his wife do. A few months later, the doctors closed the now-useless tracheostomy; and a year later, when I met Dani in my cousin’s basement, the only evidence of her ordeal was a dime-sized pink scar on her neck.

Professor Healy was interviewed later and reported that when Dani came to the front of the church, all she could say, and keep on repeating, was “This is real. This is real.”

Here’s the *rational* explanation: Under certain conditions, people can generate healing by what is called “auto-suggestion.” Although the scientific literature on this phenomenon focuses on pain management, we can imagine that it may extend to strengthening organs or muscles. We also know that in extremely rare cases, cancer and other diseases simply disappear for no apparent reason. The fact that lots of people with such afflictions are praying for healing suggests that now and then, a statistical anomaly will accrue for a person of faith, or for someone being prayed for, so it will *appear* to be an answer to prayer. But it’s just a random event. Unusual, against the odds, but more likely than the existence of a God who heals people.

The problem with the rational explanation, in Dani’s case, is that it isn’t rational. Auto-suggestion and low-percentage recovery don’t remotely account for the simultaneous disappearance of three objective, diagnosed physical conditions: a collapsed trachea with paper-thin bronchial tubes, a heart condition that prevented prolonged standing, and an inability to walk

on long-atrophied leg muscles. The sudden and complete reversal of a *single* life-threatening condition like a collapsed respiratory tract, at the instant that a seminary professor announces it from two hundred feet away, does more than beat the odds—it beggars belief—but seconds later, the same person’s heart condition disappears so that she can stand up; then, she walks several hundred feet on legs atrophied for a decade. Adrenalin or auto-suggestion might get you a few steps, but as anyone with a long illness knows, muscle tone and balance don’t just reappear in seconds. Dani spoke for everyone involved when she took a deep breath—I repeat, she took a deep breath—and said, “This is real. This is real.”

What are we to do with this story, or with the stories of Lee, and Jonathan, and perhaps a few others you can add? I find that these stories raise almost as many questions as they answer. For example, why would God heal one person in such a gathering and not others, who probably left with dashed hopes and feelings of unworthiness? Is it like a lottery, where we buy our prayer tickets and figure the odds may be one in a million, but hey, that’s a chance, and it might be me? Or does healing depend on the faith of the sick person, and does that mean a level of trust in God that guarantees a positive response? If so, does that reduce God to a kind of cosmic vending machine who is compelled to send candy down the chute when you have the right amount of change? Or was the miracle not about Dani’s faith in healing so much as God’s faith in Dani? That is, was she the one sick person there who could handle the resulting publicity with the same humility and joy that characterized her life before the event?

These are mysteries to me. How does prayer work? Our former pastor Rona’s insightful sermon this summer suggested that prayer is, among other things, a kind of aperture that I can open to let in more of God’s light, to open me to God’s presence and provision. Prayer is also a healthy exercise in honesty, where I tell God what I am grateful for, what I fear, what I want, and trust that God somehow works in me or through me or around me to accomplish my redemption. Prayer is also a worthwhile way to express love, regardless of the result or of the person’s awareness that they are being prayed for. I have known all these benefits of prayer. But they are all about prayer’s effect on *me*. The harder question is, does prayer’s effect extend beyond these reflexive functions? For example, am I just blowing holy smoke when I pray for peace, or can my request help induce God to exert a force of will against the inclinations of individuals or even groups, to turn them away from hatred and violence? Ask Lech Walesa or Desmond Tutu, who claimed in earnest, not as pious platitudes, that prayer drove the only bloodless revolutions of the

bloodiest century in history. And more to the point here, does God ever answer a prayer for healing by manipulating physical objects like respiratory systems and atrophied legs? Ask Dani. She'll tell you, not only "this is real," but, as she put it to a reporter who asked her what she learned from her experience: "Pray big!"

Yet another difficult question: Does the fact that Dani's experience is *real* prove that there is a God, or does it validate Dani's Christian faith? I don't think so. I don't think we're meant to muster evidence for God like that, as if faith is a courtroom where you establish proof beyond a reasonable doubt. If faith was about proof, then people who have experiences like Dani's, or people who have met Dani, or people who could understand certain arguments, would have an advantage in faith over others. On the contrary, my observation is that no matter what your experience in life, no matter how smart or educated you are, no matter whether you live in the first century or the twenty-first, there is room for reasonable doubt about God, and there is at least the crack of a door open to faith. Dani's story is compelling, but it's not airtight. Maybe Dr. Healy just made a lucky guess about lungs inflating, maybe Dani's lungs were already improving, maybe her heart condition wasn't so bad, maybe she could walk better than she and Doug and her doctors claimed, and maybe all those things happening at once still don't add up to a healing God. You can think that. You can choose to believe; you can choose to doubt. Which world do you choose to live in: the world consisting of random particles acting upon one another, including the particles that form your beliefs, or the world where God infuses life with love and meaning—and occasionally zaps someone like Dani? We can doubt, or we can believe. We see things, we interpret the evidence, we choose. We don't *prove*. Or as Jesus put it to a doubting Thomas long before *this one*, who believed in Jesus' resurrection only after he saw the risen Jesus' hand wounds, "Blessed are those who do not see and yet believe."

With those words in mind, I am willing to let my many questions lead me not to certainty or to doubt but to Mystery. What I cannot *know*, what I cannot even *feel*, surrounds me and holds me like the white space around the words of a poem. For me, this is real *enough*. Meanwhile, as of last May, whether the request comes in an email from far away, or in one of our Sunday morning gatherings when someone asks for prayers regarding their own affliction or someone else's, I may have my doubts, but thanks to Lee, and Jonathan, and especially thanks to Dani, I will no longer limit my prayers to a calculation of what I think God might do. I will PRAY BIG!

Dani Laurion on YouTube a few weeks after her healing:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WvT8hsmCC2E>

Note: My quotations of Dani in the sermon, as well as background details, were compiled from this video, my conversation with Dani in May, 2023, and reports published in April, 2022 by *The Lansing State Journal*, *Detroit Catholic News Agency*, and *Catholic World Report*.

Does prayer change history?

<https://www.cnn.com/2014/06/06/world/europe/lech-walesa-poland-today/index.html>

Lech Walesa, reflecting on the liberation of Poland and the peaceful collapse of the Soviet Union: “I’m sure that had there been no pontificate of John Paul II, the Fall of Communism wouldn’t have happened as quickly or as peacefully as it did. The Holy Father did not call us to fight, but gathered us in prayer.”

<https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/prayer-in-a-world-gone-mad/>

Desmond Tutu, reflecting on the bloodless transformation of South Africa, which included (not covered in U.S. news reports) prayerful reconciliation meetings between Black reformers and white former leaders of apartheid:

“A few years ago I was at General Seminary in New York, and I met up with an anchoress, and I asked her to tell me a little bit about her life. She said, “I live in the woods in California. My day starts at two in the morning, and I pray for you.” And I thought to myself, “Here I am being prayed for at two in the morning in the woods in California by this faithful woman every day. What chance does the South African government have?” Well of course now we’ve seen what chance they had. None at all! For they have bitten the dust completely. Thanks again to those anonymous ones of faith, in a sense, those living this hidden life, of silence, of worship, of adoration, on behalf of others, who prevent the world from going completely mad.”

