

The Gould Discourse April 30, 1993

"Knee-Deep in Angels: Community, Character, and the Congregation"

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I feel that one good way to keep in touch with "popular culture" is to watch the trends in the monthly catalogue of the paperback book club to which I belong. There are always computer books- the one I could use is Macs for Dummies. There are often books on sexuality- The Erotic Impulse, for example, and Look Homeward Erotica. There are always books on codependency. And, recently, there are lots of books about angels: A Book of Angels, reflections on angels past and present and true stories of how they touch our lives; Ask Your Angels, a practical guide to working with spiritual messengers to empower and enrich your life; Commune with Angels, practical techniques for recognizing the presence of these divine beings through daily meditations and exercises. Says the catalogue of this last book: "[it] gives people everywhere an opportunity to transcend the boundaries of daily living and allow the loving energy of angels to lead them to fulfillment in life."

Because I believe that this life is all we have, that we only go around once, and that daily living is where it's at, I do not look to angels or anyone else, for that matter, to transcend that particular boundary. I do my best to make meanings, to find fulfillment, within the boundaries of birth and death, every day. But the image of angels is useful to me in helping me keep in touch with my ideals about people. You and I know that life in a congregation can try the patience of a saint. People, including ministers, miss deadlines, forget meetings and appointments, don't start preparing to teach a religious education lesson until 9:30 or on Sunday morning, talk endlessly and to no point at meetings, ride their favourite "hobby-horses." But the most beautiful sanctuary, the best-organized lesson plan, the most moving sermon, would be pointless without the two-year-old joyously waving her pictures in the air, the chorister singing his heart out, the teenager playing "Wink" or sitting in meditation, the individual speaking to the group of joys or concerns...without the congregation.

Life is, as you know, a very mixed bag, and each person is a melange of caring and apathy, generosity and selfishness, hope and despair, creativity and stagnation. Each of us needs help to be the best we can be, to be a whole person with integrity, to be a "mensch." We come together in our congregations for this sort of help, this sort of inspiration, this sort of example.

We Unitarian Universalists sometimes talk about "the priesthood of all

believers," or the ministry of every one of us. This does not, I think, mean that people should be more involved in the actual work of the congregation, on the Board, serving on committees and task forces, singing weekly in the choir, serving as coordinator of the delightful and busy toddler room, although it is wonderful and necessary that all this work be done. Rather, I think it means that each person, whether child, youth, or adult, has a powerful part to play in society, ministering to others and to our wounded planet. With this view, part of the role of the congregation is to support the ministries of everyone, those activities and ways of being which then take place in the office, the school, the home, on the playground, on the street.

Such support involves powerful and moving worship experiences, both prophetic and personal. It involves religious education which helps people of all ages to address the constant moral dilemmas which face us in our incredibly, increasingly complex world. It calls for authentication, that is, recognition, audible and visible, of the growth and accomplishments of everyone. These events can be a formal part of congregational life, such as a teacher appreciation pancake breakfast or a leadership retreat. But even more important is the informal, everyday word of thanks, the pat on the back, or the hug to someone in appreciation of a job well done or a hardship overcome while doing the job.

Besides recognition related to jobs, tasks, it is also very important to appreciate, audibly and visibly, the personal change and growth that we can recognize in the congregation— a child usually seen as "difficult" who lights the chalice and says a few words in front of everyone, the youth who takes the time away from her pals to make a newcomer welcome, the person who weeps without apology in our midst.

What are we doing in our congregations but attempting to grow good people? "All it takes is a rake and a hoe, and a piece of fertile ground..." and some faith. Take a moment now to reflect on your life experience and to think of a good person. Without analyzing, rely on your sense of "the good" and your feelings. It is best to do this without trying to define "the good," because, as James Anderson and Ezra Jones write, "To choose the good is to choose life, and life is always characterized by risk, ambiguity, inconsistency, and paradox. This does not mean that the good is illusory, ephemeral, or unknowable— only that it is risky and difficult in a distorted world to know the good and to act with moral courage." (p. 26) We act in good ways when we believe that our actions can make a difference. We act in good ways when we sense our interdependence, our connections, our place in the web of life. One institution where we can begin to learn and experience these truths is the congregation. A congregation can provide "a network for love, for discovery, for responding to grief, for forgiveness, for

mutual interaction, and for reaching out to others." (Anderson and Jones, p. 67). Out of our common concerns and shared experiences, even of the "taking out the trash" variety, even out of our experiences of conflict—out of these can come satisfaction, an awareness of our mutual contributions, and increased goodness. The congregation can be for its members and friends a place of creation, of growth, of increased goodness in the world, of, if you will, a breeding ground for angels. We, together, can be for each other both a moral conscience and a creator of new possibilities (A & J p. 102) Everyone, in order to act as moral agent in the world, needs a focussed vision, a sense of hope, and an image of a small next step to take. We can help each other to articulate these and to take responsibility for them. And then, maybe, we will shake our wings and fly a little.

Every congregation has its difficult people. A congregation can be (we want it to be!) a safer, more accepting place for someone who is different, for someone who has trouble fitting in anywhere else. Here people can try new roles, new challenges, can move in new directions. That movement can be awkward, and the repercussions can be widely felt. "HE'S the chairperson of THAT?" "How in the world could SHE get THAT done?" But we give each other a chance, often, trying hard to keep in mind that the process and the learning and the personal growth are really more important than the particular goal or event. This is possible if we keep ourselves continually open to the strength and beauty and ability, the blessedness of each and every one of us.

Every congregation has its difficult times. As a community, when conflict and dis-ease arise, our goal always must be to restore the congregation as a place of healing, restoration, and hope. An extreme example of this, but one with which each congregation must grapple, is the issue of sexual abuse within the congregation. It is important for the congregation to have a policy in place about how accusations will be handled. So that everyone knows that safety and trust are primary concerns, there must be a plan to follow when these have been violated. The problem is especially traumatic when a clergy person is accused, because of the complex underlying power issues. But trust in the congregation as a whole can be destroyed by one layperson using or abusing another. As Marie Fortune says, the victim has had her or his sense of the meaningful order of creation violated, has lost a sense of the universe as a caring place. Our words, as simple as saying "You do not deserve this. This should not have happened to you," or, "We know you, we trust you, and we hope that this gets cleared up soon" can, in a small way, begin the process of restoration.

We've been talking about growing good people, about the congregation as a greenhouse for the seedlings of character. Sometimes it seems as though we

preach and teach about what we should do— feed the hungry, work for peace, affirm our differences. But Kate Fansler, one of my favorite mystery writers, has another idea. "For myself," she says, "I've discovered that when I ask myself what I should do I always tumble into confusion. The only clear question is to ask oneself what one wants to do." "Isn't that mere self-indulgence?" her friend asks. "It sounds like it certainly, but oddly enough, it isn't. The 'should' people are really indulging themselves by never really finding out what they want. It has taken me many years to learn that discovering what one wants is the true beginning of a spiritual journey." And, I would add, the true opening of ourselves to grace, to holy inspiration. Our congregations can be places where the "wants" and the "shoulds" come together, overlap, and blend, like watercolors in a painting, where the goodness in each of us shines through more and more.

We come together for worship, education, fun, social action, and personal growth. We come together in our congregations simply to be ourselves, with all our feelings, all our blemishes, together, and that is one of the most important goals. Bill Schulz, our UUA president, told this story illustrating one of the functions of religious community: A little girl, sent to the store by her mother, took a worrisome length of time to return. She explained that she was trying to help a little boy whose bike had broken. When her mother said, "But you don't know anything about bicycles. How could you help him?" the little girl replied, "I sat down with him to help him cry." (Nick Cardell's column)

When we are together in this way, like the children in that story, we are in community. Our masks are off; our feelings are exposed; we are there for each other. But there is something more. When we truly listen to and care about each other, we are in a realm, says writer Scott Peck, in The Different Drum, that is almost mystical. God, or the holy, or the power of the universe, is in our connections, too. The situation may be as mundane as a committee meeting, but with the freedom of expression and the consensual decision-making, comes joy. "The members," says Peck, feel that they have been temporarily: at least partially- transported out of the mundane world of ordinary preoccupations. For the moment it is as if heaven and earth had somehow met."

"Oh, you can't get to Heaven in a rocking chair..." goes the old song. Sitting and rocking and expecting things to stay the way that they always have been— or expecting that everyone in the congregation will always be caring and nurturing of you— that's no way to breed angels. Community only grows through risk-taking, through feelings of emptiness and brokenness. Moving through anger and discord and grief with caring and commitment, with hope for all of us and for the future— this will help our wings to grow.

"Knee-deep in angels"... I really don't know whose knees those could possibly be, but I am truly grateful for the changes, challenges, and blessings of our many ways of being together.

Response to The Rev. Liz Benjamin/ Gould Discourse  
Knee Deep In Angels: Community, Character and the Congregation

Liz, thank you for asking me to speak in response to your thoughts. It is my pleasure to respond. No sooner had I received the speech that you just presented than I found an article on angels in *The Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* called "Complex Times spur an interest in Heavenly Beings". The article spoke of Karyn Martin-Kuri who is an artist and an angelologist, known to many as the "angel lady". She feels that angels are beamed down to earth as messengers from God, and that the veils between Heaven and Earth are becoming thinner, (and I don't believe she is speaking of the ozone layer). She has testified publicly that angels pushed her stalled car out of the street and into a driveway moments before a speeding auto would have struck her. And just in case you want to communicate with her there is an organization called Tapestry with a toll free number 1-800-28ANGEL.

I suppose I do believe in angels here on earth, although I think my own definition. . . my vision . . . would not be satisfactory for Ms. Martin-Kuri. The angels I imagine call us into goodness, especially the goodness Liz quoted from James Anderson and Ezra Jones that read, "To choose the good is to choose life, and life is always characterized by risk, ambiguity, inconsistency and paradox." I agree that it's risky and difficult in our complex world to know the good and to act with moral courage, but angels are the ones who point the way.

These angels are not just beings with perfect scores for saving souls, nor are they morally pure. They are a part of our blessed community of imperfect individuals, but what makes them different, is that their way of seeing the world is slightly shifted. They are the ones who find themselves in the midst of a catastrophe and they work wonders. In small and gentle ways, angels are the ones who can look at our conflicting needs and find our shared desires so we can work together. I look for them wherever I go, and especially within my own congregation. Someone with these skills sees only the possibilities.

In a poem I have used before, and will use again, Lewis Hyde first quotes Meister Eckhart who had written:

One has to seek God in error and  
forgetfulness and foolishness.

and then the poet, Lewis Hyde, expands on this message by writing:

This error is a sign of love,  
the crack in the ice where the otters breathe,  
The fault in the sea where the fish linger and mate,  
seeds that need six months of drought,  
flowers shaped for the tongues of moths,  
the hail storms in a South Dakota town that started the  
Farmer's Cooperative in 1933,  
the Sargasso sea that gives false hope to sailors  
and they sail on and find a new world,  
the picnic basket that slips overboard and leads to  
the invention of the lobster trap,  
the one slack line in a poem where the listener relaxes and  
suddenly the poem is in your heart like a fruit wasp in an apple.  
This error is a sign of love.

From what I read, you seem to be thinking about people who can see their world as possibilities and connections, Liz.

For me, angels come in this form, but they are also sometimes the bearers of messages that I would rather not know. These angels that call me to live in all the ambiguity and paradox of life offer me a painful puzzle, and then challenge me to step outside my comfortable cocoon where I am enfolded with others much like myself.

In the New Testament, angels herald the coming of a child of possibilities, but in the Hebrew scripture it is an angel that stands guard at the entrance to Eden after Adam and Eve have tasted of the apple, and have been driven from the garden into the world that is filled with joy and pain. Some of my most powerful angels come primarily to challenge me, to make me see the harsh realities, and they come in strange forms.

Right before Thanksgiving a woman I had not met before came to talk to the woman pastor of the church whose name appeared on the sign outside the front door, and she wanted to pray. We sat together and I listened to her story of seeking the good life for herself using her religion as a guide. She walked in the ways of her understanding of Jesus, which was far from my own, but that did not matter. When the most important man in her life chose to harm her, she turned her cheek as she had been instructed by her church studies. It astounded her when he beat the unbruised side in response. We talked about her right to safety and a love that does not know violence.

Finally before she left to return to work at some unknown place downtown, she asked for her prayer. Two women who ten minutes before hadn't set eyes on each other, with four hands clasped, black and white fingers intertwined, prayed to a God of different forms. I hope she heard my prayer as clearly as I felt her fear.

"Pray." I implored her. "Say the things that are in your heart."

She prayed: **Dear God, forgive my sins.**

I responded: *Know that you are worthy of love.*

She continued: **I know that he is a good man if only he doesn't drink.**

And I said: *Let this woman know that there are helping hands if she will only ask.*

**Give me strength to go on.**

*May she find the courage to know what is right and good.*

**In the name of Jesus hear my prayer.**

*In the name of all that is love may you hear our prayer.*

**Amen. Amen.**

It was my good fortune to be able to be with her at that moment. When we need hands to steady ours and to touch our bruises, may there be someone to gently sooth us. Life is a constant circle of giving and receiving, and in both we are blessed. She was an angel come to me who reminded me that there was strength inside to keep helping.

And there is the man with whom I have never shared a spoken word. I am not even sure that it is the same man who crouches in the brick vestibule of our church to find rest. Sometimes I see him sipping coffee, and looking down as if the floor beneath his feet holds something worthy of his attention. In the winter, he huddles with the brown wings of a coat pulled around him smoking a stub of a cigarette. I've gone out to find him several times, and he has always disappeared, but his presence, and the presence of those like him cause me discomfort that does not leave me.

He is an angel who shakes my reality and forces me out of the garden of plenty into the real world where pain and pleasure are life.

These complex times are filled with angels, some bringing tidings of good news, some with creativity beyond our own, and others calling us to live in the midst of a world where the veils between Heaven, and Hell and the earth can become thin, indeed.

Blessed Be, and once again, thank you Liz.

Response to "Knee Deep in Angels" Josephine Gould Discourse  
Rev. Carl F. Thitchener April 30, 1993

I didn't learn anything about angels at the Starr King School for the ministry, or anywhere else in the Graduate Theological Union for that matter. In fact, I must admit that when I first heard the title for your discourse, Liz, I felt grossly unqualified to be a respondent on this subject. But since my lack of knowledge about a subject has not prevented me from speaking about it so far in my ministry, I decided that this was yet another opportunity for me to struggle with trying to learn about and understand a topic and to share that struggle in public. (In fact I think that my worst sermons have been on those subjects I knew the most about.)

Unitarian Universalist congregations as gatherings of angels. What a concept! To prepare myself to deal with it I tried to learn for the first time in my life, a little bit of angelology. My research took me first to the supermarket checkout counter where on the front page of one of the tabloids a few weeks ago I saw what purported to be the "first published photograph of an angel." . . . Sure enough, there was what appeared to be a woman wearing a long gown apparently standing in mid-air with two large wings coming out of her shoulders. It seemed like quite a journalistic coup for that paper, and I'm surprised that none of the other papers or the nightly news have not yet picked up on it.

Back in the middle ages theologians wrestling with the concept of angels decided that there were actually 9 different levels of immortal spiritual beings which some have collectively referred to as "angels." First of all there were the seraphim and cherubim who guarded the throne of god. The seraphim had three pairs of wings, while the cherubim were winged children with chubby rosy faces. Then came the thrones, I don't know what they looked like or did, and next the dominations and the virtues. I don't know what they did either, but it was beginning to look like SOME congregations I have known.

The spiritual entities called powers and principalities came next. They have been called the world rulers of this present darkness, and the spiritual hosts of wickedness, and finally the archangels and angels.

Unfortunately, none of this knowledge has yet helped my ministry!

The other dictionary definitions of angels were more helpful.

Angel, a guardian spirit or guiding influence. I have seen many of them in our congregations. These are the experienced members who having been active leaders and teachers know how to stay committed to their church while at the same time surrendering control to the next generation.

Angel, a kind of loving person. We see them reaching out to the sick and the needy in our congregations and our communities. They help make the congregation a palace of healing, restoration and hope.

The next definition of angel that my dictionary gives is from the field of aviation in which an "angel" is a word used to describe enemy aircraft. I laughed when I read that one because I admit that I have sometimes initially thought that way about some people who had a quite different vision of our movement and our churches. Those whose personal priorities were placed on bricks and mortar rather than the people and programs I preferred. I am coming to understand that they are not the devils I once thought them to be, and that only in the creative interchange between the bricks and mortar folks and the people and program perspectives can we build religious institutions that are flexible enough to meet today's challenging needs and strong enough to be here to meet the needs of our children and our children's children.

This concept of "creative interchange" which was coined by Unitarian theologian Henry Nelson Wainman may very well fit the Christian Science definition of angel which is "God's thoughts passing to humankind."

And finally there is the definition of "angel" that comes from the theatre where an "angel" is a financial backer. Our congregations need them as well as all the other kinds, and I thank you, Liz, for reminding me of how fortunate we are that we are indeed knee deep in all kinds of angels all the time.

I also agree, Liz, that a preoccupation with "shoulds" has blocked the joy of living for many who never find out what they want in life and are therefore stymied on their spiritual journey. Yes, too many "shoulds" are, of course, too many. But that applies to too many wants as well.

Theologian, Reinhold Neibuhr, wrote a prayer many years ago. The original words were, "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I should, and the wisdom to know the difference." Bill Wilson, founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, the forerunner of many other self-help groups, saw fit to change the word "should" to "can." I personally feel that the original word was a better choice. There are many things today which we "can" do through modern technology, have wanted to do, and have done, that we clearly "should" not have done or continue to do if life as we know it is to survive on our planet. I endorse, therefore, your vision of our congregations as places where the "wants" and the "shoulds" come together, overlap and blend. I hope that they then can serve as models for the larger society.

Knee deep in angels? It's a nice image, Liz. I'll try to remember it at my next church board meeting.