

Seek to discover our better angels



Highland Views
Chris Highland
Columnist

Our friend burst into the youth group meeting with excitement. "I saw an angel at the door of the church," he announced breathlessly. We ran out to see. No one was there, but his story sounded so believable. He told us a mysterious man was there, then vanished.

This happened during the period when our group was being split into the "church going" believers and the "true" believers. There were the "ordinary" Christians and those of us who were "filled with the Spirit." A division had begun to form between some who received the "full gospel" and those who were "only" born again.

Can you sense our youthful confusion?

Several of us had attended Pentecostal meetings where we were convinced that the emotion and drama of the Holy Spirit was "moving in mighty ways" among us. We received the gift of "tongues" and spoke in "angelic languages." We had never felt the presence of God so deeply in our lives. It was so much more exciting than church!

When we brought this new "outpouring" back to the youth group, friends we'd known for years either joined the new movement or faded away. We felt badly but we were confident that God had a special calling for us -16 and 17 year-olds.

Some of us started to see strange things. "Miracles" were happening all around us every day. One "sister" said she was saved in a car accident or claimed to see her deceased grandmother. A "brother" felt that God protected him from a fight at school or helped him pass a test. I vividly remember lying in bed one night pleading with the Lord to "show me a sign." I became terrified with the sense that a "heavenly presence" was in my darkened room. I hid under the covers and begged God to take the angel away.

Many folks don't know that in the Bible the word



Lincoln and Child, Richmond, Virginia. CHRIS HIGHLAND

angel simply means "messenger." These are not the feathered fantasy creatures as depicted in old paintings or in Hollywood films. A man or woman "appears" with an important message. Three of these messengers came to Abraham in Genesis to eat, drink and have a conversation.

Joseph heard a human voice in a dream. "Two men in dazzling clothes" met the women at Jesus' tomb.

We absorb these images from an early age. It's not easy to "put aside childish things" in our imaginations.

In his excellent book, "The Better Angel: Walt Whitman in the Civil War," Roy Morris Jr. describes the poet's compassionate work among wounded soldiers. Whitman touched the lives of thousands, North and South, in the hospitals of Washington, D.C., during the war. As Morris states, "He had lived his ideals. If he was not literally an angel and he never claimed he was - he was a more than passable substitute."

"The better angels of our nature." We've all heard this phrase that Abraham Lincoln spoke at the close of his first inaugural address. But what does it mean? How are "angels" a part of our nature?

Lincoln was making a futile attempt to keep the

southern states from seceding from the Union. His inaugural words are memorable both for their eloquence and their failure. The "bonds of affection" weren't strong enough to hold the Union together.

Whitman viewed the president as a kind of angel himself, though imperfect, down-to-earth and quite mortal.

From time to time through my years in ministry I would hear people refer to a nurse, social worker or chaplain as an angel. I understood the sentiment, but we knew a person in crisis was simply thanking us for being with them at the moment they most needed someone. A natural expression of gratitude for a very natural presence.

An oft-quoted verse from the Book of Hebrews (chapter 13) says that some believers had visits from messengers but they didn't notice. They have "entertained angels unaware." Could that be because they were unaware that an ordinary person in their midst had something to teach, or were they negligent to notice their own "better angel" within?

This is suggested by the same Hebrews passage. The community is instructed to love, to show hospitality to strangers, to remember those in prison. This gives a twist to "love your neighbor." Your neighbor (even a stranger) may have a message for you - something you need to learn or be reminded of.

The stories of angels have been used for centuries to "prove" divine activity in the earthly realm. If people believe there are messengers sent to earth from above, that's their choice.

But why would we need them? Maybe people can act like "angels" to one another.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com.

Join Chris to celebrate the release of his new book, "A Freethinker's Gospel: Essays for a Sacred Secular World," at 4 p.m. Oct. 14 at the UNC Asheville Reuter Center and at 6 p.m. Oct. 23 at Malaprop's Bookstore/Café, Haywood Street, downtown Asheville.