

Angels, Ghosts, and the Hope of Immortality

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

The Rev. Alison Wohler

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When Henry Bigelow Williams wanted to memorialize his young wife, Sarah Louise Frothingham, who had died at the age of 19, he had her depicted in stained glass as an angel: a fair haired presence watching over his Unitarian church in Roxbury from amongst the lilies and the purple hills of Massachusetts. Now, because of three things: a mold infestation in our building, the demise of the Roxbury church building, and the “generosity” of the Unitarian Association in giving us stained glass windows instead of the money we had hoped for to help us get rid of the mold, she watches over *our* services on Sunday mornings. The musicians and I are the only ones who get to look at her during the service. And I spend time with her during my days at the Meetinghouse during the week, too. And now the Amherst community is enjoying her more often as well, because of the lights we turn on every evening in the sanctuary.

But until I began to work on this sermon, actually until I just wrote the first paragraph, I had never thought of our Angel very much, other than that she was beautiful. In fact, she has been my least favorite part of our Tiffany window. I love the flowers and the landscape and the geometry and the colors, but I have been uncomfortable with the notion of an angel just in general. Angels do not fit my thinking or my theology, or my habit. I don't imagine people becoming angels when they die. I have never felt the presence of a guardian angel interceding on my behalf or saving me from myself or other dangers.

The thought came to me yesterday, though, that Sarah Louise, a young woman who was much loved, might be a presence that we could imagine loving and watching over us. It's a nice thought. As in the 121st Psalm, called the Song of Ascents, she is pointing above her head, saying *I will lift mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help*. To me she's encouraging all of us to remember that little thing I say to you each week – know that we do not walk on our path alone. Whether our help comes from God, or nature, or the hills, or from each other, it is always there for the asking. That's what I imagine. You might have your own interpretation of our Angel window. I think of the great love and the great sadness that went into the creation of this memorial to a young woman and am reminded that our lives are all filled with great love and great sadness. Believing that our loved ones are still with us in some form or that we will be reunited in the end is very comforting.

I'm wondering, also, what exactly is the difference between an angel and a ghost. I tried to do some research on this subject but had little luck, mostly finding sites like “Tell us your ghost story” or “Buy your angel T-shirt here.” I had a friend back in Pennsylvania who believed in ghosts, and told a very detailed accounting of one in particular that he was privileged to have a visit from. He said it was the ghost of Laura Brown, an early inhabitant of the very old house where he saw her. I wonder why he didn't call the vision of Laura Brown an angel. He also communicated with Mary (THE Mary) and was channeling a book from Jesus too. This was a very brilliant man and I really didn't know what to make of some of this, although I discovered that the more I was around him the more I was open to things I had never believed in before. He

was very charismatic. Mostly I was sort of jealous, or at least frustrated, that the unusual things that happened to him never seemed to happen to me.

If I had to sort out the difference between angels and ghosts, at least in our current usage, I would say that angels are more uniformly beneficent and ghosts can be either helpful and friendly, like Casper, or more frightening like the Ghost of Christmas Past. But, I discovered, “In the 1938 version of *A Christmas Carol*, the ghost is portrayed as a sweet-faced young woman looking somewhat like an angel.” One example of an angelic ghost. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghost_of_Christmas_Past) Another source I looked at actually asked the question “Are angels and ghosts really the same thing?” because they seem to manifest the same way in photographs purporting to have caught them on film. (didn’t save the source)

Maybe (for those who believe in such things) the difference is that ghosts are spirits or souls that have not yet, for whatever reason, been able to resolve their migration from the physical world to wherever it is they are supposed to be going. Angels have found their way out of this world, but have come back to run interference or be of help in some way or another. Think of the Angel Gabriel. Gabriel was a messenger from God to many of the characters in the Bible, including Mary, mother of Jesus, telling her of her impending pregnancy. The name Gabriel means *man of God*. (<http://www.keyway.ca/htm2002/gabriel.htm>) One source I found compared Gabriel to the role of the Holy Ghost, bringing God’s message to the people. (thykingdomcome7.com/the%20gospel/holy_ghost_is_the_angel_gabriel.htm) Again, the equating of an angel with a ghost.

“According to a US poll in the 1990s, 69 per cent of Americans believe in angels; 46 per cent claim to have their own guardian angels and 32 per cent have felt an angelic presence.” (www.forteantimes.com/features/articles/90/angels_and_daimons.html)

But this is just intellectual stuff. Let’s get back to how we feel about the subject of what happens when we die.

I imagine many of you have your own stories. I heard some at the social supper last night, in fact. Someone asked me, “So what do you think when you hear these stories?” since I quite openly disavow most things supernatural, and tend to prefer natural explanations for what otherwise might appear mysterious. It’s a legitimate question to ask, and it is a difficult question for me to answer, to be honest. I cannot help thinking that there may be other explanations for these experiences that other people have, but I also cannot dismiss the fact that what has happened is very real to the person involved. It may carry significant meaning or have made a huge difference in the ability of someone to survive or carry on with their lives.

And, in the end, that is what is important, isn’t it? That we find a way to get through the pain of losing someone is more important than just how we manage to do that. I am very sympathetic toward you who believe you have felt your mother or your husband in the room with you after they have died. Maybe I wish I, too, could feel that kind of continuing connection to the past. It seems my mind won’t let me – and I don’t think it’s that I’m only a thinking person, with no feelings. Hardly!

I love the story I read by Victoria Safford earlier, about the difference between thinking a kitty is in kitty-heaven and understanding that the turtle's body, and its energy are all returning to the earth and will re-manifest in millions of ways as it decomposes. I like this story partly because it brings up the struggle in many of us, I would say, between wanting to believe in an afterlife and not being able to. Can those of us who do not believe in angels and ghosts, or heaven, find comfort in what might seem like the cold hard facts of biology and physics? I would answer with a definitive yes, even as I have just admitted I would love to be able to believe in something like angels.

I do find comfort in the systems of nature, the fact that molecules and heat and minerals from the body of a living being will upon its death be returned to the living body of earth from which it came. What a glorious thought, really, to imagine yourself returning in the leaves and bark and sap of the tree under which you were buried? My late husband wanted his ashes to be scattered in the Gulf of Mexico so that he could become part of the shells he so loved to collect on the shores of Sanibel Island. We collect shells still on that same beach and I think of him in those shells and find the thought comforting. Peace comes in many ways.

I believe that just as science tells us that energy and matter can neither be created nor destroyed, the special combination of energy and matter that is each of us will also never disappear or be destroyed. Just recombined. Reconstituted. Reincarnated, perhaps, but not as a complete entity. Just as parts of many things. I would like to have my ashes put in a garden, to fertilize and become part of the plants and flowers that grow there. My chemicals will leach into the soil, be carried away by storms and melting snow, find their way around the world, or out into the far reaches of the atmosphere. It's one kind of immortality.

What is it about this wanting to be immortal? We just don't want to give up a good thing, this being alive, and we know it's a good thing – despite the bumps (or potholes maybe) in the road. So, if as Unitarian Universalists we do not necessarily believe in an afterlife, where do we put our hopes for immortality? How do we hold onto our feelings of purpose and meaning for our lives, if when we're gone – we're just gone?

Some months ago I ran across an expression that caught my attention, which I put into the folder for this sermon. "The immortality of influence." My source attributed it to one of the founders of the Humanist movement back in the 1930s, Curtis Reese, but I also found it as the title to a recent book about making a difference for school kids who are in danger of dropping out of school. "The Immortality of Influence."

Regardless of what else you might believe about the afterlife, it can always be said that what remains of a person when they die is what they leave behind. What they did, the children they raised, the people and the movements and the ideas they influenced. It is a powerful form of afterlife, but not one that might be caught on film by the Ghost Busters.

I want to end with two quotes, each about a different aspect of what is important in this discussion of Angels, Ghosts and the Hope of Immortality.

The first is from a very funny book I read this week called *Spook: science tackles the afterlife* by Mary Roach. She is also the author of *Stiff: the curious lives of cadavers*. This is the last paragraph from Spook:

Perhaps I should believe in a hereafter, in a consciousness that zips through the air like a Simpsons rerun, simply because it's more appealing – more fun and more hopeful – than not believing. The debunkers are probably right, but they're no fun to visit a graveyard with. What the hell. I believe in ghosts.

And, lastly, a reprise of Victoria Safford:

What we know for sure when someone dies is loneliness. What we know is the lifelong struggle to remember. What we know, beyond biology and chemistry, what we know forever and ever are the questions: what remains of him, of her, what remains of you...in me?