Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics (2026), 35: 3, 259
doi:10.1017/S0963180124000665

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESPONSES AND DIALOGUE

Miracle

Robert A. Burton

Independent scholar United states
Email: raburton@pacbell.net

"Wow, you're looking better," my rheumatologist begins our office visit with a look of joyful surprise "I've not seen such dramatic improvement with your particularly aggressive form of scleroderma."

"Any idea why? I ask.

"Could be your meds, or…" She hesitates, shrugs as though cautious of misinterpretation. "We don't normally use the word remission, but…."

Given my dreadful initial prognosis and having survived a bout of kidney failure, major GI bleed, pulmonary and cardiac issues, not to mention several alarming palliative care consultations, I blurt out, only half in jest, "Maybe it's a miracle."

"When you were last in the hospital, your wife mentioned that her church prayer group has been praying for you. Who knows…?"

Oddly comforted by her matter-of-fact tone, as though she actually believes in the possibility, I ask, "Are you religious?"

"I'm Catholic," she says, dodging the deeper question. "And you?"

I shake my head, having never had any religious inclinations. "But I love the idea." She nods, and we take a quiet moment, two evidence-based physicians silently flirting with the impossible. Just before the pause threatens to turn embarrassing; she turns to her computer and types some notes. When we are back on safe ground, she mutters, half to herself and half to me, "Me, too."

"Sounds good to me," I say, rising above fact and statistics. We fist-bump and I'm out the door.

On leaving her office, I hear my mind replaying our discussion. Initially tentative, as though jousting with reason, over time my mind has sidestepped the barriers of logic and evidence. Like a song stuck in my head, the word miracle often appears as unbidden as the hummingbird who periodically visits our backyard feeder.

####

Several weeks later, at the local grocery store, my wife runs into the head of her church prayer group. She describes the visit with my rheumatologist and thanks her for their support. The woman bursts into tears. "You have no idea what that means to me. I've become increasingly dubious that prayer makes any difference. We pray for world peace, ecological balance, and mediation of climate change… The list is endless, but things continue to get worse." She dabs at her eyes and softly asks, "Do you really think that prayer works?"

"My husband is clearly better than last year. He's often talking about how his improvement is a true miracle."

Taking my wife's hand in hers, she says as though praying, "You've made my day. Thanks."

Cite this article: Burton RA (2026). Miracle. *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* 35: 259, doi:10.1017/S0963180124000665

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963180124000665 Published online by Cambridge University Press