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Maybe it was Dumb Luck – Or Maybe it was Something Else

By Jeff Kunerth
UCF Forum columnist
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Sometimes things happen that are inexplicable, maybe miraculous, possibly spiritual.



(Photo by Jeff Kunerth)

My youngest brother, John, died this winter in South Dakota. The night before the funeral there was a freezing fog that frosted the trees in Belle Fourche with a crystalline white glaze: every branch of every tree etched in white. I've never seen such beauty at such a time of sorrow.

It took six of us – my other brother, my son, a cousin, John’s daughter, her boyfriend and me – to get everything done in the short time before the funeral. We emptied out his apartment. We sold his car. We made arrangements with the funeral director. We met with the lawyer. We took care of his finances at the bank. We even retrieved the credit card I left at the steakhouse.

Everything seemed to fall into place. We had only one thing left to do before heading to Rapid City and the airport: return a 40-year-old pickup truck to its final resting place at our family ranch in Wyoming.

Maybe because everything had gone so well we didn’t think to check the weather.

My brother and son drove the airport rental car, while my cousin and I followed in the pickup. The ranch is about 20 miles from Belle Fourche, the last five on a road that isn’t really a road at all – just tire tracks and ruts. As we approached the ranch, the rental car got stuck in the snow that had drifted over the ruts in the road.

The pickup bed was bare of shovels, chains or the other necessities required to pull a car out of the snow. We found a board and a broken ratchet strap. Everything we tried produced the same result: wheels spinning in the snow.

The temperature dropped into the 20s before the snow began falling. The sky darkened into dusk.

The rental car stayed stuck about an hour.

And the reality sank in: This is serious. It’s that moment when the father driving the RV realizes he took the wrong turn in a national forest and is hopelessly lost. It’s the couple in New York City for the first time who find themselves after dark in the wrong part of town.

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So when the improbable happened – when the ratchet strap hooked to the pickup bumper and tied to the hatchback hook of the rental car held and the pickup pulled the rental car backwards – your acute awareness of your mere mortality can’t help but morph into wonder: What just happened?

Maybe it was just dumb luck. If we were unlucky to get stuck, it just might be luck that we became unstuck.

Or it might have been something else. I am not religious, but you can't experience something like this without feeling something miraculous just happened. My mind went not immediately to God, but to my deceased brother John.

I wasn't alone. As we were driving back to Belle Fourche, three deer appeared on the side of the road, ran alongside us for a bit and then disappeared. My cousin evoked the spirits of the dead – my brother, father and grandmother.

“That was John, your dad and Dolly,” he said.

This was not a moment of religious conversion for me, but it made me wonder why I felt as a non-believer something akin to divine intervention.

I found something of an explanation in a book by a religion scholar who wrote *God: A Human History*: We are hardwired as a species to believe that there is something bigger and more everlasting than ourselves.

“Belief in the soul as separate from the body is universal,” Reza Aslan writes. “It is our first belief, far older than our belief in God. It is the belief that begat God.”

The problem is we are also hardwired to impose human characteristics on the Almighty. Our own self-centeredness creates a God totally fascinated by our puny lives.

“Whether we are aware of it or not, and regardless if we are believers or not, what the vast majority of us think about when we think about God is a divine version of ourselves,” Aslan writes.

But Aslan offers another theory of why we evoke God at times such as this. He contends that God and the world are not separate, but the same. Everything that exists embodies God – including ourselves.

“Consider the possibility that the entire reason we have a cognitive impulse to think of God as a divine reflection of our selves is because we are, every one of us, God,” he writes. “Perhaps rather than concerning ourselves with trying to form a relationship with God, we should instead become fully aware of the relationship that already exists.”

What he suggests is that God at work doesn't come from above but from within.

I can't believe what happened out there in the snow was proof of an all-knowing, all-seeing, interventionist God. But I also can't believe that nothing happened. Something inexplicable, maybe miraculous, possibly spiritual, happened.

Much time has passed since that night. But the feeling hasn't left me. Like the trees trimmed in white, I witnessed something wondrous.

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