

Michael Conforti on the Subject of Angels

An Interview with Paco Mitchell

Paco Mitchell: Winged people and winged animals—what we traditionally think of as “angels” or “demons”—have been a part of human culture for a long time. But many today regard “angels” as superstitious relics of an outdated tradition, with no objective existence of their own, outside of human fantasy. Since some of your work touches on this controversial topic, Michael, perhaps you could tell us how you became interested in this “obsolete” question of angels.

Michael Conforti: Before I start, Paco, I want to thank you and DNJ for giving me the opportunity to speak about angels, from both a personal and archetypal perspective.

PM: Likewise, Michael.

MC: I appreciate the depth of your opening question, in which you address two central issues. The first concerns the existence of a non-personal, transcendent domain existing independently of conscious awareness. This takes us into the realm of the Self, the psyche and the archetypes. It shows us how a world viewed by the ancients as peopled with gods, demons and angels, continues to influence the contemporary psyche, sometimes manifesting as phobias, fears, inspirations and superstitions. Each of these emotional states speaks to the primacy of the Self and how this pre-existent, “psychoid” domain underscores so much of what we currently experience, yet rarely understand.

PM: I gather that you have strong personal feelings about angels.

MC: Yes, the domain of angels is something I am deeply interested in. Angels have been present in my life for some time, both in the form of a *mentor* and in a sense of *inner guidance*, and for each, I remain grateful. I feel the presence of grace with each occurrence.

If we look back in time, we see that the ancients saw the world as animated. It was alive, vital and filled with soul. In fact the word *anima* in Latin and Italian is translated as “soul.” The world was filled with, and propelled by, the soulful machinations of a *presence* or *force*, which, from the beginning of time, we have sought to understand. In the absence of “knowing,” we have been taught to stand, and at times to bow, in awe of that which moves the world. Our predecessors understood that it was essential to establish a relationship to that spirit if we were to be in the world in a meaningful way.

Rituals were our ways of invoking and paying homage to

this spirit—the spirit of the woods, of the salmon run, of a healthy childbirth, of finding a spouse. Rituals were a form of invocation—we invoked the spirit of place, the spirit of the time and of the moment, to grace us.

As people traversed the land from their tribal village to the sacred hunting grounds, for example, each and every person understood that a *threshold* was being crossed. From one domain to another, from temporal to “liminal” time (*limen* = threshold), from the moment to the eternal—at the approach of each threshold experience, an attitude of *reverence* was needed.

The eminent scholar, Rabbi Heschel, speaks of the sacred as being an element of *time*—he felt that, at such sacred moments, one has just entered the *realm of the transcendent*. Filled with the spirit of transcendent time, one learns how to engage with such an archetypal presence on *its* terms and how to worship this form of time. This attitude toward the sacred has existed from the beginning.

But eventually, even among the ancients, there were those who occasionally sought to displace the Gods and usurp their powers. We continue to see this trend of *de-potentialization* today—in science, in modern theology, psychology, the arts, and even in Jungian Psychology, where all too often we see the power of reason and consciousness eclipsing archetype and spirit.

PM: If angels are archetypal phenomena, as you are suggesting, Michael, they must function in some respects as “laws,” perhaps in the same sense that we find the “laws of nature” reflected in the instincts of animals and humans.

MC: As a matter of fact, my mentor for close to thirty years, Dr. Yoram Kaufmann, a Jungian Analyst who originally trained as a physicist in his native Israel, said something very similar about angels. He wrote a piece simply entitled, “Angels.” In this brilliant and original perspective on the symbolic and archetypal nature of angels, Dr. Kaufman writes:

“. . . angels govern and hover over a territory, they are there before we approach the territory, they preceded us . . . Angels are confluences of established prevailing precedents.” (Kaufmann, Pg.56)

Kaufmann then goes to the heart of the symbolic meaning of angels when he states:

“Angels are like laws that govern a territory. We don’t know what the laws are, but they exist, and we must learn what they are if we are to prosper in that territory.”

It was my great privilege to know Dr. Kaufmann as my mentor for many years, and I understood full well the extent of his brilliance. In reading and re-reading his articles, I realized that his articulation of the archetypal nature and function of angels closely matched the work we had been doing at the Assisi Institute for many years.

PM: What work is that, Michael, and what is the connection?

MC: Dr. Kaufmann gave me a deepened appreciation and understanding of the nature of angels in their function as *archetypal regularities and translators of archetypal and spiritual experience*, both in the individual and in the collective psyche. The connection with our work at the Assisi Institute is that our students learn to discern the presence and meaning of archetypal patterns. Then, as Archetypal Pattern Analysts, they are able to translate the meaning of these fields and dynamics within the

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life-experience and situations of their clients.

Kaufmann's words struck me deeply, and they confirmed what I had always valued about spirituality as well as the analytic process itself. Both processes, when done well, help put words to the movement of psyche, in a way that extends our limited conscious understanding of such events and phenomena. Angels not only understand the terrain they tread, but accompany us every step of the way, and they do so through the presence of intuitions, insights and the dreams we often have when involved in what I have come to call "Threshold Events."

So, I suddenly had a deepened appreciation and understanding of the nature of angels, within the individual and collective psyche. From an archetypal perspective, angels serve to translate the particular aspects of the *archetypal fields* they preside over. We have angels of birth, of mid-life, of death; and for virtually every auspicious portal that humans have crossed since the beginning of time, we find angels watching over these crossings. It is the work of angels to help us understand the nature of these different archetypal fields and domains, and how to traverse them in a meaningful way. In virtually every respect, this is the task of anyone working within an archetypal perspective—we strive to both understand and then to convey to our clients, and to ourselves, the nature of the archetypal situation we have just entered.

One learns to truly value the presence of angels in our life: those who somehow understand something about our nature, that mercurial sense that no one else has ever seen or understood. So, too, these angels often know what it is that we need, in order to bring "la forza del destino" to fruition. There are those moments of grace in a life, when we meet the one person who can change the nature of our life, the one person who sees how our life and gifts need to move and unfold. Sometimes with utter force and at other times with a gentle nudge, these angels help us stay the course of the life waiting to be lived—the most authentic life that truly expresses what is essential about our nature.



Raphael accompanying Tobias

PM: Let's briefly go back in time again: What are some of the Biblical stories of angels that are relevant to your thesis?

MC: The Bible and other religious texts are replete with stories of individual contact with angels. In the image below we find Jacob wrestling with an angel. As a result of his heroic battle, Jacob was blessed by God with a grand *mission* and a *wound*—his mark of honor. So, too, are the true healers and visionaries of the world asked to carry both—mission and wound—as essential markers of their destiny.

In another story that is dear to my heart, we find the angel Raphael accompanying the young man Tobias as he finds his way to Sarah's heart. Raphael is the ever-vigilant and knowing companion who teaches Tobias how to journey successfully to far away Medea, where his heart will be awakened by the maiden, Sarah.

But all is not well with Sarah, as she is cursed by the dark angel, Ashmodai, who sees to it that, on the eve of her wedding night, her spouse will mysteriously die, a terrible event that was repeated in seven of Sarah's marriages. Such a history does not bring much comfort to this groom in waiting! Does this piece about Sarah and seven marriages need clarification?? Your call!!

In many ways this story speaks to the emotional crippling and the states of possession that afflict mankind, keeping far too many individuals estranged from love, cursed in never knowing the joy of a profound companionship.

When I want to learn about angels, and experience something of what it is they have to teach us about soul and spirit, I



Jacob Wrestling with Angels

turn not only to these ancient stories, but also to the presence of different sorts of guides in my dreams. Also included are those guides who have graced my outer life and, in their wisdom about life, death and transcendence, serve as modern-day representatives of these angelic presences.

Instead of wings and the cacophony of celestial harps playing in the background, some of these angels are actual fishermen, or farmers; some are chubby, aging analysts, or shopkeepers; and some speak broken English. My grandfather from Calabria in Southern Italy, for example, was an angel when he took all my cousins down to the basement to taste the wine aging in barrels, wine that just had to be tasted every so often—*justa because!!!* Maybe he never heard the word alchemy or transformation, but he brought these eternal values into his daily life, and all with just a taste of wine, something so unique that it goes from a simple grape to this sacred elixir.

PM: You mentioned angels in dreams. How do you think about them in that particular context?

MC: While I am sure that many people have had actual dreams of winged angels, I never have; nor, in more than thirty years in private practice as a Jungian Analyst, have I ever seen such a dream. However, the issue of a literal dream of angels with wings, whose gossamer presence enralls and transforms, is but a moot point. Did the Inn Keeper in the Nativity story know that this poor young couple, who had nothing, would bring the son of God into the world? If only he knew, he would have provided so much more. Would it have made a difference if Philemon and Baucis had known that these beggars standing before them were really Gods coming to see how their creation on earth had evolved?

If we need such a dream to herald the presence of the angelic, the messenger of the transcendent, we risk falling into “the sin of literalism,” that very same sin which has forced so many of us away from religions because of this emphasis on a literal set of beliefs that have to be literally followed. Are the angels really so shackled to text, that they have to fit some Procrustean bed created by the limitations of a secular understanding of something profound, something existing beyond the coffins of our sensorial world?

One needs the presence of a truly gifted mentor, teacher, fisherman, spiritual guide—someone who has such a profound understanding of and relationship to their craft, or to spirit, that they carry the divine and the celestial through their relationship with matter and with life.

Personally and professionally, I find the divine and the angelic in these sorts of experiences. The greatest Talmudic and Christian scholars taught us to look deeply into the very nature and meaning of sacred texts, in order to understand their purpose, their essence, and the specific messages that they bring to the individual and to humanity. Perhaps this is especially true when it comes to the presence and meaning of angels, where we need to ask: What is it their presence brings into one’s life? What function and role does Raphael play? What archetypal significance is there in his journeying and his instruction to the young Tobias as he finds his way from an outdated patriarchal attitude to a world where Eros is freed? It is only because of the angel’s presence, because of Raphael’s profound understanding, not only of the destiny lying in wait for Tobias and Sarah, but also of what they will need to do in order to bring to fruition that

which lives *in potentia*, to bring about this union of opposites, this *mysterium coniunctionis*, to live in the world.

Angels are messengers, and they carry the message of the divine to mankind—from Clarence in “It’s a Wonderful Life,” to the angels in Wim Wenders’ “Wings of Desire,” in which we follow the meanderings of two angels, Damiel and Cassiel, who know not only the secret thoughts of each person they meet, but also know of Damiel’s own longing to truly experience, not just the realm of the angelic, but also the world of humans.

Each of these stories follows the path carved by their Biblical predecessors, allowing us to see how the knowledge, the divinity, and all the ways of the flesh and spirit, need to be understood and integrated, if one is to have a full life. And it is the messenger angels who journey with us, as we traverse the archetypal portals of life.

Perhaps, if we can still our hearts and minds, and carefully listen, we will hear the hushed tones of angels speaking to us about a life we are meant to live, letting us know what it is that we have to do in order to live in accordance with Self, Spirit and Destiny.

This is the experience of angels that I have come to know and trust, having lived with the presence of such an angel for more than half of my life. Now I hope that I can share some of these pieces of wisdom, and carry as a messenger to my loved ones and clients, something of that other world.

PM: Thank you, Michael, for taking the time to share these fascinating thoughts on angels. You’ve given all of us much to think about.

MC: It is truly my pleasure, Paco.



Angels within the Italian family which continue to enrich and inform my life

References:

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