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DO YOU believe IN
MIRACLES?

The Beam family does—and so do nearly
80 percent of Americans



DO YOU believe IN MIRACLES?

Annabel Beam, the subject of a new film, certainly does—and so do nearly 80 percent of Americans.

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It seemed impossible. But the emergency room doctors were telling Christy and Kevin Beam that their 9-year-old daughter Annabel wasn't hurt.

Annabel, who had tumbled head-first 30 feet to the bottom of a hollow cottonwood tree on the family's farm in Burleson, Texas, had no head injuries, no brain damage and no spinal trauma, the doctors said. No broken bones or internal injuries—only a few minor bumps and bruises. A concussion, at most.

Annabel had spent several hours inside the tree, most of that time unresponsive, as rescue teams strategized the best way to free her. When they finally succeeded, a helicopter airlifted her to a hospital, where doctors ordered numerous scans to assess her injuries.

Only the doctors couldn't find anything. The next morning, they sent the

third-grader home with her stunned—but grateful—parents.

But that was nothing compared to what emerged in the weeks and months that followed.

This hadn't been Annabel's first hospital trip. Four years before, she'd been diagnosed with two painful, life-threatening digestive disorders (pseudo-obstruction motility disorder and antral hypomotility disorder), requiring a regimen of 10 drugs daily, including antibiotics, anticonvulsants, prescription-strength laxatives, reflux medication and painkillers.

Every six weeks, mom Christy, now 43, flew with Annabel to Boston so a specialist treating her with an experimental drug could monitor the girl's progress—although the grim truth was that there was no cure. The best they could hope for was that the drug would lessen Annabel's symptoms, making life more manageable.

The situation devastated the family, which included Annabel's two sisters, Abigail (two years older) and Adelynn (two years younger).

Yet just days after Annabel's dramatic rescue, Christy realized that her daughter hadn't asked for her usual pain medication. And her once-distended abdomen had inexplicably flattened. In fact, Annabel seemed unusually carefree and happy. Almost . . . normal.

As the weeks wore on, and as Christy gave her daughter less and less of the once-vital medication, it became startlingly clear to her parents that Annabel was no longer sick. She was *healed*.

Today, more than four years after the December 2011 incident, Annabel still takes no medications and has no symptoms. Somehow, an experience that should have left her with serious injuries exacerbating her life-threatening

disorders instead erased any trace of either condition.

To many, what happened to Annabel Beam could only be described as a miracle.

Who Believes?

Annabel's miracle will be up on the big screen when *Miracles From Heaven*—based on Christy's 2015 best-selling book and starring Jennifer Garner as Christy—opens in theaters this week. If it's true that eight in 10 Americans believe in miracles—a statistic from a Pew Research Center study—there will be plenty of ticket buyers. Although more religious Americans believe than the nonreligious, more than half of those unaffiliated with a particular faith still say miracles are possible. In fact, belief in miracles is on the rise, according to best-selling author Marianne Williamson, known for her teachings on the Foundation for Inner Peace's popular spiritual tome *A Course in Miracles*.

"People are evolving beyond strict adherence to a rationalistic worldview," she says. "Quantum physics, spiritual understanding and a more holistic perspective in general have come together to produce a serious challenge to old-paradigm, mechanistic thinking." In other words: "People know there's more going on in this life than just what the physical eyes can see."

Kate Bowler, Ph.D., of Duke Divinity School in Durham, N.C., and author of *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, studies miracles and people who believe in them. She's found that a very high percentage of religious people are convinced that God will make targeted or often random choices because God will heal or bless one person over another. Many such people try to figure out a formula for "what will reach into heaven and draw out some kind of

blessing," she says. "The truth is there will never be a formula, but people will certainly keep trying to find it."

The Beams, devout Baptists, did believe in miracles before their daughter got well, but as Kevin, 43, says, he thought miracles "were possible—just not *probable*." Annabel, now 13, echoes: "I knew they happened. I just didn't think they would happen to us."

“People are looking for hope today because the world is so filled with fear and chaos.”

—Marianne Williamson

Bowler's research confirms that "almost everybody I talk to believes in some kind of relationship between their positive feelings and a supernatural result. Even if they don't call it prayer. I think there's a real openness and a sort of sense of wonder at the possibility of miracles," she says.

Why Now?

"Obviously, people are looking for hope today because the world is so filled with fear and chaos," Williamson says. "But something deeper than that is going on as well. We are looking for *meaning*." Humanity has a deep, instinctive sense that life is about something more than just trying to consume, she says. "We're either shutting down in fear as we have never done before, or we're opening up to love as we have never done before. Our only choice now really is between an age of barbarism or an age of miracles."

If the *New York Times* best-seller lists are any proof, people are choosing the age of miracles. Two best-selling books



JENNIFER GARNER AS MIRACLE MOM

"I believed in miracles before the movie, and I continue to believe in them," says Jennifer Garner, who plays Christy Beam in the upcoming movie *Miracles From Heaven* (opening March 16), based on Beam's 2015 best-selling book. "Who knows what happened? For some reason, that little girl is OK. Why not see it as something incredible and special—a reminder of the possibilities of life?"

Garner also believes in heaven. "Why would we rob ourselves of believing?" she asks. "Why *not* believe in heaven?"

The actress says getting to know the Beams changed her in "a really good way. I was so touched on so many different levels," says the mother of three, who is in the process of divorcing actor Ben Affleck. "I was touched by who Christy is as a mom, and how fierce and incredibly loving she is.

"And when you talk to Annabel, there is nothing in you that can think, *Oh, she's just saying this for attention*, or *She's just saying this out of her silly imagination*. She's not. She's such a smart, bright, very self-aware little girl who is so calm and not hysterical at all about this experience that she had, that you would feel ridiculous not to take what she says at face value.

"Her heart is open to possibility and to wonder and to things happening that no one would expect. She has the faith of a child in the most beautiful way," says Garner. "It's not something she's ever questioned or doubted. She hasn't needed to wrestle with it. Her faith was a big part of what got her through the worst of her disease."

published last year—*Imagine Heaven* by John Burke and *Touching Heaven* by Chauncey Crandall, M.D.—each share stories of near-death experiences. In 2012, a trio of best-sellers (two by medical doctors) recounted miraculous (i.e., unexplainable) personal experiences. Eben Alexander’s *Proof of Heaven* tells how the neurosurgeon conversed with what he calls “the divine source of the universe” while in a coma caused by acute bacterial meningitis. Just when doctors were beginning to give up on him, his eyes popped open. Today, he’s completely healthy. Previously, the former Harvard Medical School faculty member believed near-death experiences were medically impossible.

In *Dying to Be Me*, Anita Moorjani says she learned life-



Mary C. Neal says she spoke with angels after drowning.

changing spiritual truths while in a coma following a nearly four-year battle with cancer. Moorjani woke up—and was cancer-free when she left the hospital, just weeks after the day doctors told her family she would die.

While kayaking in southern Chile, orthopedic surgeon Mary C. Neal was pinned underwater for more than 15 minutes and drowned. Before she was resuscitated on the riverbank, she says she spoke with angels. In *To Heaven and Back*, she calls her accident “one of the greatest gifts I have ever received.”

One miraculous tale—*The Boy Who Came Back From Heaven* by Kevin and Alex Malarkey—turned out to be a hoax. Alex admitted he’d fabricated his experience after an auto accident that left him a quadriplegic at age 6 (but not before his and his father’s story was turned into a TV movie).

Doctors are often mystified by stories of unexpected recoveries, but not all are ready to declare them miracles. In fact, a current Yale study is looking at whether doctors of coma patients could have made mistaken prognoses. “We know that there are no true ‘miracles’ in medicine,” says David Greer, M.D., a

neurologist at Yale–New Haven Hospital and one of the study’s main researchers, “but rather mistakes that are made by physicians who give an overly pessimistic prognosis.”

What Does It Mean?

The Beam family receives emails from people all over the world who think they’re perpetuating a hoax, and from others who say Annabel’s story inspired them to deepen their faith. As for the naysayers, “I don’t feel like I have anything to prove,” Christy says. “The proof is right there. We lived it. It’s not a gray area. It’s black and white.”

Adds Kevin, “The big question is, what does it mean since it *did* happen?” Some skeptics, he thinks, won’t believe the story no matter how convincing because it threatens their belief that God doesn’t exist. He’s hoping at least some of them will reconsider.

Yet Bowler stresses—and the Beams

fully agree—that believing in miracles and in modern medicine don’t have to be mutually exclusive. “It’s never like faith versus science. It’s always faith *and* science,” Bowler says. “For the most part, people are throwing everything and the kitchen sink at problems, and when it works no one’s going to complain. Some way or another both medicine and miracles will get the credit. People love their doctors and they love their God, and they will ask both for a lot of favors.”

“Hope and faith can be abused,” Kevin says. “Even though deep down we knew something major had happened, we also didn’t want to just say, ‘Take all Annabel’s medicines and throw them away.’ Over the course of four years, we had a lot of people who gave us well-intentioned bad advice to just claim that she’s healed because God doesn’t want any of his children to be sick. We appreciated the miracle, but still respect the medical profession.

“I would hate for somebody to misinterpret that message and say, ‘Well, I’m just going to pull all my kids off their medication,’” says Kevin, a veterinarian. “I mean, this was our experience but we also realize that’s not going to be the case for every single person.”

Why was Annabel healed while countless others haven’t been? “It’s not that God loves her any more than he loves them. It’s not that our family has done anything to deserve a miracle,” Kevin reasons. “This whole experience is just so phenomenally humbling because I remember that desperation of being a parent who would do anything to see my child get better. We experienced that miracle, but I also realize that not everybody will—and those are questions I don’t have a good answer for.”

Do you believe in miracles? Visit Parade.com/miracles to take our mini survey.