



On the problems of chatting with angels

Thomas J. Poulton, MD

Thomas Poulton, MD (AQA, The Ohio State University, 1975), is an Adjunct Professor of Pediatrics at Creighton University School of Medicine in Phoenix, Arizona, and, until recently, was a Pediatric Critical Care Physician at The Alaska Native Medical Center in Anchorage, Alaska.

Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there...
—Edgar Allen Poe¹

I love these little people and it is not a slight thing
when they, who are so fresh from God, love us.
—Charles Dickens²

The agnostic implicitly declares he *doesn't know* when he labels himself as one, but in fact he has the conviction that he knows plenty. Knows what he knows, and usually, also, what the rest of us know, and don't know.

There is much to amaze us, but certainly no tomorrows after our todays. As my health spiraled downward—I was still walking about, but we all knew where this was headed—there were few questions to ask or answer. I *know*, after all.

Yet, there were so many plans to make—astonishingly—on what appeared to be the edge of the abyss. Insurance and investments to discuss; unfinished manuscripts that mattered a great deal, or not at all; and a doorbell cover, the sprinkler system, and a gutter to repair while I still could do it. The possibly important to the undeniably trivial, but they were all on my list.

The absurdity that I still chose to plan so many things made me laugh through my brief, largely private, season of goodbye tears. The plans and tears were not directly for me, but rather for those who would live a bit longer, and for those who have made my life so worthwhile.

I reflected with considerable satisfaction that my adored family and I had very little that had to be discussed. Lives lived well enough leave little enough unsaid.

My heart was broken—literally—and beyond fixing, so I came to sleep like a baby, by which it seemed, all the time. It became a source of some embarrassment as I slept big parts of my days away in what was becoming three

naps most days. Not the way I wished to live, or to be remembered, but there really was no alternative.

My work still mattered greatly to me, provided structure and meaning to some of my days, preserved a lightness to my step that might otherwise have left me, and nourished whatever my soul might be. The naps made it possible to continue to work many days every month.

I was embarrassed by my fatigue, but the naps were also a warm, welcome, remembered connection to the very young people I spent 40 years caring for as a pediatric specialist. I looked after their medical needs in the pediatric intensive care unit, the operating room, and in hospice. They paid me with the gifts of a strong sense of purpose, of understanding important things, and of belonging to something real and urgent and immediate, and always more important than I and my problems. My everyday work was being a part of thousands of personal histories.

My alliance with the kids was fascinating to me, a connection to me, my childhood and who I was 60 years ago. That we were all little once has always seemed an important shred of shared humanity, even if a remnant remembered by few, and unappreciated by most.

And so, I yet again felt myself slipping into the soft comfort of another afternoon slumber, from which I knew I would awaken with renewed energy and a fresh perspective. Symbolically, it was inescapable that every nap was a rehearsal for my approaching demise, yet my daily dormancy was usually a welcomed excursion. Lemons and lemonade.

I wish that I had accepted my declining health with more grace and wisdom. I was initially quite angry and hurt. But agnostics accept reality, so I came to accept, as best I could, what would come at some future time—all too soon.

While I slept on this day, I traveled unexpectedly to the backyard of my childhood home.

About 15 children talked, laughed, and played in small groups. A birthday party?

Two first-graders were struggling awkwardly to plant a budding forsythia bush—one of my favorite springtime flowers. Why were such small children being made to struggle with such a large project?

Others, played softball on the improvised neighborhood diamond where we all had played. Clean cheeks, clean clothes, clean bills of health.

Boisterous preschoolers squealed, giggled and ran as they kicked large floating beach balls around my yard. I knew none of these children, I thought. They were neither neighbors nor classmates of mine, and yet, there *was* something familiar about these kids. Maybe they were the children of my adult friends?

I smiled and waved at the groups as I walked about. They met my gaze and smiled back, some of them waving the exaggerated stage waves of kids excited to be acknowledged and recognized. Where, I wondered silently, were the teachers and parents? Who was looking after these kids?

A self-possessed 10-year-old boy approached me. He carried a clipboard and looked like a little stage manager. I marveled at his confidence and comfort in approaching me under what seemed unusual circumstances.

I was aware now that this was a dream that I was in, and so a few tears made their way down my cheeks, as I was again aware of the losses my wife and son—and, yes, I—would soon endure. I pivoted away so the kids, who seemed so real, wouldn't see those tears, knowing they would be upset—or at least confused—by them, and swore a silent oath at my weakness.

"It's okay. We know," the boy said as several third- and fourth-graders nodded their concurrence and smiled at me. I quickly blotted my cheeks on the backs of my hands, but was perplexed and failed to understand, even as their words and smiles comforted and calmed me.

"We're *your* kids," a little red-haired girl in horn-rimmed glasses explained with firmness. This added no clarity for me. *My* kids?

"We're the kids you took care of. When we died, we came here. We're fine now!"

I gasped, and my breath failed me for several moments as I tried to absorb this.

Another smiling child shyly added, "This is a place for kids and people who are really nice to kids."

A small group gathered around me. They briefly took my hands, leading me around the yard, patting me on the back. Kids, but they seemed so very mature. Old souls now, if not when I first knew them.

"We like you," another offered quietly.

Stage Manager explained, "We are still kids, so you can read to us, and play with us, and just talk to us when you come here. We still need that."

"Or make snacks for us," another quickly interjected.

"You'll like it here. We'll have fun. The flower bush is for you! See you later!"

I again tried to catch my breath, and was immediately warmed by, and deeply grateful for, the reassurances from these children. I fully believed, for a moment, that I had

just visited Heaven.

I smiled as I slowly awakened, recognizing the dream as a harmless, but intense, subconscious self-deception that might make dying easier for some people.

However, I quickly grabbed a pen and paper to record what I remembered of it.

It is still a surprise that a mere dream brought so much comfort and acceptance. I regained a clear sense that, as for most of the past 65 years, all was well in my world—at least as much as it could be.

I am, I reminded myself, merely stepping across a line to become a part of history, as we all must. And I am doing so under much better circumstances than many, including most of "my" kids.

I remained bemused as I awoke further, unsure of what to make of the kids.

We all cope—or don't—as we must, while our trajectories continue as they must. I remain comfortably lifted after my dream, by my conviction that our universe is a remarkable and strange enough place to challenge the best thinking and imagination of any of us, for as long as any of us has.

I had an exceptional, noteworthy, sustaining, dream. That's what it was.

We know what we know, and what we do not know, after all.

Hope is a good breakfast, but it is a bad supper.

—Francis Bacon³

What I want to do is go home and hug my kids...

—Kevin Bacon⁴

References

1. Poe EA. *The Raven and Other Poems*. New York: Wiley and Putnam. 1845: 2.
2. Dickens C. *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Salt Lake City: Gutenberg Literary Archive. 2008: 6. Accessed at www.gutenberg.org/files/700/700-h/700-h.htm.
3. Bacon F. *Apophthegms New and Old; (Resuscitatio*. 2nd edition 1661). London: Linden Longman. Reprinted 1857. Accessed at <http://www.bartleyby.com/178/2.html>.
4. <http://brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/k/kevinbacon595728.html>.

The author's address is:

221 West Butler Drive

Phoenix, Arizona 85021

E-mail: tpoulton@gmail.com.