

Angels

Among Us?

By Bette-Jane Raphael

After our daughter was born with a small patch of white-blond hair in the middle of her otherwise darkly bristled head, my husband and I joked that she'd been "touched by an angel." It was our way of saying how special she was to us, two older parents who'd nearly despaired of conceiving her. We didn't actually believe an angel had landed in the delivery room and put his fingertips to her crowning head—as we explained to her when, years later, she asked us what we meant by "that angel who made my blond streak." Angels didn't really walk around on earth doing things like that, we said.

We didn't know then how much in the minority our views were—but we do now. Last fall the *Boston Herald* published the results of a survey by the Barna Research Group showing that fully 75 percent of all Americans believe angels have an effect on people's lives. And author Wendy Kaminer published *Sleeping With Extra-Terrestrials*, in which she documented how Americans have embraced the idea of *guardian* angels—those who walk the earth unseen and can alter the course of human events.

Why do I side with the minority on the question of angels? There are a lot of reasons. For one thing, I've never found a satisfactory explanation of why angels pick some people to help but skip helping others who are equally deserving. To me that seems so fundamentally unfair—so *unangelic*.

I'm also troubled by a suspicion that when you believe angels have the ability to intervene for good in human affairs, you become less sensitive to the power of human beings to do the same—and less prone to do good yourself. I mean, if you're convinced it is an angel who has brought your child through a harrowing accident, do you also recognize the thousands of years of human work and learning that have culminated in the medical care he or she received? Because if you don't, if you don't give human beings the credit due them for improving the lot of their fellow men, you might not feel as indebted to humanity as you otherwise would. You might not feel as caring of others, or as willing to help them, as you otherwise should.

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Personally, I believe that if angels work their way in the world, they do so through humankind, proffering to mortals the sort of divine guidance that might have been whispered into the ears of Jonas Salk, the sort of divine inspiration that might have lit a fire inside Beethoven.

The angels who do good on earth, I submit, were born here. I'm talking about people, everyday people like the Doctors Without Borders who try to repair hacked limbs in Rwanda, the farmers who risked death hiding Jews in their barns and basements to save them from the Nazis, the foster mothers who shower their love on children with full-blown cases of AIDS.

People like these, I'm convinced, have tapped into the angelic spark that's inside every one of us. Unfortunately, most of us don't bother to ignite this ember, or even realize it's there—in part, I suspect, because we are so busy looking for it somewhere else.

But when you think about it, every act of love and courage, every leap in understanding, every earthly monument to faith and feeling, has been made by the minds and hands of Man—in the aggregate, and individually, one human being at a time. And isn't that the way it should be? With God's Garden of Eden lost to us, isn't it our job—mankind's job—to create a second one, of our own designing, out of the world that's been entrusted to our care? I've always thought so.

Maybe we would all be more angelic, and more connected to one another, if we felt that our collective well-being lay in our own hands. Maybe we would all be more caring of one another if we believed that we possess the divine ability to alter our fate—to alter for the better the entire human condition—on our own.

At least that's what I'm trying to teach my daughter. ■

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