

Some Washingtonians Think
That Angels Have Saved
Their Lives, Comforted Them in
Times of Sorrow, and Blessed
Them With Love

Heaven Sent

IT IS DECEMBER: A holiday magic seems to settle over the nation's capital like a mantle of new snow, softening boundaries between strangers, quieting the edge of the city's rivalries. One might almost think that there were angels close by, that for a brief time the brush of their wings had graced even Washington.

Angels in the nation's capital? Angels in art, perhaps, or as part of the architecture, but not as forces that might affect the affairs of humans. For although Washington is a city of many religious communities, the deeper side of religion—spirituality—usually is hushed over.

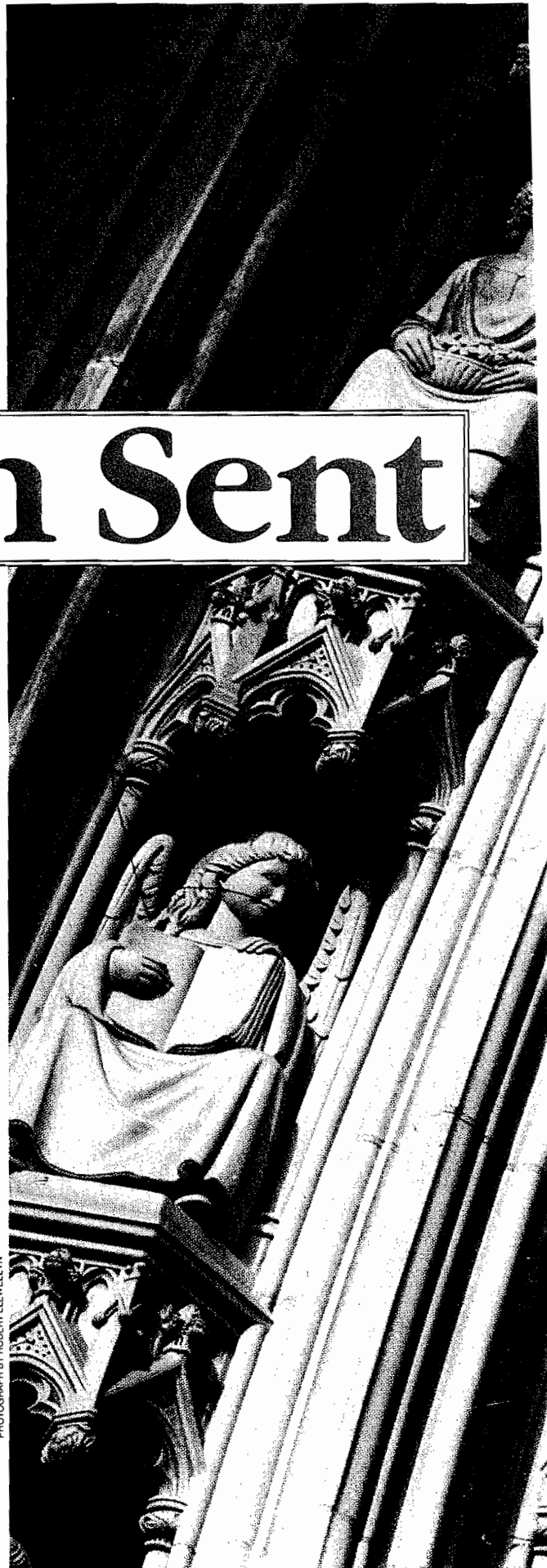
Ask people here if they believe in angels, and most respond with blank stares or an awkward silence. Gays in the military, abortion, gun laws, Bosnia—just about any topic elicits more of a response than angels.

"I can't remember the last time I had a conversation with anyone concerning their personal spirituality," says novelist and former *Washington Post* writer Sally Quinn.

The kind of religion that works in Washington, Quinn observes, is "safe religion—a downplayed, middle-ground Protestant, Jewish, Catholic, or Muslim faith. Any break from the norm is going to get attention and some sort of criticism." What's more, she says, because the separation of church and state is so fundamental to our government, "this is the most dangerous place to actually try to talk about religion, because you never know when you're going to go over the line—when it might appear that you might be imposing your belief on others or interjecting your beliefs into politics."

Yet as mystics throughout the ages have written, God has a way of entering our lives unannounced, uninvited, and with little regard for political correctness. "I doubt if the angel himself," wrote the British author C.S. Lewis, "is

By Pythia Peay



PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT LLEWELLYN

free to choose when sudden heaven in man begins or ends."

Beneath the facade of Washington, many people say their lives have been deeply touched by forces unexplainable to the rational mind.

TRUDY DINSMORE, a New Carrollton resident, was caught in a spiral of darkness and pain nearly two years ago when she had her first experience with an angel. Newly divorced, worried about the outcome of a biopsy, and struggling to pay her bills, Dinsmore took on additional work delivering newspapers in her neighborhood. Often tired during the day, she left her office job during the lunch hour to nap in the back seat of her car.

One day, Dinsmore says, just as she was drifting off to sleep in the warmth of her car, she was awakened by a brushing against her cheek. Instinctively, she says, she recognized the touch of an angel. "It was so sweet, like a first kiss," she remembers. "It brought such comfort to me that I wanted it to happen again." She felt she was going to be all right, and she

felt strengthened to go on with her life. The results of her biopsy were negative, and although her angel has not made its presence known again in quite such a tangible way, Dinsmore says she now feels accompanied by a special presence.

Such unconditional love and support is said to be the hallmark of most angelic visitations. Whatever else they may be, says Jack Welch, a Carmelite father who

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SOPHY BURNHAM



teaches at the Washington Theological Union, "angels are a way of talking about God's concern for humanity in a way that is more tangible, more understandable, than other religious forms."

Because angels break the barriers of religion, says Reverend Karl Chimiak, pastor of St. Michael's Church in Ridge, Maryland, "they are key in bringing peace to the world." Free of dogma, angels can appeal—and appear—to agnostics and unbelievers. Even Sally Quinn, who describes herself as an atheist, believes that "angels come in many forms, especially at the time you really need help."

Quinn describes her 11-year-old son, who has struggled with many life-threatening medical problems, as an angel. "I truly believe that he was sent from heaven," she says. "He's this incredible little spiritual person who has a way of keeping me on track. His point of view is so different. In some unusual way he'll spear me with his little Cupid's bow to remind me that something I'm doing isn't right."

QUINN IS NOT ALONE in her feelings about angels. Interest in angel lore has increased in recent years. Books recounting personal experiences with angels, as well as the history of angels in art and religion, top the religious best-seller lists. One in every ten pop songs mentions an angel. Angel conferences, clubs, and organizations are drawing people nationwide. And for perhaps the first time since the Middle Ages, wrote Gustav R. Niebuhr in the *Wall Street Journal*, "the ranks of angelologists are swelling."

Foremost among today's angelologists is local author Sophy Burnham. Her popular accounts of modern-day angelic encounters—including the nonfiction *A Book of Angels: Reflections on Angels Past and Present* and its sequel, *Angel Letters*—uproot conventional ideas of what an angel looks like. No longer the white-robed, golden-haloed figure of classical tradition, angels appear in an array of guises, she writes, "in all shapes and colors, visible and invisible to the physical eye."

What's more, Burnham says, "angels may come with such fragility that they are easily buried in the furor of everyday life. It requires great inner stillness to perceive their presence." After we pray, we may feel simply "a sense of something occurring, [or] we may walk outside and suddenly be washed with a feeling of light-heartedness and the knowledge that everything will be all right."

Pythia Peay writes about spirituality and psychology. She is a frequent contributor to *New Woman* magazine.



ANGELS are the perfect communicators. Able to assume whatever form is necessary to aid their human charges, they come in the shape we can most easily recognize: as mysterious strangers who appear and disappear; as moments of grace, shimmers of light, or the brush of a wing; as a bold voice of warning.

So formless are angels in their essential nature that the mystic Meister Eckhart defined them simply as an "idea of God." Yet while angels assume a variety of forms, their purpose is singular: to act as harbingers of the divine, bringing help in times of physical crisis or light in times of spiritual darkness. The word "angel," writes Eileen Elias Freeman, author of *Touched by Angels*, "comes to us via the Greek word *angelos* and means messenger."

"The Bible very clearly uses angels as messengers," says Reverend Everett Goodwin, pastor of First Baptist Church of Washington. "So there's a precedent for people to feel that if it could happen then, it could happen now." Scriptural texts, he says, refer to angels as joyful messengers, as well as "angels of death and destruction."

Karl Chimiak frequently uses stories from the Bible in his angelology seminars. In the book of Exodus, for example, God sent an angel to lead the chosen people out of Egypt. In another story, God sends the

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archangel Raphael, in human disguise, to guide young Tobias on a dangerous mission across the desert. And, according to St. Luke, Christ was comforted by an angel during his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. These stories, Chimiak says, show that God has given each of us a guardian angel from the moment we are born to the moment we die, "to assist us in our day-to-day struggles in a very beautiful way."

Angels are able to perceive what we need well before we ask, Chimiak says. Rarely appearing in visible form, they speak most frequently through the inner voice of our conscience.

FOR WASHINGTON sculptor Cecilia Rogers, the messages her angel brought proved the difference between life and death. She worked for British intelligence in London during World War II. She was shot at once and lived in constant fear for her life. It was then, she says, that she began receiving guidance from her angel.

Never knowing when she might be followed by German agents, and with no communication from her own side, Rogers began hearing instructions from a voice directing her where to sit on the train or which side of the street to walk on. This went on for ten days, "until one day," she says, "as I was walking up the road to my house, an ominous-looking car stopped in the middle of the road. The angel said to walk behind the car and get across the road immediately. As I reached my house, two men from Scotland Yard arrived and arrested the people in the car." Rogers learned that the people in the car indeed had been enemy agents.

Years later, her angel appeared to her in a dream. A tall figure of light, it took her above the darkness of earth to a reunion with a friend, clothed in a "sparkling dress," who had died the year before. Lately, after she has prayed, says Rogers, her apartment will sometimes fill with the wonderful scent of her angel's presence—roses or incense.

WHILE SUFFERING is not a prerequisite for an angel's appearance, crisis can often act as a catalyst. Our defenses are lowered, and a window opens through which our angel can enter. Skeptics say that angels who appear during our personal crises are merely the result of our need to invent them. But "inventions of our own mind can't change our lives," says author Freeman. "An illusion or delusion will leave you exactly the way you were before."

Such is the story of Melanie, a young woman who called upon her angel in an emergency. She shared her story some years ago with Washington resident Marilyn Swezey, who tells it today. In 1981, in the midst of a divorce and about to complete her Ph.D. in psychology from Harvard, Melanie took a trip to Kansas City to visit her parents. One evening she found herself at the Hyatt Regency Hotel—exactly at the moment when the "skywalk" structure collapsed, killing more than 100 people.

Melanie was pinned to the floor by a beam that had fallen across her legs. She screamed for help, but everything was chaos. Several people gathered to try to lift the beam, but it was too heavy to move.

They left to get more help. Melanie called out to her angel.

Minutes later, a well-dressed young man appeared, unruffled by the surrounding panic. Soothingly, he told her that everything would be all right. With that, he lifted the beam off her legs, reassured her again, and disappeared. When her rescuers returned, they were stunned. Nobody, they said, could have lifted the beam by himself.

Following her recovery in the hospital, Melanie completed her Ph.D. and went to Greece. There she joined a religious order, where she remains today.

Nearly seven years ago, Swezey's daughter Buffy, then 21, called upon her own angel for help in a different sort of emergency, a medical crisis. Buffy was in the hospital facing hip surgery. "It was very complicated and ultimately unsuccessful," recalls Swezey. Following the surgery, Buffy developed an infection and a high fever.

"The nurse who was on duty that night became very concerned. Realizing she had to do something quickly, she ran to get help. When she came back, she started to walk into the room, then stopped. She saw Buffy speaking to someone at the foot of her bed—yet no person was in sight. As the nurse told Swezey later, Buffy was repeating, in an emphatic voice, "Yes, I want to be healed. I want to be healed." The following night, says Swezey, Buffy had emergency surgery, which proved successful.

AS OFTEN as they honor our request for help, angels are just as likely to appear unbidden or through coincidences—God's way of performing a miracle anonymously, as the saying goes.

Watching her father die, Chevy Chase therapist Nancy Kadian Krauthamer struggled to find the right words to comfort him. Over and over again, she felt compelled to reassure him that he did not have to be afraid to die. Yet although the words would come to her lips every time she visited him in the hospital, she couldn't get them out.

One day, as she boarded the hospital elevator, a woman carrying a bunch of balloons got on with her. The woman said she was visiting a dying friend. As Krauthamer stood silently, the woman continued talking. "You know," she said, "I just returned from India, where death is such a natural process. It made me think that there's only one thing you can do for a friend who's dying—just help them not be afraid." With that, she got off the elevator.

This time, when Krauthamer felt the urge to tell her father not to be afraid, she said the words out loud. "I could almost feel something relax in him," she recalls. "It was such a gift. It helped him die in peace. I felt like the woman was really an angel."

Several years earlier, recalls Krauthamer, an angel had helped protect her unborn child. She was thirteen weeks pregnant when her amniotic sac leaked and her doc-

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tor ordered her to bed. After her recuperation, the doctor cautioned her to take it easy for the rest of her pregnancy.

One day about three months later, Krauthamer was in her garage-top apartment for quiet time away from her other two children. "The stairs were steep. As I was leaving the apartment, I tripped at the top step. In the first split-second I panicked and thought for certain that I was going to lose my child. Then everything went into slow motion. I didn't touch a single step but glided down the stairs, as though the invisible hands of an angel were beneath me. It was like falling through heaven. When I hit the bottom step, I was as light as a feather. It felt like I had landed on a pillow. When my son was born three months later, his father and I named him Nathan, which means 'gift of God' in Hebrew."

THE LEAST EXPECTED yet most commonly related angelic encounters are those that occur on the open highway.

Maryland loan analyst Angela Hanson was on her way back from New Jersey with her boyfriend several years ago when their car broke down. Almost immediately a car stopped and a man got out and offered to help them. Quiet-spoken, he reminded Hanson of a "short, black Santa Claus." He had no home, he said, but lived out of his car, which they could see was filled with his belongings. Using his own tools, he soon fixed their car,

waved off their offer to pay him, and was gone.

Thirty miles down the road, their car broke down again. Out of nowhere, the same man pulled up again, fixed their car, refused their offer of money, and was gone. Only half-jokingly, Hanson remarked to her boyfriend that the man must be their guardian angel.

An hour and a half later, their car broke down once more. Within minutes the same man appeared and fixed their car yet again. This time Hanson and her boyfriend were not far from home. Perhaps remembering the biblical admonition to "be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares," they invited the man to dinner. Although he accepted their offer, says Hanson, he didn't stay long, nor did he say much. Hanson says she can still feel the sense of serenity imparted by her angel of the highway.

WHY ANGELS APPEAR at some moments and not at others remains part of their enigma. For some people, it is proof of a meaningful pattern underlying seemingly random events—the revelation of a divine plan.

Those who have experienced angelic intervention are not always spared emotional suffering or great physical pain—nor do they expect to be.

Jane Howard, an Upperco, Maryland, angelologist and author of *Commune With the Angels*, says she is often asked by people if they have been abandoned by their angels whenever something bad happens in their lives. Howard says that although angels will reach out to protect us whenever we need help, they will not interfere with life experiences that may be necessary for our spiritual growth. Seen in this light, obstacles take on a new perspective. Instead of roadblocks to success, they become the means by which we deepen in wisdom and understanding. "There's always a higher good that we're not fully cognizant of," says Howard.

To see an angel even in the midst of affliction may seem incomprehensible. Yet such paradoxes reveal a deeper meaning. For whether called or uncalled, lovingly present or silent, angels bring us face to face with the issue of our destiny. Being saved from death or being spared pain or enduring the death of a loved one are all experiences that force us to ask: "Why was I born?" "What happens after I die?"

Ultimately, say angelologists and religious teachers, the purpose of angels is to reunite us with God, by whatever means possible. Like the angels, says Bishop

Basil Rodzianko of St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Cathedral in the District, we were created to enjoy eternal life—yet we have forgotten and must be reminded of that paradise we once called home. In a poem by 19th-century writer Mikhail Yurievich Lermontov, he says, an angel is flying through deep night holding in his wings the soul of a baby about to be born. This soul is filled by the angel with the songs of another world. The child is born with a spirit that remembers this other-worldly music—“the sounds of heaven.” This music, says the bishop, accompanies us throughout our life, as a reminder of our original home.

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL angel story told to me was that of Philip Fama, as relayed by his long-time companion, Helen Chatfield. A classical pianist who graduated from Catholic University, Fama had worked in the international division of the US Postal Service. Stricken at age 53 with esophageal cancer, he moved to a DC Hospice. There Chatfield visited him daily.

Although he had been raised as a Catholic, she says, Fama remained skeptical. How do we know there's an afterlife? he would say. Who has ever come back to tell us? And while he had asked for a priest to visit him and seemed to enjoy the visits, he was overcome with anxiety about the life he had lived, things he had done or not done. If he had no belief in the hereafter, he anguished, then what would he have?

A couple of days before he died, Chatfield visited him as usual. When Fama rang the bell for the nurse to bring him some ice chips, she volunteered to go. “But Helen,” he said, “how can you get to the door with all these people in the room? I know every single one—but they don't have a face!”

Chatfield didn't know what to say. As she moved to the door, Fama began to laugh; a radiance suffused his face. “Why, Helen,” he said, “you can't trip over them, and they won't be in your way, because they're spirits—wonderful, friendly spirits!”

“To know this man and the foibles he had about religion, and to think that he was seeing angels—it was unbelievable,” Chatfield said later.

Now, at Fama's bedside, her own struggle began. “Why did I meet Phil?” she prayed. “Why is this happening?” Suddenly, she says, she knew the answer. Seated next to him, she said, “Phil, I've thought a lot about our relationship and the things that have happened. And I know that God wanted us to be together,

because he wanted me to help save your soul. I couldn't save your life, but your soul is much more important than your life.” Fama told her that that was the most beautiful thing anyone had ever said to him.

In the moments before his death, Chatfield sat holding his hand and stroking his forehead. Still praying for the strength to deal with his death, she felt a hand on each shoulder, “One was my father,” she says,

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“and the other, I know, was my guardian angel.” When Fama died—in peace, she says—the room was filled with angels and music.

That was three years ago, and it is the most remarkable thing that has ever happened to her, Chatfield says today. It was the first death she had ever witnessed, and she wouldn't have missed it for the world. “Death isn't death,” she says. “It's life. It's the beginning of a new world. We're going to a more beautiful place.”

ANGELS in one form or another exist in almost all of the world's religious traditions. In polytheistic religions, such as those of the Hindus or ancient Greeks, the gods appear to walk beside man. Winged angels appear most frequently in the monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, Islam—in which an intermediary intercedes with a distant deity. Angels came into their glory in the Middle Ages, flowering into circles of hierarchies—the Seraphim and Cherubim, Virtues and Dominions—radiating around the throne of God.

By the 18th century, angels had all but been forgotten in the Age of Enlightenment. For much of our own century, they have been reduced to cherubs on greeting cards or characters in such movies as *It's a Wonderful Life*.

Why, then, have angels made a comeback? Author Eileen Freeman says one reason is the pendulum swing away from

the materialism of the last decade. People have realized, she says, that materialism cannot satisfy the needs of the human spirit. “We are not just beings of flesh and blood. We're beings of the spirit as well.”

Jane Howard points to the impermanence of modern life. “Things that we thought we could hang onto forever—our jobs, relationships, even our homes, which can be washed away in one day like those along the Mississippi River—can be taken from us in an instant. People are opening up to that which is steadfast and eternal in a world of changing times.”

Sophy Burnham agrees, adding that the resurgence of interest in angels is but one facet of the “incredible spiritual renaissance occurring in our culture today.” At its heart, she says, is the “extraordinary reappraisal of where humans stand in relation to the universe. For most of this century, as distinct from the previous 20 or 30 centuries, the intellectual and scientific disciplines have said that we are alone. According to this thinking, there is no divine center, and we humans are the center of the universe.”

If nothing else, the sales figures for Burnham's books say that a lot of people are looking for a new center.

SKEPTICS ARE, well, skeptical. The University of Kentucky's Joe Nickell, author of *Looking for a Miracle* and a member of the executive council of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, says the notion of angels is as silly as a belief in the tooth fairy. He believes that most angel stories, although sincere, are nothing more than the stuff of ordinary folk tales. No proof exists to back such beliefs, he says.

Nickell is most apprehensive of what he terms the “business of angels.” A lot of what is claimed to be angelic phenomena is fraudulent, he says. People who claim they can see your guardian angel for you “are charlatans, much like the spiritualists in the 19th century who claimed they could communicate with the ghosts of the dead,” Nickell says.

The burden of proof, he argues, should be on those people who claim the existence of angels. Why, for example, if angels appear to others, can't he see them himself? The iridescent descriptions of angels, as well as their habit of disappearing without a trace, leave them impossible to prove in terms of the physical world.

In response, most angelologists feel that the authenticity of an angelic visit is measurable by its spiritual aftereffects.

An angelic encounter would leave a person kinder, more compassionate, and less interested in the material world. More dramatically, as in Melanie's story, the direction of a life may be altered. If angels show up most frequently to relieve fear, there may be an inward change; a person may feel "an amplification of the spirit, a feeling of greater spaciousness within, and a sense of gratitude and reverence restored to life," says Father Welch.

On the other hand, an experience that is the product of hallucination or of our own intense longing to see an angel would leave us unchanged, angelologists argue.

Freeman, too, is wary of the tendency toward the commercialization of angels. She points to the growing danger that people will use angels less for spiritual reasons and more for their own selfish ends. A quick-fix society may see angels as good-luck genies who will grant every wish.

For centuries, mystics and saints have been alert to the pitfalls of mistaking angels for God. Angels, they have written, come only to direct us to the source from which they emanated. Both St. John of the Cross and Theresa of Avila counseled that such experiences, while gifts, are not goals in themselves.

WITH INTEREST in spirituality on the increase, some psychotherapists have tried to understand angels. They are difficult for most clinicians to comment on, says Rockville clinical psychologist Rick Levy, because "angels are based on a theological way of looking at life, and mental-health care traditionally has not had much to do with the spirit. Most therapists would view an angel as a symbolic manifestation of the unconscious mind rather than as a literal reality."

Real or not, angels can help people—perhaps especially children and adolescents—feel that there is a meaningful spiritual dimension to life.

Education specialist David Oldfield says he sees up close the effects of an "absence of angels" in kids' lives today. What children need most to be reassured of, he says, is that the universe is more than just chaos. Belief in one's own guardian angel can help adolescents feel that they are not irrelevant. Being touched by an angel tells them "they matter so much that the cosmos has assigned them each a special guide to help fulfill their unique destiny."

Angels, says Oldfield, give children the perspective that there is something greater than themselves in life to serve—

an antidote to the narcissism of today's culture.

To encourage my own three sons in the idea that they were born with a special purpose, I told them they each had an angel looking over them: Gabriel, Uriel, and Raphael. When they were little, I told them traditional stories of their "own" angel and reassured them that as they grew up, their angel would help them to help make the world a better place.

I also shared stories of my own guardian-angel experiences. Once, living in Santa

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Fe, I woke up to see a spirit in the form of a Native American wise man, as vivid and real as any person, shimmering in an aura of red intensity before me. Struck by the urgency of this spirit, I puzzled over its message. Several days later, my house caught fire in the middle of the night. Despite the heavy smoke, my son woke up and alerted us, and my family escaped unharmed.

I have also described to my children the two tall angels who appeared to me in a dream. White-robed and somber-faced, yet glowing with gentleness, they lifted me up and over a nearly insurmountable situation I faced in real life. Soon after my dream, the situation resolved itself.

IF, INDIVIDUALLY, we have each been appointed an angel to watch over our path through life, are there angels, as Sophy Burnham asks in her new book, *The President's Angel*, "governing our nations and political affairs?"

Describing her book as a spiritual parable for our times, Burnham imagines an angel appearing before the president of the United States in a vision that alters both his own destiny and that of the world.

The book came to her, she says, "the same way the angel came to the president—as a revelation. As she wrote, she had a strong sense that "the races of humankind are protected by angels, and

that we are not going to kill ourselves in a nuclear holocaust or die in the kind of apocalyptic ending people are so terrified of."

Burnham was not the first to be inspired by such an idea. More than a century and a half ago, a legend began circulating about an angel's appearing to George Washington during his retreat at Valley Forge in 1777. The story appeared in several newspapers before it was published, as a fourth-hand account, in a book by Charles Taylor in 1980.

According to the legend, Washington confided his vision to only one person, Anthony Sherman, a young officer on his staff. Sherman kept the vision a secret until just before his death—when, in Taylor's account, he said that Washington had revealed that he was alone in prayer one day when "a singularly beautiful being" appeared before him.

"Son of the Republic," the radiant being addressed him, "look and learn." So saying, the angel revealed to Washington visions of wars to come, among them the Civil War. In his vision, peace emerged from these conflicts through the intervention of "a bright angel on whose brow rested a crown of light, on which was traced the word "Union." Washington said he had seen a vision "wherein had been shown me the birth, the progress, and the destiny of the United States."

No documentation proves Washington's angelic visitation; no records even exist of a young officer named Anthony Sherman. Yet the legend endures, perhaps because so many people would like to believe it's true.

The idea that those in power need not be ashamed of having a spiritual side is what Burnham most hopes to convey through her story of an angel and a president. Throughout history, says DC's Reverend Goodwin, people at the height of culture have combined intellectual erudition with the kind of naive mysticism that trusts in angels.

And while there is nothing wrong with the wall that divides church and state today, writes Yale law professor Stephen L. Carter in his new book, *The Culture of Disbelief*, "the trouble is that in order to make the Founders' vision compatible with the structure and needs of modern society, the wall has to have a few doors in it."

Perhaps angels, in their love for all creatures of the earth and their capacity to remind us of the awesomeness of the universe, are the gatekeepers to such doors. Are there angels keeping watch over Washington? I would like to think so. □