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A wing and a prayer

Soaring angels lead a resurgence
of interest in spirituality

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Carla Johnson

Angels are still flying high in American popular culture. Unless you've been living on a cloud the last few years, you know that angels have been very much in our midst, featured on a host of products from greeting cards to salt and pepper shakers, on television and in movies, in college courses and as the subject of hundreds of books, many of which have winged their way onto bestseller lists.

If you think of angels simply as a fad (or, for the more Scrooge-like, strictly as a money-making industry), chances are that the next three people you meet won't agree. A 1996 Gallup Poll revealed that 72 percent of adult Americans believe in angels, up from 56 percent in 1978.

Why the continuing interest in angels? Is it millennial fever, aging Baby Boomers' increasing interest in spiritual matters, the popularity of Della Reese in CBS television's surprise hit "Touched by an Angel," or something else?

"Angel sightings have been happening throughout recorded history, so it's not surprising they're happening now," says Peter Kreeft, author of "Angels and Demons: What Do We Really Know About Them?" (Ignatius Press, \$9.95) and professor of philosophy at Boston College. "A kind of hunger for the supernatural, for contact with something greater than the self, manifests itself in the interest in angels."

"With today's breakdown of the family, both Baby Boomers and Gen Xers long to find someone to protect them," says Carla

Johnson, assistant professor of communication at St. Mary's College in Notre Dame, Ind., and a scholar of marketing and popular culture. "Women especially, as society's nurturers and caretakers, have a heightened sense of, 'Who's going to take care of me?' And who better than someone above this world?"

"People are looking to spiritual components to find a sense of rootedness in these changable times," says Hassidic Rabbi Laible Wolf, a worldwide lecturer on the Kabbala and author of the audiocassette "Angels, Souls & Dreams" (Human Development Institute, \$45).

Whatever the source of contemporary interest, the fascination with angels reaches deep into human history. Elaborate hierarchies and categories of angelic forces are outlined and debated in a wide range of religious and secular literature.

And angelic images span at least two millennia. For example, in "The Invisible Made Visible," a Vatican exhibit of angels opening in Los Angeles in February, one-fifth of the

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artifacts are pre-Christian images of angels, according to Father Allen Duston, exhibit coordinator at the Vatican Museum.

Angels are ecumenical, part of nearly every religious tradition, including Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism.

"If we don't have angels, we don't have the story of Christ's birth or resurrection," notes Robert Everett, director of the Institute for Jewish-Christian Understanding at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pa. And although some Christian thinkers dismiss the Catholic tradition of guardian angels as lore, others cite Matthew 18:10 as a direct reference to angels watching over young children: "See that you never despise any of these little ones, for I tell you their angels in heaven are continually in the presence of my Father in heaven."

Angels appear in the Koran and figure in Islamic practices. "When Muslims pray and turn to the right and to the left, they are turning to the angels on each shoulder who are recording their good and bad deeds for Judgment Day," says Laleh Bakhtiar, author of "Sufi Women of America: Angels in the Making" (Kazi Publications, \$12.95). "There's also a [Muslim] saying that angels are there whenever God's name is mentioned."

"The appearance of angels in the [Hebrew] Bible is not extensive, but in post-Biblical Jewish literature, an extensive and very specific tradition grows up about angels," says Howard Schwartz, author of "Gabriel's Palace: Jewish Mystical Tales" (Oxford University Press, \$16.95) and professor of English at the University of Missouri at St. Louis. "For example, a famous 18th Century rabbi, Pinhas of Koretz, said that when two people develop a great friendship, an angel is created between them, and that angel lives and breathes as long as the two people see each other at least once a year. If they don't, the angel dies."

There are ordinary men and women today who feel they have experienced angelic encounters in their everyday lives.

Don Lay, supervisor of village code enforcement in Bensenville, was a young officer in a western Chicago suburb the January evening he received a radio call for a traffic accident across town.

"On my way I hit a patch of ice on an overpass and lost control of the car," recalls Lay. "I crossed the median and was going south on a northbound lane and saw a semi coming straight at me. I really thought that was it. But what was so strange was that the next thing I knew I was in the correct lane, two lanes over. I felt a force that lifted my car up and moved it out of harm's way.

"I was so shaken that I pulled over for a while to regain my composure. I didn't see anyone or hear any voices, but I've thought since, as weird as it sounds, that we have guardian angels who protect us. I was almost killed, but God has a plan for why we are here and I guess that just wasn't my time."

Although many scholars scoff at the notion, a belief persists that some angels are deceased relatives or friends, watching over individuals with loving protection.

Jo Ann Heller, a Batavia resident who works in the accounting field, lost her fiancé to pancreatic cancer three years ago.

"Long before he got sick, we had a conversation about angels and I said, 'I don't think I have a guardian angel,'" Heller recalls. "He said he thought he did, either an aunt or his mother. One day I was holding his hand in the hospital and I said, 'Will you be my guardian angel?' and he nodded yes. He died the next day.

"It was tax season and I had promised him I would do what I could to help his son take care of his clients. So for the next few weeks I went to his office after work at 4 p.m., but I always left promptly at 9 p.m. because that's when the other businesses closed and I didn't like being alone in the building.

"One night when I was getting ready to leave, I heard a man's voice — not my internal voice — say 'don't go yet — stay a little longer.' Never in my life have I had the experience of hearing a voice outside myself, but I wasn't afraid. I stayed five more minutes, and then I left.

"On the drive home I came to a huge highway accident that had clearly happened just minutes before. At that moment I felt that the voice back in the office had been my guardian angel's. I said out loud, 'Thank you, Ron.'"

"There's always been an interest in angels, but the more people share their stories, the more other people are willing to open up about things that happened in their lives, even in their childhoods, that they think could have been the work of an angel," says Lisa Marie Rovito, assistant editor of **2-year-old Angels on Earth**

magazine (circulation 800,000), a bimonthly collection of readers' experiences with angels.

Joan Webster Anderson has chronicled ordinary people's stories of angelic intervention in numerous books, including "Angels We Have Heard On High: A Book of Seasonal Blessings" (Ballantine Books, \$12.95) and "Where Angels Walk: True Stories of Heavenly Visitors" (Ballantine Books, \$12). The bestselling author continues to receive dozens of letters each month from readers who describe personal encounters with angels.

"I like to think of angels as a beginning," Anderson says. "I tell people to think about times in their own life when they had a coincidence, and then to wonder if that was really all it was. My goal is to get people talking about these things."

Sophy Burnham practically invented the angel book genre in 1990 with "A Book of Angels" (Ballantine Books, \$6.99), and has recently written "The Ecstatic Journey: The Transforming Power of Mystical Experience" (Ballantine Books, \$25).

"Angels come as dreams, visions, voices, intuition, other people," Burnham says. "People who have connections with a higher power often have connections with angels, but the important thing is not whether you see an angel or have a mystical experience, but rather, are you changed, what are the fruits?"

Two sisters, Barbara Mark and Trudy Griswold, turned their popular angel classes into books, "Angelspeak: How To Talk with Your Angels" and "The Angelspeak Book of Prayer and Healing" (both by Simon & Schuster, \$13.95 each).

"Our feeling is that everyone has been talking to their angels all their lives," says Mark. "We help people discern angel thoughts from mental chitchat with four fundamentals: ask the angels for help; believe it will be given; let it happen, say thank you.

"Angels are with us all the time," agrees Lois Grant, author of "Spirit at Work: A Journey of Healing" (Emerald Wave, \$15), "but we always have the choice to listen or not."

Not everyone wants to be touched by an angel.

"I believe in angels, but I don't want to meet one," says Jonathan Wilson, associate professor of religious studies at Westmont College in Santa Barbara, Calif. "In the Old and New Testaments, whenever an angel appears, the person is almost always afraid, even 'sore afraid,' as the King James version describes the shepherds when the multitude of heavenly hosts announce the birth of Jesus. Angels are scary."

"Judaic angels are not always personified as a person, but are much more of a psychic force of the mind, as in a prophecy," says Alan Brill, professor of Jewish thought and mysticism at Yeshiva University in New York and an Orthodox rabbi. "The imagery of little cherubs on Hallmark cards doesn't recognize the incredible terror and awe these powers would command."

Awesome or benevolent, angels have merged into the American scene. There is even a non-denominational Angels Collectors Club of America Inc. (303-278-3772), a 21-year-old organization with biannual conventions and 41 chapters for collectors of angel memorabilia. And an Angel Museum, scheduled to open in April of 1998 in a former church in Beloit, Wis. (608-365-4838), will display more than 10,000 angel artifacts from the Joyce Berg Collection, and the Oprah Winfrey Collection of Black Angels.

Some contemporary thinkers find today's angel boom less than benign.

"I'm afraid that the current emphasis on angels is an individualistic spirituality, a kind of 'me and my angel' approach," Wilson says. "If your journey toward spirituality begins with angels, wonderful — but don't let it end there. Seek a more mature spirituality that leads you to community, to being with others."

"Taking the concept of angels literally is dangerous," says retired Rabbi Morris Margolies, author of "A Gathering of Angels" (Ballantine Books, \$12) and a former professor of Jewish history at the University of Kansas. "Angels are metaphors for the potential of good and evil that resides in each of us. The survival of the human race depends on taking personal and national responsibility for what we do wrong."

"Angels are the traditional spiritual connectors between people and a larger force," says Terry Deal, professor of human development at Peabody College of Vanderbilt University in Nashville and the author of "Leading with Soul" (Jossey-Bass, \$18.50). "I've seen 'It's a Wonderful Life' play in airports and barrooms and watched grown men cry when Clarence earns his wings. Angels make us shine and bring smiles even to cynics."