

“Lift Up Thine Eyes”: Miracles Large and Small

REX E. AND JANET G. LEE

Janet: A couple of weeks ago our family watched a Christmas movie together, after which our four-year-old grand son Alex turned wide-eyed to his mother and asked, “Do I believe in Santa Claus?”

I had two reactions to his honest question. One was a realization of the dependency a young child has on his parents for the establishment of his beliefs. The other reaction was to the vast difference between the miraculous in fantasy and the miraculous in reality. On the one hand, the more information a child gathers, the more preposterous fantasy becomes (except to take its proper place in entertainment and imaginative play). On the other hand, the more informed we become and the more experiences with the Spirit we have in this life, the more we understand the realities of eternal truth. Time and knowledge work to dispute fantasy, but the test of time only enhances what is real.

Rex: Reason is not, of course, the only avenue by which we gain understanding. Our tool kit of learning is half empty unless it also includes faith. Paul reminds us that faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. As President Benson instructed us, “Our inability to explain a thing . . . does

not disprove its reality” (*So Shall Ye Reap* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1960], p. 149). Those things that we cannot fully comprehend through our rational processes we call miracles. As we go through life, gaining maturity, the reality of these miracles is often supported by reason—but never completely. Throughout this existence, faith and miracles and faith in miracles must play an important part of our development and progress toward eternal life and also in our happiness in this life.

Janet: The greatest miracles are, most appropriately, associated with the Savior of the world. They include the creation of the world, the Savior’s miraculous birth that we celebrate at this season, the Atonement, and the restoration of the gospel. Reason and faith are the companion learning processes that, if exercised consistently throughout our lives, can lead us to a greater understanding of these most profound of all miracles. As Elder Neal A. Maxwell reminds us:

Rex E. Lee was president of Brigham Young University when this devotional address was given on 12 December 1995.

Like the wise men from the east, we too must travel a great distance in order to come unto Christ, the Light of the World. . . .

We should be like [the] star [in the east]—in our proper orbit and place, on time, putting our talents to work, doing what we have been asked to do. [The Christmas Scene (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1994), pp. 9–10]

Rex: At this magical time of year, when we turn our minds and our spirits even more to what the First Presidency in their 1995 Christmas message so beautifully referred to as “that night of nights so many years ago,” we would like to discuss miracles with you. Sometimes we tend to think of miracles in terms of history-making, dramatic events for which there is no mortal explanation, such as instantaneous healings, raising the dead, turning water to wine, or feeding the multitudes with five loaves and two fishes, miracles all performed by our Savior. But miracles come in all sizes and to all people.

Janet: As I ponder my own mission in the midst of the Savior’s wondrous miracles, it occurs to me that a whole myriad of miracles is set in motion to maintain our constant progression and to remind us of our purpose here. God didn’t create miracles as single, solitary extravaganzas to dazzle us. Each has a purpose and is given to perpetuate our progression. As we look at miracles, we must be more than astonished. We must be motivated to mold our lives in a Christlike manner. In so doing, we must see not only the obvious miracles but the many everyday miracles that give our life meaning and majesty as we see ourselves and others as literal sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father. Almost always, in one way or another, these seemingly smaller miracles tie back to the grander miracles, such as the Atonement or the Restoration, and on occasion to other miracles of the more personal kind.

Just how difficult it sometimes is to see and understand this linkage when faced with the

realities of everyday life was recently brought to my attention by America’s beloved artist Norman Rockwell. Hanging on a wall in the Springville Art Museum right now is a picture of the beautiful St. Thomas Cathedral. In the center of the picture is a young boy on a ladder, changing the lettering for the upcoming sermon. Below him, on the sidewalk, are the people of New York City. And in typical city fashion—as only Rockwell could portray—all have their heads buried against their chests and all are apparently late for some important meeting. No one, including the young man changing the letters or the priest at his feet, seem to be paying any attention to the message going up, which reads, “Lift Up Thine Eyes.”

Rex: It is this thought, to “Lift Up Thine Eyes”—to the miracles both great and small that surround us—that we would like to develop today. We particularly want to explore the idea that the quieter, more individualized, more personalized miracles can and should play a central part in our lives, in the development of our testimonies, and in our progress toward eternal life.

Janet: And very often these more individually focused miracles come in ways that we may not recognize as miracles at the time, unless our spirits are particularly attuned to recognize them. As Willa Cather said so beautifully, “Miracles rest on our perceptions being made finer so we can see what was with us all the while.”

At times when I have been really discouraged, I take a few moments to appreciate the miracle of each day and all that is in this beautiful world. To smell a flower, walk over crunching leaves, make a snowball, or visit with a friend—all these actions center me and bring me back to the reality that life itself is a miracle and that if Heavenly Father created this world for us with all of its miracles, he wants us to see them, appreciate them, and learn from them. The big miracles show us the way and make eternal life a reality. The little

miracles—the everyday miracles—motivate us and keep us going in the right direction: on the path to eternal life.

Rex: As children of our Heavenly Father, we are allowed to participate in some of the everyday miracles, and we need to lift up our eyes and be aware of them as they occur in our lives. We plant seeds, nourish them, and thrill at their growth; we bear children and marvel at the beginning of a new life; we observe kindnesses and service and are glad to be part of humanity. All this we do in recognition of the divinity of our heritage.

Janet: Just as the blossom follows the planted and nourished seed, kindness grows and blooms into small miracles through our simple acts of service. Let me illustrate with one of my favorite stories.

More than sixty years ago, a little girl named Millie and a boy named Billie were in elementary school together. Every day each student stood at the front of the class by Millie's desk to read from a primer. Whenever it was Billie's turn, the children laughed at his constant stuttering. Millie was a tenderhearted girl who disliked seeing anyone ridiculed; one day, when she could stand the snickering no longer, she reached up and took Billie's hand. A miracle happened! Billie quit stuttering, and from that day on, every time it was Billie's turn to read, Millie repeated the therapy and the stuttering stopped. The two children did not play together after school or even on the playground, but there was magic in the moments when he read.

The children grew up, married others, and raised families. Bill moved to a different state, became the CEO of one of America's largest corporations, and was called by President Kimball to be a regional representative. Millie excelled in various Church callings, was equally efficient at home and in the bank where she worked, and delighted the world with her winning smile, acts of compassion, and love for humanity.

Years went by, and they were both left widowed, separated from their eternal companions. One day after Bill had written his life history, detailing an episode of a "little blonde girl" who years ago had changed his life by holding his hand, a mutual friend told him, "I know your little blonde girl." After a time Bill phoned Millie, they talked, he flew to see her, they had lunch, followed by another lunch, more phone calls, lunches, meeting each other's families—eventually they became engaged. Last December the little blonde girl, now a beautiful woman, and the little boy with the stutter, now a confident man in his seventies, were married. They devote each day to making each other happy.

Rex: What would have happened if the mature Bill had neglected to make that first phone call to Millie or, upon meeting her again, had not recognized her for the wonderful woman she was and how she would bless his life? Sometimes a miracle occurs, and it is hardly noticed. Elder Maxwell points out that the special star that signaled Christ's birth was recognized by only a few shepherds and wise men. Obviously, the effects of a miracle depend in substantial part on the faith of each individual beneficiary.

Time and time again we see how important our own individual faith is in receiving and recognizing a miracle. Think about the restoration of the gospel and the Book of Mormon—the coming forth of that book, including a five-year continuous involvement by Moroni himself; its translation through direct revelation; and the fact that it has withstood 165 years of relentless criticism and is today accepted by millions as a new witness for Christ. Surely this constitutes, in the purest sense, one of the great miracles of all time.

Janet: But consider the case of Oliver Cowdery. He actually saw the angel Moroni, who in turn permitted him to see and handle the plates. He was the Prophet Joseph Smith's companion in the translation of the Book of

Mormon, he sat with him through that historic process, and he was the man, the only man, who recorded Joseph's actual words. It was Oliver Cowdery who was Joseph Smith's companion on the banks of the Susquehanna River when John the Baptist returned to earth and restored the Aaronic Priesthood through these two men. And even during his apostate days he never denied any of these things. Yet apostatize he did; even these grand-scale miracles that he personally witnessed and in which he personally participated did not prevent his leaving the Church for a time. Contrast that with the more intimate miracle that occurs within the lives of each of us when we come to know the Book of Mormon in a far less dramatic, but equally effective way as we put to the test Moroni's promise and receive our own divine witness of its truth. Our experience with the Book of Mormon also demonstrates that sometimes the quiet, intimate, and more personalized miracles tie back to bigger ones and often have even greater lasting effects on the individual than those that may be recorded in the history books.

Rex: Let me tell you of one such miracle involving Moroni's promise that happened to me when I was a missionary. After I had been serving for several weeks, bearing my testimony many times daily that I knew Joseph Smith had seen the Father and the Son, I began to ask myself such things as "How do you know? Do you really know, or are you just deceiving these people and yourself as well? You didn't see it happen, and you don't know anyone who did."

As the days went on, these misgivings bored into my soul more and more until they reached the point of an overwhelming obsession. I remembered Moroni's great promise contained in chapter 10, verses 4 and 5. I had been urging other people to put that promise to the test; now I felt a great need to do the same for myself. And so I began reading the Book of Mormon once again, this time with

more intensity, accompanied by prayers that always included a plea to know for a surety of the book's veracity. The answer came within about a month and a half—not through a vision, nor a voice from the heavens, nor handwriting that suddenly appeared on the wall of our apartment. But for me it was just as surely a direct revelation, and therefore a miracle, as if it had taken one of these more dramatic forms.

It occurred one hot dusty afternoon in a suburb of Mexico City, Colonia Moctezuma. We had returned for the third visit—which in those days was devoted exclusively to the events of the Restoration—and our investigators were a widow and her fifteen-year-old daughter. Neither of them had shown any visible interest during our first two visits, and, quite frankly, I was surprised that they let us in the third time. About halfway through the visit, as I began to tell the story of the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood by John the Baptist, an unmistakable divine presence came over me, literally consuming my entire being. It said to me, not exactly in words, but with a surety that I will never forget: "You know, this really happened. This same man, John the Baptist, who had baptized the Savior of the world, actually came down to this earth in the spring of 1829 and conferred upon Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery the same authority by which he personally, eighteen centuries before, had baptized the Savior of the world."

It was one of the few times in my life when I know I received a direct message from my Heavenly Father. And it affected not only me; it also affected the way that I spoke to such an extent that our two investigators felt the same spirit that I felt. It reminded me of what Nephi tells us in verse 1 of his great valedictory chapter 33 in 2 Nephi: When a man speaks by the power of the Holy Ghost, the power of the Holy Ghost carries the truth of his message to those who hear him. I can tell you that on that afternoon in that home three conversions

occurred—mine and those of the widow and her daughter. At the end of our discussion they both asked for baptism, which is something we had not yet suggested. And as for my own conversion, I knew that I had been given the assurance I had been seeking.

Janet: Such miracles, for the most part, do not come without asking, without much prayer, fasting, and soul-searching. The miracle of the good grade is not likely to occur in the Testing Center unless it has been preceded by some extraordinary effort in the library or other place of study. Wisely, our Father in Heaven is prudent in dispensing miracles. When Satan taunted Jesus in the desert to turn stones into bread, he refused. Yet on another occasion he fed a multitude of people with two loaves and five fishes. In commenting on this contrast, C. S. Lewis has observed that perhaps one may surmise that the direct change from stone to bread appeared to the Son not to follow a natural order. “Little bread,” he said, “into much bread is quite a different matter. Every year God makes a little corn into much corn; the seed is sown and there is increase.” Likewise, when we plant the seed of knowledge by thoughtful study, our mortal minds can increase in knowledge. The miracle in learning exists because God gives us our intelligence, but it is brought to pass through our individual effort.

Rex: To this observation I would add that God himself does not sow the seeds in the fields; we must do that. And so it is with our own personal miracles. We must do our part so that he is not working with stones.

Janet: While we dislike thinking of ourselves as stones, there are moments in our lives when we feel our hearts growing cold and hard. Usually this happens when we feel we have been unfairly treated or misunderstood. And it is at these times that we need to rely on the miracle of prayer to heal our broken hearts or our angry, ailing spirits. Let me illustrate with a personal example.

Several years ago, as a Young Women president, I took a group of girls to stake camp. On our first night there, without my knowledge, a few of my girls played a harmless prank on some campers from another ward. In the morning, when the girls confessed to the stake camp director—someone new in the stake whom I had never met—they were dealt a harsh punishment. One of the girls was taken out of our cabin for the entire week, and others were given additional cleanup duties.

But the director did not stop there. She then turned to me and suggested that if we could not comply with the rules we should be sent home. I had to swallow a great deal of pride, and I found myself biting my tongue at various times throughout that week, particularly since the camp seemed to be run far more like a military boot camp than a young women’s outing. But I tried to be positive for the sake of my girls. In fact, together we started looking for the good in that year’s camp, such as the fact that every activity was organized the best it had ever been.

On the last night of camp, we gathered in an amphitheater around a fire for a testimony meeting. True to the order of camp that year, we marched in single file, ward by ward. I was with our Laurel group, and we were one of the last to enter. When I finally sat down, there was only one small space left, and it was next to me. On this we piled our jackets. But, just as we were ready to begin, the camp director—or the “gestapo lady,” as the girls called her—walked in. I could feel my girls cringe as her eyes searched for a place to sit. Slowly I lifted our jackets and motioned to her, trying hard not to look at the disapproving faces of my girls.

I knew all too well that this testimony meeting was supposed to be the spiritual culmination of the entire week. The spirit at this meeting could change lives for the better and often did. And now I could feel my own resentment and that of my girls toward this woman

crowding out the Spirit. How I needed my heart to be softened. And so I began to pray fervently for help in understanding her and to let me know of her goodness. I prayed off and on for thirty minutes or so. And then, as we were singing “I Am a Child of God,” a miracle happened. Suddenly I knew her spirit. I understood and knew of her love for her Father in Heaven and of his love for her.

That testimony meeting was one I will never forget, and when it was over I took a moment to tell the camp director all the good things I had experienced at camp that week. I was not, however, prepared for her reaction. There were tears in her eyes as she said, “Thank you so much. No one else has thanked me. I have been afraid that no one liked me because I have been so strict. But I am a convert and have never run a camp before. I have just tried to do my best.” And then she hugged me.

Had a miracle just occurred? I think so. My heart had been softened just as night turns to day.

Rex: As long as we can pray, there will be miracles in our lives. Personally, I have been the beneficiary of these miracles on several occasions. Let me tell you about two of them, involving two separate people. A few of you have heard me talk about each of them. Fewer of you have heard both, and none has heard the connection between the two of them that occurred to me in a very powerful way as we were preparing this talk.

As some of you know, in late June of 1987, we made a sudden and emotionally devastating discovery that I had a very fast-acting form of lymphoma that was in its final stage at the time we discovered it. The day before I left to take my treatments at the National Cancer Institute in Bethesda, Maryland, I asked for a blessing from my home teacher, Rodger Galland, and my next-door neighbor and stake president, our new BYU president, Merrill Bateman. A couple of sentences that

President Bateman pronounced during the course of his sealing the anointing will remain with me through this life and the next. His words were unequivocal. He said, “This disease will not take your life at this time. The Lord yet has other things for you to do in this life in the Church and in government, and you will recover and do them.” It must have affected him as profoundly as it did me, because at a stake conference, while I was still at NIH and things were looking somewhat bleak, he told our entire stake how convinced he was that that blessing had come from the Lord and that I would live.

I want you to know that I had that same conviction. During my darkest hours at that hospital, when it seemed that nothing was going right, I would fall back on the words of that blessing and the surety with which my friend, my brother, and my ecclesiastical leader had pronounced them. This blessing by President Bateman, which I would put in the category of a miracle as we are discussing miracles today, also had another follow-up miracle in which the central figure was neither of my race nor of my religion. Her name is Juildeen Ford, one of my nurses at NIH, and she was as spiritually committed as she was professionally competent.

The most serious episode that I faced with infections during my stay at NIH occurred one night in the latter part of August, during the second cycle of chemotherapy, when Ms. Ford was on duty as the night nurse. I have very little recollection of that awful night, except for how terrible I felt and the fact that Ms. Ford seemed to be taking my temperature at unusually short intervals. Then I remember the great relief I felt when my fever broke and Ms. Ford, after having taken my temperature for the umpteenth time, said to me, “It’s okay now, Mr. Lee. You’re going to be all right.” It wasn’t until later that Janet told me what transpired that night from her perspective.

Janet: After I left the hospital to be with our young daughter Christie, I continued to call back and check on Rex's condition, as I frequently did. As the night dragged on, his fever rose. But when I called Ms. Ford at four in the morning, she spoke with cheerful confidence. "He's all right now, Mrs. Lee. His fever has subsided. In fact, his temperature is almost normal. Let me tell you what happened. I knew that if his fever kept rising in his condition, his life would be in danger. And I also knew that we had done everything medically that could be done. So I went next door to the nurses' station, bowed my head, and prayed, 'Lord, this is too good a man to let die. Make his fever go down, and let him live.' Then I went back and took his temperature again. It had started to subside, and within an hour he was out of danger."

Rex: And so, just as the miracle of the Atonement is followed years, centuries, and even millennia later by miraculous events in individual lives as a direct consequence of the Atonement; just as the miracle of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon continues to work other miracles through its effect on testimonies; so it was in my life that the miraculous pronouncement in June of 1987 by my dear friend and fellow priesthood holder was followed by another miracle in which the central character was completely unaware of what had happened 2,000 miles to the west three months previously. If it had not been for those two miracles, I might never have had the opportunity to know you and to serve as your president.

Janet: As most of you are aware, however, Rex's story did not end in 1987. It is truly a miracle that he is alive today, and for that I cannot begin to express my appreciation. But since that first diagnosis and miraculous recovery, Rex and our family have received other disheartening news about his health. At times, I admit, I have wanted nothing more than to wake up in the morning and find that all of this has been a dream—and that Rex has been

completely healed. That miracle has not been granted, but perhaps an even greater one has. Rex's life has been extended eight marvelous years, almost all of which have been spent on this campus with you. While we have been here, we have experienced miracles within miracles. I have learned from your example and your kindness to us as we have shared together in each other's joys and sorrows. I used to think that faith in God came in the form of feeling certain that life would be as I wanted it to be. I have grown to understand that to have ultimate faith in God is to know that he is with us and will give us unfailing strength to help us through life's challenges. Thank you for being part of our blessing and helping us learn this lesson.

Rex: Being able to come back to BYU, first to the law school and then as your president, has been a miracle in my life. Many times I have written in my journal "My work at BYU is my salvation." So many times Janet and I have returned from a doctor's visit and plunged ourselves into a direct involvement with BYU that has provided a dimension and a perspective that we could not possibly have obtained from any other source. But even beyond any specific examples, the whole of our BYU presidency experience has been larger than the sum of its parts.

I have learned so many things from you—the students, the faculty, and the staff. I have learned from and been strengthened by great examples of courage and steadfast and determined devotion to eternal principles. I have learned how miracles, grand and small, occurring in one person's life can have profound, oftentimes unintended effects in other lives. Indeed, what we are steadily building here is itself a miracle: a place where we are committed to the concept of learning by study and learning by faith. And this in turn can work and has worked more individualized miracles for each of us.

Because of BYU I am today a better person than I was six and one-half years ago. I have a better appreciation of the things in life that are really important and of what I should do because of that understanding.

I look forward to continuing relationships with you and our university, though in a different context.

Janet: Rex and I together with our family have benefited greatly from the lessons we have learned at BYU. It has been a time of unbelievable happiness, a happiness that will be with us always. Truly the world is our campus, and our experiences here have opened up new vistas of understanding for all of us. While here, we have become intimately acquainted with students and faculty, including those from other countries and cultures, giving our lives a richness we would not otherwise have known. Our appreciation of the arts and other disciplines has been fine-tuned as we have been blessed with your talents and knowledge. We have cheered with you at athletic events and enjoyed escape from worries. Along with you we have listened to prophets, seers, and revelators and other General Authorities as well as faculty members who have stood behind this podium, in the classroom, and in other places on this campus to inspire, lift, and teach us. Like you, we stand in awe as we enjoy the beautiful grounds and facilities maintained by those who dedicate their time and effort for the comfort and enjoyment of us all. We have benefited firsthand and have watched the behind-the-scenes dedication of efficient secretaries and other staff members who work tirelessly to make this great university run effectively. We have dealt with our own challenges with greater calm and acceptance as we have mingled with you and watched others with greater challenges than ours lift up their eyes to the miracles in our midst and carry on.

As we walk across campus, with Rex holding my arm for balance and support, we see others who struggle with more difficulty than

we will ever know, and it heartens us to see your smiles and perseverance. Thank you all for everything you have given us.

I am thankful also to be a daughter of my Heavenly Father, for the miracle of life itself, for lessons learned through challenges, and for the love I know our Father in Heaven has for each of us individually. I bear testimony that he has sent his Only Begotten Son to redeem the world. I testify of the reality of the restored gospel and of its great miracle in our lives as we prepare ourselves for the eternities. I humbly pray to live more worthily of these many blessings. We leave with you an outpouring of our love and take with us your love.

Nearly seven years ago we saw our forthcoming time at BYU as a gift we could give for the miracle of life we had been given. Now, looking back, we have been the recipients of the gift and you at BYU the givers.

Rex: And now, as the final words that you will hear me speak as your president, I want to leave with you my testimony of the restored gospel. I have not seen the angel Moroni nor the plates of which he was the custodian, nor was I a personal witness to other dramatic events of the Restoration, such as the First Vision or the restoration of the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods. But I testify to you with just as much surety as if I had been there and personally had those experiences, they are real. This is not just another church. Joseph Smith was not just another great philosopher and wise man. He is literally a prophet of God, chosen by our Heavenly Father to be the instrument through whom the Lord has once again restored his gospel and ushered in this dispensation of the fullness of times. These, my brothers and sisters, are eternal truths that have eternal and enormous importance for us in our individual lives—a great miracle affecting everyone who ever lived, tied to more personalized miracles that I hope will play out in the lives of each of us.

Nearly 2,000 years ago, great miracles transpired with the birth of our Savior and the Atonement. Yet even today we bask in the blessings of those miracles with the promise of eternal life as they continue to work quieter miracles in the lives of all of us. Let us always

remember the star shining so brightly above Jesus' birthplace—a star so very few ever saw. Let us not forget that to see a miracle, we must “Lift Up Our Eyes.” That we may do so is my prayer and my testimony, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.