

## Angels In Our Lives<sup>1</sup>

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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

### *Opening Words*

Welcome to our house of worship, as we celebrate together the mysteries and struggles of our lives. The angels of the Christmas story sang about Peace on Earth, and yet we know there is no peace in Aleppo, and so many other places of war and violence in our world. As we celebrate this season of peace, how can we become peacemakers? Might we be angels for others?

### *Readings*

To Be Hopeful

Howard Zinn

To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness... If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places – and there are so many – where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction... The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.

Song of a Man Who has Come Through

D.H. Lawrence

Not I, not I, but the wind that blows through me!

A fine wind is blowing the new direction of Time.

If only I let it bear me, carry me, if only it carry me!

If only I am sensitive, subtle, oh, delicate, a winged gift!

If only, most lovely of all, I yield myself and am borrowed

By the fine, fine wind that takes its course though the chaos of the world

Like a fine, an exquisite chisel, a wedge-blade inserted;

If only I am keen and hard like the sheer tip of a wedge

Driven by invisible blows,

The rock will split, we shall come at the wonder, we shall find the Hesperides.

Oh, for the wonder that bubbles into my soul,

I would be a good fountain, a good well-head,

Would blur no whisper, spoil no expression.

What is the knocking?

What is the knocking at the door in the night?

It is somebody wants to do us harm.

No, no, it is the three strange angels.

Admit them, admit them.

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### *Sermon*

How many of you have seen the classic Christmas film, *It's a Wonderful Life*? There is a certain nostalgia about it, a sweetness that makes it a treasured holiday tradition. But underneath all that, it is a subversive movie if there ever was one. We have George Bailey, running a humble Savings & Loan Association, like the credit unions of today, pitted against the greedy big banker, Mr. Potter. Main Street versus Wall Street. But our hero George is an ordinary guy, and facing the worst day of his life: he wonders if his life is worth living, if it means anything.

He is interrupted in his despair by Clarence, an old man the viewer knows is really an angel who has yet to earn his wings. In the world of the movie, an angel is someone who has died, who is now working their way through the various stages of heaven's employ. Clarence's job, his real assignment, is to help George understand that he himself has been a kind of angel—without George's presence in the world, so many people's lives would be so much worse off.

George has been comparing himself to the rich and famous—an old schoolmate who has made a fortune, his brother the war hero, those who have big adventures. So he can't see his own value. He has been a reluctant angel. He didn't want to stay home and run the Savings and Loan. But none-the-less, his kindness and decency has enabled a whole neighborhood of people to own their own homes, he has helped his uncle to have a good job, and as a boy he helped the druggist to avoid a fatal mistake. He has been a kind and loving father. He has been a champion of the immigrants and working folk of his town.

And so, when he needs help, when his uncle accidentally leaves a deposit in a newspaper in the hands of the greedy old banker, and the banker tries to use it to ruin George—well, then all the people in the town and beyond come to George's aid. And eventually, through the lessons he receives from Clarence, he is able to receive their help and cherish the ordinary wonderful life he is living.

In the final scene, a bell rings, and George's little daughter Zu-Zu tell us, “Teacher says every time a bell rings an angel gets his wings.” (a bell rings) And we know it to be true. Despite the shaky theology.

The idea of angels seems to have originated in early civilizations in Sumeria and Egypt. They were present in the Hebrew Bible as messengers of the Most High—a sign of God's presence in the midst of ordinary life. They were messengers announcing great tidings, or bearing witness to changes about to happen. An angel came to Mary to ask her to be the mother of the child Jesus, who would bring new life to his people. The angels in the story of Christmas announced to the shepherds the good news of the baby born in Bethlehem. Angels brought a message of peace on earth.

When I was a child, we learned to pray every day to our guardian angels. I can still remember how it went:

Angel of God, my guardian dear, to whom God's love commits me here  
Ever this day be at my side, to light and guard, to rule and guide.

When kids would tease me that I had a boy's name, Michael, I would answer back, budding theologian that I was, "It's not a boy's name, it's an angel's name." I knew angels had no gender, despite the fact that they were often depicted as male or female. I knew that Michael was the head of the angels, an archangel. An angel was a symbol of providence, a manifestation of the idea that there is benevolent help available to protect us and guide us.

There used to be an important area of theological study called angelology, in which people speculated on the nature and function of angels as spiritual beings greater than humans but less than God. The attempt to rationalize something so otherworldly as angels led to some endeavors we might consider ridiculous. They really did spend time, for example, debating how many angels could fit on the head of a pin. But lately, angels have had a resurgence of popularity in American secular culture, and new age folks might group them together with spirit guides.

Some UU's are open to the idea of help coming from the spiritual realm, though the popular representation of an angel as a person with flowing white robes and huge wings, is seen metaphorically—wings being the symbol of speed and communication. For other UU's angels themselves are better understood metaphorically—as a symbol of the human helpers who come into our lives during a time of need with kindness and relief. (bell rings)

Fred Rogers said:

You know, my mother used to say, a long time ago, whenever there would be any ... catastrophe that was in the movies or on the air, she would say, "Always look for the helpers. There will always be helpers. You know, just on the sidelines." That's why I think that if news programs could make a conscious effort of showing rescue teams, of showing medical people, anybody who is coming in to a place where there's a tragedy, to be sure that they include that. Because if you look for the helpers, you'll know that there's hope.

Many years ago, when I was in my twenties, I traveled by myself from my home in Michigan to New York City, to Boston, to Connecticut, visiting communities that were practicing non-violence and peace-making. On the drive back to Michigan, my red VW Beetle broke down on the New York Thruway near the town of Canandaigua. I knew no one in upstate New York, but I did have a list of people's names and numbers who were somehow linked to peace-making causes, or maybe it was music—I can't remember now what that list was. I called a woman who lived in Rochester, NY, a stranger to me.

She drove for an hour and picked me up, and then welcomed me into her home, where I stayed for two days and nights while I sorted out my car situation. The car was dead, and I ended up selling it to the mechanic for parts, and I took a bus back home to Michigan. That woman in Rochester was an angel to me, keeping me safe, warm and fed, befriending me and celebrating my journey. I left feeling truly blessed. (bell rings)

Remembering that experience, I think perhaps the best definition of an angel is a stranger who comes to us in our hour of greatest need, to offer us the help that feels so unexpected. It is that random act of kindness that brings tears to our eyes. Have you ever experienced such angels in your life? We try to be self-reliant, we humans, but we are still so vulnerable, so small, so prone to troubles and challenges that are beyond our ability to fix or solve. Those are the times we need a helper, but never expect to find one. So when someone comes to our aid, they feel like an angel.

Last week I was sitting in a waiting room, and picked up *The Reader's Digest* to pass the time. It happened to have a collection of such stories about the kindness of strangers.

Leslie Wagner, of Peel, Arkansas wrote:

When the supermarket clerk tallied up my groceries, it was \$12 over what I had on me. I began to remove items from the bags, when another shopper handed me a \$20 bill. "Please don't put yourself out," I told him.

"Let me tell you a story," he said. "My mother is in the hospital with cancer. I visit her every day and bring her flowers. I went this morning, and she got mad at me for spending my money on more flowers. She demanded that I do something else with that money. So, here, please accept this. It is my mother's flowers."<sup>2</sup>

An angel. (bell rings) Then there was the story from Clarence Stephens:

Leaving a store, I returned to my car only to find that I'd locked my keys and cell phone inside. A teenager riding his bike saw me kick a tire and say a few choice words. "What's wrong?" he asked.

I explained my situation. "But even if I could call my wife," I said, "she can't bring me her car key, since this is our only car." He handed me his cell phone.

"Call your wife and tell her I'm coming to get her key."

"That's seven miles round trip."

"Don't worry about it."

An hour later, he returned with the key. I offered him some money, but he refused. "Let's just say I needed the exercise," he said. Then, like a cowboy in the movies, he rode off into the sunset.<sup>3</sup> An angel. (bell rings)

Maybe it is the general climate of bullying and hate that has pervaded our nation the last months, but reading such stories in that waiting room, I found they were bringing tears to my eyes. This Christmas season it has felt hard to be joyful, to enter the spirit of celebration. To hear about kindness, to hear about people who went out of their way to help a stranger, helps my own heart to feel more hope.

Maybe the way to find holiday joy is to be like those angels for the strangers we encounter in our daily journeys. This is hard for me. Kindness itself isn't hard. But to slow down enough to go out of my own way, to let the need of a stranger interrupt my plans, that is hard. I think perhaps that angels are always an interruption.

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2 "The Man at the Market" at <http://www.rd.com/true-stories/inspiring/kindness-strangers/>

3 "Seven Miles For Me" Author from *Nicholasville, Kentucky*, at Ibid.

Like D.H. Lawrence writes: “What is the knocking at the door in the night?” Usually we jump to the conclusion, “It is somebody wants to do us harm.” But he says, “No, no, it is the three strange angels. Admit them, admit them.”

Interruptions. In the Hebrew Bible, the three strange angels came to visit Abraham and Sarah, to tell them they would have a child, after they had had many years of giving up that hope. In the Christian scriptures, we hear, “Don't forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it!”<sup>4</sup> An angel might come to our door looking like an undocumented immigrant, or someone who has just lost their home, or a teenager unsure about their gender identity. We might even imagine that we are the angel, opening our door to help someone in need, but in fact, they become the angel to us, bearing unexpected relief and hope.

Kindness has this dual effect—to uplift the giver and receiver in such a way that we are no longer sure who is giving or who is receiving. But how do we make enough room in our lives and in our hearts to be ready to open the door when the angels knock? We have to cultivate a kind of spaciousness, the opposite of busy-ness. We have to cultivate a certain flexibility and resilience. Rebecca Solnit has written: “Leave the door open for the unknown, the door into the dark. That’s where the most important things come from...”<sup>5</sup> She reflects: “To me, the grounds for hope are simply that we don’t know what will happen next, and that the unlikely and the unimaginable transpire quite regularly.”<sup>6</sup> (bell rings)

On Christmas morning, in 1939, the minister serving the Unitarian church in Wellesley Hills, Massachusetts, stepped into the pulpit, and made a special request. “Just this morning, I received word that a ship carrying refugees will be docking in Boston within the next few days, he told the parishioners. The refugees will need temporary homes. Would you take them in?”<sup>7</sup>

The ship carried 87 refugees, all but one or two of them Jewish. “Almost all the men [aboard] had spent some time in concentration camps.” The congregation answered the call, and took in 34 of the men. Other Boston area people sheltered the rest. The minister was the Rev. Waitstill Sharp, who with his wife Martha, had traveled to Europe in 1939 and again in 1940, rescuing hundreds of people from the advancing Nazi threat, despite great danger to their own lives.

But what must it have been like to sit in that congregation on that Christmas morning in 1939? How would you decide whether to disrupt your own family gatherings and Christmas season plans to welcome into your homes these refugees who were fleeing for their lives? How would you respond if your minister made that kind of request on a Sunday morning when you least expected it?

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4 *Letter to the Hebrews*

5 Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, (Viking, 2005) p. 4-5

6 <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/woolfs-darkness-embracing-the-inexplicable>

7 I learned about this story from my colleague, the Rev. Sylvia Stocker, who discovered the story in the archives at Harvard Divinity School: Robert C. Dexter, "What One Parish Did for German and Czech Refugees," *The Christian Register*, January 24, 1940. All quotes are from that article as well.

I have a feeling that for each family who did open their door, it turned out to be a blessing. Oh, maybe there was some awkwardness, and those who were introverts suffered a little from the loss of privacy. But I believe that if they were truly open, those who chose to be angels for the fleeing strangers discovered, rather, that they had welcomed an angel into their homes. This meeting between strangers revealed the presence of the holy in an unexpected way. (bell rings)

We usually like to think that we would be those people, that we would open our door to those fleeing Nazi persecution. But we have to remember that they didn't know for sure at that time how bad it would get. History repeats itself, but never quite in the same way. How might our doors need to open in the coming months? Will we be asked to harbor a stranger? Perhaps an undocumented immigrant living in Portland, but being threatened with deportation? Perhaps a family fleeing the war and violence in Syria? Maybe they won't ever get a chance to knock on our door, if we don't start knocking on the doors of politicians demanding that all human beings are treated with kindness.

But that is not what I am going to ask of you today. Today, I want to ask you something else. I want to ask you to look at your own lives, and see if there is any spaciousness there. Many of you are so busy with so many good things, that there is no way you would be able to say yes to one more request. I feel like that sometimes too. How do we make room in our lives for spaciousness? How do we leave some open time, so that we can stop when a neighbor is stranded by the side of the road in the snow? How do we leave some empty spaces in our schedule, so that we can make soup or cookies for someone who just came home from the hospital?

I am going to ask you to consider how to clear some of that space in your life. Maybe now is the time, not to get busier, but to let go of some of the things we are doing, so we can feel that openness to the unknown, so we can hear the knocking of the three strange angels when they come to our door. So we can open the door and let them come in. (bell rings)

### *Closing Words*

To live with an open heart is to live fully alive.

May this season help us to remember

to create an empty room in the house of our hearts.

May this season help us to cultivate a spacious welcoming spirit,

so that we don't miss the angels at our door

As we extinguish the flame of this chalice,

let each of us carry its light into every day of our lives.