

“A Meditation on Angels Unawares”

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Genesis 18, Hebrews 13:1-2

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I've been thinking a lot about fathers this Father's Day week.

My father and the fathers of my friends struck a lasting impression. They rise like sequoias in my memory—still alive, still strong, still providing protective shade.

My dad worked both in the shipyard and NASA (called NACA back then) before I was born. He was a jack of all trades and master of none. He was good with his hands. Good with people. He was in sales when I was growing up; he liked chatting up customers and learning their story more than he liked selling them furniture and appliances. When you met my dad, you made a friend. If you needed help with a leaking pipe, or your coughing car, or tilling your garden, Dad was your man. He was a good neighbor. A friend in need is a friend indeed. My dad lived this creed.

My friend Frank's dad was a gifted surgeon. On more than one occasion he stopped by our house on his way home from the hospital to check on me when I had been sick. He saved my mom's life when her lungs were choked with antibiotic-resistant coccidiomycosis.

Cary's father was a man who believed in causes. He went on strike at the shipyard, and when the union resolved the strike, it wasn't good enough for him and his men, so he stayed on strike. He was still on strike when he died as an old man.

Bret's father drove submarines for the United States Navy. He and his wife Virginia were among the young adults making a difference at Hampton Baptist Church downtown.

These men were nobodies to the rest of the world, but they were famous to us boys. They were giants on this earth. And we loved and admired them for the agents of God's grace they were.

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In the middle of an afternoon one day, Abraham and Sarah were pondering what to have for dinner when along came three strangers. These guys weren't famous people as far as Abraham knew; they were just people-in-need passing through. Abraham offers them more than water and shade. A calf is made ready, cakes are prepared, curds and milk are shared.

We know, of course, that these three men are messengers from God. Abraham didn't know that, though, when he got out the best china and offered them the cream of his crop.

This text from Genesis has become a reminder that this is how we are to treat others, especially the stranger. In somebody's world, everyone we meet is famous, beloved, irreplaceable. So, everyone deserves a measure of hospitality. "Be not forgetful," the writer of Hebrews wrote, "to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares" (KJV).

Each of us, created in God's image, is the apple of God's eye. As God loves us, we are called to love others—including the stranger.

We are reluctant to enter into relationship with people we don't know, people who are different from us. But scripture here and in other places tells us to welcome the stranger, to serve those who sojourn through our neighborhood, to befriend the outcast, even, to love our enemy.

When somebody needs help, why wouldn't we lend a hand?

A friend in need is a friend indeed.

* * *

Howard Thurman, the legendary pastor, did not dedicate his autobiography to any of the great people who were influenced by him, people like Martin Luther King Jr, or the novelist Alice Walker, or the stateswoman Barbara Jordan. No. He didn't dedicate his autobiography to his beloved grandmother. He dedicated his autobiography *With Head and Heart* to an unknown stranger.

“To the stranger in the railroad station in Daytona Beach,” writes Thurman, “who restored my broken dream sixty-five years ago.”

Thurman was at the Daytona Beach railroad station and didn't have the money necessary to transport his trunk to the Florida Baptist Academy up in Jacksonville.

“I sat down on the steps of the railway station and cried my heart out. Presently I opened my eyes and saw before me a large pair of work shoes. My eyes crawled upward until I saw the man's face. He was a black man, dressed in overalls and a denim cap. As he looked down at me he rolled a cigarette and lit it. Then he said, “Boy, what in hell are you crying about?”

And I told him.

“If you're trying to get out of this damn town to get an education, the least I can do is to help you. Come with me,” he said.

He took me around to the agent and asked, “How much does it take to send this boy's trunk to Jacksonville?”

Then he took out his rawhide money bag and counted the money out. When the agent handed him the receipt, he handed it to me. Then, without a word, he turned and disappeared down the railroad track. I never saw him again.”^[1]

The next stranger you meet might be one of these undercover angels that God sends to help you on your way.

You might actually be one of those angels for somebody else.

Holy God, thank you for the angels you've sent us, O God. And help us to be the angels you call us to be. AMEN

^[1] – Kirk Byron Jones for *The Christian Century* magazine weekly mailer, June 12, 2023, “Holy Wild Card.”