

Angels Unawares

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Great minds, it is said, think alike. I am encouraged in preaching this sermon to know that our Cape Cod Unitarian Universalist apostle Peter Fleck also preached a sermon titled “Angels Unawares,” which is printed in his last book. He takes off from the same Bible quote that I am using, but his sermon dwells on what Blanche DuBois would call “the kindness of strangers” – little or big acts of support or help from people with whom one has no ties of kinship or even friendship. The ones Peter tells of range from a waitress returning the wallet he had dropped to Dutch citizens taking Jewish babies into their households during the Nazi occupation. What a blessing are such random acts of kindness. I read of one such act recently in an e-mail forwarded by my sister. It seems that a young Swedish bride was in the Miami airport in 1991. Her new husband had already flown back to Stockholm and she was trying to follow him. But the airline was insisting on her paying an additional \$105 for her luggage, and she didn’t have any money on her because her husband had taken it. As she was breaking down and crying, the man behind her in line stepped forward quietly and offered to pay the money for her. He was a complete stranger; it turned out he was a law student, so probably living on a pretty meager income himself. She gratefully accepted his offer and then repaid him by mail when she had gotten home. The reason this story is circulating today is that that young angel who stepped forward to help that traveler on that day in 1991 was Barack Obama.

But I want to offer a little different take on angels today; to me this passage from the Epistle to the Hebrews doesn’t speak just of random acts of kindness but of the practice of hospitality.

Hospitality is an ancient virtue. It is a nonnegotiable obligation in many cultures of the world; the folklore of the world is rife with stories of poor peasants trying to find food for unexpected guests. Hospitality was never so important as in the early Christian church. The early Christian church was an underground church. From what we can tell of its history from the early scriptures, it was persecuted by not only the Roman government but by the general population. Which made it very risky to admit strangers into your home for your church meeting. You would think there would be strict security. Thus it is striking that St. Paul advises, in the Epistle to the Romans,(12:13) “extend hospitality to strangers.” And in the Epistle to the Hebrews, we find the passage on which this sermon and Peter Fleck’s sermon are based(13:1-2):

“Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels unawares.”

The Greek word translated “hospitality” in both passages is *philoxenion*, which means love – *philos* – of strangers, *xenion*.

Now for our hard-core rationalists, I must hasten to add that it is not necessary that we deem angels as supernatural beings. The Greek word in the passage is *Angellaw*, which simply means messenger. Any messenger, from any person. But I think the point of the passage is that indeed any person we entertain might be a messenger of God.

While hospitality was risky in the early church, it was a necessary virtue; after all what would the message of Jesus be if you were stingy about sharing it? Think of it: the early church was basically a countercultural movement; it was persecuted in some places and it had to go underground; there were no phones, internet or newspapers, so it had to be propagated by personal ministry, which meant preachers and organizers and sisters and elders on the road a lot from town to town. They needed places to stay. They needed the assurance that whatever Christian home they came to would take them in.

We in America have some trouble seeing the essential virtue of hospitality because our notion of hospitality has become tarnished by hype. Martha Stewart is a great symbol for what’s wrong with American notions of hospitality. The contemporary American idea of hospitality is to spend millions of dollars to build a big mansion that is totally disproportionate to its neighborhood so that one can throw large parties which employ armies of butlers, gardeners, caterers, vintners, and which invite the neighbors to come in and be impressed with the wealth of the host. Let us call this McMansion hospitality. It is essentially a large ego trip.

Some angels may show up at the McMansion party, but the host will be too busy taking his

guests on a tour of the art works, the Jacuzzi and the tennis court to hear what they have to say.

True hospitality is more of a mutual thing. It is like an arch. John Ciardi has a well-known poem called “Most Like an Arch,¹” in which he describes an arch as “two weaknesses that lean into a strength.” An interesting image because of course the arch is not just the structure in itself, but also a passage through to the courtyard or building within. True hospitality is mutual though it doesn’t always look mutual from the outside. The host gives the guest something the guest needs: food, shelter, sanctuary from his enemies. What the guest gives the host in return is more subtle. It is the opportunity to make these gifts. Entertaining the angel unawares is an added benefit, but we cannot expect all of our guests to be messengers.

In the Jewish tradition, the essence of mitzvah is to do a favor for someone which can never be repaid. The paradigm example of this is seen in many Jewish funerals, where the mourners each put a shovelful of dirt on the coffin; thus the mourners participate in making sure that the deceased is properly buried according to law and custom, a favor the deceased can never repay. When we bestow benefits which cannot be repaid, we are operating out of pure and disinterested goodwill.

The theme of angels unawares, of apparent men who turn out to be messengers from God, is found throughout the Bible. Abraham prepares a meal for three strangers who then tell him that his 80-something wife is going to have a child, and she falls to the ground laughing, which is why they named the child Isaac, which means laughter. Last spring the UU Ministers in the Metro New York District had a retreat at a retreat center on the upper Hudson, in which we all prepared the feast that Abraham and Sarah prepared for the angels. It was a wonderful experience. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, Jacob wrestles with a man all night one night and then discovers that it was God with whom he was wrestling. In the New Testament, the story of the Good Samaritan is a story of hospitality, one of the most important of Jesus’ teachings. The Samaritan does not turn out to be an angel, but he is unexpectedly the best neighbor to the injured man.

Jesus was famous for breaking the exclusiveness of Jewish table-fellowship, dining at will with prostitutes, tax collectors and other sinners. One of Jesus great parables, found in Matthew, Luke and the gospel of Thomas, concerns the man who was throwing a dinner party, and his servants could not convince the guests to come, so the man told the servant to go out into the highways and byways and invite in whomever would come, so that his house would be full. What an image of hospitality.

Some of the passages in Matthew, Mark and Luke² which scholars think are most likely to be

¹ Most Like an Arch This Marriage
by John Ciardi

Most like an arch—an entrance which upholds
and shores the stone-crush up the air like lace.
Mass made idea, and idea held in place.
A lock in time. Inside half-heaven unfolds.

Most like an arch—two weaknesses that lean
into a strength. Two fallings become firm.
Two joined abeyances become a term
naming the fact that teaches fact to mean.

Not quite that? Not much less. World as it is,
what’s strong and separate falters. All I do
at piling stone on stone apart from you
is roofless around nothing. Till we kiss

I am no more than upright and unset.
It is by falling in and in we make
the all-bearing point, for one another’s sake,
in faultless failing, raised by our own weight.

²Matthew 9:35, 10:1, 9-11, 14; Mark 6:7-13, Luke 9:1-6; 10:4-11

the words of the historical Jesus are what are called the mission instructions. In them, Jesus tells his followers how to spread the word among the houses in the hill towns around the Sea of Galilee: go out on the road carrying no purse, no food, no cloak, not even sandals. Go up to the door of a house and knock on it. If they take you in, heal the sick, eat what they give you, say peace be upon this house and tell them the kingdom of God is coming near. If they don't take you in, shake the dust from your feet and say nevertheless the Kingdom of God has come near you. This is the obverse of the entertaining angels. Jesus tells his followers explicitly to be the angels, the messengers of God. It is unclear whether the people to whom St. Paul was writing knew these mission instructions, but they fit together pretty nicely. If the word is to be spread by house-to-house visits, it is necessary for those in the houses to practice hospitality and take in the missionaries.

One of the areas of life in which people have honed their hospitality skills is that of the pilgrimage. First Church in Belmont has a wonderful Tiffany window at the front which depicts a weary pilgrim who is being comforted by an angel. Perhaps the traveler is aware of the angel and perhaps not. Some signs suggest that the pilgrim is on the road to the famous shrine of Santiago de Compostelo, in Galicia in Northeast Spain. This is the site where, legend has it, the remains of St. James, the brother of Jesus, miraculously washed up and a cathedral was built around them. Santiago is Spanish for St. James. Santiago de Compostelo has been a popular pilgrimage destination for centuries, and the routes to it in France and Spain have built up a hospitality industry which thrives to this day. The sign of the pilgrim is the cockle shell; the French dish coquille St. Jacques was originally whipped up for pilgrims, and every time you order it in a restaurant, you might think of the millions of Santiago pilgrims who have consumed it over the years. Nowadays, of course, you don't have to travel for hundreds of miles on dusty roads to visit the shrine; there is a webcam on it twenty-four hours a day, and you can log in from your computer.

Let me give a little plug here. One way in which a lot of UU churches practice hospitality and take pilgrimages is to participate in the Partner Church program. Hospitality is what American UUs offer to our partners from abroad when they come to our churches, and hospitality is what they offer us when we travel to theirs. One of the highlights of my ministry was a trip Jacqueline and I took to Transylvania with the Belmont choir in 2006. In that trip we learned that we are all fellow pilgrims on a journey of discovery. I would like to explore having this church get partnered with a church abroad. In the process, we find many similarities, and of course wide differences between us. Pilgrims have always come together and found out what they had in common and what were the differences. One of the earliest works of English literature, the Canterbury Tales, takes this as its theme.

Is there a downside to hospitality? Yes, like any vulnerability, it has its risks. The guests may make off with the silverware, may trash the place, may insult the host or trample all over local sensibilities. But nobody said every angel was going to behave always like an angel.

The Persian poet Rumi has these oft-quoted lines:

Rumi - Guest House

This being human is a guest house
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out for some new delight.
The dark thought, the sham, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.
Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

Angels unawares, guides from the beyond. You see it is so much deeper than being nice to people so that people will be nice to you. It is engaging with the people who may help you see through to some ultimate truth.

I'll tell you a story. In June of 1995, I closed my law practice in Charleston to go to divinity school. In January of 1999, I was back in Charleston for a few days for my ordination. On the morning of my ordination, I attended services at the Unitarian Church, and a member of the church who is a sometime mental patient stood up at Joys and Concerns and said the church should not be ordaining me because I should be practicing law and I should be taking her psychiatric malpractice case I had turned down ten years before. It became clear that in her obsessive way, she had become fixated on the idea that this lawsuit was her salvation and only I could do it. She thereupon started a pattern of agitation with the church, and finally I went to see her in the state mental hospital, where she had been committed again, to talk to her. It was not easy for me to go: the state mental hospital is a place haunted by the ghost of my father, for our family had to commit him there several times in his manic phases.

But I did go there and see her. We spent maybe an hour together. She did most of the talking, as she usually did during our interviews. Little that she said made any sense. Her peculiarities of mind were such that a sentence starting off in one direction would encounter a thousand qualifications, detours and reversals before ending up ten minutes later at a point miles away from where she had started or the question which had been posed. In listening to her, I recalled that I had rejected the idea of bringing suit for her ten years before because the case would have depended on her as a witness and she was impossible to follow. I did deliver the message that I had rejected her case because in my opinion it could not be won, that I was still of that opinion and in any event was no longer practicing law and that she needed to accept that.

But in the middle of my listening to her, as I watched the painful emotions flicker across her face and listened to the disconnected thoughts fluttering about, a different thought entered my mind: this could be the face of God. This could be a messenger from the beyond. What is this person trying to tell me?

I think if she was a messenger, she was one despite herself. For her request was that I should come and bring a lawsuit and save her. What she taught me was that at some level I would entertain the possibility just because it was someone asking for my help. She touched my savior complex and showed it to me. She helped me think through what it is that I am doing in the ministry. She was indeed a guide from the beyond.

We encounter guides from the beyond all the time.

And there is no better place to practice hospitality than in our churches. But it is not always easy here either.

To illustrate, let me give you a little more from this extraordinary sermon on welcoming that I heard at General Assembly in 2006, preached by Rev. Gail Gesenhainer³. Gail used to be the minister in Vero Beach Florida where she had in her flock Hoyt and Debby Ecker during the winter months. So I guess she and I have some sort of bond from sharing parishioners. But at any rate, this sermon was terrific and I want to share just a little more of it with you. Remember that she was quite skeptical of the church and was skeptical that it would welcome her in her "Amazon" presentation. She was surprised to find when she showed up that she was welcomed and invited to coffee.

On a subsequent visit, however, she encountered a little turbulence:

"During the worship service on my second or third Sunday, a woman stood during Joys and Concerns to announce that all homosexuals had AIDS, all homosexuals were deviants who could not be trusted with children, public health or civil society. All homosexuals should be quarantined; packed off to work camps to provide useful labor for society and keep their filthy life style and deadly diseases to themselves.

"As the member spoke I slowly sat upright from my customary slouch. I tucked in my arms, looked furtively around to see who might be glaring in my direction, and I tried to remember if I had parked my car facing in or out in the parking lot."

³The full text of the sermon can be found at <http://archive.uua.org/ga/ga06/5002b.html>

Gail had not yet committed to the church, and she was later to reflect whether she was going to have what Martin Buber would call an “I-Thou” relationship or an “I-It.” But in the moment all she could think of was escape. As she was making her way out, this is what happened:

“what I remember most is the sensation of holding my breath as I hurried out during the postlude. I ducked my head, avoided eye contact, spoke to no one as though the shame were mine. There was a man in the foyer between me and the exit door. I quickly glanced up to his face, silently pleading for him to let me pass without more pain. He smiled, held the door open gently for me, speaking softly, he said, ‘See you next week?’

“My head snapped up. ‘Excuse me,’ I muttered. Surely I had not heard him correctly? He gently repeated, ‘See you next week?’

“Was he mad? Was he impaired? Had he not just heard what that woman said? ‘See you next week?’ It was at once a question and an invitation. Surely, I thought as I scrambled to leave the parking lot, surely it was an invitation to madness, but for one thing. The man's voice, his soft smile, gentle words, direct eye contact, ours was an ‘I - Thou’ encounter. The very thing I'd been seeking.

“In the throes of awful moments, in the slap of insult, the breaking through realizations of injustice, disrespect, unkindness, hatred and worse, there is a way to detect if we are off course or on course. In these terrible moments all sense of movement stops. Instinctively, some of us begin to hold our breath. We become hyper alert to details, the sense of ‘other’ and our sense of ‘apartness.’

“Conversation, of course, comes to an abrupt halt. The sense of movement stops. Our brains want to scream, ‘what did you say?’ When the attack was made all motion in the room appeared to stop. I hurried from the building nearly holding my breath. Then the fellow at the door said, ‘See you next week?’ At once a question and an invitation. At once an acceptance of the reality I might not come back. ‘See you next week?’ I exhaled. The salvific power of breathing. My first lesson on the Beloved Community where we walk together, though all that life brings. Just enough to keep us in motion, to keep us in conversation.”

I love the image of this greeter saying “See you next week?” But why did this little phrase make the difference between Gail leaving for good and deciding to stay and remain in conversation? Because it signified, in some small way, that she was still accepted there. It showed her hospitality.

The word “religion” comes from re-ligio, roots meaning “to bind together again.” The root of all religion is a recognition that the other is in some way like me. Gail was struggling with her sense of apartness in the world because of her sexual orientation and lifestyle choices, and her question in entering the religious community that was that church was whether she could recognize others as at some level like herself despite their straightness and be recognized by them as like them despite her queerness. This one little sentence spoken by a polite man seemed to tip the balance.

For in the end, she came back. She had a tough time making up her mind, but when she came back the next week, she was amazed to find person after person standing up at joys and concerns to say that the views expressed the previous week did not represent their views. And they did it without demonizing the original speaker. Gail realized that this was a conversation worth engaging in, and a community worth joining. And later she decided that it was a community worth devoting ones life to in the ministry.

You never know, do you? At any moment, my friends, in the slightest, most routine encounter, you may be entertaining angels unawares. It's right here under your nose. Which is why we will soon sing these words:

No longer forward or behind
I look in hope or fear,

but, grateful, take the good I find,
the best of now and here.
I break my pilgrim staff,
I lay aside the toiling oar,
The angel sought so far away,
I welcome at my door.

Amen.

Readings

Epistle to the Hebrews 13:1-2

“Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels unawares.”

Gospel of Luke 14:

16 Then Jesus said to him, "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. 17 At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.' 18 But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.' 19 Another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.' 20 Another said, 'I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.' 21 So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.' 22 And the slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.' 23 Then the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. 24 For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'"

Rev. Gail Geisenhainer, Sermon at Sunday Worship, General Assembly 2006, St. Louis:
I was forthrightly evangelized into Unitarian Universalism. I was 38 years old, living in Maine, driving a snow-plow for a living and feeling very sorry for myself when a friend invited me to his church. He said it was different. I rudely refused. I cursed his church. "All blank-ing churches are the same," I informed him, "they say they're open - but they don't want queer folk. To Heck with church!" My friend, persisted. He knew his church was different. He told me his church cared about people, embraced diverse families, and worked to make a better world. He assured me I could come and not have to hide any elements of who I was. So I went. Oh, I went alright.

And I dressed sooooo, carefully for my first Sunday visit. I spiked my short hair straight up into the air. I dug out my heaviest, oldest work boots, the ones with the chain saw cut that exposed the steel toe. I got my torn blue jeans and my leather jacket. There would be not a shred of ambiguity this Sunday morning. They would embrace me in my full Amazon glory, or they could fry ice. I carefully arranged my outfit so it would highlight the rock hard chip I carried on my shoulder, I bundled up every shred of pain and hurt and betrayal I had harbored from every other religious experience in my life, and I lumbered into that tiny meetinghouse on the coast of Maine.

Blue jeans and boots. Leather jacket, spiked hair and belligerent attitude. I accepted my friend's invitation and I went to his church. I expected the gray-haired ladies in the foyer to step back in fear. That would have been familiar. Instead, they stepped forward, offered me a bulletin, a newsletter and invited me to stay for coffee. It was so... odd! They never even flinched!

They called me "dear." But they pronounced it "dee-ah." "Stay for coffee, dear."