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CALLING ON THE ARCHANGELS

Angels are central to that same history of yearning and the search to connect the visible with invisible. In cultures stretching back tens of thousands of years, there have been winged creatures who serve the gods and who make a bridge, or ladder, between the divine realm and the earthly one.

—Peter Stanford, *Angels: A History*

Angels appear throughout the Hebrew and Christian scriptures as well as in the Qur'an. All three Abrahamic traditions affirm the existence of these invisible beings who serve as protectors, messengers, healers, and bearers of wisdom.

According to the Talmud, the essence of angels is fire. Psalm 104 tells us God makes “the winds [his] messengers, fire and flame [his] ministers” (v. 4). Angels are made of fire and sustained by fire. In Islam angels are made from light itself; they are light beings. Many Christians would ask what angels were made of. Light was St. Augustine’s clear

response, emphasizing what we learn from both Hebrew and Islamic sources. Augustine, in the *City of God*, suggests that angels were created right at the start of the whole process of creation. When God proclaims “Let there be light” (Gn 1:3), the sun, moon, and stars were called into existence, but the angels were as well. “As intermediaries,” Augustine proposed, “angels’ entire being was so designed as to allow God’s light to shine through them into humanity.”¹ Angels were translucent windows onto the sacred luminosity shimmering in the world.

In the Celtic tradition in Ireland, the Otherworld is the dwelling place of gods, other supernatural beings, and ancestors. It is an elusive place of beauty and abundance as well as a threshold place. There is no direct portal to it, but there are moments when the doorway appears, and we are able to experience a connection to the sacred in a more concrete way than in ordinary time. There are openings that break through our everyday vision so we can see angels at work in the world.

As author Peter Stanford writes in the opening quote of this chapter, angels create bridges and ladders between the heavenly and earthly worlds. We might think of the story of Jacob’s dream of a ladder in Genesis 28:11–12: “He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.”

God then appears in the dream and promises Jacob many descendants and that God will abide with him. When Jacob awakens from his dream he says, “Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!” (Gn 28:16). And goes on to say, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven” (Gn 28:17).

In the dream, angels are ascending and descending the ladder that connects the Divine and human. Jacob’s dream reveals the place where he slept as the very gate of heaven, a doorway or threshold place that reflects this human desire to connect with the invisible realms and the beings who dwell there. From Jacob to us, we all have a longing to reach into the invisible world and receive its wisdom for comfort and courage.

After noting how angels create bridges and ladders between us and the heavenly realms, Stanford goes on to write, “Yet angels have been, for millennia, in scriptures and myths, hearts and minds, an expression of human aspiration, hope and expectation, an in-built instinct to engage not only with invisible worlds, but with invisible beings too, as a way of relieving anxiety about living, and about the inevitability of death.”² Angels point to a very real human longing to have a connection to something larger than us to guide and protect us. Having a way to connect with these celestial messengers and guides through the ladders they create is a way to reassure ourselves that we have not been left alone in this world. The wisdom traditions make this clear: there is a multitude of presences, and the love of thousands is available to us. We just have to seek that love through the connections they’ve made for us.

THE ARCHANGELS

In the Christian scriptures we are presented with three of the four archangels: Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael. Uriel, the fourth, is named in other sources. These four archangels are also named in Jewish texts and prayers.

Archangel Michael: Warrior

The earliest surviving mentions of Michael’s name are in the Jewish book of Enoch, written in the second century BCE, where he is listed as one of seven archangels (the others are named there as Raphael, Gabriel, Uriel, Sariel, Raguel, and Remiel). There he is noted as the chief of the angels and archangels and as responsible for the care of Israel. Christianity embraced many of the Jewish traditions concerning Michael, and he is mentioned explicitly in Revelation 12:7–12, where he does battle with Satan, casting him out of heaven. Because of this battle with Satan, Michael is often depicted wielding a sword and defeating a dragon. He is also mentioned in the Qur’an.

In the book of Tobit, a slightly later Jewish work, the archangels are said to “stand ready and enter before the glory of the Lord” (12:15). We

can presume that because the archangels are mentioned without further explanation in this book, the community was already familiar with them. Michael is mentioned again in the last chapters of the book of Daniel, a book about an apocalypse, where it is said, “Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise” (12:1).

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, there is also a devotion to the archangels, as well as guardian angels.³ Archangel Michael appears in many of the icons in Orthodox churches and is mentioned in many of their hymns and prayers. Michael is generally viewed as the angelic warrior who does battle with the inner and outer presence of evil in the world. He is also depicted at times as being the angel of death, offering each soul a chance at redemption and carrying the souls of the dead to heaven.

St. Francis had a special devotion to the archangel Michael, especially in his role as the one who would transport the dead, using his strong, protective wings to carry souls from their earthly bodies to heaven, where their eternal fate would be determined. Life was felt to be very fragile during St. Francis’s time, and the fate of one’s soul was an intimate and pressing concern.

Because of Michael’s ascent toward the sky, those who had lost a loved one would often climb to the peak of a mountain to offer their prayers to Michael to usher their beloved ones into Paradise, in the hope that from the height their prayers would reach him more directly.⁴

Michael has been present across time and traditions as a fierce protective presence who also stands at the threshold between life and death. He is the archetype of the sacred warrior, defending life and virtue.

Archangel Gabriel: Messenger

Gabriel also appears in the book of Enoch, among other ancient Jewish texts. Along with Michael, Gabriel is described as the guardian angel of Israel. He also appears as a celestial messenger in the book of Daniel, interpreting and explaining Daniel’s visions. In Islam, Gabriel is the archangel sent by God to Muhammed and is believed to have revealed the first verses of the Qur’an.

You are likely most familiar with Gabriel from his appearances in the Christian scriptures. He appears in Luke's gospel to announce the births of John the Baptist to Zechariah and of Jesus to Mary in the Annunciation: "He is the herald, the one who announces good news and reveals the hidden plans of God."⁵ Gabriel is the archetypal messenger, bringing important questions and invitations to humans.

In art, Gabriel is often depicted wearing blue or white garments while carrying a lily, a trumpet, a lantern, a scroll, a scepter, or a branch from paradise. He is a symbol for all the ways we receive calls or invitations in our lives that feel as if they are from a higher source.

Archangel Raphael: Healer

The name *Raphael* means "God has healed" in Hebrew. He is mentioned in the Hebrew scriptures in the books of Enoch and Tobit. In Tobit he acts as physician to expel demons and heal Tobit's eyes. In Enoch he is set over all disease and the wounds of the children. He later became identified in Jewish tradition as one of the three celestial visitors whom Abraham entertained in the oak grove of Mamre (see Genesis 18:1–14). Michael, as the greatest, walks in the middle, with Gabriel to his left and Raphael to his right.

Raphael is not named in the Christian scriptures or the Qur'an, but he later becomes identified with healing. He is connected to the unnamed angel who stirs the waters at the Pool of Bethesda in John's gospel.

Raphael is believed to help protect pilgrims on their journeys and is sometimes depicted as holding a staff. He is the archetype of the one who brings physical and spiritual wholeness.

Archangel Uriel: Wisdom-Bearer

The name *Uriel* means "light of God" in Hebrew; it is the name of one of the archangels who is mentioned in the post-Exilic rabbinic tradition and in certain Christian traditions. He is well known in the Russian Orthodox tradition and in the Anglican Church. Uriel is also known as a keeper of knowledge and archangel of wisdom. He is generally not

depicted in art as frequently as the others, but when he does appear, he sometimes holds a light in his open palm to symbolize truth.

Uriel is generally the fourth archangel added to the original named three (Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael) to represent the four cardinal points of north, east, south, and west. As we will see at the end of this chapter, there is a traditional Jewish prayer recited at bedtime that places the four archangels around us, to the right, to the left, before, and behind.

THE PRESENCE OF THE ARCHANGELS

In early December 2010 I was heading from Seattle, Washington, where I lived at the time, to Vienna, Austria, for a time of retreat and writing. Vienna is where my father grew up and is now buried alongside his parents and is a place of renewal for me. It had been an especially hard autumn with our beloved dog dying of dementia and my dear mother-in-law's own Alzheimer's progressing at such a rapid rate she no longer recognized loved ones. I was traveling by myself, and my husband, John, was going to meet me a couple of weeks later so we could celebrate a quiet Christmas together.

The day after I arrived in Vienna, I began having leg pain, but I thought it was because of the long flights, that I just needed to stretch and walk it off. Three days later, I started feeling shortness of breath while wandering all over that city I love so much. Finally, the fourth day after arriving, I woke up to pain and swelling in my leg and realized that I likely had a blood clot.

I went to the emergency room and was told to sit in a wheelchair and not move at all because, if I did move and did have a blood clot, the clot could dislodge and kill me instantly. I waited for several hours, having an ultrasound and a CT scan that showed deep vein thrombosis and a pulmonary embolism. I spent the next few nights in the hospital as they administered blood thinners, and I began to recover. The doctor told me one in three people with pulmonary embolisms die, so I was quite lucky given I was traipsing all over the city on foot.

I felt death had come very close to me and a fierceness in me had clung to life. Even more than that, I felt a powerful presence, a strength I was not familiar with.

John rescheduled his flight to arrive early and be with me. After being released from the hospital, we wandered slowly together over cobblestone streets, grateful to be alive and together. We passed by St. Michael's Church across from the Imperial Palace. I know this church well, but this time I saw the stone statue of Michael on the roof of the portico in a new way. His strong body lifted a sword above his head, wings spread behind him. He was suspended in a moment of fierce protection. In that moment, I felt a knowing, a sense of connection I hadn't felt before, as though my body knew that Michael, at least as an archetypal energy, had come to visit me, to perhaps defeat death until a later time.

Perhaps the archangels come to visit each of us when we need them most, even if we don't recognize them in the moment. Consider the times in your life when you were given protection from danger, a powerful message, a potent healing, or a profound sense of wisdom, and see if you can imagine one of them shimmering there beneath the surface of your experience.

PRACTICE

Becoming Fully Present

One of the core assumptions of this book is that not only are there thousands of spiritual beings (angels, saints, and ancestors) who dwell just across the veil between worlds but also that they desire to be in relationship with us. Contemplate for a moment the love of thousands awaiting you to turn toward them, to be present with them, to receive their wisdom, and to know yourself as deeply loved.

We might consider the ways we cultivate relationships in the human realm: by giving our full attention to a loved one's needs and desires, committing regular time to nurturing this connection by making it a priority in our lives, letting mutuality flourish, and growing in trust of their intentions and dreams. How often are we with a friend or spouse,

and we miss what they are saying to us because we are distracted by our own thoughts, by technology, or by fatigue or worry? We only deepen into our intimate connections when we bring ourselves present to our time spent with loved ones. When we bring our full attention, commit our time and presence, honor mutuality, and nourish trust, our friendships flourish. I think of the heartfelt conversations I have with dear soul friends, people who know my vulnerabilities and cherish me. Conversation is often sacramental, because speaking our stories and being heard, witnessing others into speech, are graced moments when we often experience moments of transformation.

These ways of being with our human companions—attention, time, mutuality, trust, and vulnerability—are equally important practices to consider when encouraging connection with the spiritual beings who long to support us and communicate with us.

The first two aspects—time and attention—mean that we intentionally set aside moments of the day to bring our full presence to the angels (and later in this book, to the saints and ancestors). We can begin to integrate this into our morning and evening prayer times, simply listening for what they might have to say to us or remembering when they appeared in some form to support us. Was there a moment we felt love reaching toward us from beyond the veil? When we had a sense of a comforting, loving presence with us amid the daily struggles of our lives?

Mutuality means learning to lean into their wisdom for us and seeing angels as partners in the journey of spiritual transformation. We allow them their full agency as they allow ours. Over time, as we begin to see patterns of support emerge in our days and feel their presence in our prayer moments, trust is fostered. We begin to trust our own experience and intuition that angels are real and available to us. And we trust the reality of them in our lives.

From this space of nurtured time and attention, of mutuality and trust, we learn to offer our vulnerability to the angels. We sense their deep care for us in moments of tenderness and uncertainty. We may find ourselves able to consciously name those moments of disorientation

and unknowing and reaching out for help that had previously been unconscious.

The most important step to deepening our relationship with the archangels is to make the commitment to be available for this relationship, to practice presence. The more we show up, the more we can deepen our connection to the angels and know their love and care for our lives. The more we weave an awareness of the angels into our prayers, the more they become real to us.

Jewish Bedtime Shema Liturgy

In the Jewish tradition, part of the Shema liturgy at bedtime is to call on the presence of the archangels to guard over us at night. We will be working with this prayer in the guided meditation later in this chapter. This translation is from Rabbi Rachel Barenblat:

In the name of God, the God of Israel
On my right is Michael, on my left is Gavriel
In front of me is Uriel, behind me Raphael
And all above, surrounding me, Shechinat-El.⁶

When we go to sleep, we surrender our burdens and ask God to carry them. We have to trust that things will continue on without our work and worry. Asking the archangels to surround us is another guard against anxiety and an invitation to solace. When we rise, we offer gratitude for the gift of another day.

The idea that the archangels govern Earth's four cardinal points comes from various Hebrew and Christian passages in which God mentions the four winds of heaven. Some of these passages are as follows:

Flee from the land of the north, says the LORD; for I have spread you abroad like the four winds of heaven, says the LORD. (Zec 2:6)

I, Daniel, saw in my vision by night the four winds of heaven stirring up the great sea. (Dn 7:2)

And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. (Mt 24:31)

We find this idea of calling in the presence of the sacred in the four directions in the Celtic practice of encircling prayer, such as when St. Patrick invokes Christ behind, before, to our right, and to our left.

MEDITATION

Calling the Four Archangels

Consider engaging in this meditation at bedtime while lying down and preparing for sleep.⁷

Take several slow, deep breaths. With each exhale imagine that you are releasing the tensions and stresses of the day. See yourself intentionally letting go of whatever you are carrying and placing it in the arms of the Beloved to hold for you.

Drop your awareness to your heart center. Call on the Divine Presence with whatever name you choose. Ask the Source of Life to carry your burdens and worries as you go to sleep and to strengthen you through the presence of the archangels.

Call upon the archangel Michael to stand on your right side. Michael is the warrior and defender of boundaries. Ask Michael to be with you through the night, warding off anything that does not contribute to your rest and well-being. Imagine yourself leaning toward the right into Michael's strength, and notice the quality of light he brings.

Call upon the archangel Gabriel to stand on your left side. Gabriel is the messenger, the one who summons you to your holy call in life. Ask Gabriel to be with you through the night, making space in your heart for the creative birthings God desires to cocreate with you. Ask that he show up in your dreams and intuitions upon awakening. Imagine yourself leaning toward the left into Gabriel's presence, and notice the quality of light he brings.

Call upon the archangel Uriel to be in front of you. Uriel is the bearer of wisdom and insight. Ask Uriel to be with you, revealing new