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 Arlington Street Church
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Coincidence

Coincidence: a seemingly random convergence of people, time, and place. As Unitarian Universalists, we don't need to explain away the mystery of synchronicity. But as spiritual people, spirited people, let's *pay attention*.

Hebrews 13:2 - "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." Rabbi Lawrence Kushner comments, "... Ordinary people are messengers of the most high. They go about their tasks in holy anonymity, ... often unknown [even] to themselves. Yet, if they had not been there, if they had not said what they said or did what they did, it would not be the way it is now. *We would not be the way we are now. Never forget that you, too, ... may be a messenger.*"¹

Pay attention! Christmas is over, and you *still* might get to play the angel!

Here's a lovely, anonymous blog entry:

"I'm walking to work this morning, and as I round the corner, I see her feet sticking out [of] the doorway of a church across the street. The closer I get, the more of her I can see. She sits there in the midst of a jumble of blankets and bags, her skirt [hiked] up above her knees, her plump legs bare to the morning sun and breeze. She's eating candy and smiling. I cross the street sooner than I usually do, so I can pass by and say good morning, pulling off my gloves and earmuffs as I go. When I reach her, she says, 'Can you help me?' I tell her I have no cash, but she can have these ... and the smile that lights up her face as she accepts my gloves is as the sunshine peeking out of storm clouds on a dark day....

"I walk on down the street and hear her voice behind me. 'Wait.... I want to give you something, too.' And I stop and look back to see her moving [towards] me with a

¹ source unknown; italics mine

plastic shopping bag in ... hand. I wait for her, and she reaches me, all smiles and joy, and pulls [out] a lovely, red straw hat with a red and purple rose on it.... 'I want you to have this,' she says. I [say thank you and] take it from her and settle it on my head. Our smiles fill the air between us.... She tells me, 'Somebody gave it to me last night and I want you to have it.'

“They said it’s, it’s....’ and I finish for her, ‘the red hat club?’ And she ... exclaims, ‘Yes! But I don’t know where it is....’ And I tell her it’s [not a place; it’s] in our hearts. The red hat club is for women over 50, which is me, for sure. And she says it [is she], too, but she wants me to have the lovely hat.

“And she links arms with me and says she will make sure I get across the street ... and she dances along beside me ... singing an old Beatles song. ‘All you need is love, love, all you need is love.’ And I sing along with her. We reach the corner, she pushes the button on the light pole, and ... wait for the walk signal ...still singing, [and] she is still dancing. Then she walks across the street with me, and we stop and hug each other goodbye. And I walk on to my office, still wearing the red hat....

“We entertain angels unawares...

“An angel gave her a red hat, and it gave her joy.

“An angel gave me the red hat, and the joy spread to me.

“And Tuesday night, when I go to the nursing home, an angel will give the red hat to a lonely little lady, [an angel,] who always, ... always wears hats, and the joy will spread to her, [and to anyone who sees her wearing it].”²

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I've heard people say that coincidences are g*d's way of remaining anonymous. “According to the Buddhist understanding of ... coincidence, all circumstances can be brought to the spiritual path. Everything that happens to us ... [– everything –] can serve to awaken us....” Author Rachel Naomi Remen adds, “[And] occasionally, events cluster in particular ways that give us a glimpse of the deeper structures of reality, and suggest that time and linear causality may not be the ultimate way in which the world is ordered.”³

2 adapted from *On Spiderlillies and Motorcycles*, 1/18/08; see <http://spiderlillies.atlblogs.com/archives/017178.html>

3 Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, “Glimpse of a Deeper Order” in *Shambhala Sun*, November, 2000

Believe it or not; however you interpret the signs – or not – I say, *pay attention!*

This is *Eagle Poem*, by Joy Harjo:

To pray you open your whole self
 To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon
 To one whole voice that is you.
 And know there is more
 That you can't see, can't hear
 Can't know except in moments
 Steadily growing, and in languages
 That aren't always sound but other
 Circles of motion.
 Like eagle that Sunday morning
 Over Salt River. Circles in blue sky,
 In wind, swept our hearts clean
 With sacred wings.
 We see you, see ourselves and know
 That we must take the utmost care
 And kindness in all things.
 Breathe in, knowing we are made of
 All this, and breathe, knowing
 We are truly blessed because we
 Were born, and die soon, within a
 True circle of motion,
 Like eagle rounding out the morning
 Inside us.
 We pray that it will be done
 In beauty.
 In beauty.⁴

Paying attention to beauty – awakening to beauty – may well be the first gate to mystery. Herbert Howell's gorgeous anthem, which you'll hear our choir sing in a few minutes, begins with Robert Bridges' haunting words, “My eyes for beauty pine / My soul for Goddess' grace.” We long for beauty, a sort of earthly manifestation of grace: unmerited favor, an unexpected gift. If we will come to rest and *pay attention*, chances

4 in *How We Become Human: New and Selected Poems, 1975-2001*

are it is right here, right there, before us. Seek, and find.

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen is the founder and director of the Institute for the Study of Health and Illness at Commonweal in Bolinas, California. Over forty years ago, Dr. Remen lost a patient, a child, just before Christmas. To honor his memory, she bought an angel ornament, and hung it on her tree. A kind of ritual grew from that single, healing gesture: every year since, she has bought an angel ornament – “angels made of china, of straw, of tin. Angels of wood and glass. Hand-painted angels and hand-sewn angels. Angels from all over the world.” Just after Thanksgiving each year, she begins to hunt for a new ornament, “leafing through catalogs, going from store to store, seeing dozens of angels until [she finds] the right one, ... a labor of love and remembering,” a simple, profound ritual.

Every year for over fifty years now, except one. Fifteen years ago, Dr. Remen was consumed by her work, and found not one moment to write cards or decorate, bake or buy gifts. As the season closed in on her, she found herself increasingly consumed with resentment, all focused on her boxes of angels. For the first time in thirty-seven years, she hadn't unpacked her angels or bought a new one.

About a week before Christmas, she was seated in the aisle seat of yet another plane, preparing to fly across the country yet again. Drowning in self-pity, she settled in to write the talk she was to give to a thousand health professionals on “serving [people] at the end of life.” Dr. Remen was feeling a little “at the end of life” herself. Shortly before takeoff, a very young woman in full dress uniform took the window seat. Dr. Remen spent the next five hours in silence, writing about “death and mystery and their power to transform our lives and our work.” The young naval officer was absorbed in a book.

When the pilot informed them that the plane would be landing in twenty minutes, Dr. Remen put everything away and sighed deeply. The talk was almost finished.

This is how Dr. Remen tells what happened next:

“Turning toward me, my seat-mate spoke for the first time. 'Excuse me, ma'am, ... but I feel called to speak to you.' Seeing the look on my face, she apologized ... but pressed on. She told me about her recent difficulties and loss of direction, and that she had been in San Francisco seeking wisdom and support from her grandmother. It had been very helpful. 'I feel that things are hard for you, too,' she [said].... 'My grandmother

gave me something to help me. I would like you to have it.' And reaching into her navy blue attache case, she pulled out one of the most beautiful ... Christmas ornaments I had ever seen, and held it out to me [– an angel].”

Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

Rachel Naomi Remen concludes, “I suppose one might call this coincidence, and perhaps it is. But it felt as if whatever it is that we really serve when we serve others had reached out and shaken me awake, saying, 'You get on with the work. I'll take care of the small stuff.’”

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“At a certain level, synchronicity suggests that there is more to life than we realize.... [It] is always an experience of ... [mystery. Coincidences] do not really prove anything. They are simply a reminder to wake up and pay attention, because the mystery at the heart of life can speak to [us] at any time.”⁵

My spiritual, spirited companions, the world is full of synchronicity and coincidence: magic and mystery. Believe it or not, you, too, may get to play the angel. As this new year unfolds before us, let's practice! *Pay attention!*

These closing words are attributed to Fra Giovanni, written in 1513:

“There is nothing I can give you which you have not got; but there is much, very much, that, while I cannot give it, you can take. No Heaven can come to us unless our hearts find rest in ... to-day. Take Heaven! No peace lies in the future which is not hidden in this present little instant. Take peace!

“The gloom of the world is but a shadow. Behind it, yet within our reach, is joy. There is radiance and glory in the darkness, could we but see; and to see, we have only to look.... I beseech you to look.

“Life is so generous a giver, but we, judging its gifts by their covering, cast them away as ugly or heavy or hard. Remove the covering, and you will find beneath it a living splendour, woven of love, by wisdom, with power. Welcome it, grasp it, and you touch the Angel's hand that brings it to you. Everything we call a trial, a sorrow, or a duty: believe me, that angel's hand is there; the gift is there, and the wonder of an

5 Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, *op cit*

overshadowing Presence. Our joys, too: be not content with them as joys, they too conceal diviner gifts.

“Life is so full of meaning and of purpose, so full of beauty—beneath its covering—that you will find that earth but cloaks your heaven. Courage, then to claim it: that is all! But courage you have; and the knowledge that we are pilgrims together, wending through unknown country, home.”⁶

Happy New Year!
Welcome home, angels.

⁶ Fra Giovanni Giocondo (c.1435-1515) , A Letter to the Most Illustrious the Contessina Allagia Dela Aldobrandeschi, Written Christmas Eve Anno Domini 1513. The British Museum stated in 1970 that it had “proved impossible” to identify Fra Giovanni. This was published, probably in the 1930s, “with Christmas Greetings” from Greville MacDonald, son of novelist George MacDonald, and Mary MacDonald. See bartleby.com/73/1467.html