Opinion
Spirituality
Soul Seeing



A statue of an angel carrying Christ's cross is seen on the Castel Sant'Angelo bridge in Rome. (CNS/Paul Haring)



by Christopher de Vinck

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My brother Oliver died 41 years ago of pneumonia in my mother's arms. After bathing him in bed with a sponge for 32 years, after feeding him with a spoon for 32 years, after pulling down the shade each morning so the rising sun did not burn his tender skin, Oliver took his last breath and my mother whispered, "Goodbye my angel."

When I was a boy, it was my job to feed Oliver dinner: a raw egg, baby cereal, sugar and a banana puréed inside a red ceramic bowl my father received one Christmas filled with plum pudding. I never needed a watch for I had this instinctive feeling that it was time to feed Oliver, and I never missed. If I was playing baseball on the front lawn in the summer, or sledding down the neighbor's hill in the winter I'd suddenly call out, "Gotta go! Gotta feed Oliver!" and I'd abandon my position at third base, or grab my sled and rush home.

Oliver was blind. Once I doubted that he couldn't see, thinking maybe he was faking it, so I snuck up on him and waved my hand right in his face. He never blinked.

Oliver couldn't talk, read or sing. The doctors, after many tests, convinced my parents that Oliver had no intellect, no possible way of learning anything due to severe brain damage before he was born.

My brother was on his back in his bed for 32 years. His bed was against the yellow wall, and my father built a wide swinging door on the other side so Oliver would not roll out. He never moved. He was rolled back and forth and bathed each day. He never had a bedsore.



Oliver, the author's brother, is pictured with their brother Bruino in the family's Christmas card from 1948. (Courtesy of Christopher de Vinck)

We never know how sorrows of the past will influence us in the future. When Oliver was born, my parents were devastated. With each passing day they learned more and more of Oliver's afflictions: unable to lift his head, unable to chew, or walk, or grow up to be the president of the United States. So instead, they just chose to call Oliver their son and they chose to love him.

Because of that single decision I was given a guardian angel, and I didn't realize it until many years later.

I liked watching how gently my father shaved Oliver and combed his hair. I liked helping my sister carry Oliver to the bathtub. I liked propping Oliver up with my hand behind his head as I gently touched the rim of the glass to his lips and watched as he slowly drank the cold milk.

Oliver learned to do two things: raise his crooked arms up and down and laugh. That is all. Sometimes in the middle of the night I could hear his belly laughter echoing down the hall. My grandmother often said that Oliver was laughing with the angels.

Often when I am tired after a long day, I rub my face and I think of Oliver's deep, brown eyes. When I pour a bowl of cereal in the morning before trudging off to work, I often think of Oliver's red bowl that I carried up to his room all those years as a boy.

Remember that charming film "As Good as It Gets," where Melvin, played by Jack Nicholson, says to Carol the waitress, played by Helen Hunt: "You make me want to be a better man"?

Oliver made me a better man. I have been a father, teacher and writer all of my life. Through my brother's helplessness he taught me how to help children in need. Through his silence he pointed out how to be a poet. Through Oliver's hunger he showed me, like Merlin, how to mix life in a red bowl. Oliver was my guardian angel.

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The Islamic tradition speaks about the *raqib*, the watcher, an angel who protects mankind throughout our lives. The Buddhist lamas teach that the devas are angel-like, ethereal beings who applaud our goodness, rejoice when we are well and rain flowers over us when we struggle throughout lives.

In Judaism the angel Lailah protects pregnant women at night, and serves as a guardian angel to everyone in life and guides their souls on their paths to heaven.

Christians believe, as Pope Francis said in 2014, that "no one walks alone, and none of us can think he is alone." And he acknowledged that the voice of our guardian angel is always within us, whispering wisdom and comfort during our times of distress.

I wish the world could rub the sponge onto Oliver's tender skin, and feed him from the depth of the red bowl, and give him milk. I wish we could all stand at his bedroom door together as a civilization at midnight, during these times of distress, and hear Oliver laugh.

On my brother's tombstone at the Benedictine monastery in Weston, Vermont, my mother wrote "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God." May your guardian angel help you see God, Allah, Buddha, Abraham, Christ. May we all sleep in peace and laugh at midnight.

George Eliot, in her novel *Silas Marner* wrote, "In old days there were angels who came and took men by the hand and led them away from the city of destruction. We see no white-winged angels now."

Perhaps Oliver could guide us all out of the cities of destruction this Christmas. I wish I could carry Oliver to Bethlehem, to Mecca, to the Wailing Wall, to the Buddha, to the temple, mosque and church and have the world touch Oliver's hand.