

Quirks of grace: When strange things happen

by [James C. Howell](#) in the [July 12, 2005](#) issue

Ministry is befuddling, either in the way the people we serve are just so very strange, or in the way the grace of God catches us off guard—or both. Granted, some out there “get” the liturgy and sound theology we’re offering them, and in admittedly wobbly ways try to embody what the scriptures are about. But a stunning host of others latch on to spiritual oddities, untested (and untestable) private experiences and even silliness.

What are they thinking—and what are we to think—when they fall for the notion that Jesus and Mary Magdalene are the ancestors of Merovingian royalty? Or that the spiritual blatherings of celebrities reveal truths about past lives? Or that inner visions and hunches have validity? Is there some desperate lunge in their gullibility to which I need to pay more attention?

And what should I have said a while back when a couple told me they saw the Holy Spirit on my head at the end of worship, and that this was a sign they should move to Colorado? I assured them it was the sun glinting through the stained glass behind me as it does every day at that hour, but they waved off my rational explanation and moved west.

My strange people put far too much stock in mere coincidence. I understand why: we all crave some proof of the Divine; we all could really use some definitive direction from God. But my analysis suggests that when people notice a coincidence, they are glad, even eager, to find the sign they were looking for in that coincidence. I would vastly prefer that my parishioners make decisions and believe what they believe about God because of the coincidence of the prayers of the liturgy with the scripture readings and our inherited treasury of belief and the exemplary lives of the saints.

I side with the atheist evolutionist Richard Dawkins, who said that if our head spins over some chance occurrence, “What we need is less gasping and more thinking.”

Do the math: coincidences just happen, and explaining chance isn't hard if you use your brain. The chance may feel knee-buckling when out of thousands of cars on the road, a drunk driver hits the car driven by the one I love. But believing that God arranged this coincidence is worse: it kills all consolation. So I ask my strange, sad, loving and lost people to look to the Bible and the sacraments—you know, the means of grace, the grace we measure out, a grace well calculated. Let's apply critical thinking, I say, to stave off superstition and find grace where we are supposed to find it.

But then something happens that brings wide grins from the spiritually intuitive and raises the eyebrows of rationalists like myself.

I had a friend named Clay. Single, a gastroenterologist, a ferocious competitor at spades, a loner content to sit on the back pew, an occasional volunteer for medical mission work. Clay called one day: "Can you come over? I have something to show you." There on the floor of his den was a bassinet with a baby inside. Clay had gone to Oklahoma and adopted a little girl. I had never imagined him as a dad, but as I observed him with Lauren, I felt as if I'd discovered a new wing in a museum that revealed its most stunning treasures. He was a marvelous dad, and she returned the favor. Like the girl with curls Silas Marner found instead of his gold, Clay's daughter "stirred quiverings of tenderness, impressions of some power presiding over his life. . . . [She] called him away from his weaving, and made him think all its pauses a holiday, reawakening his senses with her fresh life, warming him into joy because she had joy."

Never have I seen a dad more delighted than Clay when he brought Lauren to the font for her baptism. But after the service, a woman who had never met Clay called me. "I had a vision during that baptism." I patiently listened to yet one more of the syrupy stories I've heard too many times. "The roof of the building lifted off, and light streamed down on the child from heaven, and a host of angels from heaven gathered around the font." I thanked her and forgot about it.

Five years later, Clay (who had since moved to Texas) called to tell me that he had been diagnosed with brain cancer and had only a few months to live. The prospect of losing my friend was compounded by the thought of Lauren, a kindergartener, losing her only parent. After a restless night I was opening the morning mail, and found a notecard from the woman who'd had the vision at the baptism. She had thought about it again, commissioned an artist to paint what she had seen and had

the painting made into notecards—and she thought I would like one.

I tried to do the math and calculate the odds of this woman having this vision during this particular baptism, of this card arriving in my mail five years later on the morning after Clay learned of his diagnosis. Although I know Richard Dawkins would mount some explanation, the odds against this coincidence being random are astronomical. But what did it mean? Hesitantly I told a friend, whose face lighted up as he said, “He’s going to be healed!” I wish he had been right. Clay died a few weeks ago, and Lauren lost her only parent.

I flew to Texas to preach his funeral, with the notecard with the light and the angels in hand. Should I share the notecard? Say something about it? If so, what? In the pulpit I spoke of the gospel, making a few points out of Clay’s life and loves. As I started to sit down, it occurred to me that to withhold the evidence I held, no matter how confused I might be about its meaning, would be to slam a window shut when we really needed some light. So I told those present about the vision, the card and how it came in the mail. A jaw or two dropped; a few people nodded; one man rolled his eyes.

“I don’t know what this means,” I admitted, “but it has to mean something. Perhaps when Lauren was baptized, the dark shadow in Clay’s head that would eventually lengthen and be his undoing was perceived by the God we invoke in worship. And perhaps God, who is never happy to leave such a shadow to become nothing but darkness, flashed a small light in another mind, so that we could see a small flicker, some intimation of grace bridging space and time so we might detect the goodness of God in the darkness.”

Yes, our theology requires us to believe that in baptism, both Lauren *and* Clay were sealed with the Spirit and claimed by a God whose power manifests itself in the liturgy and scripture. But doesn’t God’s power also show itself in the minds and hearts of all kinds of folk and in the most surprising of places? Isn’t grace sneaky like that, tiptoeing up behind us in the dark, making no sense whatsoever?

I am wondering how to develop this underdeveloped, intuitive side of my own befuddled self. I am listening more attentively to people who tell me of their faith experiences, knowing that some are sheer quirkiness and that others contain signs of grace. I am looking for God in the cracks, in curious circumstances, even with my eyes closed. And I am betting the roof might just come off the church building when I least expect it, and light and angels will flood around us. At least I hope so.