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 But many today regard “angels” as superstitious relics of an outdated tradition, with no objective existence of their own, outside of human fantasy.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-potentiation 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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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.

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

References:

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