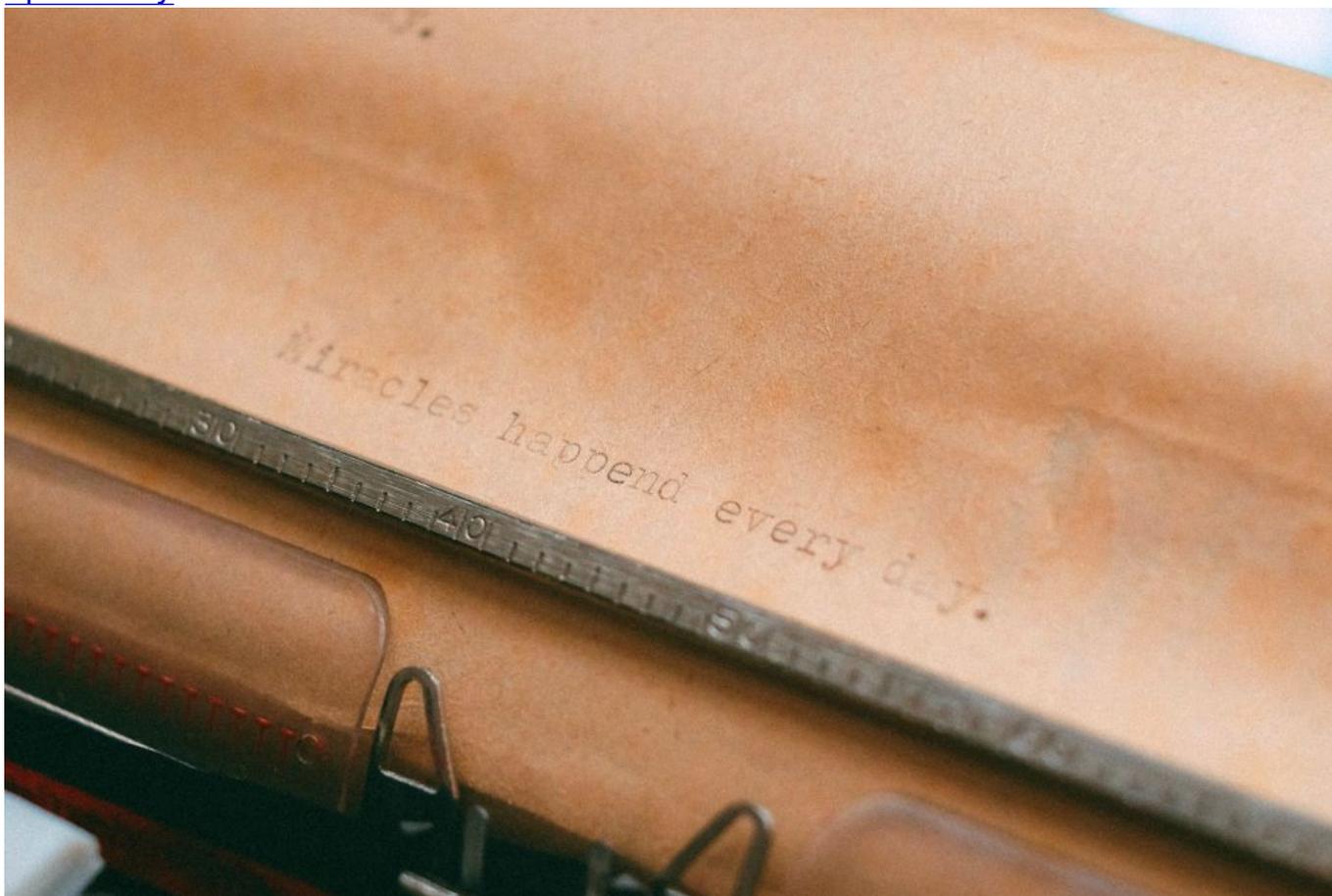


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Last Sunday, we arrived at Sacred Heart Catholic Church in La Conner, Washington, just in the nick of time for Mass, as usual. Instead of the 10 minutes to our local parish, we choose to drive the extra half-hour to our neighboring town for weekly service because that is simply a better fit for us. Mass at our local church feels solemn and serious, while the crowd packed into that small white chapel overlooking the Swinomish Channel can be depended upon to be loud and chatty and welcoming.

Since we never seem to be able to arrive any earlier, when we entered and searched for seats, there were very few spaces remaining in the noisy pews. We spied a gap wide enough for us — myself, husband Dan and son Nick — and we hustled over, squeezing past folks' knees apologetically. As we settled in and looked around, I realized that we just happened to have ended up right next to some acquaintances. It seems we aren't the only churchgoers who prefer a raucous welcome over a somber one.

At a pause in the conversation between her and a lady in the pew in front of us, I touched my seatmate gently on the shoulder, and said, "Good morning."

When she turned, her eyes were at first startled, but then registered familiarity and she smiled, "Well, good morning to you!" She did a small wave past me, acknowledging Dan and Nick.

I asked how long they had been coming here, and she affirmed they had similar reasons: The friendly morning commotion here was worth the extra miles.

I inquired about how she and her sweetheart had been doing since we last met, and her response was surprising. She grabbed my left arm with both of her hands and looked straight into my eyes. Hers were round with excitement and glossed with sudden tears.

"My son was healed last week!"

"What?" I asked.

"My son. He is 30. He was born with a bad back. He has struggled with pain his whole life. A man at his church asked if he could pray for him last week, and lay hands on him. And my son was healed! His back is all better. No more pain! Can you believe it?"

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I hoped my face was reflecting back only joy for her and her son, because I realized that my brain was instantly skeptical. I mean, we are Catholic, not Pentecostal, right?

I found myself picturing a glossy-suited large-haired evangelical preacher smacking a guy on his forehead, yelling "Devil, come out!" and the guy falling down, then leaping to his feet, dancing around with his hands in the air. That visual seemed way more at home on a television screen or Las Vegas stage than it did in the aisles of our local church, notwithstanding how relatively boisterous our morning Mass crowd was.

She was still gripping my arm, beaming at me earnestly, tears on her cheeks. She said again, "Can you believe it?"

It dawned on me that she really wanted me to. And I pondered that just maybe it was real. That even though it might appear to be random, maybe it was no accident that the only seats available to us were right here, right at this spot, next to this woman who would share this exact news with me.

I laid my hand on her two hands and squeezed.

I said, "Yes, yes, I do believe it."

Music from the piano in the far corner swelled suddenly, and the pastor and his altar servers moved past our pew. Mass was starting. We smiled into each other's eyes, I patted her hands once more, and she released my arm. She turned her attention forward, wiping her wet eyes with the back of her hand, her shoulders heaving up and down with deep breaths.

I tried to focus on the ritual words and music but found myself feeling profoundly humble and somehow broken open, standing alone in the mist from my own surprising hot tears. I did believe it. I did believe that God could and did heal this young man. My cynical brain was no longer in charge. This understanding emanated from a deep primitive place within me. I felt at once both isolated from those around me, and in the encompassing presence of God.

And from that quiet stillness, I felt and heard this: "Just relax and let me love you."

You see, I have had a lifetime of neck injuries, and pain in my head, neck and shoulders has become so normal, I don't even feel it anymore. Instead of registering that I am hurting, I find I can only gauge it by how tired and ragged I feel. If I am exhausted by bedtime, I realize I must have really been hurting that day.

A recent car accident flared that up, and I had been struggling daily with a much sharper awareness of pain: headaches, soreness in my neck and shoulders, tingling down my right arm, dropping things with my right hand.

It had never occurred to me to ask God for help.

But when I heard "Just relax and let me love you," I knew just what it meant. I inexplicably understood that I could and would be healed, too.

The warmth of that idea filled the cavern of doubt inside me. I knew it was true, and real, just as I knew that I myself was its biggest obstacle. Me. My ego. My identity as separate and strong and self-reliant.

I knew I would have to remember and repeat this line — "Just relax and let me love you" — over and over again, and allow this feeling to quash my annoyingly analytical mind.

As Mass continued, I found I had to remind myself to "Just keep breathing, stupid," as I struggled to keep tears from spilling from my eyes. When we held hands and said the Our Father together, it was all I could do not to weep openly. And when it was time for the Sign of Peace, I kissed my husband and son, then turned to my friend. We hugged each other fierce and long, and I realized that the miracle of her son's healing was surging through her body and spirit, as well.

Since then, I underwent an MRI that confirmed I have two bulging discs in my neck from that July accident. When my doctor relayed that information to me, just as I started associating that news with future struggle and pain, I heard once again, "Just relax and let me love you."

Instead of panic, I felt peace.

No matter how it goes, or how long it takes, that is already a miracle.

[Amy Morris-Young graduated from and taught writing at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles.]

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