

MIRACLES UPON MIRACLES FOR MAHER

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Many years ago, my husband was saved by a series of remarkable events. Or miracles? Our international Muslim and Mormon family, which now includes four adult children, their spouses, and a growing number of grandchildren, continues to celebrate life while still being amazed by what took place in 1978.

That summer, my husband Maher (a Palestinian Muslim I'd met in college) and I decided to take our son Anan, eleven, and daughter Halla, eight, on a vacation to Guatemala.

We drove from our home in Houston to take a flight from New Orleans. From our hotel in Guatemala City, we set out in a rented car to Chichicastenango, where we explored the bustling crafts market with colorfully dressed vendors.

The next day (Friday), we drove to Panajachel on Lake Atitlan, which some have called the most beautiful lake in the world, ringed by volcanos and Mayan villages. We thought of taking a boat tour the next day to some of the villages, which are named for Jesus' twelve disciples.

Looking from our hotel room window out across the lake, we got the idea instead to drive around the lake and watch the sunset from the top of a small volcanic mound named Cerro de Oro.

The road we took got increasingly rough. Eventually, it was more of a trail than a road. There were no other cars. At one point, the bottom of the car was scraping the ground, so Anan, Halla, and I got out and walked alongside.

The sun was about to set when we parked and began our climb up the volcanic mound. From a distance, probably less than a mile down the “road,” we could hear faint sounds of life in a Mayan village.

Maher and Anan hurried up the mountain. Halla and I, wearing sandals, trailed behind. It became apparent that there wasn’t much of a path. Maher and Anan started climbing over big rocks.

I shouted to Maher, who was far ahead: “It’s getting dark. Halla and I are going back to the car.”

Maher yelled back, “We’re almost to the top. We’re going to make it.”

Then I heard a yell and a crash. Maher had fallen.

It was clear that we were in serious trouble. Maher was out of sight but within shouting distance. He could not walk at all. I instructed Anan to stay with his father and told him that Halla and I would run to the village for help. The car keys were with Maher.

Anan shouted that Maher was not bleeding badly but would need to be carried down the mountain. If I could bring rescuers, he could direct them to his injured father.

It got dark very quickly. I started running toward the village and, almost immediately, stumbled and fell. I felt my ankle twist and was shocked to realize that I couldn’t put any weight on it. It was badly sprained.

My only alternative, it seemed, was to send my sweet, timid little eight-year-old daughter alone, down the dark path to the village to get help.

Halla started out, but it quickly became clear that this was too much to ask of her. She started to cry, and I told her to come back—I’d go with her, leaning on her and hopping on one foot.

I’d hopped only a few yards when I saw the lights of a car approaching our parked car. I was thrilled when the driver stopped and I discovered that he was a pharmacist from Guatemala City. He was on his way to meet relatives at their vacation home a short distance away. And he could speak English!

“I was hours and hours late. I kept having delays,” he said later. “Now I know why. I believe God caused me to arrive when I did so I could be there to help you.”

We had been traveling on the rough road to Cerro de Oro for hours, and this was the only other car to come down it.

Our rescuer drove to his cabin and got his brother. They went to the village and returned with about eight Indigenous men ready to carry Maher off the mountain—three or four men on each side. One walked in front, clearing vegetation with a machete.

They put Maher and Anan in the back of our rescuer’s car. Maher was alert and seemed to be in good condition except for his foot, which flopped unnaturally. It wasn’t bleeding much. Our rescuer said he would drive his car to get medical help and his brother would follow, driving our rental car, with Halla and me.

At the first village we reached, we found a person who bandaged Maher’s ankle.

At the second village, we found someone who gave him a shot of antibiotics.

In the third village, we found an ambulance. Maher would not reach a hospital in Guatemala City until about ten hours after he fell.

As we drove to each village, we found ourselves farther and farther away from our hotel in Panajachel, where we’d left everything we’d brought to Guatemala, including our passports. I’d have to take Anan and Halla and drive the car I thought I couldn’t drive to the hotel in the middle of the night, on dark, narrow, winding mountain roads, with a sprained ankle. At daybreak Saturday I’d have to drive to Guatemala City and find Maher in the hospital.

At the hotel in Guatemala City, I showed the desk clerk a note with the name and address of the hospital where Maher had been sent. I was surprised when he had no knowledge of the hospital. I got more concerned when our taxi driver had trouble finding it. Why hadn’t Maher been sent to the country’s largest, best-known hospital?

The hospital listed on the note I'd been given in the village the night before looked like a big, old house that had been converted for medical use. When I entered, leaning on my children due to my sprained ankle, attendants thought I'd come for treatment for myself. I said "esposo" (husband) and what I thought was a Spanish version of "ambulance" to no effect. There was a book that appeared to list admittances behind the reception desk. I grabbed it and pointed to Maher's name.

We were relieved to find him in bed, looking comfortable, with his foot in a cast. He said that, upon arrival, he was taken into surgery, where the doctor removed a piece of bone, and that he was fine. The doctor had told Maher (whose Spanish is better than mine) that the wound was very dirty but that he had cleaned it up the best that he could.

"Maybe this is like when a skier breaks a bone, spends a couple of days sitting in the lodge, and returns home wearing a cast," I thought.

I started to worry after Maher asked me to bring a pan of hot water to him so that he could shave and I realized I'd have to get the water from the kitchen, where it was being heated on the stove. Then, when we were discussing whether we should continue with our plan to take an airplane tour to Mayan ruins in a couple of days, someone walked into the room carrying a glass jar with a large, angular bone in it, suspended in liquid. I took one look and felt ill.

"That's not a piece of bone," I said. "That looks like an entire ankle bone."

Why was Maher in this hospital? What had happened to him? Should we stay in Guatemala so that he could recuperate before traveling or should I change our tickets and get him home as soon as possible?

I couldn't communicate with the doctors. We didn't know anyone in Guatemala. I said to Maher, "We need help. Would it be okay if I contact the Mormon Church?"

There was a telephone book in the room, and, using my knowledge of the Spanish words for "church," "Jesus Christ," and "Saints," I found

several listings for “La Iglesia de Jesucristo de los Santos de los Últimos Días” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints).

Additionally, Maher knew the phone number of one of his best friends in Houston, Dr. Abdel-Kader Fustok, who is a plastic surgeon, and told me to call him. I could explain what I knew about Maher’s accident and have Dr. Fustok make arrangements for medical treatment in Houston.

The children and I returned to the hotel so that I could make these phone calls. I reached Dr. Fustok first. There was no answer at any of the numbers listed for the Church, so I decided to take a taxi to all of the addresses and leave notes on the doors, asking for help.

Before leaving, I also tried phoning the American embassy. I was relieved when I heard the person on the other end speaking English with an American accent. He said the embassy would be able to help us—but now, on Saturday, they were closed. I should call first thing Monday morning.

“I just came in to clean my desk,” he said. “The phone rang, so I answered it.”

He asked if we knew anyone in Guatemala.

“I’m trying to contact someone from my church, but I haven’t been able to reach anyone,” I said.

I told him it was the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

“Your mission president was here a couple of days ago. He’s a retired doctor,” the embassy worker said. “He left his card with me. It’s right here on my desk. I can give you his home address and phone number.”

There was no answer when I called the mission president’s home, so I brought the children and took a taxi there, planning to leave a note on his door.

When we arrived, we found that the mission president was at a conference but that his wife had returned home. She said she would send two missionaries with me to the hospital and that her husband would visit Maher in the hospital the next day.

The missionaries—Americans who spoke Spanish—provided comforting news about the hospital. They understood why Maher had been sent there. It was a hospital of specialists, including an orthopedic surgeon.

The next day (Sunday), the mission president, Dr. Willard I. Skousen, came to the hospital and reviewed the X-rays of Maher's injury. He said that the ankle bone had essentially been "amputated" by the accident itself. The Guatemalan doctor had finished removing the bone, cleaned up the wound, reattached the foot, and put on the cast.

The mission president's only question to me was, "What do you need?" I believe the steps he took next saved Maher's life.

After conferring with Dr. Skousen, I realized it would be best to do whatever I could to get Maher back to Houston as soon as possible, but, due in part to his comforting words, I didn't feel the situation was urgent.

This conviction came after Maher's brother, Hisham, started calling me every few minutes. I felt that, regardless of whether it was vital to get Maher back to Houston, I simply had to get him on the first available flight to satisfy Hisham. He is a man who won't take "no" for an answer.

When Maher had his accident, Hisham, who lived in Qatar and worked as a technical advisor for the emir, happened to be traveling in the United States with Middle Eastern government dignitaries. He learned that his brother was in danger from their cousin, Saud Abu Kishk, who also lived in Qatar but was visiting with his family in Houston at the time. And Saud learned about the accident from Dr. Fustok. This happened through a series of amazing coincidences.

Shortly after I'd called Dr. Fustok about the accident, Saud happened to take his son in to seek medical advice about a strange growth on his tongue.

"How is Maher doing?" Dr. Fustok asked Saud.

"He's having a great time in Guatemala," Saud replied.

“No, he isn’t,” Dr. Fustok said and told Saud about the accident. The fact that the doctor in Guatemala had said that the wound was very dirty was alarming, he explained. It was vital that Mike receive treatment in the States, and there was no time to spare.

Saud immediately decided to contact Maher’s brother, who he knew was in San Francisco with the delegation. He got on the phone and called every first-class hotel in San Francisco until he found him. Hisham went into action, trying to get a visa so he could fly to Guatemala immediately (not possible), attempting to get a private plane to bring Maher back (very difficult to arrange on short notice), and calling me repeatedly to insist that I get Maher home immediately.

I slept little Sunday night. Very early Monday—about 5:30 a.m.—I left the children asleep in our hotel and took a taxi to the mission president’s home, planning to ask for help in getting Maher on the first direct flight to Houston.

Dr. Skousen came to the door, wide awake and dressed. He had investigated the possibility of a private flight and had, like Hisham, given up on the idea. He said the best alternative was to get Maher on the only commercial direct flight to Houston, a Pan American flight leaving at 9:00 a.m. that morning.

There were several problems: The flight was full. The only person who could authorize “bumping” passengers was the president of Pan American for Central America. He was out of the country and couldn’t be reached. Emergency arrangements could be made for only the patient and one attendant, not the whole family. The banks wouldn’t open until 10:00 a.m. The plane would leave before I could get \$1,500 in cash to pay the hospital and secure Maher’s release.

Dr. Skousen had answers for all of these problems. He said, “The mission will pay your hospital bill. The hospital will take our check. You can give me a check.” He said, “I’ve sent missionaries to the airport to intercept the president of Pan Am. He’ll be flying in and we’ll get him to sign the authorization to bump the passengers before the flight

to Houston leaves. You and your husband can go to the airport in an ambulance. My wife will be at the hospital with her car and will drive you if there's any problem getting an ambulance." He had stationed missionaries at the airport to receive Anan and Halla and arranged for me to go with Maher in the ambulance. We'd all meet at the airport.

There wasn't much time. I called my eleven-year-old son at the hotel, woke him up, and told him, "You and Halla need to get dressed quickly. Bring your and Daddy's passports but leave everything else at the hotel. Go to the front of the hotel, get a taxi, and tell the driver to take you to the airport. Two missionaries wearing white shirts and name tags are waiting to meet you and pay the taxi driver. You will be flying to Houston as Daddy's attendant. In Houston, there will be an ambulance for Daddy and people to meet you. Halla will stay in Guatemala with me until we can get home."

The arrangements made by the mission president went like clockwork. Dr. Skousen dealt with the hospital. I hurried to Maher's room and told him, "You're going home right now."

At the airport, we literally ran through the terminal, pushing Maher in a wheelchair, and he and Anan made the flight.

I breathed a big sigh of relief. I felt that Maher would be fine if I could just get him home. Halla's and my flight, leaving the next day, would go through El Salvador to New Orleans, where we had left our car.

I wasn't told officially until I finally reached the hospital in Houston that Maher's leg had been amputated. But I had figured it out when I reached his cousin Abed on the phone from New Orleans and asked how Maher was.

"He has had the best doctors and they've done everything they could," Abed said.

I later learned that, by the time Maher and Anan reached Houston, Maher had a high fever. He was transported to the hospital by ambulance and seen by specialists. However, as Dr. Fustok had feared, gangrene had set in under the cast.

It was necessary to amputate his leg below the knee. If he had arrived the next day, he would have lost his entire leg. If we'd delayed two days, he would have been too ill to fly. He would have had to undergo the amputation in Guatemala.

We've been told that Maher irreparably damaged his foot when he had the accident. With such an injury, the only way to save it is to get to a good hospital immediately. There is a very good chance that were it not for the combination of blessings and miracles or amazing coincidences that took place after Maher's accident, he would have died.

We were thankful he had survived. His hospital room was filled with flowers and visitors. And he was a model patient.

After waiting for the wound to heal, Maher got his artificial leg and immediately booked a flight to Palestine, where his father was hospitalized with terminal cancer. Remarkably, Maher was able to walk so naturally that there was no sign of his disability. He never told his father about the accident.

Many people who have known Maher for years are surprised to learn he has an artificial leg. He has continued with the same spirit—not complaining and quietly adjusting to limitations such as difficulty walking long distances. He enjoys life to the fullest. We all feel blessed.

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