

Our unseen companions

“Angels, saints, and ancestors are real presences that are not visible to us in our linear, rational mind,” says Abbey of the Arts founder Christine Valters Paintner.

Interview by [David Dault](#) in the [April 2024](#) issue

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Christine Valters Paintner is founder of Abbey of the Arts, a virtual monastery offering classes and resources on contemplative practice and creative expression. She is author of 17 books on monasticism and creativity. David Dault spoke to her about her most recent book, *The Love of Thousands: How Angels, Saints, and Ancestors Walk with Us toward Holiness*. A longer version of this conversation appeared on Dault's podcast, *Things Not Seen*.

I want to begin with a quote you included in the book from the Native author Kaitlin B. Curtice: “You may not be Native in the way that I am Native, but you belong to a people as you long for a space to know what it means to hold the realities of love, mystery, and hope.” How were you thinking about that in the context of angels, saints, and ancestors?

Well, so many people are exiled from their Indigenous lands, whether by choice or through colonization or through force, through slavery. They don't have a sense of belonging to the land that they're living on. They don't have a sense of their ancestors being from this place. When we're moving unconsciously in this way, there is this pain of severing that we then act out in unconscious ways. It's real suffering and real sorrow. My work with the angels, saints, and ancestors has largely been about discovering places of belonging and connection that present to us in the invisible world, so it's not even just about the physical reality that we're in. Then we can bring that sense of belonging to wherever we happen to be.

I want to linger on what you said, that there's real suffering that happens when we don't acknowledge that we are a part of a larger family that is not just our parents and our grandparents but can actually connect to thousands of people going back generations, and that we are also in some way kindred with or in relationship with those that don't have a physical existence—what we might call angels or spirits of benevolence. If I understand your thesis, it's our not acknowledging this that contributes to our suffering. I'd love for you to expand on that a little bit.

First of all, the angels, saints, and ancestors are real presences that are not visible to us in our linear, rational mind. They exist in this threshold space, what's known as a liminal space in the Celtic imagination. But this force of love, grounded in divine

love, is available to us, and actively cultivating it through intuitive practices can help to give us that sense of support and belonging and care and kinship and all of those beautiful gifts that I think most of us are longing for, even if we're not completely aware of it.

Saints are not necessarily related to us, and yet you treat them as part of that kinship.

Yes. When I talk about ancestors, I am primarily referring to ancestors of blood and bones, the thousands who have lived before us who brought us to this moment. We also have ancestors of path. We have ancestors of calling, ancestors of vocation. And in the Christian tradition, there's a more formalized tradition of the saints. The way I would describe the saints is those who are wise and rooted in love who have died and passed over the veil. Not all of the ancestors are wise and well, and there is work that we can participate in to help with that healing. The saints are the ones that we know embodied love in their lifetime. They are available as guides, wisdom figures, and sources of support and inspiration.

My work is about integrating contemplative practice and creative expression, and Hildegard of Bingen, for me, is the embodiment of that. She and I are very likely not physically related in any way, but I turn to her as a source of wisdom and cultivate my relationship with her. The blood and bone part is important, but I think the embrace is much wider, and we're looking for support from all of those who reach out in love.

For me, there's a sense that these beings also want to be in relationship with us.

So we're not necessarily talking about those saints who have been officially defined by an organization like the Catholic Church. You're seeing this in a much more capacious fashion.

I don't like to limit how we understand the Divine, and certainly the saints who are the embodiment of that divine love can be manifested in any number of different religious traditions or even none at all. Maybe there's an artist or a poet who wasn't particularly a religious person but who lived a life of real beauty and love, who you feel inspired by or connected to.

You suggested that as unseen presences help us on our journey, we in some way also have agency to help and heal them. What do you mean by

that?

When my father died about 25 years ago, we were estranged. He was a wounded person, an addict. It was very painful. Then a few years later, my mother died. I began to wonder, what happens when someone dies in a wounded state?

The idea is that though these souls may or may not be in a state of the fullness of love, they can change even after death. On this journey with my father, I realized I was praying for the souls in purgatory. For many years, I resisted the idea of purgatory. But that's exactly what I was doing.

That may sound very strange to some people.

We know from the field of epigenetics that there are actual changes that happen to our DNA from wounds, ancestral family wounds from generations back, and that we carry the wounds of our ancestors in our own beings. Carl Jung said the unlived dreams of our parents and grandparents continue to be expressed in our lives. Even if we have absolutely no idea about our actual, genetic inheritance, we can ask the ancestors who are wise and well to help us. I believe we can do this healing not just on behalf of ourselves but also for those generations who came before us.

It reminds me of the ancient Christian text *The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity*. One of them keeps having a dream of a brother who has died. In the dream he is trying to drink from a fountain. Eventually he is able to drink from the fountain, and then one night the brother is not at the fountain at all. The interpretation is that the prayers of Perpetua and Felicity helped the brother to complete his journey to paradise.

I think that's a beautiful example. When I mentioned purgatory, I did so with a little reticence because I still have a trembling around that word, because it does make me feel uncomfortable. Yet I'm just pointing to the reality of it, whatever we call it. Healing doesn't happen in isolation. Healing is not something that we just do on our own and figure out for ourselves. We are always part of a collective, and that collective includes invisible as well as visible beings, human and nonhuman presences. It's a widening out of our understanding of how healing happens. It's not just a human, individual sort of phenomenon.

I was fascinated by how you deal with angels in the book. Even just in the Christian and Jewish traditions, we find angels that have very distinct

personalities and roles within what we might call the order of the cosmos. You look particularly at the four archangels and connect them not simply to spiritual space but to the physical space that we live in. You write, for example, that the four archangels help to ground us in our movement in the cardinal directions. How do angels map to our physical world?

Angels are the first topic I cover in the book, but they're the last ones I really grew into my own relationship with, in part because I didn't really like the little baby angels we have grown accustomed to seeing in popular culture. I didn't feel like those kinds of angels could meet me in my reality as an adult human being. Then, when I was in Austria, I had a pulmonary embolism and nearly died. There is a church in Vienna called the Church of St. Michael, and on top of it is this really large statue of the archangel Michael—with the sword and Lucifer and all that. I remember walking by the church dozens of times, if not hundreds. But on this particular time, all of a sudden, I felt a shift. I felt the presence of the archangel Michael as the warrior and protector, as an archetype that could be present to me and offer me gifts that I had not previously seen or experienced. Once I opened that door, I discovered so much more.

The Jewish and Islamic traditions are both full of teachings about angels. There's a Jewish bedtime prayer where you call the archangels to stand on your different sides: Michael on your right, as the warrior and protector; Gabriel, the messenger, on your left; Uriel, the embodiment of wisdom, in front of you; and Raphael, the healer, behind you. And so we have this sense of encircling. We also have this in the Celtic tradition, with St. Patrick's breastplate prayer, which calls on the presence of Christ in every direction. I find it quite compelling to think about this human desire to feel that sense of being encircled and protected. The archangels surround us. They're already there, but we can call upon their presence and then we can lean into these different archetypal energies depending on what we're in need of in our lives.

When we're thinking about ancestors, we can look through genealogies or stories or possessions passed down to us. We can find tangible connection there. If we think about the saints, we could go to a place where there's a reliquary, some aspect of the physicality of the saints, and we can connect to them there. But when we're talking about angels, we're talking about completely spiritualized beings that have no physical corporeality. What are some of the ways you suggest to connect with these beings that have no real kind of physical manifestation in the way that saints and ancestors

have?

Well, one way is to create an altar space. That's a very physical, embodied, ritualized way of expressing our desire to be in relationship with these invisible beings. You can put on the altar symbols perhaps of the different energies that the archangels represent for you. It might be a feather for communication, or it might be a bowl of water for healing, or something earthy for wisdom. I think of Michael as that fiery protective energy. So that could be a candle. I often recommend people go for a contemplative walk, which is a walk where they aren't trying to get anywhere, with only the intention to connect to the archangels and to ask for gifts to be received.

Another piece that's really important—it was really key in medieval theology—is the idea of angels and music, that there is a perpetual choir of angels in the heavens. For Hildegard, singing the liturgy of the hours was a way of participating in that primal paradisiacal harmony. I think music of many forms can be that kind of communication and joining in with the angels, who are all singing praises all the time.

I was very taken with the idea that we once had access to that kind of celestial and eternal harmony, and we've lost that, but we can regain it to a limited extent when we participate in things like singing in harmony with others.

When you work with people to help them contemplate and to create, what are some of the fruits of that work? What have you observed that shifts in people as you work with them on these two modalities and bring them together?

In the Christian mystical tradition, we talk about the apophatic and cataphatic paths. The apophatic path is the way of unknowing, of darkness, of mystery. This is the category that most contemplative prayer would fall under, in terms of meditation practices and listening in silence and all of that. The cataphatic path is the way of images. It's the path of beauty, of discovering God in the colors and scents and the incredible array of sense experiences that we have in our lives.

These two things are not in opposition; they are a dance or a dialectic.

There may be seasons of our life when we're more drawn to one or the other, but what I discovered in my own life and practice—and then discovered was true of the whole monastic tradition—is that for those who make time for stillness, creativity then wants to pour forth. I have the good fortune, largely because our monastery is virtual, to connect to people all over the world who had this sense of call to being both a monk and an artist—two archetypes I see as nourishing each other. As artists, a lot of the teachings in the monastic tradition help us get out of our own way when it comes to the actual creative practice, where all the inner judgment can arise and stop us from doing what makes us feel most alive.

The idea of becoming more fully present to ourselves and the idea of getting out of our own way—on the surface, those seem like contradictory ideas.

I'm a big fan of paradox. We're all a multiplicity of parts, right? We all have different voices inside of us, some of which we like to reinforce and some of which we like to resist. And I definitely believe that all of those parts of us serve purposes and can be fruitful sources of wisdom.

In the monastic tradition, hospitality is a core principle. The Rule of Benedict says that when a stranger knocks on the door, welcome that stranger as Christ. To me this is incredibly profound, because it means that the thing that makes me the most uncomfortable is the very face of the Divine. That's where I have the encounter. The monastic tradition and other contemplative practices can invite us into this space where we can embrace more and more of ourselves, because that stranger is within us as well as outside of us. And of course, Jung would say that we project the inner onto the outer. So, it's all connected.

The mystics tell us that the divine spark is in every single being, and I would say again, the human being as well as other living beings. There is this sense of unity that we also can reach through our contemplative practice, this sense of a deep connection to the source of love within us that we then also experience. The more we go to this place of stillness and compassion for ourselves, the more we discover that we're actually connected to everything else that exists.

I can imagine that occasionally this sort of thesis bumps up against those who want to say there is no unseen realm—these are fables, these are just stories. Can you talk about how you would engage such a person, someone

who is committed to the idea that there is only the physical world?

It's obviously a very different worldview, and yet we share some common human experiences in terms of our feelings, states, or perhaps a sense of wonder, beauty, and joy. I think those are places where we can find common language. So even if you don't believe that there are actual invisible presences who are the embodiment of love, to live a human life that feels rich and deep there has to be an openness to love and care and compassion and joy and beauty. Obviously, we don't get that right all the time. But hopefully we're always on the path, whether we believe that source is a divine source or that it's a kind of a choice or an inner moral compass. What is it that generates a sense of generosity in us, a sense of caring for others who we don't necessarily have to care for?

I wonder if, to close, you'll give us what filmmakers would call a sizzle reel of some moments when you have encountered this other world.

Being out in nature for me is a primary way of experiencing this. I was very close to my mom, and I still grieve her loss. Recently, on the anniversary of her death, I went out to the woods near my house to be with her spirit. I put my hands on some of the trees, and I heard her say to me, *My beloved daughter, I am in the greening life force that infuses you and everything that is*. I've been praying with that image a lot, the greening life force. It goes back to St. Hildegard, who saw that aliveness in all of creation. So it's been this beautiful gift of a connection to my mother, but also my mother connected to all of these angels, saints, and ancestors, and my loved ones here and all of creation.

I had another experience, 20 years after my father's death, on the anniversary of my mother's death, while lying on a massage table. It was very spontaneous, even though I had been working hard at this healing work for 20 years, but the moment that the sense of healing came through was so spontaneous and unbidden. I wasn't actively thinking. It just arrived, this sense of my father finally moving into this beautiful, golden light. I think if we slow ourselves down, listen, and cultivate these relationships of care, there's going to be communication. There's going to be these little synchronicities. And if we take them seriously enough, it becomes part of a conversation that's unfolding.

What I really love about that answer is that there is one sense in which we could say these are true metaphysical realities that you are participating

in where, beyond the veil of whatever we might call it, there is healing happening with real people who were part of your life. But the physicalist, the materialist, might come and say, even if I don't believe that, I can see that the stories that we are telling ourselves are improving, and that we have a sense of connection and wholeness so we're not carrying stories of pain and loss and separation but rather stories of healing and generational repair. I hope that you don't hear that as a challenge, but rather as another example of common ground.

I don't hold a lot of attachment to belief. I hold a lot of attachment to practice and how we embody what it is that we hold most dear. Whether or not someone believes a particular doctrine is not as important to me as the conversation that happens—and how we are in relationship to each other, how we show up for one another.

I often think that so many of our world's problems could be softened, alleviated, solved if we danced together. You know, what if we just had space? What if our politicians danced together before some sort of big summit? Dance for me is a symbol of joy and release and surrender and vulnerability. We could be bringing that kind of spirit into our relationship to others—whether we agree with them or not, that isn't actually that relevant to me.