

Chapter 2

Ascending and Descending Angels

The ramp in Jacob's dream has angels coming down the ramp from Eternity to here and angels moving up the ramp from here to Eternity. The descending angels are the angels of encounter with the Unfathomable Final Reality, and the ascending angels are angels of response to the Unfathomable Final Reality.

Perhaps we should note for any literalists that are still reading this book, that ascending and descending are metaphorical images that are part of a very old metaphor that pictures Final Reality as up – up above the ordinary realities of our lives. Until fairly recently, this metaphor seemed logical and useful. In the flat-earth era, it seemed obvious that the earth (here below the sky) was full of changes. The sun, moon and planets also moved. The stars were seen as stationary, but they were potentially movable since they were seen as creatures who might fall. Final Reality, however, was changeless; it did not move at all; it was beyond the stars. Therefore, in a flat-earth era, when we wanted to symbolize the changeless, we looked up. But Final Reality does not have to be pictured as up, it can just as well be pictured as standing behind each ordinary reality and shining through it. The ramp leading up to heaven is symbolic talk about the Unfathomable; Jacob dreamed in the symbolic language of his era. Only if the reader will remember that “up” is symbolic talk, will I be able to communicate my meaning using this symbol of a ramp from here to Eternity, with angels moving up and down upon it.

Perhaps the most difficult challenge facing contemporary Christian theology is recognizing that this ancient two-story metaphor is a metaphor. It did not come into being as a literal belief in the existence of an empirically verifiable place. Heaven was not understood by Moses or Jesus or Thomas Aquinas as a literal place up above our ordinary place. Heaven was understood by them as metaphorical talk. But this did not mean false or superstitious talk. Metaphorical talk existed alongside empirical talk as a natural part of discourse.

For example, Jesus used the experience of the familiar patriarchal family of his time as a metaphor for the “Father in heaven.” Final Reality is like a father who welcomes wayward sons and daughters home. Twelve centuries later, Thomas Aquinas was still using this two-story metaphor. He was surprisingly explicit in his awareness that heaven is a metaphor. He used the analogy of an earthly king and said (I am paraphrasing), “*suppose* there is an Eternal King who promulgates an Eternal Law, a law that is unknowable to the human mind.” In other words, this King and his Law are sheer Mystery. This is not literalism. This is metaphorical talk about the unfathomable.

Today we are experiencing the passing of the up-there metaphor and learning to speak of the Eternal as more like a brilliant light that shines through our ordinary experiences. When our consciousness is released to see beyond the boxes of our own personality construction, we can have a full experience of Reality in which the ordinary is transparent to the shining quality of Mysterious Eternity. In this new metaphor the Eternal is no longer pictured as transcending the ordinary but as shining through it. That is, we are experiencing and speaking of Eternal Reality with what we might call the “transparency metaphor.” We admit, as so many have said, that the “transcendent metaphor” is dead, that we killed it and are still killing it because it does not fit well into the rest of our cultural fabric. But this death does not mean that the transcendence metaphor was not alive in earlier eras. Intelligent and highly conscious human beings like Moses, like Jesus, like Thomas Aquinas used the transcendence metaphor with

great power. These persons and thousands of others were not stupid. They simply lived in another era. We can listen to them speak in their own language and metaphors and then translate their words into our own language and into contemporary metaphors that are compatible with the cultural life of our times.

When I speak of angels in this book, I am dialoguing with the metaphors of the past. An angel is an aspect of the transcendence metaphor. An angel comes down from the Eternal into our ordinary lives. Or an angel moves from our ordinary lives up to the Eternal. An angel is a messenger, a communicator, an active motion moving on this ramp of relationship between Eternity and the space-time here and now of your or my actual life. The Bible uses the metaphor of an I-Thou dialogue to speak of our experience of Final Reality. The Awesome Final Reality is encountered by us as a Thou sending messenger angels or states of Awe toward us. And then the deep "I" who is Awed by this "Divine" encounter responds in responses that are also states of Awe. That is, angels of Awed response move back toward the Awesome Final Reality.

Many different diagrams have been drawn of the numerous states of Awe that human beings are capable of experiencing. An important mentor of mine, Joseph W. Mathews, drew four charts which he named the Land of Mystery, the River of Consciousness, the Mountain of Care, and the Sea of Tranquility. On each of these charts were sixteen separate but closely related states of Awe. In other words, he described 64 states of Awe, 64 different angels occupying the ramp of our souls.

I have reordered the information contained in Mathews' charts and in other patterns of analysis into another rational model of these transrational actualities. My model describes various families of angels that move up and down the ramp of our soul. Below is a chart of these families of angels. I will begin with a brief description of the **Angels of Response**: The Angels of Trust, The Angels of Love, and The Angels of Freedom. Later in this chapter, I will describe in some detail the **Angels of Encounter**: The Angels of the Void, The Angels of the Fullness, and The Angels of the Total Demand. Then, in Part Two I will describe further the Angels of Trust, Love, and Freedom.

A Model of the Families of Angels

The Angels of Encounter	The Angels of Response
<p>The Angels of the Void Ever-present Nothingness Inescapable Limitation Unrecoverable Past</p> <p>The Angels of the Fullness Connecting Wholeness Enduring Sustainment Unimaginable Possibility</p> <p>The Angels of the Total Demand Futuric Radicality Inclusive Obligation Unavoidable Intentionality</p>	<p>The Angels of Ultimate Trust Transparent Attention Universal Forgiveness Effortless Letting Be</p> <p>The Angels of Spirit Love Affirmation of Self Enchantment with Being Compassion for Others</p> <p>The Angels of Complete Freedom Beyond Personality Beyond Good and Evil Beyond Fate</p>

The Angels of Response

I will describe first the Angels of Response, because Trust, Love and Freedom are states of being that are central in Christian theology and thus relatively familiar to us.

The Angels of Ultimate Trust

Spirit Trust is a family of angels characterizing the Awed response, moving from each of us toward the Awesome Eternal. On the way to the Eternal these angels pass through all the layers of our own inner consciousness, all the layers of our own body, all the close neighbors, all the far neighbors, the solar system, our galaxy, our cluster of galaxies, and the entire space/time continuum of objects and forces. As the angels of Trust pass through each of these layers, each layer and each aspect of each layer is courageously faced in all its complex reality. Each aspect of each layer is trusted as a gift from a Wholeness that is deemed trustworthy. Each reality is allowed to be what it is without protest or compulsion to alter it. Trust is a family of divine angels not a creation of my or your will. We participate in Trust, but we do not create it. Even though we are doing the Trust, Trust is a gift. It is a dynamic of Reality. It is a family of angels moving up the ramp of our soul.

The Angels of Spirit Love

Spirit love is another family of angels of Awed response, moving from each of us toward the Awesome Eternal. On the way to the Eternal these angels pass through all the layers of our own inner consciousness, all the layers of our own body, all the close neighbors, all the far neighbors, the solar system, our galaxy, our cluster of galaxies, and the entire space/time continuum of objects and forces. As the angels of Love pass through each of these layers, each layer and each aspect of each layer is affirmed with deep gratitude, delight, joy, and sweet compassion for its presence, its fulfillment, and its well-being. Spirit love includes loving ourselves, loving all other human beings (friends and enemies), and loving the Wholeness in which all beings dwell. Love, like Trust, is a family of angels, not a creation of my or your will. We participate in Love, but we do not create it. Even though we are doing the Love, the Love is a gift. It is a dynamic of Reality. It is a family of angels moving up the ramp of our soul.

The Angels of Complete Freedom

Spirit Freedom is also a family of angels of Awed response, moving from each of us toward the Awesome Eternal. On the way to the Eternal these angels pass through all the layers of our own inner consciousness, all the layers of our own body, all the close neighbors, all the far neighbors, the solar system, our galaxy, our cluster of galaxies, and the entire space/time continuum of objects and forces. As the angels of Freedom pass through each of these layers, each layer and each aspect of each layer is chosen, is accepted without judgment, and is courageously altered without certainty of doing the right thing. Freedom, like Love and Trust, is a family of divine angels not a creation of my or your will. We participate in Freedom, but we do not create it. Even though we are doing the Freedom, the Freedom is a gift. It is a dynamic of Reality. It is a family of angels moving up the ramp of our soul.

We might say that the number of ascending angels is infinite, but according to my model of organization, each of these ascending angels belongs to one of these three families of angels: Trust, Love, or Freedom. I will describe the angels of Awed response more fully in Part Two. In the rest of this chapter, I will describe in detail the descending angels, the angels that move from Eternity to here – moving to the here of your or my conscious center. The descending angels communicate to humanity the power, holiness, and benevolence of the Unfathomable Final Reality. They also communicate the necessity of our response. That response may be Trust, Love, and Freedom. That response may be despair, malice, and bondage. We participate in choosing our response, but if we choose Trust, Love, and Freedom, Reality carries us along. If we choose otherwise, we must fight Reality, and fighting Reality is a losing

battle. It is despair. It is malice. It is bondage to the demands of a limited reality rather than living the liberating devotion to Reality as a Whole.

We might say that living the Spirit Life is as easy as falling off a log. All we have to do is tilt and gravity takes over, carrying us to the solid ground. If, on the other hand, we opt to stay on the log, that takes effort. It takes more effort to move to bigger and bigger logs. It takes still more effort to pile the logs high into the sky and stand on the top of the pile. But falling off the log to solid ground is easy; all you have to do is tilt. The response of Trust, Love, and Freedom is like that. It takes only a tilt; then Reality takes over.

The Angels of Encounter

Like the ascending angels of Awed response, the descending angels of Awed encounter are infinite in number. Nevertheless, they can be grouped into families of angels. Such is the capacity of the human mind – to describe the unfathomable without reducing it to the boxes of its description. I will describe the descending angels as members of three overarching families: the family of the Void, the family of the Fullness, and the family of the Total Demand. Later, I will explain why this organization is meaningful. But for now I will focus on the experiences that the symbolism of descending angels can point to in our everyday lives.

The Angels of the Void

Western literature is filled with references to the angel of death. We might wonder why death can be called an “angel.” Why not a demon? Death is an angel because it brings us the truth, the truth about our finitude. When we have crawled into our personality box, into that pseudo-reality of our own creation, we have most often left our consciousness of death out of that box, especially our present-time consciousness of our own death. We are profoundly inclined to assume that we are the exception to the rule that all things die. Since we do not have the courage, the skills, or even a reason for being realistic on this topic, we need the angel of death to remind us that all things die, including everything in our outer and inner life that makes up what we usually call “me.” The angel of death communicates to us the invincible power of the Final Reality. We often picture the angel of death as a large skeleton swinging a scythe, but humanity has created other pictures. In India the goddess Kali with her belt of skulls and her two edged sword is a symbol of death as well as a symbol of destruction – destruction being half of what goes on in our lives. Kali is also the slayer of falsehood. As we approach the final detachment from our box of personality habits, Kali appears as the redemptive, purifying slayer of the last remnants of falsehood in our lives. We can identify with Kali and other angels of death and destruction, when we see ourselves in this role of slaying all falsehood in order that the sober truth may reign.

The Angels of Ever-present Nothingness

The angels of death and destruction belong to a family of angels I am calling “Ever-present Nothingness.” Even at the moment of birth, we can notice that we are born out of a void, out of a black hole of nothingness. As Nikos Kazantzakis put it, “We come from a dark abyss and we end in a dark abyss and we call the luminous interval life.” Birth is an entry from the abyss. Death is an entry into the abyss. And as we walk our life from birth to death, the infinite abyss walks with us.

We are surrounded by an ever-present Nothingness out of which we have come and into which we are returning. Each galaxy, each star, each planet, each squirrel, each human had a beginning and will have an end. The angels of ever-present nothingness

travel with us at all times, smiling, grinning, constantly reminding us that we were not always here and will not always be here. Carlos Castaneda suggests that death is a constant companion walking just behind our left shoulder. If we turn our head quickly, perhaps we can catch a glimpse of this companion.

The Angels of Inescapable Limitation

The angels of ever-present nothingness have some cousins in a family of angels I will label “inescapable limitation.” These angels remind us that we are never secure, no matter how much money we have, how smart we are, how much we have accomplished, how many people love us, how much effort we have expended toward being good. All our high and pleasant moments do not last. Everything in our life that we might be tempted to consider necessary to our happiness is vulnerable to loss. And even the things we currently have are limited. Few of us are as beautiful as we might like to be. Few of us are as smart as we might like to be. Few of us are as successful as we might like to be. The angels of inescapable limitation communicate to us that no particular part of our life is infinite in any way whatsoever. Perhaps one of the angels in this family is named “unavoidable futility.” Futility is unavoidable because we are limited by Final Reality. “Final Reality” means that all-powerful actuality by which we are finally limited. This power, this holiness, this truth is communicated to us by the family of guardian angels I have named “inescapable limitation.”

The Angels of Unrecoverable Past

A third subfamily of the angels of the Void can be named “the angels of unrecoverable past.” We often say that what is past is past, but we do not always believe it. And even when we do believe it, we do not always accept it. Whatever we had yesterday, we no longer have today, at least not in the same way. Whoever we were yesterday, we no longer are today. Even though there are continuities, there are also big differences. Actual life in the living now is a continual departure from earlier moments of now that never return. The angels of unrecoverable past communicate to us over and over that this is so. Life is a flow onwards, forcing each realistic person to become detached from all things, lest we be ripped in two by the Power of time that relentlessly moves forward. No one can willingly live in the here and now of their lives until they see that all the other options are subject to the invincible wrath of time. The angels of the unrecoverable past communicate to us that we need to live each moment, each day, not the day before, not the day after. This NOW is our life. The content of this NOW, pleasant and unpleasant, will soon be gone forever. It will return into the Void out of which it came.

Most of the time, all these angels of the Void seem like angels of wrath to our familiar living in the supposedly safe box of our enduring personality habits. But if we are to take the Spirit journey, we need to leave this box. If we yearn for Spirit fulfillment, we must open ourselves to leaving the box of personality as our primary identification. When such openness is present, the angels of the Void are experienced as healing agents, as gifts of grace that show us the futility of clinging to the passing orders of life.

The Angels of The Fullness

The angels of the Void are not the only angels who are coming down the ramp from Eternity to here. We also encounter the angels of The Fullness. These angels communicate the EVERY-THING-NESS of the Final Awesome Actuality. They communicate to our consciousness the detail of encountering Wholeness.

The Angels of Connecting Wholeness

The Unfathomable Final Reality comes toward us as the connectedness of all things, as the EVERY-THING-NESS in which all things cohere. The gravity of the sun, moon, and Earth shapes the space/time in which we live. The light of distant galaxies reaches our telescopes. In the more intimate aspects of our lives, all the people we know are residents in our own heads, haunting us, instructing us, demanding responses from us. We are connected to all things: a robbery in our neighborhood, the AIDS pandemic in Africa, the squirrels in our trees, the coyotes in our fields, the sun, the moon, the stars. We are each connected to all things. We are not separate. We are embraced by the Wholeness of Reality. Even our own deep autonomy and Freedom do not separate us. That autonomy, that Freedom is posited in us by the Wholeness in which we dwell and in which we exercise our autonomy and Freedom. If we use our Freedom to separate ourselves from the Whole, we create an unreality. "Connecting wholeness" is a useful name for this subfamily of the angels of Fullness.

The Angels of Enduring Sustainment

The angels of Fullness also include a subfamily we might call "enduring sustainment." Whatever is sustaining the sun, moon, and stars is also sustaining you and me. We began our lives through no effort of our own. We have a cosmos to live in through no effort of our own. We might be able to affect the time of our death, but if we choose to live a while longer, we do so by allowing ourselves to be sustained by the Sustainer of all things. These angels communicate the welcome we have from Final Reality: the forgiving embrace, the ever-present support, the foundation and underpinning of our existence. Our very desires, longings, and drives are gifts of this Enduring Sustainment. In our despairing need to be a separate person isolated in our box, we may experience these angels as angels of wrath. But for those who are willing to be their Spirit wholeness, the angels of enduring sustainment welcome us home to our true lives, our true nature, our actual Spirit journey.

The Angels of Unimaginable Possibility

The angels of Fullness also include a subfamily of angels we might call "unimaginable possibility." When we insist on living in our box, we eventually run out of possibilities. Hopelessness ensues. Despair yells out loud or hides in our unconsciousness. The boxed person cannot see most of the actual possibilities, cannot even imagine them. Imagination is restrained by the box. The angels of unimaginable possibility bring this truth: there is always another way to look at the matter. Reality and possibility are always bigger than we thought. The possibilities that actually stand before us is truly unimaginable. To access this fullness, we have to step off into the unknown, the unknown unknown of the actual future. The angels of unimaginable possibility beckon us into the fullness of our actual lives. A boxed person will tend to resist these angels. We feel secure in our box, and may not want to sacrifice security for fullness. But Final Reality loves us with unimaginable possibilities and sends angels to lead us forth onto paths which we have never taken before. Consider a professional athlete who sustains a career-ending injury. As long as being a professional athlete is the whole game, only despair is possible. Imagination must be expanded – coaching, sports casting, restaurant owning, etc. Consider a military superpower which is unable to win its wars. There are other possibilities for that nation. These seemingly unimaginable possibilities can open out into fresh directions and contexts for creative living.

The Angels of The Total Demand

The angels of The Void and the angels of The Fullness are joined by a third family of

angels coming down the ramp from Eternity to here – the angels of The Total Demand.

The Angels of Futuric Radicality

The future always hangs before us as an uncompromising demand for response. The actual content of that response has options, but some response is necessary. Even what we call “no response” is actually a response. Being alive means making responses. Responses are required, demanded. There is no escape from making a response. Life moves forward with or without our consent. Just as the moments of the past are unrecoverable, the moments of the future are unavoidable. The relentless future demands a response, and this demand is another experience of the descending angels of Final Reality. “Futuric radicality” is my name for the first subfamily of the angels of Total Demand. The word “radicality” points to the fact that none of us is allowed to be fully conservative. The present state of things is always being overturned and superseded. The inadequacies of our familiar habits are always being shown up by the challenging future that relentlessly appears.

The Angels of Inclusive Obligation

The future which is coming at us is not simply my or your individual future; it is the inclusive future that contains everybody and everything. Speaking personally, my life does not take place in the box of my personal life or in the box of US domestic issues. I am part of a planetary drama that includes Muslim fundamentalists and Muslim moderates, Israeli fundamentalists and Israeli moderates, an earthquake in Pakistan, a tsunami in Asia, an AIDS pandemic in Africa, the growth of oil usage in China, the needs of women all over the world to find a greater place of dignity and participation, the needs of the poor all over the world to have even the simplest form of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. I can respond to all these things. And because I can respond, I am response-able. I am **responsible** for everything. This is a Spirit state I am talking about. I am **not** talking about some sort of moral beating of myself over the head. I am **not** talking about what my specific vocation needs to be. I am talking about a **quality of my Spirit being and your Spirit being**. Nikos Kazantzakis pointed to this state of Being in this bit of poetry: “Learn to obey. Only he who obeys a rhythm superior to his own is free. Learn to command. Only he who can give commands may represent me here on earth. Love responsibility. Say: ‘It is my duty, and mine alone, to save the earth. If it is not saved, then I alone am to blame.’”¹ That is an angel of Inclusive Obligation speaking.

The Angels of Unavoidable Intentionality

The angels of unavoidable intentionality tell us that we don’t get to stand on the sidelines of history. We are in history and we have to respond. We can back away, but that is a response. We can pretend to do nothing, but that is also a response. We can follow the path of laziness, fear, and addictions, but that would be our response. We are in this business of living as an agent of response. The angels of unavoidable intentionality reveal to us that embracing this responsibility and being this responsibility is what a Spirit being looks like. Our intentionality has only two primary options: to intentionally attempt to escape intentionality or to intentionally be the intentionality that is demanded of us. The experience of being intentional is more like a surrender than a heroic effort. The experience of being intentional is more like being spontaneous than being in a struggle. If someone tells you that they are struggling to be intentional, ask them what the struggle is about. If they can be honest, they will have to admit that they are struggling to quit struggling to be unintentional. Intentionality itself requires no struggle. Intentionality is unavoidable. It is like a

¹ Kazantzakis, Nikos, *The Saviors of God* (Simon and Schuster: 1960) page 68

mighty river already in motion. The Total Demand requires a total surrender to our unavoidable intentionality. This is another subfamily of angels moving down the ramp from Eternity to here.

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Hosts of angels move down our ramp from Eternity to here. These are the angels of encounter with Final Reality. And hosts of angels move up our ramp from here to Eternity. These are the angels of response to Final Reality. This ramp of moving angels represents our soul. These angels define what I mean by the word "soul." Our soul is not a structure of our own making. We did not intend it. We did not choose it. We are constructed with it, and we are stuck with it. We may be trying to escape from it, but our own soul is inescapable. Our soul is posited (created) by Final Reality. Our soul is an expression of the creativity of that Mysterious Wholeness that is also the far end of that ramp that is our soul. When we are living in our box, all this is unclear. We experience a restricted soul when we imprison ourselves within the box of our personality. In the imagination of our personality, our self seems to us something much more modest than all this Divine activity that characterizes our true soul. What we call our "ego" is a stand-in, a facsimile, a tiny replacement for the true soul. Indeed, our ego is only a creature of our own imagination; it is a working model of who we think we are. And it is far less than who we truly are. Our true soul, the soul we actually are, is a ramp from here to Eternity with angels aplenty moving down and up upon it.

And if "angel" is still a difficult symbol for you, perhaps the language of a phenomenology of Awe is more to your liking. Your soul is the Awe of Encounter with Final Reality (the movement from The Awesome Final Reality to the center of your conscious being). And your soul is also the Awe of Response to Final Reality (the movement of Awe initiated in your conscious center and returning through all the layers of your being toward the Awesome Final Reality). Your soul is a dialogue of Encounter and Response, a living, moving, flowing actuality.

If you count yourself a physicist, perhaps you have noticed the Awesome traveling down your ramp as you study the enigmas of space and time or mass and energy. If you count yourself a biologist, perhaps you have noticed the Awesome traveling down your ramp as you have become aware that aliveness and consciousness are mysterious actualities that cannot be explained in terms of the basic ideas of physics. Perhaps something more pedestrian has brought you face-to-face with yourself as a ramp from here to Eternity. Jacob had a dream about this on his first night away from home, traveling alone to a place he had never been before.