

Becoming Recollected: Human Crossroads – Angelic Turning Points

by Therese Schroeder-Sheker

What is it that the scribe wrote in *Ecclesiastes*? His gaze penetrated the boundaries of space and time. *There is nothing new under the Sun*, he said earnestly. Connect his insight to our experience today: The size and shape of the implements of war change, as does the terrain, but tragically, the cycle of bloodshed is a recurring pattern.

And what about the guileless refrain sung by the young troubadour? What is it that Dylan saw so poignantly in his own inner life exactly sixty years ago? He called them his Back Pages. *Ah, but I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now*. The rigid grids of his preconceived notions disappeared if only for that moment in time. In his lucidity, the presence of paradox was a sure indication of a mysterious truth.

In these two examples, sacred scripture and visionary song both emerge as Wisdom texts. Spanning 2500 years, we see and are seen. Our afflictions and burdens appear in a new light. How natural it is to turn and renew our relationship to all the arts because they have the power to support and encourage life and to ask the questions that matter. Individuals, communities, and nations face their humanitarian crossroads this very moment. We are in urgent need of wisdom. What kind of consciousness is required to face life, to inhabit the turning points with love and insight? With a combination of bravery and humility? We are daily confronted with the choices that hold powerful consequences. Look again! Look closely. Spiritually, to see and be seen is very different from the meaning attributed to that activity on YouTube.



Despite bumping into my own limitations several times a day, I pray to find the strength to stay spiritually awakened to and culturally and intellectually informed about seemingly impossible national and international events. I want to know these events and conditions as they truly are, not as they are reduced to slogans. Not as they are quickly hijacked for political agenda. How can this level of participation be accomplished without becoming overwhelmed? I want to continue to nurture the spiritual life, lest I become, as Dylan once sang of himself, *my own enemy*. I want to renew or deepen all forms of interior activity *and* relationship to art while continuing to maintain intimacy with loved ones and the Master of Love. But that's a tall order.

In this focus on the transformative power of the arts, I don't mean to imply recitals about personal likes and dislikes, nor unearth the forces of sympathy or antipathy. No, that's not it. Rather, I'm suggesting a path of witnessing. It used to be called recollection. It is a contemplative endeavor, and so this writing constellates a meditative essay. It is possible to gather ourselves up and *enter into* works of art, meditatively, if art is genuine. This is because both artist and the art being offered are alive, streaming; they are not static. Art, music and poetry can each closely serve and reflect the sacred Transcendentals, because they too echo the inspiration of Beings. Philosophy and theology both identify Truth, Beauty and Goodness as Transcendentals. As star-like intelligences or forces, they live in the dimension



where time opens up and becomes space. Residents of Eternity, the spiritual world is able to transmit healing currents and do so abundantly, not because angels are pleasing or safe, but because they startle us so.

When present in works of art, these forces offer humanity a new view of reality precisely because that which is enlarged and deepened at great cost can be lovingly, humbly received and integrated. (It isn't junk food. It is Bread). It is in the spirit of meditative reflection that I attempt to share a way in which I've been living with a contemporary artist of the spirit. Elena Markova's probing and soulful paintings witness human and divine interactions. The consolations and insights offered in these canvasses invite us to enter and bridge worlds and hidden layers rather than explain or debate chapters of political history. Spiritually attuned, emotionally courageous, morally imaginative, I am consistently moved and startled by Elena Markova's vision.

Warring, Fighting, Infighting, Dissent

During the global crisis of the pandemic and currently, as two separate wars rage, daily life has become literally and physically accosted for those living in the war zones. Additionally, life is inwardly challenged for those living in places that seem buffered or safe. Millions of people have been displaced, and countless numbers of innocent

men, women and children have been killed. Adversarial forces work behind and between the scenes, invading speech itself. The degree to which language and communication have been subverted and abused would have been unimaginable a few years ago. The voices of deception and hypocrisy are now exponential. They work overtime as the great devouring maw belonging to a face purposefully obscured. Each individual human being must now find a renewed or newly awakened relationship to inner forces and outer conditions in order to work on behalf of the future of humanity. But of course, the way each age group cultivates the future is necessarily different.

I have been living with the paintings of Elena Markova, a woman who is very grounded and anchored in the normal activities of daily life, yet as an artist, she works in response to the world of the spirit. Without ever doing something like narrative or representational art, she has developed the capacity to make visible the inner experience of human and angel as they both suffer, serve, listen and respond to one another in a new and living communion. Elena's personhood is modern: artist, mother, spouse, humanitarian and woman of prayer. Originally from Kargopol in Northern Russia, Elena immigrated and resettled in Oregon. For years, she has exhibited at Dragon Fire Gallery in Cannon Beach, on the Oregon coastline.



Elena's works hold converse with an expansive view: she paints the dialogue occurring between human and angel. Some paintings speak profoundly to our human suffering while struggling amidst the turbulence of war, and some transmit a vision that shows human turbulence transformed.

She paints individuals and small groups. When clustered together, some humans appear to have chosen their unity from afar, gazing out tenderly from across time and space.

Others seem to have chosen their unity suddenly. Both kinds of shared experience serve the spirit as preparation for a future life.



Without exception, every painting I have seen emphasizes the weight and mystery of freedom. The angel is always nearby, available, walking with us. Since coercion is absent in the 'heart' of the angel, there is no current of interference. How opposite from our human tendencies.

I am fortunate to have a number of Elena's works here in my own home and often have the opportunity to reflect upon her expanded view. Whether while 'doing' work or simply 'being' a person, something radical stirs the water. Close proximity to vision ignores Chronos time and instead invites Kairotic sensibilities. Vision has a way of speaking – morning, noon and night – perhaps it is a resounding, not unlike the tones of the largest abbey bell that rings only at solemnities. Its sound fills the valley wordlessly. In response, the ringing bell invites each of us to choose deep listening, deep hearing and disarmed responding. I am grateful to be able to become a little more recollected in this milieu, especially while approaching the sacrifice of Holy Week and the miracle of Easter.

When I visited Elena in her home in December of 2022, she showed me innumerable paintings on themes with which I was somewhat familiar, because of her gallery exhibitions. She also showed a dozen or more new paintings, all on the theme of WAR. Her son kindly translated, as I have zero Russian fluency. I came to understand that everything in the WAR series will be kept together; it is not for sale. Now Elena is a colorist, and my experience of her work responds deeply to the very sensitive spectrum she has mastered. But on that day, I was deeply struck by the sudden switch in vibration. Her WAR series is extraordinarily expressive, and yet at the time I saw much in a kind of black wash and hues of dark brown. In the following sixteen months, this WAR series has continued to grow, sometimes returning to color, and only now in retrospect have I come to understand that perhaps some of what I had seen that day in the darkened palette were initial studies.

Being in my seventies and living in a quiet village, I am the least likely writer to even begin addressing the experience of war. Yet maybe not, if only because my decades of professional life have allowed me to experience the ways in which intellectual, linguistic, political and financial wars unfold in educational institutions and hospital-based medical systems. Academia and medicine – two of my three worlds – both suffer from blitzkrieg infighting to the point that they are imploding from within. How we emerge from any institutional rubble or profiteering implosion is the making of the woman or the making of the man. For that, I can only be grateful.

So let's return to the questions of the day and to Elena's many canvasses.





Who am I? From whence have I come?

What is this pressing condition, this force so near at hand? What is this event or experience? Is it beast or blessing?

Whether speaking, writing, singing or painting, human beings have been filled with burning questions. From inside and outside, urgently burning questions press and sculpt us. From mountain top to shoreline, in cave or forest, cottage or castle, temple or chapel, library or laboratory, human beings form, hear, live with and ask pressing questions. Sometimes the heat of the press is so great that we discover that we are in touch with transformative creative fire. Our questions are much like the strings of the harp, anchored in the sound board and stretched up vertically into the harmonic curve. Every harp string is pulled in two different directions simultaneously, as are we humans, especially during war or infighting. Without that stretching, a string cannot sound – it thuds. Only with the stretching of the string can the beauty-filled tone be liberated. Sometimes exquisite tone is activated by human hands, sometimes by the zephyr, or wait! Was that a star or an angel?

While being pulled by daily life in two directions simultaneously, pulled from above and below, we humans are stretching. We are being asked to maintain the tension of opposites rather than burst asunder.

Having thus been stretched beyond who or what I used to be, who or what I was before this affliction or challenge, this fear or pain, I hover at a threshold and have become liminal. It seems we have been brought to a breaking point. But no! We don't snap. We are found gazing out; we let go of and die to who, how or what we used to be before being stretched.

Maybe even everything we used to know has been rolled up and carried away. Teilhard de Chardin in *The Divine Milieu* spoke deeply about our massive diminishment, and the way they bear fruit.

Whether or not we know it in the immediate present, this strange subtraction, this stretching and letting go can later become a hidden source of Beauty. Having risked leaving the familiar and entering the Unknown, or having everything taken from us, it is possible to come into the realization that life has not ended. It has undergone change and metamorphosis. In our living and our dying, we live *with* dying, live *while* dying, only to emerge from the chrysalis. Isn't this a form of initiation?

We arrive at a new shore, and in a new form, condition and vesture. These clean waters are light-streaming and love permeating.

But I need to return once more to the milieu of ferment.

Deep and fervent questions arise in times of cultural



chaos or anguished confusion, and this is especially true amidst the horrors of war. (Are questions ever sparked in corridors of ease?). Day and night, asleep or awake, forgetting or remembering, the ability to form and sustain deep questions while maintaining the tension of opposites accelerates the *human-making curriculum* and ushers us into the praxis of self-knowledge. As artificial intelligence technologies gallop and as humans become lulled by the screen and the cell phone, aspects of our humanity become desiccated.

Becoming human doesn't just occur because we have been born into a physical body. Our humanity is born or dies in stages. The poet Wordsworth once hinted at an uncanny medicine of recovery when he said"a deep distress hath humanized my soul..."

War exists on many levels, and to our human shame, military war has always entailed atrocity. Even reading about the atrocities is devastating. We reel. Amidst our cycles of inexplicable suffering, we can become *hollowed* out or *hallowed* out, retain some original light or become filled with a new light.

In this way, we have the creative capacity to form and sustain burning questions, to raise our voices in prayer or dissent, and to listen and receive horizontally and vertically. I remember reading a line from the mystical literature of the *Zohar* many years ago, describing

how when humans sing, we create something like a vertical column. In it, while singing, while resounding, the angel can most directly experience what it is that humans experience. With our last breath, whether we are in glory or lament, whether we whisper or speak, we can still separate the wheat from the chaff. We can comele with the angel, and by extension, meet our Maker, stand before Our Lord.

How is it that Herbert Mason rendered this path of human initiation and metamorphosis in his re-telling of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*?

*Friendship is vowing toward immortality,
and does not know the passing away of Beauty,
though take care,
for it aims for the Spirit!*



*Many years ago through loss I learned
That Love is wrung from our innermost heart
Till only the Loved one is and we are not.*



In asking, listening and receiving, signs and wonders abound. For those who have eyes to see and the capacity to hear, these signs and wonders are seeds, each disclosing the nature and significance of life itself. This disclosure includes seeing ourselves unvarnished,



seeing ourselves as we truly are. We see ourselves in and out of our humanly made prisons and as we are surrounded by the help of the spiritual world. The timeless angel sees us inhabiting or ignoring our spiritually ordained freedoms. And freedom is the fruit of spiritual activity, isn't it? William Butler Yeats, that *Wandering Aengus* sings of the *Golden Apples of the Sun*.

So it is that we have agency and can lay down our burdens. By this I mean: we can choose to lay down the dead wood, that which is fruitless. Epiphanies large and small accompany interior reflection, and the psalms tell us that despite our darkest hours, despite the times of anguish and the bread of affliction, mourning can turn to joy. By extension, and despite all odds, many have learned that grief and even trauma can metamorphose. What was once a singular event

or cement-like condition can metamorphose into a burgeoning capacity. Our lead can be transformed into rose gold; the deepest most penetrating wound can become a source of light, thus, *the luminous wound*.¹ We cannot or do not witness these blessings outside of the mystery of the human biography, and this includes enigma. Our turning points are written or inscribed in the Book of Life. That which has been taken from us in one kind of war or another is still living and streaming in the chronicle of the next dimension, and that truth, no individual or group can destroy. In many ways, sustained, prayerful meditation on the mystery of the human biography speaks of a new kind of sacrament, a new placement of the altar. In everything that is sacramental, we witness the ways that human and divine meet and interpenetrate, work together and harmonize. And so we begin our recollection anew:

Again, Who am I? From whence have I come?

What is this pressing condition, this force so near at hand? What is this event or experience? Is it beast or blessing?

What are these crossroads? I've never seen them yet it seems as if I have always known them.

So then, how shall I take the next step? There is a blizzard and I feel lost.....Wait! Look! I am never alone. Angel, Human, and God. I follow in the Maker's footsteps, and just in case I falter, the Angel heads up from the rear.

Proximity and participation. Some of the deepest questions ask that we reach across space and time in order to see and to

hear. *Why am I on Earth? And why am I here at this particular moment in time?*



Ultimately, *Whom do I serve?* We must each find out.

The timing and condition of each metamorphosis determines each rebirth, each future. Wisdom elders teach that all of life is interrelated and interconnected,

and yet however deeply shared our questions are, the activity of thoughtful questioning is a form of deep interior reflection, otherwise known as philosophy.

I suppose it is possible for someone to live and die without having formed questions, without having lived philosophically, but for many, questions born of inner necessity are synonymous with inner activity. These efforts are no more denied or abandoned than the human need for air or water can be outgrown. Consciously and unconsciously, questions arise and press into us. Take care! They can press us forward or backward. Questions are universal and particular, earthly and cosmic. Even when shared, questioning burns rightly within the individual heart and mind and if sustained, bears extraordinary fruit.

Sometimes the fruit is a responsorial *seeing*; sometimes the fruit is a responsorial *hearing*; sometimes it generates an *encounter*. In substance and symbol, humans and angels are both emissaries. Even the presence of the adversary contributes something essential, to the degree that everything we have known



and loved may someday be removed. The fire of asking requires time, interior solitude, and an intelligence of the heart that gradually clarifies each shining intuition.

It is time to close, even if our journey with Elena has only just begun. This article is an excerpt from a much longer work, but I cannot close without invoking two further essentials.

First, returning back to the horror of atrocity and place that reality alongside the humility born of genuine recollection. Not one of us is an angel. Each of us is intimate with one kind of failure or another, and each of us has slain some precious life force in another human being. In times of trouble, the temptation to delude ourselves into categories of division – good guys and bad guys – is precariously close to the surface, and to this end, I know of no more insightful voice than the

mirror held up by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, speaking through his experience called *The Gulag Archipelago*.

“..If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line of dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart? During the life of any heart the line keeps changing place; sometimes it is squeezed one way by exuberant evil and sometimes it shifts to allow enough space for good to flourish. One and the same human being is, at various ages, under various circumstances, a totally different human being. At times, he is close to being a devil, at times to sainthood. But his name doesn't change, and to that name, we ascribe the whole lot, good and evil..”

And finally, one additional pearl. There is a much beloved British composer named Bernadette Farrell whose work has accompanied the celebration of the sacraments for decades. She hymns of a *God Beyond All Names*, and asks choirs and congregants to sing a kind of Jacob's Ladder mystery:

We are like You, we reflect You, we are woman, we are man.

All around us we have known You, all creation yearns to hold You.

In our living and our dying we are bringing you to birth!

I am convinced that these two Sophianic and agapeic artists, Elena and Bernadette, have much light in common. For the fifty years I have worked within music-thanatology, being with the physical and spiritual needs of the dying as a knee-woman, a midwife, I have consistently experienced living and dying as a birthing continuum. They are not separate. Unified, they sing an epic of becoming. Bernadette's musical vision has ensouled this music-thanatology endeavor and conviction for more than thirty years. As important, I had the great three alarm fire of discovering the dissident writer Solzhenitsyn the same year that I began working in end of life care. Fifty years ago!

When we weave all three visionary voices together, that of painter, composer and writer, we find ourselves engaging with an utterly naked and fully disarmed Resistance movement. Some might call this kind of Resistance the call of the Grail.

Grailing seems to me to be an artistic Resistance vocation reaching across time and space. The question is: Shall we don the mantle? A few days ago, when I was in a state of lumpy smallness, (as often happens), the temptation was strong to just want to hide or disappear. One of my dearest and most Sophianic friends shored me up, saying: *We were born for this.*



I remain especially grateful to Elena Markova and her family and to all at Dragon Fire Gallery. These people have generously helped me to approach and walk toward the artist's vision. I miss the mark, to be sure, but in loving her work, I recognize the presence of the angel a little bit more each day and each night of living with dying. It is possible to experience the awe, the hush, the flutter of wings, and the earnest radiance of the world the angels populate.

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Therese Schroeder-Sheker, harpist and singer, made her Carnegie Hall debut in 1980, concertized internationally for over 3 decades and has numerous recordings with American and European record labels. She founded the palliative medical modality of music-thanatology and its flagship organization The Chalice of Repose Project, chaired programs at universities and seminaries, and publishes widely in theology, musicology and medicine. She has lived in Mount Angel, Oregon, USA for twenty-two years.

Endnote

1. *The Luminous Wound* is the name of a series of forthcoming books authored by Therese Schroeder-Sheker to be published by Angelico Press.

The Chalice Well, Easter 2024

