

“Star Light, Star Bright”

Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
Meriden, CT

Intergenerational Christmas Eve Candlelight Service
December 24, 2013

“There is no use trying,’ said Alice; ‘one can’t believe impossible things.’

‘I dare say you haven’t had much practice,’ said the Queen. ‘When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.’”

I invite you to heed the Queen’s counsel. As for the six impossible things, who knows? Mystery, miracle, myth, memories, and magic are at the heart of Christmas if we would but open our hearts.

I’m remembering a December when I was barely old enough to read. My excitement was already stirring as our home filled with the sites and scents of Christmas. Then a story arrived in the mail. Like some holiday surprise, it was all but hidden in one of the magazines to which my parents subscribed. When I spotted a different kind of illustration on the cover, I was curious. I tucked myself into a corner of our sofa, opened it up, and entered the story of “The Littlest Angel.”

Now the birth stories that we read from the Gospels of Luke and Matthew have nothing to say about a little angel. Perhaps it’s enough that Luke even mentioned angels and Matthew told of wise men and a star. This other story stretched the magic.

It starts off with the sad tale of a small boy who became an angel. Its author, Charles Tazewell, never wrote that the boy had died; he simply began talking about a little angel, who was newly arrived in heaven and not at all happy to be there. He was gloomy and grumpy and completely uncooperative. Throughout heaven, he quickly became known as “The Littlest Angel,” because he arrived there when he was just four and a half years old....way too young for such a place, but there he was.

You would think he would be grateful to be in such an amazing space; but he just stomped around, teary-eyed, whining, and making it clear that he was not impressed. Nor was the big angel who stood at the entrance impressed with him, but she had to let him in because Heaven is for everyone. Somehow he had made it through the gates with a favorite toy, a whistle. Once inside, he took it from a secret pocket in a fold of his robe and blew it so hard that all the other angels covered their ears in fright. He didn’t even look like an angel. His tiny halo was tarnished, and when he ran recklessly through the clouds, he barely managed to keep it atop his small cherubic head. When he tried to fly, all of heaven held its breath, for he would shut his eyes tightly and count to a hundred before hurling himself into the clouds. He was simply terrified, so he forgot to move his wings.

Clearly our littlest angel needed some talking to about heavenly behavior. So the Welcoming Angel took his plump little hand in hers and walked him over to the Angel of Understanding. Suddenly he felt a lot more comfortable, and he took a long deep breath, as he tucked his robe in and glanced up to see a smile take shape on the face of the Angel of Understanding. "So you're the one who's been causing such mischief!" he said. "Come here; tell me all about it." With a quick flap of his wings, our Littlest Angel found himself on a soft lap of understanding.

"You don't know," he whimpered. "You don't know how hard it is for a little boy who suddenly becomes an angel. There's nothing to do here. There aren't many kids for me to play with. All the swings are this gross gold. There are no ballgames. You just don't understand!"

But the Understanding Angel did understand. He smiled warmly as he remembered another little boy of long ago. Then, like a heavenly Santa Claus, he asked the Littlest Angel what would make him happy here. The Littlest Angel wrinkled his brow and thought for a long time. Then he whispered into his elder's ear.

After this visit, everyone wondered at the change that had come over the Littlest Angel. He skipped about. He said "Please" and "Thank you." He even whistled more like a flute and less like an angry policeman. And he flew with a newfound ease that matched the grace of any angel in Heaven.

Years passed, hundreds of years, and it came to the time that another little boy was to be born. The birthplace of this other child was in a town called Bethlehem. The Littlest Angel knew this was a big event, because the finest angelic voices were chosen for the choir that would be sent to sing that night to shepherds on a hillside, telling them about this new little boy. What could he do? What could he give to this newborn child who was so special that he had his very own choir announcing his arrival? His voice hadn't earned him a place in the choir. He couldn't even write a carol for them to sing. And he had no fine toys to give to the new baby. What could he possibly do?

Just as Jesus was born to Mary and Joseph in a shabby old barn behind an inn in Bethlehem, a very worried looking little angel showed up with a small box tucked in his hands. It wasn't a fancy box; in fact it was quite plain, but inside it were all the things that he thought another Child of God might enjoy. It was a box that he treasured from his own few years on earth. When he had received it not so long ago from the Angel of Understanding, it had made him so happy.

Shuffling forward, the littlest angel placed his box next to the manger. Then he backed up, for he saw all the other gifts lying there, gifts of such rare beauty and magnificence that his looked shabby by comparison. "Oh no!" he thought. Maybe there was time to take it back. Maybe there was time to think up something else. But it was too late! The Hand of the Heavenly Host moved across all the gifts gathered at the manger. As it touched upon the gift of the Littlest Angel, it paused. The Littlest Angel was in tears, he was so embarrassed.

As his gift was opened, everyone present saw for themselves what he had chosen for the newborn babe. There was a butterfly with wings that were pure gold, a butterfly that he had

caught one day on the hillside above his home. There was a robin's egg, a sky-blue robin's egg that had fallen from the nest of a tree he had climbed. And there were two stones that glowed in the moonlight, stones that he and his friends had played with, making up all kinds of games that he had been sure this new child would figure out for himself. Finally, there was a raggedy tooth-marked strap, once worn as a collar by his dog, who had died just as the littlest angel had lived, with utter enthusiasm.

How had he possibly thought his gift was so wonderful? Why had he thought that the baby Jesus would treasure his choices? He cried and cried. Everyone at the manger grew silent, embarrassed for him.

Then suddenly, a voice rose among them and filled the earth and all of heaven, and everyone there heard the words:

“Of all the gifts of all the angels, I find that this small box pleases me most. Its contents are of the earth and of children, and this newborn babe is a child of the earth. These are exactly the things he will come to know and love and cherish. I accept this gift in the name of the Child, Jesus, born this night in Bethlehem!”

Suddenly the shabby old box began to glow. It became a brilliant flame, and the flame rose and grew bright as it soared into the heavens. The Littlest Angel watched with amazement as he saw the flame become a Star. Yet it was only he who saw it rise and watched it take its place, because everyone else was blinded by its brilliance. There it shone in the night sky over the manger of Bethlehem. Its light was so radiant that it was reflected down through the centuries into the hearts of all humankind.

Who knew that the simple gift of the Littlest Angel had turned into the shining star of Bethlehem?

Lest we think this is a story for children only, consider that it was written in 1939 and first heard by children and their parents on a radio show and not even issued as a story in print until 1946. The fathers and mothers of those years knew well the treasure of youth who cherished their childhoods and loved life and left far too soon. Of course, of course they would understand that from the hopeful heart of a child newly arrived in heaven and a child newly arrived on earth springs a common language, a language of butterflies and robin eggs and stones for skipping and dogs for hugging and stars for shining.

May the gifts that we give rise from the child in us. May the gifts that we receive find the child in us on this magical night.

Amen.

Sources:

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*, 1871.

The Gospel According to Matthew and *The Gospel According to Luke*, in *The Bible* (Revised Standard Version).

The Littlest Angel Book Review, <http://hubpages.com/hub/The-Littlest-Angel-by-Charles-Tazewell-Book-Review>.

Tom Longden, "Charles Tazewell: Famous Iowans," *DesMoinesRegister.com*,

Charles Tazewell, illustrated by Katherine Evans, *The Littlest Angel*, Grossett and Dunlap, New York, 1946.