

## A Miraculous Life of More by Anna Alkin

“We’re in the business of creating a miracle here on earth.” – Charles Eisenstein

What is it like to be in the midst of a miracle? The idea of a miracle sounds so warm and delicious, the kind of thing you would aspire to experience in a minute, right? Well, in fact, here on earth we are in the middle of miracle school, whether you remember enrolling or not. And, much like life itself (a miracle in its own right), it’s not all sunshine and rainbows.

It’s very important to know the signs that one is participating in a miracle so you can see it through and not mess it up. Because miracles inspire panic, not awe, while they are in process. Keep this in mind so you can thwart your impulse to escape, hang in there with the fear and the pain, and keep moving forward with the plan instead. You see, contrary to popular belief, miracles require our participation to take root and grow.

I had the privilege of spending some time with a man who was on death row for 16 years in Georgia. Billy Moore not only lived to tell the tale, but is now walking about the world a free man. And he really is a free man — inside and out. Being that close to death by electric chair so many times helped form Billy in the crucible of fire, and it shows. Billy is a walking, talking miracle.

Being in the midst of a miracle story doesn’t always feel good. Once, a tiny baby squirrel came up to me at a coffee shop, repeatedly standing on my shoe, asking for help, despite his innate fear of me. This little squirrel had to override his instincts after finding himself out of the safety of his nest. The baby squirrel reached out to a larger being — in this case, me — for help. Shaking, the baby allowed me to catch it, pick it up, and place it in a box. So far, so good.

When I put the lid on the box, though, this poor little squirrel panicked and began scratching fiendishly at the slick sides of the cardboard box, trying with all its might to escape. The darkness was terribly frightening to my little friend, and its distress was distressing to me. If only I could communicate with it, let it know that its trust in me had not been in vain. The darkness enveloping the squirrel was a sign of the fulfillment of my end of the bargain, not its betrayal. Remember that the darkness can be a sign of the benevolent action of love the next time you find yourself in the middle of a miracle and are tempted to despair, or worse yet, are tempted to escape.

Being in the midst of a modern-day miracle is a lot like the situation of the baby squirrel in the box: you are in the dark about what to do, your survival instincts are kicking in, you are stretched beyond your own ability to make things right, and you find yourself wholly dependent upon an unseen being far larger than yourself for help.

For my friend Billy on death row, the inner prompting that he got from the Big Unseen Being was to write letters of apology to the family members of the man he killed. Not easy letters to write. And why even bother? The lid was already placed firmly on the box: Billy was on death row. Even here, the mind's survival strategy would be to deny wrongdoing, to present excuses, and certainly it would seek to hold the suffering of the victim's family at a distance.

If you watch carefully, you will notice how we try to avoid taking responsibility for something as small as being late for an appointment, how easy it is to reflexively offer excuses about the weather, the kids, the traffic, or whatever, instead of simply saying, "I'm sorry I am late." The mind takes the acknowledgment of mistakes, no matter how small, very personally. Acknowledging mistakes is indeed a threat to survival, but it's a symbolic survival: the survival of our picture of ourselves.

We like to see ourselves as good people, as people who arrive on time, as people who say "please" and "thank you," as people who don't kill other people. It takes a tremendous love of truth to allow that airbrushed picture of ourselves to fall from its elevated position on the wall, and shatter. The irony, however, is that the wall and the elevated image of ourselves are what imprison us. The ground that shatters is the painful, but freeing, action of Love.

Lid on box, Billy thwarted the universal survival instinct, and wrote those letters. He wrote those letters even though he knew there was nothing he could say that had the power to bring their loved one back. Fruitless as it seemed, Billy took full responsibility for his actions to the family, as he had done in the court proceedings. In the letters, Billy acknowledged how small his gesture was. Billy asked for help from a Big Unseen Being, received an answer, acted on it, and continued to wait in the dark, lid firmly on the box.

From our limited human perspective, the small squirrel's perspective, it's hopeless. Here we are, flying through the air with the lid on, in a cold unfeeling box, going God knows where, but we're pretty sure it's to our death. If only we had remained in the nest. If only we haven't ventured to the edge and peered over. If only we hadn't reached for more. In Billy's case, a legitimate need for more money, taken by illegitimate means, turned into an unplanned murder. Billy fell out of the nest of safety, in the search for more, and did he ever get it: a miraculous life of more.

Being in the midst of a miracle can feel like hell — not heaven. It goes against your every instinct for self-preservation. You look over the edge of the nest, you fall out, because you're called to a fuller participation in life. You wanted more, and rightly so. But once you're in that box, being transported from your old life to a new life by a being far larger than yourself, you start to panic. You start crawling up the sides of your box. You wish you never asked for more.

You contemplate breaking out of the plan you made for yourself and for a better life. You consider going back to the mindless job you hate, returning to that lover who pays the bills and steps on your heart, taking that drink or pill instead of continuing to make amends and stay sober. Miracles are terrifying. By their very nature, miracles are solutions to a problem that you and the world cannot provide.

And miracles, like love itself, can never be forced upon us. Miracles require our participation to germinate and grow. No matter what our situation, we have a choice. Continue to open to the heart-rending action of love? Or shut down, harden, and ossify. Why do you think so many people walk around virtually dead in this world? Because

reaching for life is scary. You have to be out of your mind to do it, and I mean that literally.

Those letters written by Billy were received by the family of the murdered man, and they sparked a correspondence. Initially, they wrote about forgiveness. The family forgave Billy, in part out of the Christian faith instilled in them by the man whose life was taken, and in part out of enlightened self-interest: they no longer wanted to suffer, or to live in pain.

They continued writing for the full 16 years Billy was on death row. And in that time, through the love of the grieving family, Billy came to forgive himself. He learned to open to the painful, freeing action of love. No small miracle that, opening one's heart to love for the unloveable stranger in our midst: ourselves. If only all of us on death row could allow the seeds of love to be planted in our hearts, then we, too, might come to know the paradise of being seen and loved fully in our perfect imperfection.

The inner, unseen miracle, the miracle of new life, had taken root, sprouted, and grew in Billy and in this family, over the years through these letters. Hidden from the light of the world, within the darkness of this tightly closed box, a miracle unfolded.

It was largely because of this family's testimony that Billy's death sentence was commuted to life in prison, and later his commutation turned into release. In their plea for Billy's life, the members of this family said in essence: "We have already lost one family member, do not take another away from us. Billy is now a member of our family."

The inner miracle burst forth into the public sphere. The parole board in Georgia even received a call from Mother Theresa with a plea for his life. After 14 death dates, and 16 years on death row, facing death by electrocution in an electric chair, Billy's miracle was complete: the lid to the box was opened, and he was released from prison. As Billy's wife, Donna says, Billy is a walking talking miracle just like the rest of us. It's just more obvious in Billy's case.

What kind of miracle are you in the midst of now, at this very moment in your life? No matter what kind of miracle, the aim of a miracle is new life. Not a continuation of your prior life, but a radically changed, altered life. A more expansive life, a life that was impossible to reach from the roots of the old life before. That's why the death, the darkness, the disruption, the pain. A miracle is the action of a new seed being planted in the soil of your current life. Much has to be cut, removed, and cleared away, to make way for this new life, this miraculous life of more.

Remember that miracles don't feel good in the making. We tend to only recognize a miracle in retrospect, not in the going through. You may now be experiencing the gravest problems of your life, and yet, your own miracle story may well be unfolding. Feel however you need to feel. Panic, even, if that helps. Just don't jump out of the box because you find the darkness too frightening.

Remember the darkness and the despair experienced by that small squirrel while it was being carried to safety. Seeds can only germinate when planted into dark earth. It's your job to nurture those seeds of new life, no matter how hopeless it seems. St. John of the Cross, the mystic, once wrote: "The brightest light in God is complete darkness to the intellect." The darkness, believe it or not, can be a sign of progress and cause for hope.

The lessons of our small lives are but a preparation for our common life on this earth. The

problems facing us, and their solutions, are bigger than we are individually, and in many ways, bigger than we are collectively. We are in training to become nothing less than miracle workers in the world.

We sense the oncoming darkness as the lid comes down. It's scary and it's dark, but what we've got now on the planet — this isn't living. We are leaning over the edge the nest because surely there is something more to life than this.

Miracles are possible even on death row. Murder can turn into a way of deepening the bonds of love within and among people. It is time for a change. It's time we all got carried away and started cultivating new ways living in the world.

It's coming: we are going to fall out of the nest of safety. Good. We deserve a new life, a fully alive life, a miraculous life of more.