Do You Believe in Miracles? If Not, You Might After Reading This

Throughout my illness, I have had to rely on God in so many ways. He is the reason I am still alive today, because I've suffered through many different illnesses, not just MS - postpartum depression, lyme disease, migraines, food allergies, sciatic nerve pain. Every time I felt like my life was over or that there was no way I could get better, I'd pray and a miracle would happen. While these stories focus on HSCT, many similar stories have happened to me throughout my illness journey. When people think of miracles you might think of seeing angles in the sky and hearing the angelic "ahhhs" in the background. You may think that something dramatic needs to happen for it to be classified a miracle, but God does not usually speak in those ways. Many times he speaks in whispers and you only realize an event is a miracle when you reflect on the past.

Some people do not believe in God or miracles, but I have a very strong faith. Throughout my life God has provided me with answers with unbelievable coincidences that no one can explain except as acts of God. Many times throughout my illness I had asked God to reveal to me what I needed to do to rid myself of this disease. When I look back I see that my story was being written even before I knew it.

A Chance Encounter

The reason I first researched HSCT was by a complete miracle. I had long forgotten about this story, but was reminded of it just months ago when I started the HSCT process. My parents own a party center and host a variety of events for people. In 2019 my mom was running around doing different things for the party, when a woman called her over. She thought the woman needed something - Is the toilet clogged? Is there a complaint or a mess to clean up? But no, this woman said she had to tell her something. She said that sometimes she gets a feeling and has to tell people things. It usually focuses on people being sick and if they are going to be okay. She asked my mother if she had a daughter. My mother said she did. And the woman says, "And she is sick?" My mom says, "Yes she has MS." The woman said, "She needs stem cells and then she'll be okay." Then she went on to talk about my brother with accuracy. My mother did not ask for this reading and this woman did not know anything about my mom. It was very random. When my mom told me this story I laughed, because it was so crazy! And I told her that I knew people who had gotten some stem cells and they only worked temporarily. These people did not get HSCT but had the procedure where you get the stem cells removed from the adipose (fat) and it is put into specific areas of the body to promote healing.

Even though I had my doubts, I did a little research online and found out about HSCT at Northwestern, but it was a lot different and much more invasive than the other stem cell therapy.

Flowers for Algernon

One thing that struck me was that Dr. Burt often talks about the book, *Flowers for Algernon*. It is a book about a person with a cognitive disability. The main character has a procedure done which reverses their disability for a while. Whenever I hear Dr Burt mention this book, it always stops me in my tracks because I have read this book a couple times in my life for English classes - in 7th grade and in college.

While in college, I was not diagnosed with a disability....yet. I enjoyed the book again and it was interesting to read it as a young adult versus a kid in middle school. Maybe it's because both of my grandfathers suffered from dementia and I had to watch them slowly lose themselves to the disease. I had wished they had a procedure to reverse their disease like the character in the book had. I remember discussing in English class as if we were the main character, if we would choose to do the experiment so it could stop an incurable disease. We talked about how it felt to be that character. And now in some ways, I was the main character. I have multiple sclerosis which cannot be cured. If there were a possible treatment to stop the disease, would I do it? Well, I am now! HSCT may not reverse the damage already done, but I hope and pray it stops the disease where it is.

I got the paperwork in May 2019 to be screened for the procedure at Northwestern with Dr. Burt, while doing more research. I gathered the information and sent it to my husband and family. They weren't quite on board with the idea yet but I was still trying to convince them. See, Dr. Burt hadn't finished his clinical trials yet and did not have the data that would convince us that this was the path. And my neurologist at the time didn't know what HSCT was. Funny as now they are doing HSCT at the facility where I go. It wouldn't have mattered anyway because right after in September 2019, I learned in a Facebook group that Dr. Burt's office had suddenly closed. While I was disappointed, I was also a little relieved that I didn't have to go through such a big procedure with little kids at home. It wasn't the right time. I put it out of my mind and went on with my life. Maybe one day....

A Sign in Front of Me

In 2021 my daughter started at a private school in another town. I had to drive her every day. Since I had a 30 minute commute, I do remember praying a lot at this time that God would help me figure out what to do to stop the disease, because I had just gone on Ocrevus and did not want to be on medication. I was limited as to what I could do and I feel called to do ministry but often cannot do things due to the fatigue and symptoms. God answered and literally put a sign in front of me nearly every day.

On most days, I would follow a white pick up truck with the vanity license plate that read,"HSCT4MS." Most people would probably see this license plate and have no clue what it meant, but I understood. What are the chances of seeing a car like this and not just once but to follow it over and over again?! It took everything in me to not honk the horn, yell out the window and pull the truck over. There was no way for me to stop this person without making a scene or causing an accident.

It got me interested in HSCT again, but Dr. Burt was still not practicing and I couldn't find places offering it domestically. We had just been through the pandemic which put many things on hold in the healthcare system. Some people were going to Mexico and Russia, but I wasn't comfortable leaving the country on the tail end of the pandemic. Again, I was hopeful for HSCT and then disappointed I could not get it. Maybe one day…

Little did I know that one day I would be able to speak to the owner of that truck and learn she had been treated by Dr. Burt herself! We recently got in touch through Facebook and she encouraged me to contact Dr Burt for a consultation, so I did. Her sons went to a different private school, which happened to be just a few yards away from my kids' school. What are the chances? God literally put a sign in front of my face every day. Her story is in Dr. Burt's book, *Everyday Miracles*.

The Geisel Building at Scripps

For my day job I am a children's book author and illustrator, so of course I adore Dr. Seuss books. I was pleasantly surprised when I saw a huge Cat in the Hat statue in front of the Geisel building. If I need to get medical care, I would definitely choose a building with a giant Cat in the Hat! Kid's books make me feel at home. It's my life. I just had to get a selfie with it! Of all the places I could go for HSCT and this is the name of the building where my first appointment was? A very strange coincidence I must say.

Illustrating [redacted]'s True Beauty

Speaking of children's books - back in the summer of 2024 when I was feeling fine, I was approached by a woman to illustrate a book. Her story was about a little girl [redacted] who was obsessed with her hair and looking good. The girl didn't have many friends because all her time was spent on keeping her hair beautiful. Until she met a girl at a hospital that had lost her hair due to chemotherapy. This changed Judy and she donated her hair to others. Cutting her hair made her free to be who she truly was meant to be. At some point during the illustration process, I started to get sick and MS started to rear its ugly head. I was in the middle of illustrating it when I met Dr. Burt for the first time. I too would be like the bald girl in the book and lose my hair to chemotherapy. I had to start thinking about wigs. Let's think about this on a

deeper level - would losing my hair during HSCT make me free from MS? Free from a disease that prevents me from being who I'm meant to be? Time will tell. But for now I hope it is a reflection of what is going on in my life. I hope that HSCT will free me from the burden of this disease.

The authors wrote this book in the memory of a teen [redacted] who lost her life to cancer. Because of all the delays with MS flaring, it took me extra long to do this book. When I finally finished the book we randomly chose a date to release it. April 19th was the day. Finally! When the author told [redacted]s mother about this date, she said it was a very special day. April 19th was the day [redacted] gave her life to Christ and dedicated her life to him. That is a strange coincidence!

It Was Blessed in the Name of the Lord

On the day of my transplant, a nurse came into my room with a machine that was defrosting my stem cells. They had been removed a few months prior and had been frozen. He came into the room a few times to check the temperature. When the stem cells were just about at the temperature they needed, the nurse was standing there talking to us as we watched the thermometer rise. In walks the chaplain, Father [redacted], who happened to be a Catholic priest. I was so confused because we were about to do the transplant. I did not ask for him to come to my room. Although, I wish I had known I could have asked for a chaplain because it was so perfect for him to be there. In my heart I wanted it to be prayed over and somehow he knew this. I remember saying some prayers to myself before he came in. I asked him why he was there and if he goes to all the transplants to see if people need him. He said No. I asked again why he was there. He said "Because God was calling me to your room." Woah.

He said some prayers and recited one of my favorite bible verses that I often quote when writing cards to people. "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious unto you. The Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace." Numbers 6:24-26

I had heard about this priest from another nurse during my stem cell mobilization. She had told us how he has a strong faith, is a wonderful priest and that he had some stories about how powerfully God works. Because of this, I truly believed him when he said he was called to my room.

This was the most perfect situation I could have asked for. My transplant was prayed over by a priest. Every time I doubt if this will work, every time someone asks me how I will know if it works, I come back to this moment of my life. My transplant was blessed. God knew I needed that moment so in the future I could reassure myself that I did the right thing. As I

reflected upon this moment, something came to me. I have to move forward with the confidence in Christ's healing. It was blessed. It was prayed over by a God fearing priest with strong faith. Even if it does not work at some point in the future, I know this is what I was meant to do today. This was my best shot at stopping the incurable Multiple Sclerosis so I can fully live out my life serving God and fulfilling my calling.

My Story Is Just Beginning

Like the song *Unwritten* by Natasha Bedingfield "Today is where your book begins. The rest is still unwritten." My choice to do HSCT broke tradition. My try to stop this disease was outside the lines. We've been conditioned to not make mistakes, to not go off the beaten path. But I cannot live that way. I've tried everything to stop this disease because I refuse to allow it to stop my life. I feel like a human guinea pig because I will try anything. I do not accept that this is how my life will be.

As Robert Frost wrote, "I shall be telling this with a sigh. Somewhere ages and ages hence: Two roads diverged in a wood and I – I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference." That is my prayer. That HSCT is the path less traveled by and that it will make all the difference. It already has as I went from having weakness on my left side, walking with an uneven gait and having to take breaks, not having good balance, to walking with a normal gait and at a normal speed. I'm a fast walker so this is really amazing that I can walk again without slowing down. I'm back to yoga so balance is much improved! I didn't think these things would come back to me, but here I am living my life again.

You too can take that path less traveled by. If you are struggling with something, not necessarily MS but anything, how will you go off the beaten path and go outside the lines? You have the power to change your life. You can do it, even though it is not easy. You can change your life even when it seems impossible. You just have to find the strength. Making hard decisions. Changing the course of your life. Changing careers, getting out of a bad relationship, finding joy, living who you were meant to be. There are a lot of ways to find that inner strength. But for me, I cannot do any of this without my faith. I learned this from my grandparents who survived the Nazis in Greece during WWII. Their example of undeniable faith and having everything point back to God has helped me through my trials. This is what gives me the strength to do hard things. Without my faith and trusting these signs in front of me, I would still be sitting on my couch while losing my ability to walk, to think, to balance, to see clearly. Your story is still unwritten. Today is where your book begins. What will you do?

Excerpt from the song *Unwritten* by Natasha Bedingfield

I am unwritten
Can't read my mind
I'm undefined
I'm just beginning
The pen's in my hand
Ending unplanned.
Staring at the blank page before you
Open up the dirty window
Let the sun illuminate the words that you could not find.
Reaching for something in the distance
So close you can almost taste it
Release your inhibitions
Feel the rain on your skin
No one else can feel it for you
Only you can let it in
No one else, no one else
Can speak the words on your lips
Drench yourself in words unspoken
Live your life with arms wide open
Today is where your book begins
The rest is unwritten.
I break tradition
Sometimes my tries are outside the lines
We've been conditioned to not make mistakes
But I can't live that way