

# Tending Angels

*Stories From the Frontlines of Heaven and  
Earth*

*by Sherry Cothran*

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## Introduction

We go searching for ourselves in all kinds of places, often looking for a purpose, a cause, or just something to soothe the burning question in our bellies, “What am I here for anyway?”

We all crave purpose and meaning in this life, it's just part of being human. But many of us struggle to find it. Books, articles, seminars and workshops with purpose gurus, guides and coaches call to us from every corner with expertise as to how to live a meaningful life. Yet, even with all the available instructions about how to find our purpose, we seem to be a culture that has lost its reason for being. It might be, as the poet Rumi says, that “we are searching among the branches for what can only be found at the roots.”

There is something much deeper within all of us that lives just beneath the craving for purpose and meaning—this is the cry for love. When the need for love is met, we seem to have an easier time finding our way to a meaningful, purposeful life. Strangely, this cry for love in our own hearts is often satisfied best when we are answering it in others, particularly those who are wounded, rejected, abandoned, traumatized, and poor. We truly are, as Jean Vanier said, “healed by those we reject.”

“Tending Angels” is a collection of stories I wrote as the pastor of an urban church in Nashville. For a decade, I tried to meet the needs of some of the city's most traumatized, abandoned, and rejected population: homeless, refugees, immigrants, and poor. As I opened my heart, searching for the emotional resources to heal some of their deepest hurts—the pain of rejection—I was the one who was changed. I often felt as if I were

“tending angels unaware” on the frontlines of heaven and earth. In such a place, God showed up regularly, in human skin.

These are tales of a decade spent in heart time, as the senior pastor of an urban church, a place the Pope has called “a triage hospital on the frontlines of the world’s pain.” This is where I learned to love broken people in a broken place, see the sacred face of homelessness, find beauty in the impossible, and to honor failure as my greatest teacher; and slowly come to believe in something greater than myself. Purpose is something that just happened along the way. It couldn’t be lost or found, it was just a part of me, like my breath or my heartbeat. I found that my true purpose was love.

I hope these tales of tending angels unaware will give you the same courage they gave me: to journey to the bottom of life, into your own story, to let your heart break open and say yes to love. After all,

*. . . the crack is the place where the light enters in. –Rumi*

# 1. CORONA AND THE BROKEN CHURCH

Monday morning, and once again, I avoid tripping over the three-inch elevated flaw in the concrete sidewalk in front of the church where the earth has pushed up the corner.

“I need to get that fixed,” I utter beneath my breath, letting the guilt rise in me that I haven’t done it yet.

I then torture myself with a scenario I am certain will happen: an elderly person will be looking over their left shoulder at those two giant cornerstones into which the dates 1889 and 1956 are skillfully carved (placards to the banner years) and suddenly remember their baptism or their wedding in this church, unconsciously take a step forward, and tumble. In my mind, this has already happened at least twenty times so if there is such a thing as self-fulfilling prophecy, I apologize in advance to those who are injured upon attempting to enter this church. I apologize for tarnishing your nostalgia, because despite my best efforts and my youngest, most energetic years, I have not been able to make the entrance stable.

I glance at the railing, knocked out of its base several years ago and made wobbly because a truck had backed in to unload supplies for a birthday party rental of the fellowship hall. It was a quinceañera, a very large party with lots of Corona. The clause in the building usage permit says in Spanish, “No alcohol on the premises,” but even though it was translated, it was not comprehended. I stopped by at the beginning of the party to ask the five men who were exactly five inches shorter than me to open the five coolers on the kitchen floor for my inspection, having cited the evidence of cardboard Corona boxes in the alley. I said that I was concerned that they might not be in compliance with our policy. Even though upon opening the coolers, revealing at least a hundred bottles of Corona, they still denied it was there. I told them they would have to let me watch them remove it from the premises. But, of course, the joke was on me.

I know this because I stopped by again later and around the kitchen island were standing several men cooking a big pot of pozole, a traditional, Mexican soup, and they were laughing and drinking Corona. At this point, I decided that I would give up my battle against Corona, which seemed to be a battle against happiness itself, because half of these men were shaking in fear that I would call the police who would then check their conspicuously missing IDs. Half of the party goers were daring me to walk further in because they had nothing to lay claim to in this world except their *machismo*.

It was then that something like compassion (or fear) took over because I, too, once liked the taste of Corona, especially with a little lime. The truth is, I envied their party and there was a pang of loneliness in me because I could not participate and had been forced

into the role of disrespected den mother, even though we were all about the same age. I was also beginning to understand the lives of the undocumented in our country and developing a new and profound respect for their capacity for pure joy.

So, the railing got busted that night.

It's been two years since that party, and no one has really noticed the wobbly rail, there are just too many other things to fix.

As usual, the front steps are littered with McDonald's Styrofoam cups, wadded up toilet paper wet from last night's rain, and empty liquor bottles. I go get plastic gloves and remove the debris for another day. (Sometimes I walk past it—just being honest here—and it is secretly removed by someone else. This is grace.)

I have strategically placed incense and Glade plug-ins all around the church to rid that "old smell" every time you open the door. I put flowers in vases around the building, too, sometimes. Some kind soul planted pink and red Knock Out roses all around the perimeter. I prune them regularly and bring them inside.

The work is beginning for the day. Downstairs, an agency begins its daily pace of working with refugees and their children, mostly from Africa. There is laughter in the hallways, women dressed in saris with their babies heaped up on their backs, and men dressed nicely for citizenship classes. The bathroom doors slam a hundred or more times in one day (I need to get that fixed, too).

I pick up the tissues that overflow in the trash can. I am the pastor, and yet, I feel invisible.

Another agency that works with families of prisoners and a psychologist who sees clients will have their people in, the doorbell right beside my office will ring for them at least fifteen or more times. I am pleased that they are thriving. In the beginning, they were also like those refugees, lost.

In the other basement, on the other side of the building, a very passionate woman runs a food pantry—she has found her place. Here, in the church, it's become a close-knit community for those who are on the streets. Sometimes the homeless lay on the tattered, donated couches in a dead sleep like seals beaten by angry waves.

I have invited them all into this building to grow, to be, to do the work of Christ in a place that time has almost forgotten. Everyone seems to be thriving around a church that is struggling to be—everyone but me, that is. During the week, I feel forgotten, like the church itself. Though there is music, I blend with ghosts. Though I know I am full, I feel hollow. I remind myself of a beautiful Hafiz poem that tells me to make my ribcage

hollow like a flute so God can breathe through me.

Sunday morning brings a mixture of people, always the fresh-eyed, young adult visitors from the re-gentrifying neighborhood who will come only once or twice and move on to the larger church down the street with so much more to offer in the way of emotional satisfaction, or they will just give up completely. It's a mystery, what they desire; even with my leftover rock-and-roll persona, I am not hip enough to figure it out. Critical mass, they say, is what's missing. People want to feel comfortable and anonymous, not on display. I get it, I want that, too, sometimes. We just don't satisfy that criterion, perhaps.

The faithful few, those who are on a spiritual journey, those who support and are fed by the uniqueness of this particular haven, come together. The wonderful, bright group of educators, professionals, activists, writers, editors, students, musicians, workers in the world, and the homeless, too. They come together. I love them, I love the light they bring, and no matter how much statistics state the few numbers do not warrant me being their full-time pastor, I still say to those faithful few that they are enough.

I am getting ready to take on another church, part time, just down the street, to make ends meet for both congregations. It's just where we're at in our time, struggling to be the church.

I know of no magic formula. I only know that there is a violence in the world that often seems so much bigger than me. I pick up the trash it leaves behind and I ask God to intervene. I am not sheltered from it, though I have a thin veneer of insulation, I see it. I try and open some portal in the universe for God's intervention to happen. Each Sunday, I break the bread and I say, "Take and eat, this is my body, broken for you, as often as you do this, remember me." We eat it, the ones gathered. We put our offerings in the plate. We believe we are all here for a purpose greater than ourselves, though the evidence is shaky, depending on the day.

There is a violence in the world and I feel its reverberations every day, the people who come through the doors are beaten in its wake. The Pope said the church is a triage hospital on the front lines of the world's dystopia, though he didn't use the word dystopia, he used "pain."

As much as I would like to lead another life, one where I am rewarded for my accomplishments, I keep returning to the facts as I cannot help but see them, that darkening spirit in our world.

These days, I don't do more, I pray more.

I am a female pastor in a time when the world's violence against the feminine is so

engrained in our psyche that we even do it to ourselves. I don't know how to rise above it, other than becoming aware of it and letting it pass through me each day which is healthier than denying it is there. Asking God to heal me, at least enough to become an authentic person when everything is pushing me to be something else. This is an act of defiance each day, stepping over the step that is actually a flaw, shaking off the air of destitution and the pain of utter loneliness to be, for another day, grateful. It goes against every bone in my body, but it is what I know must be done each day, at my altar, surrender.

Love is the most powerful force in the universe still, and I bow before it, knowing it is my only hope of salvation.

Some days, this is the greatest act I can do and it is enough.