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Make Us A Song: A Reflection On Songwriting And Intermediaries

I like to think about songwriting and musical inspiration as coming from intermediaries. Throughout scripture angels are depicted as God's messengers who are often found in tough, unfriendly places. Angels often terrify us with their other-worldly presence even as they bring a word of peace, hope, encouragement, and order to our chaos.

A friend once told me that "*the angels communicate through music*". His statement is probably not scripturally or theologically defensible. Nevertheless, I am interested in the poetic depth of what his idea suggests: a realm of possibility in which God's angels communicate through a language of musical interaction and play. My friend's words have been a gift of inspiration, clarification, and reflection for which I am very grateful.

So, what if the angels do communicate in music? More questions would have to follow. For instance, we would need to ask: who are the angels? What are they trying to tell us? And how can we learn their song? These three questions serve as the basis for my reflection on the spiritual significance of music.

If angels communicate through music, then to what extent are musicians angelic? Certainly the behavior of some musicians does not correspond to what we often consider "*angelic*" activity in the world. Or does it? Musicians, like all people, are prone to fits of dissonance and disorder. Nevertheless, the complicated and sometimes questionable behavior of artists reveals a deep longing for transcendent expression; a hope to communicate messages to the world that go beyond speech and vocabulary. Artists yearn to create the world anew, seeking to live in the heavenly realm of discovery, possibility, and creative activity. In this way musicians and artists serve as intermediaries between the world as it is and the world as it could be. Perhaps we need a broader understanding of angelic activity.

Who are the angels? Scripture tells us that when we entertain strangers we may actually be in the company of angels [Hebrews 13:1-2]. As I see it, to welcome angels is to participate in their creative activity in the world. Could the "*strange angels*" among us be those estranged members of our own families? What about those children and adults living in the most physically, emotionally, and spiritually desperate places in the world? The answer is yes on both accounts. Angels are in the unexpected, yet somehow obvious people and places. They communicate to us in familiar yet forgotten songs.



What are the angels trying to tell us through their music? Alzheimer's patients remember hymns and spiritual songs from childhood long after they have forgotten the names and faces of their own family members. Individuals living with brain injuries experience moments of re-cognition and healing through musical play. Clearly music holds a deep stamp on our identities even when our brains are fatigued through old age or injured in accidents. Music calls from the deep recesses of memory, opening up new pathways for communication when other avenues are no longer possible. The psalmist(s) said it well when they penned, "*Out of the depths I cry to you*" [Psalm 130:1]. Jews and Christians throughout the centuries have sung this verse, calling to God from the deepest places of human need.

Angels remind us how to be fully alive here and now. The core of their message is that life is to be lived abundantly one moment at a time. Such a reminder can be jarring when we are stuck in worries about the future or regrets about the past. Nevertheless, angels consistently wake us up to the task at hand. They are a witness to God's faithfulness in our lives.

So, how can we learn the angels' song? We hear the angels' song when we welcome strangers into our precious time and space. We share the angels' song when we serve strangers and allow our lives to embody messages of love. Songwriting is musical dialogue with the angels. In songwriting, we are invited to join the Heaven on Earth chorus of voices, a community of saints and sinners rehearsing for the kin(g)dom to come. In such moments, we can sense a family connection that moves us into shared creative space.

In our purest moments as songwriters we seek to be in tune with each other, with each "*strange angel*" we meet. Our spiritual intonation comes from our yearning to be in tune with God. As creative people, it is our task and joy to be loved deeply by God – to know that God loves us with a whole heart, and that God's love is a uniting force that pulls us together. When we are tuned in with God, we don't consciously know the sound or reach of our musical praise. We become willing instruments of peace, suspended in God's broad time; what Bob Dylan might call "*Time Out Of Mind*". In God's time we share moments of co-creation with our Creator and the heavenly messengers. Inspiration reaches us in the abundant present, where we become "*lost in wonder, love, and praise*". The safest place in the world is to be lost in God's broad time and space. In God's time, we meet the angels and allow God to play and pray us a song. In God's time, we can hear the songs of angels and we simply rejoice to be part of the ensemble.



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