

## Angels Unaware

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

September 27, 2009

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One of my former professors, Thandeka, is one of the leaders in our denomination on small group ministry. She tells this story:

“Several years ago I spent an evening discussing small group ministry with members of a New England church who were interested in starting a covenant group program. At the end of my formal remarks, I asked the members of the audience if they might be willing to simply get together in small groups over a meal and talk about their unmet needs in their church.

One of the most respected elder statesmen of the church stood up and slowly walked to the front of the assembly, faced his fellow congregants and said he was interested in joining a covenant group. He had wanted something like this for years, he said, because he was lonely, ‘I do not have any friends,’ he finally confessed. Waves of shock rolled through the gathering. How could *he* be lonely? He was a revered

and beloved member of the congregation, a pillar of the church. Many people expressed disbelief.

When the group quieted down, the man spoke again, saying, ‘Every man in this room who is my age knows what I am talking about. Our social upbringing has taught us not to talk about our feelings. We are not supposed to be emotionally vulnerable or close to anyone except our wives.’

As I listened to him, something changed. I could hear his heart beating. I could hear my heart beating. I could hear other hearts beating. At that moment, we were all one heart and thus all of one breath. One deep, long, loving breath infused each heart with new life. (Let’s not forget that the Hebrew word for *spirit* refers to a movement of air, wind, the breath of life itself.)

And at that moment, I learned why covenant groups are transforming our Unitarian Universalist movement today. They are ministries for the heart.”

Many people come to our church doors, or to our website in these modern times, with starving souls. They are hungry for real community. They crave a connection with another person that goes beyond the superficiality of our culture and deals with the stuff in life that really

matters. Our hearts ache for community just as our stomachs ache for food. And yet, let us be honest with each other, it is very easy at church to get distracted by institutional needs. Like an individual, a church can become overly concerned with its own survival at the expense of higher purposes. The purpose of the church, Unitarian Universalist or otherwise, is to make the beloved community real in this time and place in history. Its purpose is not to extract money from people, to write bylaws and policies, or consume your free evenings with meetings. Granted all of those things are necessary at the most basic level, but our calling transcends the basic. Our primary *raison d'être* is the beloved community on earth. Everything else should be in service to that.

You have heard me talk about radical hospitality before, and you shall hear it again. Anticipate hearing it many, many times, not because I think so little of the comprehensive abilities of you my hearers, but because it is so fundamental to the teachings of Unitarian Universalism. It is one of our core values. Radical hospitality teaches us to remember, first and foremost, the spiritual hungers of our members, friends, visitors, and community at large before we ever jump to our institutional needs, vital though they may be. When people come to us with spiritual hunger it is our job to provide nourishment; plain and simple as that. This is true for the person coming to us for the first time as much as it is the leader who is on every team and every committee but forgets to tend to their own spiritual practice. Both are hungry and come here to be fed.

Although Paul is traditionally cited as the author of the book of Hebrews, even early Christians came to see that this book was unlike his usual style. Paul wrote letters that followed a very specific format that Hebrews does not conform to. Regardless of who the mystery author is, he or she has some important insights regarding radical hospitality. Our ancient reading this morning is quite famous in the Christian tradition. It entreats us to follow an intriguing spiritual practice: look at every stranger as if they were an angel, because sometimes they might be. Now you may be like me and not be real thrilled with talking about angels. I don't begrudge people who believe in them of course, but angels just aren't my thing. So I would invite you to read Hebrews in a slightly different light. If "angels" makes you feel uncomfortable try "Buddha nature" or "the potential to become a Buddha." Perhaps "our innate goodness" or "seeds of peace," or "the divine spark within." Since today is Yom Kippur, maybe we can substitute "angel" for the Yiddish term "mensch"; a stand-up guy or gal. A good egg. For today, I will use the term "angel" to represent this constellation of ideas.

Radical hospitality begins with seeing the stranger as an angel, the proverbial mensch. Note that this person may not see themselves as an angel, but in this practice we begin by cultivating our awareness of them as potential angels. Sometimes the angels themselves are unaware! When we begin to see everyone as an angel then our hearts peek open just a little bit. Maybe it is just a little crack or sliver that is open to

making a soul-level connection with this person before us. That is okay. Given time and effort it will become easier. The goal is to be able to risk a little bit of vulnerability in the presence of this other person. Not extraordinary amounts of vulnerability, but enough to create soul-level connections with strangers.

I realize this practice can be a challenge to us UUs. We are very comfortable in our heads talking about abstract and intellectual things. There is nothing inherently wrong with this. There is much to be said for religious discussion and religious education. Reason in religion has been a key tenant of the Unitarian tradition at least since Channing. It has been and always will be a part of who we are as a religious movement. But as Carl Jung once pointed out, sometimes our biggest strength can be our biggest weakness. Reason has a downside. Because it is our comfort zone we can too easily run to the intellectual rather than risk sharing our deepest pain. We need to learn to take off the masks of intellectual debate and discussion that can sometimes hide our pain and brokenness. We should come to church just as we are with our full integrity and authenticity. That was Channing's point in Baltimore in 1817 and it was the whole point to the Welcoming Congregation program that helped our congregations become havens for gay, lesbians, and bi-sexual folks. But it takes courage to choose love in these times of fear.

“How do we do that?” you may be asking yourself. How exactly do we practice radical hospitality and build that beloved community that is ultimately the whole point of being a church? We need a vessel, a container to hold our vulnerability. The courage to try to connect to someone, be they stranger or friend, requires a structure and a guide. Without these we would never take such an audacious risk, nor should we. The answer is a new program that we are beginning this fall called “Open Circles.” At the most basic level they are small groups. But they are not just any sort of small groups. These are open groups that are the laboratories of radical hospitality.

Our new Open Circles program will be a ministry of the heart as Thandeka puts it. It will be open to everyone, new today or new fifty years ago, who has a soul hunger that needs to be fed. These are not discussion groups on political or theological matters. They are about what troubles you or what makes your heart sing. They ask a lot, but they give a lot in return. They ask you to be an angel unaware. But they provide a chance for you to receive a healing word from another angel in return. I believe that they will transform our church into a beloved community.

May we find the courage to see the angels around us. May we too be an angel for another. May we trust in the power of change. And may we become the community of our dreams. Amen Blessed Be.