

... we killed them off
so now, there are no Gods
here, no ghosts and
spirits in America, there
are no angels in America...

(Louis, in Tony Kushner's
ANGELS IN AMERICA)



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My Dear Friends:

On the way to work yesterday morning I was reminded of how wrong Louis' assessment of spirituality in America is (in Kushner's extraordinary play). If angels are simply manifestations (sometimes audible and visible) of the love, tenderness, joy, hope, consolation and courage of a God who needs messengers to break through to our often deaf and blind world, then I have a lifetime's worth of angel-spottings! Yesterday morning's was merely the latest.

I was trudging, more than striding, towards the Downtown Chapel, feeling somewhat melancholy and vulnerable (for reasons which may become obvious later in this letter.) As I made my way down 6th Avenue, nearing the Chapel, I spotted a woman, across the street, under the marquee of The Roseland, loudly and theatrically singing "Anchors Aweigh!" (in the style of Ethel Merman.) I wasn't sure whether she was drunk, deranged, or perhaps both or neither. When she realized that I'd stopped to enjoy her performance, she added some Rockettes-like high kicks to the routine. As she finished, I applauded, and yelled: "Yeah for the Navy!" She shouted back: "You must have been a great seaman!" I resisted the urge to continue, smiled, waved and rounded the corner, into work, with a joyous grin. (Don't tell ME there are no angels in America!)

Yesterday was my last day of work with my friends and colleagues at the Macdonald Center of the Downtown Chapel. It was a fitting conclusion to my time here. (Most of the day was spent hosting a party for folks with December birthdays at The Foster Apartments, one of the nearby SRO hotels for people a step away from homeless. My day ended as an escort for a confused and suicidal young man to the downtown mental health center.) It's been a marvelous year-and-then-some here in Portland. I've had the privilege of working alongside some loving women and men, whose caring energy for the poor is nothing short of a blessing.

But it is time to move on, not only from Portland, but from other realities as well. After twenty-five years in "final vows" (12-31-68) and just a few months short of my "silver" anniversary of ordination (4-12-69), I have decided that I really need to take a leave of absence. If this is disturbing news for you, trust that it is a thousand times moreso for me!

All of you know, to some extent, my mounting frustration over the years with those elements in the church who are so determined to reverse all the hopeful and challenging developments that get lumped together and called "Vatican II". (The pendulum has swung far in the opposite direction from the very stuff that set my heart on fire twenty-five years ago!) Yet we have all learned to coexist, at least, with all that. More recently, however, this has become much more personalized for me in a conflict of disillusionment with the leadership of my own Holy Cross community. The disruption and trauma I have experienced in the last two years have raised for me some troubling, critical questions about my relationship with C.S.C. -- questions that will probably be better answered from the perspective of distance.

I want to emphasize that this is not a decision I feel HAPPY about. But it is one that I feel RIGHT about. It does not, in any way, represent a 'crisis of faith'. I feel more spiritual -- more consciously connected to God -- than I ever have before!

And I don't want to predict outcomes. It is a 'leave' rather than a permanent departure. It represents my own need to live with integrity and to strike out in new directions, knowing that I may well decide to return to Holy Cross and ordained ministry in the future. There is a tale from the Sufi masters reprinted below that speaks with poetic truth to what is in my heart.

Please give me the benefit of the doubt and trust that I am proceeding with faith and hope (and some wisdom!) in my heart. And please (!!) know that I would NEVER do anything, consciously, that would shake or weaken your own faith commitments. After spending my whole adult life trying to help people keep hope alive, it would make no sense at all to reverse that effort now! (In the words of Leonardo Boff, I am "not changing directions so much as switching tracks.")

Shortly after News Years I will be moving to the San Francisco Bay area, where I will search for a job consistent with my devotion to the poor and broken. As soon as I have a new address I will let you know it. Meanwhile I am sure the U. of P. mail room will forward mail sent to the above.

A stream was working itself across the country, experiencing little difficulty. It ran around the rocks and through the mountains. Then it arrived at a desert. Just as it had crossed every other barrier, the stream tried to cross this one, but it found that as fast as it ran into the sand, its waters disappeared. After many attempts it became very discouraged. It appeared that there was no way it could continue the journey.

Then a voice came in the wind. "If you stay the way you are you cannot cross the sands, you cannot become more than a quagmire. To go further you will have to lose yourself."

"But if I lose myself," the stream cried, "I will never know what I'm supposed to be."

"O, on the contrary," said the voice, "if you lose yourself you will become more than you ever dreamed you could be."

So the stream surrendered to the dying sun. And the clouds into which it was formed were carried by the raging wind for many miles. Once it crossed the desert, the stream poured down from the skies, fresh and clean, and full of the energy that comes from storms.

From the *Sufi Tales*

Pray for me, in this blessed season and always. You are in my heart as I move on, trusting that a loving God accompanies me and will fill me with "the energy that comes from storms."

BLESSINGS AND LOVE

