

A Question of Faith

By Corie Ralston

Won first place in the Firebrand/SFReader contest, Dec 2005

Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1)

Sidney Miller

Video interviews, 2025

I still remember the exact moment the Miracle occurred: two-twenty in the afternoon, March 7, 2015. I had driven to Atlanta that day to buy a ring for Jane as a surprise anniversary gift. Fifteen years together at that point and I was still crazy about her.

It happened while I was sitting in one of those shops in the diamond district discussing cuts and impurities and generally trying to pretend I knew something about diamonds. The Miracle was a sudden stabbing joy in my heart, so startling and intense that it eclipsed everything else in an instant.

The store was gone. Every earthly thing was gone. I was encompassed by the presence of something extraordinary, a being so absolutely beautiful that it was almost terrifying, like something so hot it feels cold. I thought maybe I was dying, and my second thought was that I was okay with dying. My soul was lifted free of the shell of my body and cradled in God's hands. That's how it felt. When I was set back down, I knew I was forever changed.

When the moment was over and I could focus again, I saw everyone in the store blinking and staring stupidly at each other. I couldn't believe it. I'll be honest here. The Miracle was so *intimate*, like a private conversation with God, and I was annoyed to discover that I was not the only one who had felt it.

Colin Hersch, Historian

From "A Crisis of Faith: America Before and After the Miracle"

First Ed. 2040

The most striking aspect of accounts of the Miracle is the similarity of experience. Ninety five percent of recorded accounts include a reference to the divine. A huge percentage of

those interviewed concluded that God, as defined by their particular religion, was speaking directly to them. This is, of course, the reason for the popular term "Miracle". It is difficult for those born after the Miracle to grasp the significance to those who experienced it. But despite the personal nature of the event, America and many other nations underwent vast political and cultural changes following the Miracle. The questions we will attempt to address are how and why "proof" of the divine so radically affected cultural mores and international affairs for years to come.

Sidney Miller

Video interviews, 2025

The day after the Miracle, back in Fox Hollow, Alabama, Jane and I went to All Souls Presbyterian.

We squeezed into the church along with all our neighbors and a whole bunch of other people -- apparently the whole town had the same idea. I knew our minister, Derek Raganeaux, because his son was enrolled in my after-school art program. I had always liked him. He seemed a quiet, thoughtful man.

"For life is not a paragraph," he said. "And death is no parenthesis." I still remember those words. He was quoting some poet.

He went on to say that everyone had their proof that God existed. "Our lives are completely different now," he said.

I looked at the faces of those around me, many of whom I knew on a first-name basis, and saw smiles and tears and a stunned happiness. People hugged one another and wept. Our town was small, mostly white and middle class, not much more than a remote suburb of Birmingham. Mark and Jason were the only other gay couple that we knew, and I didn't see them in church.

I remember the last rays of the setting sun angling in through the open doors. I remember the smell of perfume and bodies packed just a little too close to one another.

I remember the gazes of our neighbors and friends lighting on me and Jane, then sliding away.

Not everything was different now, I thought. I remember wondering why I hadn't bought that ring after all.

Derek Rageneaux

April 11, 2015

Derek paced from one end of his small study to the other, a notebook clasped in his hands. He stopped briefly next to his crowded bookcase where his well-used tatty copy of the Bible rubbed shoulders with Thoreau, Russell, and C.S. Lewis. He would have liked to sink into the world of poetry and philosophy, to mull over the meaning of the divine and his private memory of the Miracle, but he had a sermon to write.

It had been difficult to concentrate since the Miracle. His experience of the event had been a crystallized moment of pure joy, a melding with the God he had always loved with all his heart. Never in his years as minister had he felt such certainty about his calling.

Except that now, only one month later, there were troubling reports from around the world. The small radio resting atop his encyclopedia persisted in using words like "bloodshed" and "Miracle" in the same sentence. It reported on a surge of terrorist bombings all over the world, not just the Middle East, but in Europe and Asia and South America. It chronicled the rise of vigilante groups in Atlanta and machete-wielding gangs in Haiti.

He stopped at the window above his desk. The sun was sinking into a pink and gold soup at the horizon, visible through the languid arms of the giant oak outside his window. In Fox Hollow, spring expressed itself exuberantly with rainbows of wildflowers strewn across lawns and medians and parks, breezes ripe with citrus and magnolia fragrances, an open defiance to the whispered strife from the rest of the world.

Derek rubbed his temples with the heels of his hands and tried to laugh. God, he thought, thank You for Your Gift, but couldn't You have been a little more specific?

Each drew his sword, on the side of the Lord. Where had that come from? A poem he had once read. Perhaps he could work it into tomorrow's sermon. He reached for his pen.

Jane Trundle

May 1, 2015

Dear God: It feels silly addressing my diary to you again after all these years. I haven't believed, I mean *really* believed in You since I was twelve years old. I stopped going to church when I was sixteen and fell in love for the first time. I

still remember her name -- Erica Juno. I knew it was wrong, and I prayed for You to make me feel differently, but then I had that huge falling out with my Mom and I guess I just gave up. Now You have shown yourself to me and to everyone else in the world and I can't help asking myself "why now?" Why now instead of during the Holocaust? Why now instead of when Jesus died? I keep thinking You are trying to tell us something.

From the Fox Hollow Daily, Letters to the Editor

May 5, 2015

To all good Christian citizens of Fox Hollow: don't back down now! Our children deserve the best education and that includes learning the love of Christ and that means Prayer in School and daily Bible Classes. It should not have taken a bona fide Miracle to make us take action in the first place. Throw out the proctors! The Feds don't know how to run our town. I ask you this: is it better to satisfy the government or make sure our children go to Heaven? Think about it.

Excerpt from TeenGodChat, hosted by Christians in CyberGrace

June 24, 2015

Alwaz4Him> u aren't going to believe this -- yesterday my dad shows up at school and says we're going to be home-schooled from now on and then he tells everyone else that their parents are coming for them, too!

WordsWorth> In my town we're opening a Rehabilitation Center for all the Sinners.

SnoozButton> Alwaz, u r so Blessed. In New York no one is defending God's Word like in other cities

Alwaz4Him> Words, what kind of sinners?

SnoozButton> if God is for us, who can be against us? Romans 8:31.

WordsWorth> Sinners like adulterers and homosexuals and abortion doctors. The dangerous ones like murderers still go to real prison.

Alwaz4Him> homosexuals are dangerous

SnoozButton> i'd hate to be home-schooled, my Dad would make us memorize all of Leviticus

WordsWorth> Leviticus rocks. Moses is the man.

Alwaz4Him> Jesus is the Man

Sidney Miller

Video interviews, 2025

At the time I thought the church and the idiotic small-mindedness of our town were the things getting to Jane. But now I think it was the Miracle itself, as ironic as that is.

I remember one conversation where she asked me if I believed.

"Sure," I said. "I believe in God. In my own way."

"You can't believe your own way," she said. "That's the whole point. The Bible gives you the rules."

"The Bible was written two thousand years ago by a bunch of fucking misogynists."

She held herself very still. She hated when I said stuff like that, and I knew it, but by then I was really tired of everyone's obsessive talking about religion and the meaning of the Miracle. I was tired of Jane's moping phone calls with her mother and the way she didn't seem to look at me anymore. I was terrified that she was slipping away.

"The Miracle was a test," she said.

"If it was a test then we failed it." I was thinking about the people who talked about "crusades" to the Middle East. About some of the people in town who talked about reviving the harsher punishments of the bible for sins like adultery.

"That's what I'm afraid of," she said.

I had meant humanity was failing the test. Looking back, I know she meant something different.

Fox Hollow Daily -- Live On-line Interview

September 14, 2015

Daily: Minster Raganeaux, what do you make of the local miracle witnessed by Mrs. Hittel that the flowers in her window box are blooming in the shape of Jesus on the Cross?

Raganeaux: Well, it's true that there have been lots of stories about miracles around town. Maybe people are just finally seeing that every day the sun rises is a small miracle in itself.

Daily: People are starting to worry that it has been six whole months since The Miracle. When will we have another one?

Raganeaux: Whether we have miracles or not is irrelevant, isn't it? God never abandoned us. Whether or not He shows himself physically to us, He is there for us.

Daily: Do you think that Hittel's flowers and other miracles are signs from God that we should continue our efforts abroad?

Raganeaux: I never supported any so-called crusades to other countries. In my bible-study sessions I try to focus on the message of love in the bible.

Daily: Yes, but getting back to the flower arrangement. Do you believe that--

From the Fox Hollow Daily, AP International News Section

October 7, 2015

The newly-formed International Association of World Religions (IAWR) got off to a shaky start today when the Pope reportedly told interviewers before the meeting that God had spoken directly to him during the Miracle, thereby proving Christianity's truth. In response, the President of the United Arab Council issued a statement that over one billion Muslims worldwide had felt Allah's presence during the Miracle, thus validating Islam as the one true religion. Representatives from Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and many other religions attended the meeting to discuss ways to bring together people of all faiths to work toward world peace. A small group of Scientologists gathered outside the conference center to protest the fact that they had not been invited. Meanwhile, scientists

from around the world continue efforts to determine whether there is a scientific explanation for the Miracle.

Sidney Miller

Video interviews, 2025

My sister started calling from New York almost every week.

"I saw they closed another Planned Parenthood," she would say. Or: "What's with those mandatory Sanctity of Marriage classes in high schools?"

I reminded her that gay marriage was banned in over forty states even before the Miracle, back in 2003 or so. That Planned Parenthood had been under attack for years.

She said there were groups up north who were talking about starting an underground railroad for the people trapped in the crazier states, like Alabama.

I told her to stop being such an alarmist. The truth is that I could not even imagine leaving. Jane and I had built our lives in Fox Hollow. Jane's pottery sold to shops all over town, and I had been managing the town's after-school programs for ages.

I would tough it out, I told myself. People would come around. Boy, was I wrong.

Jane Trundle

October 12, 2015

Sidney was fired yesterday. I've never seen her so mad. She says it's because she's a dyke, like it surprises her. She doesn't know what people are saying about her. About me. I've been going to church a lot to talk with Derek. He says everyone's been asking him about the meaning of the Miracle and that maybe the meaning is different for everyone. He said if I wanted to check into the Rehabilitation Center that was my own decision. Mark and Jason left two weeks ago. They didn't even say goodbye. I don't feel like I have any friends anymore in this town, including Sidney. She's so angry all the time. I told my mom I was thinking of checking myself in to the Center, and she said she would support me all the way.

Sidney Miller

Video interviews, 2025

At first it was voluntary, sure. Isn't that always the way it starts?

Christians have been sending their gay and lesbian children to places like the Center since before the turn of the century. Exodus, Evergreen, the so-called Love-in-Action. The Miracle didn't make those programs exist; they just became more popular. The Center was for all us misfits: homos, drug abusers, women who had abortions. Jane actually went voluntarily a few months before they forced me to go. They never let me see her, of course.

It wasn't a mean place, but let's face it: it was a prison. We couldn't leave. We had strict schedules: meals, therapy, exercise. I had very little privacy. It was the lowest I've ever felt. It wasn't just that I had lost everything I ever valued: my job, my freedom, my partner of fifteen years. It was the feeling that everyone in town, and maybe the whole country, thought I was sick. I started to believe it. I started to believe there was something wrong with me. I started to hate myself.

Jane Trundle

November 28, 2015

I've had a flu I ever since I came to the Center. I can't seem to shake it. I feel so awful. I wake up every night at 3 am thinking God has come to punish me for something and I'm terrified. I pray everyday for Sidney. I also pray for myself. God, why aren't You helping me change?

Derek Rageneaux

December 24, 2015

Derek followed Josh Turell, head guard of Fox Hollow Rehabilitation Center, down the carpeted hallway. They passed a small library and Derek caught a glimpse of wooden tables, a battered but serviceable couch, a Christmas tree in the corner.

Josh stopped to adjust one of the Christmas light strings that had fallen off its hook above a window. "You remember when we first opened this place?" he said.

Derek nodded. He knew that members of his congregation had worked hard converting the old factory into the Center.

Josh pulled out a bulb and examined it. "There are people in town who think we don't need this prison after all."

"It's not a prison," Derek said. He glanced at the lights on the walls, the doors decorated in artwork. It was homey, actually. More like his college dorm, with its mismatched reading lamps, hand-sewn curtains, old-carpet smell. Nothing like a prison.

Outside the barred window snow flurries danced in an uneven wind.

"Anyway," Josh said. He replaced the bulb. "There's someone who's been asking to see you. Jane Trundle. She made me promise to bring you by."

Derek sensed that Josh wanted to say more, but if he had learned anything from counseling people, it was when to keep quiet. He nodded and followed Josh down the hallway.

They stopped in front of a door and Josh knocked before unlocking it. A sheet of paper taped to the door stated in careful cursive writing: Who needs Faith when you have Proof?

Derek didn't recognize the woman who opened the door. Her shoulders were hunched, her gaze unfocused. She seemed to be staring at something over Derek's left shoulder.

"Jane?" Derek said, trying to place her. These days so many souls clamored constantly for his attention that often all the faces and names blurred together. During the day he went from one meeting to another, and he wrote his sermons at night when he should have been sleeping.

"You wanted to speak to me?" he said.

"I wanted--" she turned from him, sat on the narrow bed. "I'm sorry. I'm not sure what I wanted." She clasped her hands in her lap, her whole body apologizing for its existence.

Then he remembered: Jane had come to speak with him several times before the Center opened. He remembered her as a vibrant, interesting woman. He had enjoyed discussing the meaning of Bible passages with her. She had wanted desperately to reconcile her love of God with her love for her partner Sidney. But this woman who stood in front of him was not the Jane he remembered.

She put her face in her hands. "I feel so sick," she said. "It's a flu that won't go away." She started to cry.

Derek looked at Josh, who stood with his hands in the pockets of his makeshift uniform, his eyes on the snow falling outside the window.

It had been the coldest winter in the history of Fox Hollow. Everyone spoke of a white Christmas, but Derek would have preferred clear skies. The cloud cover made the days even shorter. Only three-thirty in the afternoon and already the outside lamps were winking on.

Derek thought about the quote Jane had put on her door.

It's not a flu, he realized. This was a woman who had lost her faith.

He thought suddenly about his Bible study sessions of last summer which had so frequently veered off into discussions about God's Will and the importance of punishment for sinners. That's when the idea for the Center had surfaced and taken hold. He had often let the tide of conversation wash around him while his mind wandered, tuning in for fragments of conversation or when someone spoke directly to him. Now he wished he had paid more attention, had taken control of the conversation more often. Without faith, people were ruthless in their certainty.

A quote from John, so popular in those discussions, came vividly back to him: "Our love must not be a thing of words and fine talk. It must be a thing of action and sincerity".

No, the Center was not a prison. But it was not a place of love and sincerity, either.

Derek felt an unexpected hot shame sweep through him.

Excerpt from New York Times OpEd: "Stop Talking Bad about the IAWR"

January 5, 2016

The International Association of World Religions has garnered an unfair share bad press lately. Granted, they've had their bickering and in-fighting, but let's look at what they've accomplished. They brokered a peace treaty between India and Pakistan, convinced the mountain fighters in Chile to give up their guns and come home, even pressured the United States into withdrawing some troops from the Middle East. Some people say that the world is just tired of war and starting to rethink their initial interpretation of the Miracle, but I think the

IAWR doesn't get enough credit. The tide is indeed turning from war to peace, and the IAWR is playing a key role.

From the Fox Hollow Daily, Front Page

January 14, 2016

Last night between three and four in the morning a group of the unreformed escaped from Fox Hollow Rehabilitation Center. The group comprised of three homosexuals, four adulterers, and two outspoken anti-life activists. The Center's manager, Sean Poole, expressed deep concern for the escapees. "Several of them were showing promise" he said. "We will pray for them every day." Poole also noted that none of the locks had been broken or the doors forced, indicating that one of the Center residents may have had access to a key. "We are understaffed," conceded Josh Turell, Head of Center Security. "But we will make every effort to ensure the security of the Center." Meanwhile, the Fox Hollow group Citizens For Fairness continues to demand the Center's closure.

Fox Hollow Community Forum E-Board

February 2, 2016

10:16. I heard the military is going to be deployed to the states that fought for Prayer in School. The Center might be closed. Anyone else hear anything?

-Josh Turell

11:01. Good news, neighbors -- My Robbie is coming home! His National Guard unit is coming home at the end of the month! -
Martha Newberry

12:23. I wouldn't mind if the Center closed. I miss Joseph, even if he was a philandering b*st*rd, excuse the French, he was funny and he made the best pizza in town.

-Nancy

14:13. I can't wait until the government fixes the darn potholes on the interstate and WalMart can get their trucks through again.

- Mike F.

Derek Rageneaux

February 23, 2016

Derek set his cup of coffee on the windowsill. He rested his chin on his arms and watched tendrils of fog wisp upwards from the lawn below. A thin sheen of ice that had formed overnight on the window frame was melting, refracting the light into a dazzling rainbow.

There had been another rash of miracles, though Derek thought he might have been the only one who noticed. They were not reported on any news station in any country, made no hysterical news headlines. But there hadn't been any bombings anywhere in the world in a week, and he knew that somewhere, a terrorist had taken off his jacket, carefully unwrapped the length of copper wire, and set the explosives aside. He saw the armies of the world falter and start to pull back. He heard people in town using words like "love" and "forgiveness" instead of "anger" and "punishment".

He saw that that the human spirit was resilient, and that the only true gift from God was self-determination.

Sidney Miller

Video interviews, 2025

The eyes gave him away. I always thought Derek had expressive eyes. I could tell it was him, despite the hat and the ridiculously large turtleneck pulled up over his mouth and nose.

I was scared when the guard woke me up, but then I noticed the group standing behind him: Derek and Cora and Irene, and some of the other prisoners. Derek started talking about how there was a place up north all ready for us. I had heard rumors, but I hadn't dared hope. The guard brought us down a back stairwell, and got us outside without setting off any alarms. Derek led us to a waiting windowless van and we all got inside. I never saw him again.

Why did he do it? I don't know. Simple human decency, maybe. Or maybe God told him to. Maybe He did.

Jane Trundle

March 1, 2016

Things are pretty much back to normal here. I got the house back. Someone even watered the plants while we were gone. I know it wasn't Sidney. When she escaped the Center she didn't come here. I would have known. I don't know where she went. The house is so empty now. God, I tried, I really did, but I can't stop loving her. And honestly, I don't know if that's so wrong.

Derek Rageneaux

March 7, 2016

Derek bicycled down the oak-lined street, enjoying the feel of the warm afternoon air against his skin. Spring was his favorite season. It was the time of the year he felt God's joy most keenly expressed in the physical world: dogwoods draped in lush pink and white blossoms, the air alive with a busy insect buzz and steeped in the scent of fresh cut grass.

He paused in front of Jane's house, hoping to see her outside, but the front porch was empty. She hadn't been to church since the Center was shut down. In fact, his congregation

had diminished since he began speaking out against the deployment of troops to foreign countries, since he had backed the closing of the Center. He knew that many people from his former congregation were attending other churches in town. But that didn't bother him so much.

Derek began to pedal away from Jane's house. He hoped someday Sidney would feel safe enough to come home. Perhaps then Jane would come to see him and they could continue their discussions of the meaning of the Miracle and faith and all the other mysteries that had engaged humanity throughout the ages.

Why did You talk to us? Derek thought. And then: Why did You stop? But he knew the answer.

A lot could change from one spring to the next. A year was enough time for soldiers to march eagerly off, then hesitate, then finally abandon their wars. Enough time for a woman to break herself on the unforgiving edge of doctrine. Enough time for a philosopher to find within himself the strength of a soldier.

A year was enough time to start the slow recovery from hearing God's voice.

