

ANGELS UNAWARES

A Sermon by Kathy Fuson Hurt
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It is an old idea, as old as humanity itself—and as new. More dream than idea, more shimmering hope than cold abstraction, it appears in stories of religions from all places, all times. Sometimes beautiful, sometimes terrifying, it warns (and promises) of hidden dimensions in ordinary experiences, dimensions which we overlook at our peril. It is the idea, the dream, the hope of visits by angels, of having heavenly, superhuman, otherworldly beings enter our lives unexpectedly—for better or worse.

Abraham looked up from his work one day to see three strangers approaching. He and his wife Sarah invited them into their tents for a meal, showed them fine hospitality, and received a blessing from them. The three strangers happened to be none other than the most high God, accompanied by two angels.

Baucis and Philemon, a poor, elderly couple, once served a modest dinner to two dusty travelers who had knocked at the door of their humble cottage. Halfway through the meal, the old couple realized that the wine bowl remained always full, regardless of how much they drank. The travelers, it turned out, were Zeus and Hermes, gods in human disguise. Other homes that had refused them hospitality were destroyed, while Baucis and Philemon saw their cottage transformed into a magnificent white marble temple.

Arjuna, an Indian soldier, despaired of winning the battle he was fighting, and anguished over the loss of life being incurred. Suddenly his youthful charioteer began to

exhort him onward and to offer him amazing insights into the meaning of life and death. As Arjuna listened, he saw that his charioteer was actually the Hindu deity Krishna.

Two travelers on the road to Emmaus were joined by a third. A conversation about the recent death of the Nazarene prophet Jesus was transformed into an intense, lively discussion of scriptural teachings on human redemption, with the third traveler leading the discussion. No wonder he knew the subject so well: he was himself the subject, the dead Jesus, now risen.

And the stories go on and on, telling and retelling of instances when we humans suddenly found ourselves entertaining not just another human, not just a weary stranger, but an angel in disguise. Evidences and emissaries of the divine, so the stories claim, do enter the most ordinary of lives. If these angels are welcomed, if we offer them food, lodging, kindness, a few minutes of our time, then a blessing is often granted us. However, a refusal to entertain them, to recognize the heavenly spirit hidden inside the dirty, bedraggled exterior, means a blessing lost—and may even result in our homes being destroyed.

Today we continue our yearlong exploration of themes in Unitarian Universalism. Thus far we have considered our liberal spiritual path from the standpoint of mystery, as a fundamental appreciation for the complexity of experience that resists all creedal definitions; and from the standpoint of ongoing revelation, as our conviction that there is always more to be understood and our primary spiritual practice is therefore one of questioning.

This morning we move into the challenging commitment to mutuality, a commitment more typically expressed as tolerance of the differences among us, but which I believe is

more profound than the stance of tolerance suggests. Unitarian Universalism encourages each of us to develop our own perspective on the truth, and then weaves those individual perspectives into a common journey of mutuality.

Because mutuality is a difficult quality to embody—and particularly so in our present culture where absolute certainty and conviction is prized above all else—we may be more familiar with its inversions, with the *absence* of mutuality. Many spiritual paths, particularly those of an evangelical variety, practice the opposite of mutuality, which is conversion. Someone who is bent on converting you is so filled with the truth of his or her own perspective that your perspective, your ideas, your truth become immaterial; all that matters is that you listen (not talk, but listen) to the converter and be persuaded by what s/he is saying. While converters show up in all walks of life, including our liberal congregations, we do not, at least in theory, accept conversion as a viable spiritual behavior; in fact, seeking to convert, to coerce another into accepting our viewpoint, whether that viewpoint be theological, political, or a viewpoint about church priorities, is not supported by any Unitarian Universalist principle.

In contrast to conversion, we typically propose the notion of tolerance, though I would argue that tolerance is actually somewhat akin to conversion, a kind of distant cousin. Tolerant spirituality is content simply to let others alone. Being tolerant, we say, “You believe what you believe; I believe what I believe; we agree to disagree, and let it go at that.” This oh-so-polite non-interaction does represent an advance from the bullying tactics of conversion—but not much of an advance. Like conversion, tolerance is grounded in the conviction that I am right and you are, if not wrong, at least less right than me. The converter cannot let this difference rest and seeks to cancel it by changing

the other; the person practicing good tolerance also dislikes the difference and figures that by ignoring it the difference will somehow cease to matter. Both conversion and tolerance are ultimately exclusive, not inclusive, for neither stance honors the reality and significance of the other, the one who is not me.

To see how these unhelpful attitudes might play out in our own congregation, suppose I changed our customary order of service so that instead of typically including a time of meditation, we engaged in a time of prayer, complete with words addressed to a heavenly being, perhaps even called "Father." The conversion-minded among us who do not themselves find such praying a meaningful practice would likely recoil at the words, stop listening, and begin preparing criticism for me to let me know in no uncertain terms that people in this church (and Unitarian Universalists in general) do not believe in prayer and thus prayer has no place in our worship services. If I respond from a similar mindset of conversion, I will note that the speaker clearly has unresolved issues from childhood religion which need addressing, that I know many UUs who do pray, and that the criticism is groundless.

On the other hand, those among us who strive to practice tolerance and who also do not themselves find prayer a meaningful activity also would likely recoil at the words, stop listening, and begin preparing a speech of long suffering for me, to let me know in no uncertain terms that people in this church (and Unitarian Universalists in general) do not believe in prayer, and while it is fine to introduce new experiences in the Sunday services, and while we are all open-minded folks, I would be wise not to make a habit of it because I exclude all the non-prayers when I do so and we come on Sundays for comfort and familiarity. If I respond from a similarly tolerant mindset, I will thank the

speaker for sharing, declare that I truly do hear where s/he is coming from, remind of the value of new experiences, suggest that those few who do find prayer meaningful deserve to be included occasionally, and promise not to make a habit of it.

In both these responses, of the conversion-minded and the tolerant, no real communication has occurred because no real listening happened. Those who convert and those who tolerate are equally convinced of being right, of having the truth. Once you have the truth, listening to an alternative view becomes pointless: if I know what is right, what could you possibly offer me? For the converters and the tolerant, the only acceptable opinion is one that echoes their own. A different opinion is greeted with argument or denial by the converter, and an indifferent “how interesting” from the tolerant.

But Unitarian Universalism calls us not to conversion or tolerance, but to mutuality, a response to the other which neither seeks to deny or detach, but actually to engage. A mutual exchange occurs when each person listens to the other without preparing a rebuttal in advance or withdrawing. In a mutual exchange, the first words out of my mouth in response to you are *not* “I don’t agree” or “how interesting” or “that isn’t my experience at all” or “how can you say such a thing” or “well, my opinion is” or “well, the *New York Times* says.” Rather, the first words out of my mouth to you, in a mutual exchange, will be “tell me more” or “help me understand”—or even no words at all, a silence of thoughtful reflection. Such responses actually demonstrate the profound and difficult truth of our first principle affirming the inherent worth of everyone, even those we dislike and disagree with. Mutuality is exceedingly difficult to maintain. It requires ongoing awareness to be able to respond differently, to thwart the automatic replies of

argument, self-assertion, or indifference in which we are so well trained. Mutuality demands a willingness to give up something—my love of my own brilliant ideas, my carefully constructed self—to set this aside in order to be open to another. If I am full of myself, there is no room in me for what you bring. I keep myself intact when I convert you; I keep myself intact when I politely tolerate you; in a mutual interaction, I lose something of myself to create an opening for your perspective, your experience to enter my world.

A discussion of mutuality seems poignant to me this morning, as each day's news brings reports of suicide bombers, injured troops and civilians, grim-faced leaders vowing to fight as long as necessary, self-righteous politicians who find those disagreeing with them to be so repugnant as to be labeled with a gun sight, self-righteous citizens who believe any means are justified to advance their cause. Our current climate, both at home and abroad, of warfare, literal and religious and political warfare, is a clear and brutal illustration of what happens when mutuality is nowhere to be found, when only conversion or tolerance are the order of the day. Policy makers and religious leaders alike refuse to hear the other. Though we often use the phrase "global community," there is precious little community in evidence. When was the last time you heard or saw an instance of a country or a country's leader, or a church or a church's leader, being more interested in hearing another's point of view than in righteously asserting its own view? What might happen if those people who hate one another—the Israelis and the Palestinians, the Indians and the Pakistanis, the conservative Christians and the conservative Muslims, the progressives and the fundamentalists, the Democrats and the Tea Partiers—what might happen if any among these polarized pairs set aside their

grievances, their righteous opinions, their craving for power and tried to understand the other's perspective? Might it then be a little more difficult to escalate the fighting to violence?

“Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (Hebrews 13:2). This ancient advice to “entertain strangers,” to be open to others, to invite them in and offer them food and listen to their stories, point to the reward that comes from this “entertaining,” this response of mutuality: in that other, we may just find an angel.

Now I admit that I have never seen any sort of mystical angel, a divine glowing being with halo and wings, and I suspect I never will. But I have met a fair number of angels in human guise, if an angel is also someone who offers me something I never expected to receive, tells me something I never expected to hear, shows me something I never expected to see, helps me understand something I never expected to grasp, or otherwise breaks into my usual mindset. When another manages this feat, moving past my defenses and my absolutely true opinions to remind me that I really, finally, do not know everything, then I have been visited by an angel. Though I have only known all of you a brief time, I am already discovering the presence of many, many angels in this church.

As humans have discovered since the beginning, visitation by an angel may not necessarily be a pleasurable experience. I do enjoy new insights, new perspectives—but not so much when those new insights require me to change, or show me my limitations, or demand that I love more, that I act more humbly.

Yet if I want to live in community, then I have no choice but to entertain angels. If I want to be part of a diverse community, then I am required to practice mutuality, to listen

more than I speak, to remain open to what another brings me. If we want our global community to survive, to know a measure of peace, then we are called, called urgently, to learn the discipline of mutuality and carry it forth as builders of community into the larger world. As Unitarian Universalists, part of a heritage that has always honored a mutual exchange between differing viewpoints, we are uniquely capable of doing this work. And we clearly have no time to lose.