

My experience of miracles

The neuroscientist Josh Brown's investigation was prompted by his own healing. Interview by **Sarah Meyrick**

JOSH BROWN is a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Indiana University. His academic interests, the university website shows, are wide-ranging, but focus on the brain's frontal lobes: specifically, on the ways in which both people and animals learn, optimise, and control their behaviour in complex and changing environments — processes that entail planning, prediction, expectation, evaluation, and the sequential ordering of movements, on top of complex sensory processing.

The website lists 28 academic papers, representative of Professor Brown's impressive credentials. But what most of his colleagues didn't know until he gave an interview to the *New York Times* at the end of last year, is that he has another, very personal story of miraculous healing.

Nineteen years ago, Professor Brown was diagnosed with a brain tumour, a glioma. The tumour was inoperable and unlikely to respond to chemotherapy or radiotherapy. It was devastating news: he was only 30, and a new father.

"You go and pick up the reading from the hospital, and the reading says, 'We're very sorry, but you have a brain tumour,' and, of course, I'm a neuroscientist; so I'm a bad patient. I've read the literature. And I knew immediately that this was this was really bad. We can summarise it as, 'there was a lot of prayer and a lot of screaming.'"

Professor Brown and his wife were both Christians. He had had a memorable experience as an international student in the UK in the 1990s, when the Toronto Blessing reached the University of Edinburgh. "I was quite suspicious of it,"



Dr Mary Healy (in the orange top), Professor of Scripture at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit, and author of a book on healing, at a service of prayer and healing in Michigan, in 2020

he says. "But I had a very dramatic encounter. I was all alone in my room by myself. And it was as if the presence of God just invaded my room and literally knocked me over. I had this incredible experience in the love of God . . . like nothing I'd ever experienced before. So, at that point, I knew that God was real."

His intellectual understanding of faith became something else entirely, although he still knew nothing about healing. "But I reasoned that, if God was real enough to touch me in that powerful way in Edinburgh, then perhaps he's still around doing miracles, and so that became kind of a touchstone in my life."

He and his wife — their baby daughter in tow — began travelling the country to attend healing meetings wherever they could find them. "I would go up in the line, receive prayer, and then go get back in the line and for more," he says. He remembers the meetings as "very powerful experiences . . .

like grabbing an electrical wire".

There was no single moment of cure that he can identify. "But, after about a year, it became clear that the tumour was not growing. It looked a bit smaller. And the doctors started talking as if, what, maybe this isn't a tumour — which is remarkable, because, at the outset, we talked to multiple radiologists and they all indicated that this was a tumour," he says.

Five months after the seizure that led to the diagnosis, the seizures stopped altogether. There were no other symptoms that anything was amiss. He had regular brain scans until the doctors concluded that all they could see was what looked like scar tissue.

THE brain, of course, is his area of expertise. So, what did he think was going on? "Having gone to all these healing meetings, I figured that, well, perhaps this healing is something, after all," he says. It wasn't just his own recovery that convinced him. He witnessed the dramatic healing of others. "Many of them were dramatic. I spoke to people who had had metal rods and plates that seemed to have disappeared, and missing bones that are grown back, and I've seen all kinds of blind and deaf people healed. Given all that, it didn't seem that far-fetched."

Alongside their own academic studies, Professor Brown and his wife, Candy Gunther Brown, a professor of religious studies at the same university, started investigating healing more seriously. In 2009, they were funded by a John Templeton Foundation grant to travel to Mozambique to investigate the healing claims of the Global Awakening and Iris Global ministries.

In a small sample of patients who requested prayer for healing from deafness and blindness, they found statistically significant improvements. (Some of their findings are included in Professor Gunther Brown's 2012 book, *Testing Prayer: Science and healing*.)

In 2011, the Browns helped found

the Global Medical Research Institute, which — according to its website — exists to bridge the gap between science and faith, "applying rigorous methods of evidence-based medicine to study Christian spiritual healing practices". The Institute documents inexplicable healings; so far, more than 2000 testimonies have been considered.

This is separate from the day job, Professor Brown says. "I'm still active in research, in terms of neuroscience and psychology. I run a research lab, and we continue to do

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brain imaging and build computational neural models. The research into claims of miraculous healings also goes on, but mostly separate from my university position."

FAMILY and friends have long known his own story of healing, of course. But why is he going public now? "I've hesitated to talk about this publicly, in part because I think one would like to be sure of the situation before announcing something," he says. "But I don't know of anyone who's survived a brain tumour like this for that long. I think it's safe to say that I've survived for nearly 20 years."

"And the other thing is, part of my ability to do my job depends on me enjoying a certain amount of respect among my peers within the scientific fields in which I work, and one doesn't run around claiming God did a miracle lightly. There are certain reputational risks that one might consider, before sharing something as deeply personal as this."

Talking about it is risky. "There have been a few colleagues who have told me as much — that they think I'm spouting nonsense. And so I'm well aware of the larger sort of social and professional dynamics. Talking about this, I recognise that I'm taking a bit of a risk, and, for many years, I felt that that risk wasn't worth whatever might be gained. I'm now at a point in my life where I just can't be bothered to keep my mouth shut about it any longer."

And how have colleagues responded? "I think, on the whole, it's been fairly positive," he says. "I've gotten a lot of nice, kind words. There was a little bit of hate mail, which I suppose is to be expected, and I've had the odd person calling it utter nonsense. But I think, for the most part, people understand that when you face a major illness, it's a deeply personal thing, and people respond to that in different ways."

So, why does Professor Brown think that God heals some people but not others? "It's probably the single most urgent question in all this," he says. "And the bottom line is, I don't know exactly. But I do know that I've seen situations in which healings seem to be much more likely, and situations in which they seem less likely. . .

"I've seen a lot of remarkable healings happen, and I've also watched people pass away. I mean, literally watch them pass away, and it's very hard, and I think if you go about praying for healing, that's a risk that you take. You are opening yourself up to the possibility of disappointment."

Sometimes, someone is healed in two minutes, and, at other times "it seems like we pray for hours and nothing happens," he says. "As far as I can tell, if someone's preaching a sermon about healing, and offers prayer, then I'd say it's more likely that someone would experience healing. I think I can say that there are situations where healing seems

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Josh Brown