

## ***ANGELS IN AMERICA: A New Religious Vision***

*“Better to sink in boundless deeps, than float on vulgar shoals.”* –Herman Melville

*“Without a vision the people perish,”* -- Proverbs 29/18

Visions are tough in a post-modern world. What is my moral vision and how do I know? Peace? Sure, but... A world of sufficiency for everyone? Well, yes. Living in harmony with nature? Seems like a no-brainer. But all of these ring trite, if true. Lacking in teeth. What is my moral authority and what my call? Anything is likely to offend someone. We have become so individualized that we hesitate to speak beyond particularity. Yet if we do not venture beyond, our visions can never transcend personal opining, where, in a parody of democratic values, we consider all opinions to be created equal. Thus our public visions fragment into private hopes. As Robert Bellah et al point out in the now classic, *Habits of the Heart*, the language of psychology has supplanted moral language. And while the technologies and insights of transformation and human potential are useful and applicable to both individuals and the culture, they are neither normative nor public in their scope for the creation of happiness and a moral commonwealth.

Post-modernism has robbed us of prophetic language emboldening the public domain. It should not surprise us, then, that we are trapped in a *Weltanschauung*, where nostalgia passes for vision in government and culture. How does one make a coherent statement when any sort of generalizing is suspect? Those who have vision dare not speak for more than themselves, or lay claim to any sort of universality, in part for fear that any ideology put forth in the nation's name is in danger of being hijacked by pretensions of manifest destiny. Where then the leadership for justice, freedom, and God's Kingdom on earth? As Yeats observed so long ago, “the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.” Without universality, vision is mere hallucination. A prophet is no more than a private madman, flattened under the tread of psychologizing.

It was not always so. Emerson had a vision and language to express it. Organic intellectual. It's a wonderful phrase. Rolls off the tongue. Makes me want to be one, to

claim, “Yes, that’s what I am, an organic intellectual.” Alas, Cornell West holds him responsible for many of our sins as a nation, due to his vision of self-transcendence not reducible to social location. Margaret Fuller had a vision, too, of the socially situated self, defined in action. But then, what of reflection? Is the unexamined life worth living? And are we not seeing such unexamined action in our world now?

Tony Kushner’s vision was more prophetic than pretty, in the tradition of prophets of old: a millennial vision that came while watching his compatriots die of a new plague, as the year 2000 loomed large. “In the new century I think we’ll all be insane,” he prophesied.

Kushner ironically reflects the vision of Joseph Smith, an earlier American prophet and founder of the American settlers’ only real homegrown religion: Church of the Latter Day Saints. The Mormons knew how to have visions right here on this soil, angels and all. Their vision even included sexual transgression. It is a reversed image, in which, contrasting Smith’s mandate to multiply with many wives, we find the new prophet dying, not multiplying, and having no wife, but only a lover who has abandoned him.

Here we find character types deconstructed from where Bellah et al left them. Through Kushner’s urban vision they are transformed, redeemed, regenerated. Hannah, a proper Salt Lake City LDS mom living in denial of her son’s homosexuality, is one of the types we find in *Angels In America*, grounded more or less in the Biblical tradition. Hannah follows her ambitious lawyer son and his pill-popping wife to New York to try to straighten things out using her old fashioned, heterosexual, no-nonsense values, but things go awry. She gets directions from a homeless, toothless, psychotic angel slurping soup on the street, eventually finding her way to St. Vincent’s Hospital, where she comforts and mentors the angels’ chosen prophet of the new millennium: a gay man sick with AIDS. Hannah finds her Middle American values inadequate to the present moment. She has a new vision, meets a new angel, has an ecstatic, orgasmic communion, and falls back to earth, transformed. Hannah moves beyond her narrow worldview, taking what wisdom she can from Joseph Smith’s vision and transmuting it into a new vision for the

world amid her unlikely companions. She even gets a new hair-do. In the final scene, beneath the statue of Bethesda, she integrates old and new angelic visions.

Prior Walter, descendant of Mayflower America, is certainly what Bellah et al would have put into the Expressive Individualist type, as is his ambivalent lover, Louis. Prior has left or been abandoned by the living members of his proper WASP family. His only community is that of his chosen community and “the kindness of strangers” in New York City. Louis, a tortured young third-generation secular Jew, is unable to cope with the fleshy exigencies of his lover’s illness. He flees Prior in shame, taking up an affair with Hannah’s son, the neo-conservative protégé of the detestable Roy Cohn.

Kushner’s ultimately generous vision sees Prior, in his fear of being alone and responsible, and Louis, in his failure of courage, reconciled and transformed by struggling with love in the context of what we would have to call a community of memory, which suffers and struggles along with them. Belize, the black gay nurse to whom it falls to nurse his archenemy, utilitarian individualist Roy Cohn, into death, is the central symbol of the transformative power of engagement. Kushner’s character types, from hallucinating Harper to no-nonsense, yet visionary Hannah, reflect and transform the public and religious issues facing a post-modern world. For, while the play examines their private lives and interactions, everything is contextualized by the profoundly public event of the AIDS pandemic, and their relationship to it, inside their community.

Kushner’s vision transcends and answers many of the complex contradictions we wrestle with. Art surpasses politics. In spite of Louis’s comment that there are no angels in America, only political power, Kushner seems to say that art, love and vision, alongside the power of messy human engagement and forgiveness, can surpass the static solutions of the angels.

Angels cannot grasp our world. It is moving too fast for them. They don’t face the choices and dilemmas that impact humanity. They can’t understand why we would choose suffering over respite, why we can’t wait, why we would want more in the very

moment that life is devouring us, devolving into apocalypse and pestilence. It is this very engagement in history that distinguishes us from angels and animals: having eaten of the tree of knowledge, we forever after must weigh and choose. Our innocence long left behind, we must “become as gods, knowing good from evil,” just as the snake predicted. There is no way back to the garden. We must move forward or die.

Perhaps this is why Prior finds God missing from heaven. God has become so fascinated and enthralled with humans as to have left heaven to be with us on earth. The angels need *us* now. We have entered a new era of human participation in which static, dogmatic religion, as we have known it in the past, cannot encompass what we must now address if we are to continue. The Torah bursts into flames. Its words cannot help us. They are as gibberish. We are alone. Angels are helpless and confused. God has abandoned our project. It is up to us. The terrible moment of co-creation has arrived.

What’s an angel to do, then, when humans defiantly choose “more life” in the face of evil and suffering? How can they explain such an unreasonable act of forgiveness as Ethel Rosenberg and a left-wing gay Jew saying the Kaddish for Roy Cohn, the very icon of self-serving utilitarian individualism run amuck in mayhem of hatred?

In that moment, Louis’s ritual speech at Belize’s behest is performatory. An ancient Hebrew rite becomes an act of redemption. Moral and religious leadership is claimed and enacted in the moment, at the deathbed, in the prophetic hands of the marginalized believer. A miracle occurs.

Whence comes Belize’s moral authority? For moral authority he claims, in his dignified treatment of Roy Cohn, even as he personally chokes on relating to the man as a private person. There is a something larger at stake. In insisting on the necessity of the ritual act for a man he detests, then appropriating and, in fact, redeeming the life-saving medicine for a more deserving person, he takes power. A disenfranchised gay black nurse becomes efficacious through action and agency, empowering his community.

The nurse, servant leader of the sick and dying, initiates the pivotal salvific action. Belize's is a moral act in a moral drama. Moral action is action that transcends mean self-interest through relationship to some larger whole, serving some larger value. He is not acting out of any personal desire. He is acting out of love for his friend and his community. He loves human dignity more than he hates any single person. It is this love that gives him his clear ground for action. "Forgiveness is where love and justice meet," he tells us.

At the epilogue we are told the struggle of gay men with AIDS is the struggle of all people for justice and dignity; they will not go away. This is a political statement, and a call for social justice. But in the end, although it has definite political implications, *Angels in America* is a fundamentally moral and religious drama. Kushner considers the political frame insufficient to hold all the complexities of living, loving, and suffering in multi-dimensional, interconnected relationships. These great questions have always been and continue to be the province of religion, the common thread that can re-bind our nation into a body politic.

We have reached the limits of tolerance, he tells us. It is insufficient to carry us through the anguish and the moral unraveling tearing us apart as a nation. Social justice and political struggle alone, outside a moral and religious context, cannot reunite us. The moral commonwealth was already in tatters as we neared the millennium. It had been torn asunder by the likes of Roy Cohn. Twenty years after Part One of *Angels*, medicine has stemmed the tide of the pandemic, but it is not healed. Open sores infect our congress, our churches, and our judiciary. Without vision and hope for redemption, such tumultuous events simply grind our souls to dust. How do we redeem a healthy commonwealth? Where is *our* Perestroika?

Prior's speech to the angels may give us a clue. He affirms the animate. We are not stones. Animation and desire are what living things do, he tells them. He chooses more life in the face of suffering and demise. More life. We will not stop changing. It is our

nature, and that, perhaps, is the point. Maybe that's why God can't be found with the council of angels in Heaven. Maybe God is here with us, changing right along with us. I would guess this is the ground that Kushner stands on to prophesy: the shifting ground of an animate universe, the omnipresent possibility of transformation, upon which redemption and regeneration rest. A God who has not, after all, abandoned us, but who is right here beside us. I am reminded of a young man I knew at the height of the epidemic, as the AIDS chaplain at a San Francisco hospital. An estranged Anglican priest laid dying, alone and bitter. He looked up from his deathbed and demanded, "Where is Christ now?" The chaplain answered, "I believe he's right here in this bed."

Kushner's prophetic vision points to the need for religious leadership, whether emanating from pulpit or stage, to guide us through troubled waters and keep us true to our course. Religious leadership can help us see a vision beyond that of our immediate self-interest. We recall the opening scene, in which the Rabbi describes the journey of Louis' grandmother from the shtetls of Russia across the sea, to the new world, at once leaving everything behind and taking the soil of the old country with her to be carried in her grandchildren's hearts. Perhaps Kushner is calling us forward on a new journey, calling for new religious leadership to carry us across this desert into a new promised land. If evil is estrangement, as Tillich wrote, then good is a journey toward unity in co-creation with God and the angels, taking up the mantle of God's love and creation, in whose image we are created, and insisting that that love extends to all God's children, all the faces of life and humanity. We are at last becoming adult children, taking our places beside the angels, able and willing to help steer at last toward the good, the true, and the beautiful.