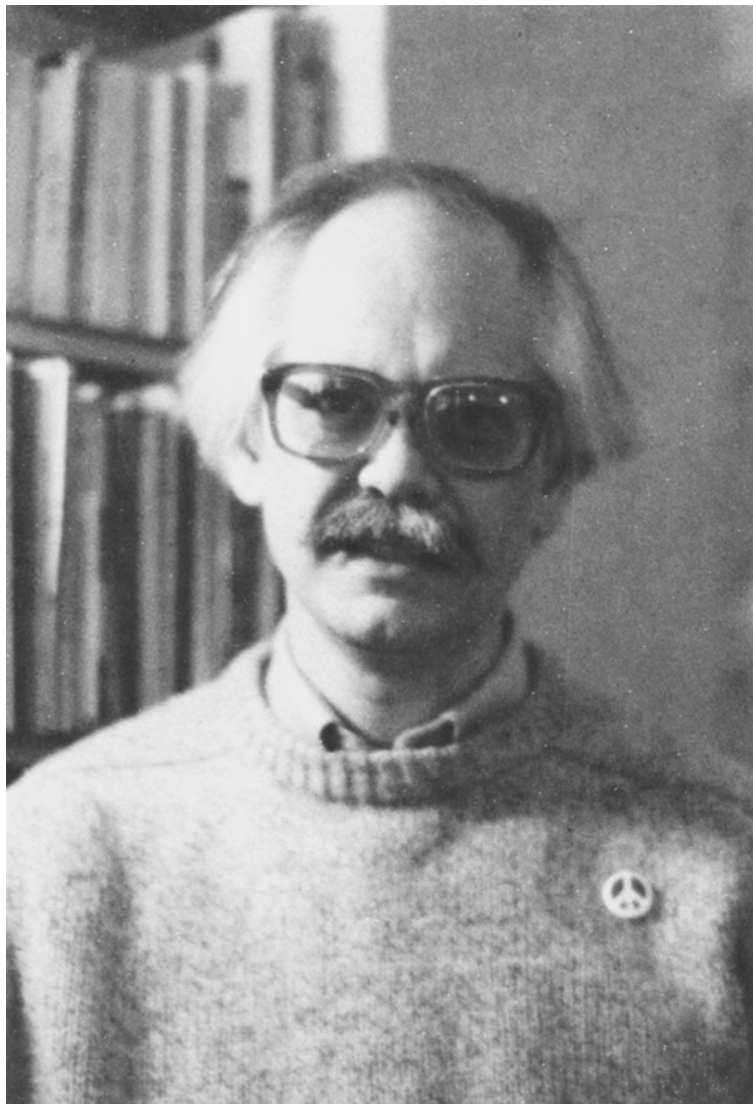


Angels Watching Over Me

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Angels Watching Over Me

"All day, All night, Angels watching over me!" and "There are angels hovering 'round...". Those songs helped me get started on this.

I'm often asked what I'm going to talk about at Yearly Meeting. And I've met with some incredulity when I say the subject will be "Angels." As a more palatable but less obvious answer, I sometimes give it a subtitle of No Room for Gloom. We'll be getting at the same thing, no matter what the title.

A more classic starting place is to have a scriptural text, and I'd be happy with the phrase from the 11th chapter of Hebrews, "Evidence of Things Not Seen."

It's rather bold to talk about angels. I'll also quickly add that, aside from knowing you folks, I haven't seen any angels. I am rather envious of the prophet Ezekiel, who gave very detailed descriptions of messengers and helpers who came from dimensions of experience that I have not yet witnessed. I am willing to speculate with you about the probability of visitors to Earth from other planetary or galactic systems. If they have been around sufficient time to evolve or discover the wherewithal of successfully traversing the vast spaces, then I assume they are beneficent enough to have overcome the self-destructive curse of violence. However, such discussion would be only speculation, and at this point I prefer to speak from experience.

An "Angel" is an agent of God, and the word derives from the same Greek root that gives us "evangel" -- a divinely-appointed messenger -- a bearer of good news. The four "Evangelists" of the New Testament were writers of their version of the Gospel, the good news of God's salvation as they saw it in Jesus as the Messiah.

Earlier in my life, I might have approached an assignment like this by beginning with theological propositions, then mustering evidence from the Biblical literature, looking to the experience of the people of the Bible. That literature and those people are still very important to me, but the order of reference has changed

I now begin by looking at the information which has been made real in my own life, and then finding confirmation of its meaning by looking at the messages from our 3,000-year-old community of faith. I am sure this is what you want to hear, consistent with Friends' tradition of asking "But what canst THOU say?" The empirical takes precedence over the speculative, and first-hand experience has a greater validity than what is reported at second-hand.

So, taking the risks of sounding too ego-centered, I will report from my own life. Whatever the theme of a Yearly Meeting, it seems a person standing up here is expected to talk out of his or her own life. Therefore I want to recount some aspects of the "Gospel -- or 'Good News' -- according to David Finke." What it lacks in humility, I hope it gains in authenticity. This is the style of discourse, and the way of "doing theology," which I have come to treasure most, and I thank Quakers for teaching it to me

SCIENCE AND WORLDVIEWS

I suppose one of the sources of the idea of Angelic Beings comes from the thought that God is so great, dealing with such awesome things as Creation & Redemption, that it's probably not convenient to be looking after the minutia of our personal affairs. God would be so busy that He'd have to delegate some of the maintenance work to angels. It seems unfortunately limiting to have a view of God only as Creator and not so much as Sustainer. Jesus taught that God is aware of each hair on our head, and that not a sparrow falls to Earth without the notice and care of the divine creator.

The pious ancient mind, especially in pre-democratic social structures, could picture the rule of God in terms of a kingly court, with all kinds of specially-appointed officers and authorities to carry out the many facets of the Lord's Will.

Now that doesn't exactly fit my image of the nature of God, but if that's the way people think about God, it's entirely credible that Guardian Angels, given the task of looking after each of us, should have a place in the Eternal Order of things.

Contrasted to this is what generally can be called a Scientific worldview. Others can describe more precisely than I the development of this particular (and in many ways very Quaker) way of seeing the universe. This is the context in which our own consciousness has been formed.

Part of what science demands is an appeal to experience rather than dogma: It's true because we find it to be true (or in principle could verify it for ourselves), rather than an authoritarian approach which says, "It's true because I say so."

But another part of the contribution of science has been the presumption of Order, of predictable regularity. I think we are rightly suspicious of religious orientations that posit a capricious God -- one whose favor can be bought or bargained for. I value that contribution to our civilization which can be called "natural law" philosophy. We can be thankful for the rationality of ancient Greek thought, preserved by the Church's adoption of Aristotle as the philosopher, and then rediscovered in greater depth in the humanistic excitement of the Renaissance.

We value the dignity, power, and creativity of the human mind. This contrasts to the image of people as pawns in some predetermined, or even ultimately absurd, gameplaying among the gods. In this regard, I am proud to be labelled a "humanist," a "rationalist," a child of the modern world.

INTERVENTION

If the scientific worldview depends on predictable order, and a rather impartial universe, then the idea of Guardian Angels -- or indeed any sense of Divine Intervention in human affairs -- can be rather offensive to that rationality which I hope to share in.

If we see God as a Heavenly Parent, do we expect always to be running to Him/Her and asking for special favors, exceptions to the rules, pleading that our case is more worthy than the needs of our brothers and sisters? Isn't that less than the image of good parenting that we expect of human mothers and fathers? Good parents help us learn how the world works and how to function responsibly within the opportunities and limits we are given.

I too am put off by an approach to prayer and religion which assumes that we have the right to ask God to suspend the basically orderly laws of nature, just for us. It probably gets most absurd when we see pious people on opposite sides of wars earnestly praying for victory over their enemies! This version of "God is on our side" presumes that there are no other sides with just claims to God's help; We alone know what's best, and we'll write the whole script!

Jesus had to face this kind of thinking in the story¹ of his temptation by a devil who kept urging the use of spectacular displays of heavenly powers and supernatural intervention. In repudiating this, Jesus knew from whence such temptation comes. He told the demonic one to get lost!

The story goes on to record that at the point of resisting that urge to suspend natural law, then the devil left him and "angels came and ministered to him."

CO-CREATORS

We as human beings have the capacity to discern pictures of understanding of our world. But we also have the capacity (and I believe the obligation) to enter into and constructively affect the course of the universe's development. We have a role as co-Creators with the Divine. We are the products of evolution who can take a hand in guiding the further evolution of the species. I see humanity as matter/energy thinking about itself and creating new energy. This is a countervailing force to the law of entropy, of all energy eventually running down.

In the light of these philosophical commitments, then, it may come as a surprise to hear me using the language of "Angels." The picture of divine intervention in nature or human affairs is understandably at variance with the world since Sir Isaac Newton, whose picture of a clockwork- like universe has guided science well into this century.

Now the way that I resolve this, is to say that all the Laws haven't been discovered yet. We may at this point be using more metaphorical language to describe phenomena which some generations or centuries from now will be better understood, more precisely described in their operation.

For instance, it's only been a hundred years or so since we've known that bacteria and viruses cause diseases, or that we've had a clear understanding of the equal role of father and mother in contributing to a child's unique genetic heritage. And yet in one sense, people have known all along about disease and about inheritance, well before Pasteur or Mendel. To me, it doesn't seem fundamentally different to account for mental illness by reference to demons, or calling it schizophrenia. It still is only dimly understood, and we still rely a great deal on the Grace of God in treating it. I believe that such Grace works through sensitive therapists and diligent biochemists. But simply to name something doesn't explain it, and substituting modern long words for traditional concepts is not always an advance.

HOW GOD WORKS

This brings us to an exploration of different conceptions of how God works. Obviously, this is an area in which we can have only very partial knowledge, and we must be content with sharing the best clues that each of us find. Remember Paul's beautiful statement in a letter to Corinth: -- "Now we see as in a mirror, dimly, but then will shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood -- as complete as God's knowledge of me."²

Let me give you the outline for what I want to say next: I have found five significant ways in which God works, in which my life is touched by the divine:

- (1) Through the ongoing process of Creation,
- (2) Through Nature,
- (3) Through People,
- (4) Through Music, and
- (5) Through Angels.

CREATION

Some 14 billion years ago (give or take about 5 billion)³, an incredibly complex and indeterminate (that is, open-ended) creative process was set in motion. In this creation ex nihilo ("out of nothing") the basic elemental forces we know thus far as gravity, electromagnetism, strong and weak nuclear forces, have been interacting throughout our universe according to regular, discoverable Law. Over the last century the pace at which we've been discovering these laws governing matter/energy and the evolution of life has been dizzying. Whether in physics, cosmology, or biology, the best picture which scientists could draw a generation ago as to what constitutes "reality" is but a rough outline for the more subtle, theoretical constructs that today's scientists put forth. Sometimes these newer pictures are simpler, sometimes more elaborate. Perhaps the brightest minds are the most humble in refusing to be absolutely certain as to what IS and how it came to be that way.

So. There's my first statement of how God works: God creates for us a world, and I can't improve on the poetry of either Genesis or John. They both describe a beginning process of creation, in which Light separates out from the void, and the intentional Lovingness of God -- the Word, the source of Life, later manifest in Jesus -- was present and integral to this process from the very start.

GOD WORKS THROUGH NATURE.

My second statement is that God continues to work in our lives through Nature, enriching healing, and inspiring us. The little cats that share a home with me do a good job of constantly reminding me of some basic truths -- how to live serenely, how to give affection, how to be playful, how not to take more than is needed. The stars and planets and nebulae and clusters move my mind beyond the boundaries of this world, to times and spaces and processes that stretch the very limits of imagination. The little meadow on the edge of Chicago's Loop where I park my car, where I see pheasants and rabbits, milkweed and bees, blue chicory and monarch butterflies, where I can smell the honey-like fragrance of the summer air even within sound of the expressways -- these invariably bring me closer to a sense of the Goodness of Creation which surrounds me. In their own way, each of these are "angelic" to me.

Let me share some more testimony about God speaking to me through nature, specifically in the process of my writing this talk. When I started pulling it together, I camped out over at the "Fox Hole"⁴ for about 24 hours, surrounded by the Original Songsters -- swallows, redwings, a pheasant, cardinals, mourning doves -- my eyes guided down fertile rows of early June corn, lovingly tended by a descendent of the original Quakers around here. I was buoyed along by having just spent the day with other Quakers at a retreat. I was well-supplied with food left from the retreat, but also with a delightful supply of wild roses alongside the road, a few of which joined me in the shed.

I felt like another person with David in his name, who settled in at Walden pond, free to pursue writing and reflection, nourished by the living world around him.

One advantage, though, that a century and a half gave me over him was an electric outlet, into which I could plug my word-processing computer. For me, the blinking cursor, the editing commands, and the insert mode have freed up a writing power that pencil and paper just can't keep up with, and I recommend this "appropriate technology" to all. However, I'm still glad to have a pen and a scrap of paper around to jot down my thoughts.

Early that Sunday morning, I sat alone outside here at a picnic table. I considered the tiger-lilies of the field that were along the back of this Meetinghouse, heard the exuberant sound of some birds chasing each other, saw two ants scurrying by, marvelled at the precisely right balance of temperature, sunlight, and visual clarity provided for that day, saw rainbows in a drop of dew at my feet. The night before, I was a bit shocked, to realize that I was totally alone here; the magic I had always associated with this place was gone, in the absence of the worshipping/celebrating community that really comprises the Yearly Meeting. I saw that the piece of land is but the raw material for something even better.

But that morning, I sensed in a strong way, "It's enough! -- it's good enough for me." Come what may, there is this solidly good Earthly reality which I cling to. It's right. It fits, and I belong in it all. I have a home in this universe -- I may be related to, descended from, the stars. I may be in touch with that which is trans-earthly. But, I rejoice that this Earth is my home, and I am enthusiastically part of it, brother to the birds and the ants, the trees and the wind.

During another round of writing, I sat in a Friend's home, watching trees dance in the wind, through a window thick with plants. At that time, I saw something I'd never before noticed: a blossom hanging inverted on a plant, with the backlight showing a dozen sparkling-clear drops of nectar, pure jewels given to delight first my eyes, and then my curious tongue. Oh, for the grace more often to consider these masterpieces, who as Jesus reminded us exceed Solomon in all his glory, how God has arrayed them.

GOD WORKS THROUGH PEOPLE.

My third statement on the working of the Divine Purpose is: God works through people. WE are entrusted with a role in the continuing creation and sustenance of this world and the beings in it. Again, I would have a hard time improving on the ancient Biblical metaphor of a garden, in which we are placed as both beneficiaries and caretakers.

Friends are discovering that this caretaking extends to the ecological and political work of watching over the welfare of this earth. For the healthy growth and long-run survival of this planet and our species, I see God's Will being worked out by those who protect our soil and water and food supplies, those who stand in the way of war's destructiveness, those who build safe bridges and highways and buildings whose reliability we can trust. Many hands, many tasks, many inspired visions of useful work, coordinate to create a livable, human world.

God works through people. There's the poem that says, perhaps overly-simply, that "Christ has no hands but ours."⁵

It can be through structured social relationships. Examples that come to mind include: the life and love and guidance that is given by parents to children; the compassion and healing that are given by the medical and counseling professions; the responsibility that Friends take for each other within a religious community; the affection and life-long trust shared within a marriage; the intimacy and caring of other less-formal friendships and committed relationships. One of my favorite hymns comes to mind: "For the joy of human love -- brother, sister, parent, child; Friends on earth and Friends above..."⁶

THE SPIRIT AND CHRIST

I'm not sure where you would fit it in an outline, but for me the next two points fit under how God works through People.

First, as Quakers, we have an especially strong sense of how God works in the immediately-felt presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. To this we can testify whenever we gather for Meeting for Worship. We sense it in our life together as a community of praise and prayer and faith, and from time to time we may sense the power and the presence of the Spirit in our individual lives. Sharing how we are experiencing the life of the Spirit, how it is when we walk in the Light which the Spirit gives us, is enriching and vital to our Life Together.

And secondly, as one who has been nurtured in the Christian faith, I want to add the affirmation that God has worked through human beings in a special and powerfully-revelatory way in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. A community that spans two-thousand years has declared that this Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah of Israel. He fulfills the ancient expectations for Truth and Justice and Mercy, and through him human life can find transformation and purpose. This Christ brings in the Kingdom of God in ways radically different from what the world expects of its Liberators. I stand in the community of faith which testifies to these realities, and this has been a central part of my perspective on Life long before I began my sojourn with Quakers.

MUSIC

Another way in which I've experienced the Grace, healing, and creativity of God is through Music. For me, this can't be reduced to the category of either nature or people, though it flows through both.

I think of my namesake, the Psalmist David, when I find a special measure of God's power coming to me through lyric, melody, and harmony.

An unfortunate legacy of traditional Quakerism is the old negligence of music. However, the present generation is helping to set that aright. I hope that this week at IYM has renewed our awareness of how the aesthetic sense can feed into and be fed by our worship together.⁷

I find it no accident that the traditional image of angels is of Beings with harps and other instruments of music. When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, we read of the accompaniment of angelic hosts filling the skies with songs of praise and rejoicing. And when we have experienced the birth of the Divine Presence in our hearts, I am sure that we also hear the choirs of heaven.

There are specific songs that come to me in times of need, helping me see through to the next step, summarizing the Good News to me. I urge each of you to create a personal "first aid kit" of a meaningful

collection of uplifting songs or psalms. (Needless to say, I hope you are not deterred by whether or not you can "carry a tune!")

Vivaldi, Bach, Mozart, Scott Joplin, Pete Seeger, Susan Stark, Charlie King, Malvina Reynolds, and a generous host of others, have enriched my life beyond words by capturing and sharing some of the "music of the spheres." Charlie Murphy's song puts it so well: "There is healing in the singing of our songs."

I want to give sincere tribute to those Quakers from Northern Yearly Meeting who have created and kept alive a group called "Nightingales." I am told that at the most recent Friends' General Conference they shared their contagious singing with the whole multitude. Now, the joy of joining with them is a secret which can't and shouldn't be kept to the North Country! Let us therefore name and thank the Founding Mothers, Rosalie Wahl and Barbara Greenler, and their children of the flesh and of the spirit, who have been an angelic presence to lift us above a life of prosaic routine and mere words. I urge us to share with each other the moments in our lives when song has carried us through. If you gave me another hour to talk, I'd load you up with my own testimony of such critical times. I really don't care whether I can see angels... so long as I get to hear them.

LANGUAGE and METAPHOR.

Before saying more about angels, let me share some thoughts about language. In discussing the things of the Spirit, we mustn't try to be too literal. Rather, I think that metaphor is the approach that is most productive in describing that which moves us.

Metaphor says that one thing is another thing (as compared to simile, which says that one thing is like another, in some respect.) Biblical writing, and especially that poetry collection known as the Psalms, are very rich in metaphor when talking about God. For instance, God is:

"the shelter of a mighty rock in a weary land"

and

"Our dwelling place in all generations."⁸

But, forgetting the conventions of poetry, the literal-minded skeptic may object "How can you say God is a Father? or a Shepherd? or a King?" If that skeptic is simply trying to say that God is God and anything else we venture verbally is but a partial approach to Truth, then I will agree.

But whenever we try to capture something in words, a certain amount of distortion is inevitable. Think how you have felt attempting to describe your affection for someone you love -- "mere words fail us." And yet, having the gift of human speech, we keep trying to describe profound and meaningful experience.

We need the power of metaphor to express what purely mechanical, "factual" language cannot convey. For instance, if you say "the roof fell in on me" people generally sense what is happening to you and no one thinks you are describing a failure of an architect or homebuilder. Or, if you say "I was caught between a rock and a hard place," you don't mean in that context that you met with difficulty while mountain climbing.

I think if we get too insistent about the specific language that we use in matters of religion -- indeed in any sensitive and personal area -- we needlessly create obstacles in our communication. For instance, "streets of gold" as a description of a better world to come would be too flashy for my own aesthetic tastes. I would be squinting too much in that glare to be as happy as I would hope to be. I have the same kind of objection to those who want me to say I have been "washed in the blood of the Lamb" before they believe I have experienced God's saving power in my life. That particular metaphor of being forgiven our sense of shame and sinfulness, is not as compelling to me as it might have been for those accustomed to a Temple worship that centered around animal sacrifice.

Similarly, I don't want to be too pushy about the use or the interpretation of such words as "incarnation," "annunciation," "resurrection," or "salvation." In each case, I would look to the human experience, the effect in actual lives, of what is being pointed to by the classic religious language.

ANGELS

Having said all that about my approach to language, I'm now ready to talk more about Angels, the fifth point in my outline of how God works.

The 91st Psalm has strong words of assurance, when the poet says:

"For He will give his angels charge of you, to guard you in all your ways.

On their hands they will bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone."

I have had times in my life quite a ways back where I felt was Providentially spared, and was quite thankful for the gift of life. The more dramatic instances include: being run over by a wagon on a hayride as a teenager, and suffering no broken bones (or worse); and, surviving a head-on auto collision, being startled that I was still alive and able to move. But these were 30 and 20 years ago.

It has been in very recent years, though, that I've started to see a pattern of sustaining, transforming Goodness in the face of what could be radically destructive. And it may be convenient therein to speak of Guardian Angels.

THE FIRE

My most notable story, of which I'll spare you most of the details, was when the printshop in which I was a partner burned to the ground with a total loss of equipment, files, inventory, and income. But within a matter of days, indeed in the first hours, I began to see several profound phenomena:

an incredible outpouring of concern, affection, and generosity to me and my family; that things could have been so much worse (that's when I started talking about the differences between inconvenience, disaster, and tragedy). Loss of property seemed insignificant when contrasted to loss of life; and

that a great deal of good was emerging out of the disaster which might never have happened without it -- opportunities for fresh starts, for rethinking, for new work relationships, for having my worth affirmed as a provider of printing services to social movements.

EVIDENCE

In these 2½ years since the fire, I have found myself much more open to seeing, if you will, the Hand of God, the Force for Good, moving through both the mundane and the complex events of life.

During this past half-year I have been gathering "evidence of things not seen," where I consider Guardian Angels to be at work in my life. If all this angel talk is still difficult for you, we could just as well call it Divine Grace & Goodness. Or, use the word "Providence" -- we are provided for. We are cared for. I think that's my central message, that's the experience and the conviction from which I speak, and which I urge you to search for and validate in your own lives.

At my press, in my car, and on slips of paper that go into my pocket wherever I am, I've been jotting down lots of examples that might sound trivial to others. But to me they have come from and led to an increased sensitivity of how we are cared for, how Someone is looking out for us, how things have not gone wrong when they well might have. At this point, my list has become long enough that I could easily fill our hour just with the narration of such Interventions, with no time left for the reflection on these events.

I don't know whether any of what I take to be evidence of Guardian Angels would be convincing to anyone else -- especially if one is disinclined to believe. But what distinguishes these events is that they have

convinced me, and have given me refreshment to go on ahead with my life, with some renewed faith and vision.

So: on to a sampling from my notebooks of examples.

One of the more spectacular stories was when the building where my shop is located became filled with carbon monoxide fumes, sending 4 people to hospitals (blessedly with no fatalities). This happened in the early hours of morning, and by what some would attribute to fate or luck or coincidence, I had just that week spent 2 nights working by myself during those lonely hours when no one would have been around to find me in time, had the furnace failure occurred then. Indeed, the night before the incident, Lew Walton and I had just finished putting together the booklet of Judy Brutz's talk here last year. By the next day no one was allowed into the building for a matter of weeks. I certainly had a sense of the Providential, how well things worked out.

Speaking of working around the clock, which is sometimes my own peculiar work-style, I am often impressed with how, in the face of physical weariness, there is always just a bit more energy than one expects, to get through a job. It's like a runner finding that last ounce of strength to throw him/herself across the finish-line. When we feel at the end of our own resources, haven't we all experienced that sense of being born along on angel's wings?

With my old-but-productive press equipment, I have had two occasions this spring when a pin on a shaft sheared off just as I was starting a major press-run. "Murphy" would point out that these things always happen at the worst possible time, and indeed it was at night when I couldn't call for a mechanic, and deadlines were looming. But in both cases I had an extra pin, and remembered seeing how an outside mechanic had made the complex repair a year earlier. That mechanic had left a spare pin behind for good measure. For those who point out that "God helps those that help themselves," will concede that after the break in April, I bought several extra pins, so that I was more prepared for the break that happened in June. It's one thing to recognize and be thankful for the angels who pull us out at the last minute, but we shouldn't overwork them, nor should we neglect to learn from our experiences.

Reading from a little note to myself early this spring, I find: "It is a GIFT when you don't know how you are going to get it all done: it seems impossibly jammed up. And then someone cancels." I uttered heartfelt thanks when my sister the TV producer cancelled my assisting her on a Chicago job, just at the time when we were about to be overdue for an IYM printing job. My notes also pointed out what a relief it was when my dentist cancelled an appointment just when two newsletters were brought in at the same time to be printed.

More stories from the printing trades which aren't just routine good things happening, but incidents that caught my attention because they seemed clear contradictions of Murphy's Law:

A disappointment in not being paid when I expected, causing lots of extra financial shuffling, actually provided the opportunity to clarify some money expectations on which I and the other party had been unclear for years. We would not have come out at the good place we did, if I had just settled for being mad, or figured that things were going wrong, as usual.

A customer was sure I hadn't delivered a job I had billed them for, and just as I was preparing to spend what I considered a needless extra 3 hours and write off a loss I could ill afford, they called me to say they found the items, when they looked far enough down in the carton! A simple enough case of a mistake being rectified, but the Guardian Angel part of it for me was the Providential timing, and the fact that I was saved from feeling embittered and resentful.

Another little tale: I was running low on carbon arcs for my plate-burner, and the special order which they said was going to take 2 days took nearly 2 weeks. Then on a Saturday, a phone call came through to say the new carbons had arrived, precisely as my last stub of a carbon burned out!

I am aware that some of these narrations may sound awfully prosaic, or just "coincidental." But it was a very healthy spiritual discipline for me to continue observing their occurrences, and becoming surprised at how frequently they were happening.

OTHER EVIDENCES

Although spending time with the graphic arts accounts for a good deal of my life, it certainly isn't the only arena in which I've recently felt as if Guardian Angels were watching over me.

Let me give you five examples:

- (1) My computer had a failure in its power supply, after 3 years of use, and blew some chips. I was fortunate to find a place which would have it economically fixed and back to me within a week. I immediately saw that the breakdown could not have happened at a better time:
 - a. I had just finished several days of writing on a deadline assignment for my sister,
 - b. A big week was coming up which required full-time attention to printing, and
 - c. The repair was completed in time for me to use the equipment during the weekend I had set aside for some writing of this presentation.

Clearly, I had "no room for gloom" in the way things worked out.

- (2) After years of not thinking of myself as a writer, this spring I found myself getting back into that mode and felt comfortable with typing out my thoughts, by taking the assignment from my sister, and by getting into some extended debates on the computer "Bulletin Board Systems." This doesn't sound especially "miraculous," but it confirms for me that things have a way of working out in a purposefully, creative direction, often better than we could consciously plan.
- (3) I find a little note from back in April, when a car pulled out of a blind spot into an intersection, and I was given the half-second benefit of time that made the difference between safety and an accident. That same day, I saw a bird fly in front of the car and not get hit when I expected it. I challenge you to watch for just such evidences in your own life, and I believe that when you start looking, you will be delighted and possibly startled to see how many big or little disasters are avoided in the course of a day.
- (4) My next example is from something that happens almost every week. I've been a patient at the University of Illinois dental clinic, and all this year I've found that when I get there, I can settle back behind a curtain of local anaesthesia and tune out the dental procedures, leaving them in other skilled hands. I then listen through headphones to a little FM stereo radio that puts me in the middle of some of the world's best chamber groups and orchestras and right next to some truly inspired singers. I have heard Henry Purcell's music, Mahalia Jackson, and Joan Baez more attentively and fully in that dentist chair than I ever recall hearing in person.
- (5) Several weeks ago, just as was fretting about how well our Meeting would get done some of its responsibilities for Yearly Meeting, two Friends from other Meetings phoned me to offer help. "Angels watching over me!"

When I take these and other stories together, I realize that Paul's testimony increasingly makes sense to me: in retrospect, this could well be the best Biblical text for what I'm trying to convey: "As we know, all things work together for good for those who love God." Or, as rendered in some other translation, "God himself co-operates for good with those who love God."⁹

M & C STORY

I have another story, from the life of my Meeting, which indicates to me that angels are watching over us.

When I was brand-new on our committee on Ministry & Counsel, I came home from one meeting quite stunned at how chaotic and petty-minded we seemed to be -- we who were looked to by others in the Meeting to provide some leadership, example, and inspiration. I wasn't at all clear on what could be done, and was tempted with some very gloomy, despairing, thoughts about the Meeting and Quakers in general.

But before I fell asleep, one leading came to me: the simple thought of putting it in God's hands -

- usually not a bad idea when we're not sure we can do anything!

Over the next two weeks, a marvelous number of things came together, fell into place, which benefitted me and the Meeting in ways I doubt would have happened had we not previously endured that awful committee session.

The very next day I called a fellow-member of the committee, to get some perspective on what had been going on, seeking some guidance and comfort. As soon as she came on the line, she thanked me for "returning her call," since, unbeknownst to me, she had left word for me to call her. She wanted to give me some encouragement, to explain that the meetings weren't usually that bad, and went on to interpret the behavior of several Friends who had been particularly distressed at that moment. All this before I could even tell why I was calling her! I simply had wanted to ask her to hold me in the Light, that I might not succumb to my despairing feelings and fears about the Meeting, and here was my prayer already starting to be answered.

That following weekend, I was at a glorious gathering of Nightingales, Quakers who get together just to sing and celebrate, and share from the deep places in their lives. The whole time I felt as if I were being carried along in a beatific stream, in which there was no danger of sinking. So I used the occasion to share with two very sensitive Friends my fears and problems from my home Meeting. Each of them assured me they would keep me in their prayerful thoughts.

In the days that followed, I took up the task delegated to me by the M & C committee to set up several meetings, a job which I usually have avoided with fervent conviction. I was astonished that each of the four Friends I spoke with to make the arrangements I had dreaded, had an unusually good phone chat with me. I found I was relating to tender places in these Friends' lives; they welcomed the calls, and could tell me about illnesses and operations, family crises and personal joys. One Friend I even called by "mistake," dialing a number I had not consciously intended to reach; but she truly wanted to talk with me. In some of the conversations the troublesome meeting came up, but it hadn't seemed as bad to others as it had to me, and generally people were ready to move on.

As we approached the meetings that by now had successfully been scheduled, I found a new sense of energy and creativity, and even spent one morning rather spontaneously writing and calling several in our Meeting, to our mutual edification. My conclusion from this little 2-week saga was that we actually can pray for each other, and such effort may enrich us in ways we can't anticipate. And because I sensed that I was "standing in the need of prayer" as the old spiritual puts it, and was willing to share that vulnerability, I believe it opened a number of us to receiving greater Wisdom than any of us had individually.

Once more, I became convinced that God is working in our lives, bringing good out of apparent evil, building something finer out of something that appears to be garbage.

The promise remains: "Ask, and you will receive: seek, and you shall find; knock, and the door shall be opened."¹⁰

ANOTHER'S STORY

Whether or not it sounds "modern" or "scientific", some of us may be comfortable in talking about Miracles. If we but open our eyes, I believe we can see our lives are quite heavily sprinkled with what could be considered miracles. Take a look or around to see just how much there is to be amazed about.

I'll vary from my intention of telling just my own stories, with the following account from a letter I quite recently got from a Friend who has moved from my Meeting. She didn't know the topic of this talk, but she recounted a story which I think fits in precisely with what I've wanted to say. What she described as "the lovely miracle" happened when she drove to the grocery and heard horrible sounds from her car. As she tried to maneuver the car into a service station across the street, a man came running up and told her she was about to lose her muffler. He then pointed out a muffler shop on the opposite corner, which she hadn't seen. At this point in her letter, she unabashedly described him as "an angel sent of the Lord," which fits in fine with my usage of that word. But the story continues, and I now quote from her letter:

"I slowly proceeded to that shop. The man in charge said it would be a 30- minute wait. I deplored that I had frozen stuff in my bags. It was a scorching hot day. He said, 'No problem!' and put the bags in his refrigerator. When he finished the job, he said, 'Have you had a birthday present recently?' I said no, that my birthday was in September. He said he was going to give me a birthday gift and I owed him NOTHING! I was shocked and absolutely stunned. As he was talking to me, however, I sensed he was a man who lived in the Spirit and that he was doing it for the Love of God and perhaps as his tithe to God! Wasn't that just beautiful? So many miracles happen like that to me."

She then closed the account with the quote "Acknowledge Him in all thy ways, and He will direct thy paths."¹¹

Letters like this convince me that all of the Pastoral Epistles were not written in the First Century A.D.

NO ROOM FOR GLOOM

I mentioned that, for those who doubt about angels, I would subtitle this talk "No room for gloom." This catchy little phrase has come to me recently to remind me of what a marvelous life I have, in what a bounteous world... how surrounded I am by the love of God as made manifest through friends and family and nature and music... how well sustained and protected my life is!

"Lead us not into temptation" says our Lord's Prayer. Each of us has our own unique vulnerabilities, whether they come from chemistry, upbringing, or environment. My most threatening, recurrent temptation is to succumb to Gloom.

Now, I've never been tempted to abuse (or, even run for) political office. I haven't been surrounded by cash which I might have been tempted to pilfer. I haven't had to face the challenges of violence or injustice which tempt some to resort to deadly weapons. But I have been tempted many, many times by that negative outlook I call GLOOM. It comes as a pathetic or oppressed self-image; as despair, pessimism, or sourness; the thought that things will probably not come together right and I will no doubt be neglected or ignored or misunderstood -- these are the little demons that nip at my heels in a most annoying and persistent way. You may not have seen this side of me, but I think naming a demon helps one better to combat it. If we share our struggles with each other, we may mobilize the loving resources of those who are more willing to help us than we may think.

The first 2/3 or so of my life I assumed whenever I got in a car, that there was a good chance some drunk would crash into us, a tire would blow out, or I would fall asleep at the wheel. I usually breathed a prayer of thanks and a sigh of relief every time we returned safely from a trip. (Not that driving can't be dangerous, but use this as an example of the lack of faith with which I chronically faced life.)

My tendency to sourness was aggravated by being in political groups which urged people to "get in touch with your oppression." I still want all of us to be actively sensitive to the liberation issues of all people, but I now question a strategy which assumes that pain is the primal Truth.

FINKE'S LAW

Another companion to gloom is "Murphy's Law" -- "Anything that CAN go wrong, WILL go wrong." As you're probably aware, Murphy's cynical view of the world, with its various corollaries, has become quite popular in recent years. You can find it in most collections of posters for sale at souvenir shops.

As one who works around machines (and customers), there have certainly been times when I've been tempted to adopt Murphy's conclusion as a valid one. We know that systems have a tendency to break down, and almost invariably at times that catch us by surprise. When was the last time you planned to have a flat tire, or anticipated that a fuse would blow? When was it not disruptive to have your alarm clock fail, or your shoelace break? It doesn't take much imagination to fill out your own list of examples of Murphy's Law. But I question whether Murphy's so-called "Law" is a fundamentally true statement of how our universe is constructed and how it functions for us. Over against poor old Murphy's view of things, I boldly offer "Finke's Law".

It goes like this: "Most things go RIGHT most of the time." There are corollaries: (1) We don't think about this Law until the exceptions show up, and then we behave as if the exceptions are the rule. (2) Things go right with a greater frequency than randomness or chance would lead us to predict.

This is my statement of the contradiction of Murphy's Law. Ultimately, these two apparently opposite "Laws" may simply be the obverse and reverse sides of the coin of a Maker who has a sense of humor. But in the meantime, I will try to hold up my side of the argument with Murphy. I ask you to consider the evidence:

The mail usually gets through. The car starts most of the time. Crops are growing. Kids are learning. Jobs are getting done. The lights go on when you throw a switch. The Meeting's bills managed to get paid. You got over that last cold. It didn't rain on that picnic. Another day went by without nuclear war. Thousands of parts and systems continue to function correctly in that plane overhead, and the passengers have not crashed. We heard each other in business session, and made some good decisions.

In looking at this principle of things going right, what most consistently fills me with awe is our own human body: The simultaneous biochemical reactions happening within us every instant may number in the millions if not billions. They are reliable enough that you and I are here and functioning. We usually don't have to pay any attention to the myriad subsystems for them to work reliably. I hope, at those final moments when my body wears out beyond repair, I can be grateful for the many years of extraordinary service it has given me, all those tiny molecules having done their thing, so faithfully, so long.

The choice is ours: we can live our lives building catalogs of failures, inadequacies, and disappointments. Or, we can look from a different perspective, and marvel at how graciously we are sustained, how much routinely goes well in our lives, how precious are the dozens of miracles that come our way.

SEEING DEEPER, A REBIRTH OF WONDER

Lawrence Ferlinghetti's poem says:

"I am waiting for a rebirth of wonder."¹²

We can have that quality of openness to the splendor of creation.

When we acknowledge that this is our Father's world -- that it's not abandoned to chaos and meaninglessness -- then, to our listening ear all nature sings and round us rings the music of the spheres.¹³

This sense of amazement has personally-transformative power when we come to the realization that God loves us -- the Creator of grandeur and power in all that is, cares about and seeks to make an abode in our hearts. We can never be quite the same again after such an experience of finding, sometimes after much struggle and search, that there is One who can speak to our condition.

To discern the work of God in everyday affairs, it helps me to pray "Open my eyes that I may SEE visions of Truth thou hast for me."

George Fox described his "openings" wherein he perceived down to unusual spiritual depths.

When that openness to the Truth beneath the surface focusses on external events, the world of politics and history, it can be called "prophetic." Rather than being a future-predicter, the prophet is the one who shows the workings and purposes of the Divine in what people assume is only "secular." Telling—forth the Big Picture is a treasured gift not to be hidden under a bushel.

This deeper sight can be brought to bear in interpersonal relations, "reaching to That of God" in the other. At such times we are given the gift to see beyond the other's pettinesses or annoying behavior, the lapses of sound judgment. We can then come to appreciate what it is that God has uniquely created for good, that this person brings to the world. In such ways are our communities built and strengthened.

GOD, THE COSMIC RECYCLER.

Speaking of wonder, I'd like to repeat the realization which first came to me during meeting for worship right here several years ago. In the moral sphere, I am convinced that nothing of value is ever really lost. The waves from a kind deed or a gentle word go rippling out far beyond our vision or imagination.

Now that statement is a matter of faith: I base the direction of my life on the assumption that it is true, and I think the results are healthier than if I based my actions on an opposite assumption -- something like "why bother, nothing really matters, all is ultimately folly, vanity, and entropy."

But I have discovered something from the physical sciences of astrophysics and cosmology, which to me verifies the moral insight. I think that a great deal of wisdom may come from discerning parallels and making connections. The physical facts go something like this:

Of all the 92 or so elements found on earth, only 2 have been created in our own solar system. When we look up at the sun, we see the result of the lightest atom being converted into the second-lightest one -- hydrogen fusing into helium. In a literal sense, there is nothing new under the sun. The best thinking I have found suggests that, besides hydrogen and helium, every other element is created in that incredible pressurecooker of a star in its death-throes. In nature, only the heat and energy of a star going "nova" and collapsing before blasting apart can create the heavier elements. Then, some of that celestial debris may eventually coalesce into the material that becomes a new star system, with gravity sorting things out so that the heavier elements -- indeed, the matter of which our own bodies are made -- settle out into the cooler regions, some of which may condense into planets. If you say that your lover and you are made of stardust, you are correct scientifically as well as poetically! I find that to be a lovely thought, and a comforting one. Where did this good earth, the good people and the beautiful creatures around us come from? Not from our sun, which is right now making something new, but rather from old garbage! The debris of dead and anonymous star systems, which in their final moments gave us carbon and oxygen and nitrogen and iron and all the other things essential to life. The hydrogen atoms found in every cell of your body may have been formed in the first phases of creation, "In The Beginning." But all else that makes up the physical You is a by-product, a retreat, a remake, something that's been sent back to the factory from the junkyard. This is not a demeaning concept, but leads me to admire the immense creativity of our Designer, who having set it All in motion provided for cosmic recycling, that even the apparent waste-products of whole solar systems (and in the case of disastrous supernovas, whole clusters of stars) might not be an end, but a chance for a new beginning.

If we can but take a long enough view, there is "no room for gloom."

CARING

It seems I've talked about angels largely in terms of trying to account for the Good in our lives, beyond the more readily-explainable phenomena. It may, or may not, be useful in describing how God works.

But I want to thank personally those "angels" who are also human beings. To me, you don't have to be sporting wings and a halo to be a messenger of God, an agent of the divine Goodwill for our lives.

My testimony is that people who have cared about me and have been bold enough to tell me about that, as well as showing it in action -- people who acted in love -- have held me together. This caring for each other, this tenderness -- this quality of God that is translated from the Hebrew as "lovingkindness" -- is just about the most important discovery that has been given to me in recent years.

I have this picture, probably first shared with me right here at IYM, of our being held together in a delicate and yet strong network of relationships which are life-giving. The structure is fine-tuned, it is dynamic: the elements of our community of trust and caring are always changing, as new ones join us and others pass out of our visible midst.

Various rich metaphors point to this sustaining reality: A Biblical writer,¹⁴ seeing that dimension which transcends our own point in history, said we are "surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses." In our time, we hear the phrase "Reweaving the Web of Life:"¹⁵ The Ribbon Project, which joins together the colorful, creative offerings of thousands into a common endeavor, reminds me of the imagery I first heard in a Pete Seeger song: "Oh, had I a golden thread, and needle so fine, I would weave a magic strand of rainbow design. Far over the water I'd reach my magic band... Bind up this sorry world with hand and heart and mind."¹⁶

I'll mix the metaphor a bit, and say that if we are the web or the band, if we exist in a fabric of caring relationships, then God is the glue that holds it all together. What I call God is the intentionality, the purpose, and the Source for whatever of Good happens among us. As we hold each other in caring and love, the Divine Presence working through us is what makes the whole greater than the sum of its parts.

When I was experiencing some loss, two dear Friends sent me the following message interpreting their offer of concrete assistance: Their words were those of Isaac Pennington in 1667, and I wish I could put so simply and clearly my own intentions.

Our life is love and peace and tenderness,
And bearing with one another,
Praying for one another,
And helping one another with a tender hand.¹⁷

So Friends, you and I are entrusted with the work of the angels. It may not seem like a Big Deal to us, when we act on that good impulse to reach out in friendship, kindness, or concern to a fellow human being. But I know that it can make the difference between night and day to the recipient of such attention. We can help each other to pass through that Ocean of Darkness into the Ocean of Light. Perhaps the very best thing that happened to me in my seminary education was when, walking out of chapel one day, a beloved prof simply put his hand on my elbow as he passed. God's love and caring was shared with me in that touch, but the Angel in that situation probably never gave it a second thought.

I close with these words of a hymn:¹⁸ "For not with swords' loud clashing, nor roll of stirring drums,

[But] with deeds of love and mercy, the heavenly Kingdom comes."

AMEN

Notes

- (1) Matthew 4
- (2) 1 Corinthians 13:12, drawing on several translations: Revised Standard Version and Today's English Version.
- (3) Based on the Hubble Constant. "Cosmic Horizons," The Portable Stanford, p. 126.

- (4) The "Fox Hole" is an old outbuilding at the IYM campground, being rehabilitated by Young Friends.
 - (5) Cited in London Yearly Meeting's Epistle, May 24-27, 1985.
 - (6) F.S. Pierpoint, "For the Beauty of the Earth," in A Hymnal for Friends, (Philadelphia: Friends General Conference, 1966), p. 126.
 - (7) The theme of the Yearly Meeting was "Creating Ministries" and included panels, presentations, and workshops by Friends with gifts in a variety of expressive media.
 - (8) Based on Psalm 31; Psalm 90.
 - (9) Romans 8:28, Revised Standard Version and New English Bible.
 - (10) Matthew 7:7.
 - (11) Proverbs 3:6.
 - (12) "I Am Waiting," in A Coney Island of the Mind, (New York: New Directions, 1958), pp. 49- 53.
 - (13) Thanks to Maltbie Babcock, "This Is My Father's World," in A Hymnal for Friends, p.26.
 - (14) Hebrews 12:1.
 - (15) Title of book by New Society Publishers (Philadelphia).
 - (16) In Bells of Rhymney, c.1959 by Stormking Music Inc.: All Rights Reserved.
 - (17) To Friends in Amersham, Letter XXI in Letters of Isaac Penington (Philadelphia: Book Association of Friends, 1883), p. 64.
 - (18) Ernest W. Shurtleff, "Lead On, O King Eternal," in A Hymnal for Friends, p. 78.
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David Finke is a son of the Prairie State, born in Chicago 45 years ago, growing up in Aurora, and coming back to Chicago after college at Oberlin, Ohio, where he met his wife Nancy.

Coming from a pacifist family, he first met Quakers while in high school through programs of American Friends Service Committee, which also helped him develop his successful conscientious objector claim.

Studying social ethics at Chicago Theological Seminary brought him close in thought and in geography to 57th Street Meeting, and by 1967 he was ready to drop the studies to take up full- time work with AFSC as Peace Education Secretary.

Six years later, David left that work, spent a year enjoying full-time fatherhood, travel, and reflection with Nancy and his daughter Alice, and since 1974 has been a partner in Omega Graphics, a printing collective which grew out of the anti-draft movement.

His concern for peace, simplicity, and a "free-church" style of religious life led him to join Friends, after his first sojourn at this Yearly Meeting in the late '60s. Since then, he has served his Monthly Meeting in various clerking capacities and in religious education, and currently serves as Illinois Yearly Meeting's Recording Clerk, as well as a member of Continuing and Publications committees.

He says that he considers the Yearly Meeting to be a second family to him.