

Year End: 2018

**"So I pray to my holy guardian angel"
"At the end of the day, to my holy guardian angel"
- Van Morrison. Holy Guardian Angel**

Franklin the gardener is lovingly attending to a dormant butterfly bush in the Zen Garden. His movements, once cautious and hesitant, display a sense of self confidence that visibly radiates across the vegetation, even on this chilly, near winter's day.

When I stare intently enough I catch the monochromatic image of Franklin's guardian angel hovering about a foot above his right shoulder. 'Damien' as I have dubbed him, has, in the vernacular of my youthful playground days, a big 'shit eatin' grin spread across his face.

Franklin is a married man now. He and Jill live within walking distance of their jobs. Often, at midday, returning from my swim, we cross paths in our café. Franklin is usually sitting at a table, lunch spread out in front of him. We always exchange pleasantries.

I was raised Catholic. My mother, a devout Christian, signed the papers and kept to her end of the deal. She outlasted my dad by thirty-seven years. I attribute my belief system to the enduring love my parents showered upon my two brothers and me, as opposed to all the time I spent learning about religion.

**"So I pray to my holy guardian angel
Come what may, to my holy guardian angel"**

I sense a lightness of being in Josh that I have never experienced in the nearly two decades we've know each other. He and Hope are moving to a new apartment in Northbridge. I study him as he tells me about a fateful day. "Jim, I was up on a ladder in the kitchen of 58 (Clinton Street). Faith was sitting

at the table with a cup of coffee. I asked her to lunch. She said, "I'll think about it." The next day she said yes. The best day of my life."

Josh's health issues mean that he's on long term disability but today his eyes are clear, his color is good and he's dropped a few pounds from walking every day.

In this moment, I lose my composure and turn away. I recover quickly and give Josh a big hug. We both ignore my tears.

My childhood fascination with the winged dudes of Christendom was reawakened several decades ago when a bunch of us got into Gnosticism. Elaine Pagels' The Gnostic Gospels had just come out and we were hooked. Throw your Baltimore Catechism out the window. Show Thomas Aquinas and Ignatius of Loyola the door. The hippies of early Christianity have come to town preaching a heady brew of mysticism. Drag Francis of Assisi along to learn about the direct experience of the Divine, women priests and communal living. Naturally this movement was stamped out by the Nixons, Kissingers and Agnews of their day.

The Union Avenue road work has finally been completed which means I get to resume my driving routine - cutting over to Union from Franklin via Arch Street. This morning I'm rewarded. The 'Unicorn' is at her usual morning spot in the side yard of 360 Union, sitting on a white plastic chair. She looks healthy though I see that her stint wearing the patch didn't help. I spot 'Veronique' lounging on the side porch roof, she flashes me a 'thumbs up' as I turn onto Union. It appears the Unicorn will be in from the cold for another winter.

**"Nobody know the trouble I've seen
Nobody knows my sorrow
Nobody knows the trouble I've seen
Nobody but me"**

In the late morning, when the low slung winter sun heats up the space in front of our entrance and along the brick façade of the

building folks from our single adult continuum tend to congregate there. Here folks from the shelter, from housing, residential programs and rough sleepers waiting for the drop-in to open spend time sitting on the benches or leaning up against our building's back wall. Generally it is a quiet and laid back scene.

If I angle my head a few degrees to the right, a scene straight out of Wim Wenders' wondrous Wings of Desire appears. Guardian Angels are everywhere. Perched in the tree, on top of the smokestack and "bird house", congregating in the gardens or the roof of our building. Several appear to be posing, taking their cue from Rodin's The Thinker.

There's Donnie, in his ever present dirty gray hoodie, standing in front of everyone, looking like he's ready to lead this ragtag group on a mission in which he'll be walking point. Donnie's disease is akin to a giant, red neon sign.

I stifle the urge to engage him thusly: "Hey nice to see you vertical." (The EMT's have made several trips to haul a horizontal Donnie out of the building and off to the hospital.) or "Hey Donnie, how the f . . . are you still alive." One way playground banter would be inappropriate.

A simple "Hey Man" suffices for today. Right before entering the building I spot Donnie's angel 'Dominic', sitting, lotus fashion, on the edge of the portico. Dom responds to my wink by pitching me the bird.

Our staff feverishly works to get Donnie a judiciously sanctioned 'time out'.

Later the 'Rev' sends me photos from our single adult lunch at the Greater Framingham Community Church. Donnie's in two of them. He's sitting, sweatshirt open, eating lunch, a water bottle and a Sprite in front of him. Looking healthier than he has any right to be.

It's way too early to wish for a miracle.

I began my professional career in 1973 as a case worker/therapist for abused and neglected children living at a public institution. I quickly discovered that the children were being abused by the very people employed to nurture and protect them. I tried to stop it. I failed. It would be hyperbolic to say that that failure haunts me, but it would be fair to say that what happened to me at the Children's Center is never far from my mind.

Now, in the present, as my career winds to a close I find myself wondering about the fates of the children I worked with so long ago. An effort, perhaps, to link the past and present of my work narrative together. That's what I find myself doing when I study the faces of our guests, rough sleepers and supportive housing residents. Donnie, in particular, could be the grown up version of at least five of the kids I grew to love as a young helper.

I guess giving folks their own guardian angel is my way of creating a spiritual ally in the battle to help these individuals recreate and restore their personal narrative.

I've learned that a belief in an individual's ability to change transcends belief systems. Everybody matters.

When Don Sawyer, the documentary filmmaker responsible for Under the Bridge, came to town last spring he filmed interviews with three young adults who are part of our continuum, Albert, Joey and David.

Today Albert the artist, stops by my office with an installment of the 10 paintings deal he struck with me a few weeks ago. My first glance at the canvases confirm that he's followed through on his interest in Picasso's Blue Period.

Albert is justifiably proud of the large streetscape mural he painted on the side of Building 7 this summer though he's careful not to display too much of that pride. His hajib fashioned hoodie has been replaced by a stylish jacket and denim baseball cap. When he speaks I catch a glimpse of a newly installed 'grill'. I make a mental note to name his angel.

I see Joey fairly often, wandering through our building, the bag of existential stones he carries perpetually affixed to his back. My mantra is always "Hang in there man."

As for David, well my brief encounter with him at the holiday meal left me apprehensive. He remains lost in space and time.

I fear he always will be.

**"Gonna be a transformation in your heart and soul
Gonna be a transformation baby, now that you know
Get used to righteousness when when it makes you feel whole
Gonna be a transformation, baby down in your soul"**

- Van Morrison. Transformation

So as we wander, walk, dance, stumble, hurtle, run or whatever toward 2019, here's what I got.

I remain convinced the simple acts of kindness can help change, transform and sustain lives. Fill your satchel with smiles, handshakes, affirming smiles, pats on the back and words of encouragement. Pull them out liberally. Use them often.

There is a power in these simple actions and behaviors that make our Guardian Angels nod in approval. It is the manner in which we connect the mystical with the material. It is the way we link the timeless with the immediate.

The glass is half full.

Add water.

Jim Cuddy
December 2018

NOTES:

- Most names have been changed.
- Lyrics are from Van Morrison's Holy Guardian Angel and Van Morrison's Transformation.
- Elaine Pagels. The Gnostic Gospels. 1979
Has just published a new book Why Religion. 2018
- The net has some very interesting information on Gnosticism.
- 58 Clinton Street is an affordable housing building for unaccompanied single adults.
- 360 Union Avenue is a supportive housing program.
- Wings of Desire directed by Wim Wenders. 1987
The two angels were named Damiel and Cassiel.
- The 'Rev' refers to the Reverend Dr. J. Anthony Lloyd.
- Under the Bridge: The Criminalization of Homelessness, 2015
Director: Don Sawyer