

# **Angels Come In Various Sizes, Shapes and Colors**

(Speech delivered to the 13th Annual Robinson Memorial Hospital Memorial Service 5-20-2010)

I want to commence by thanking Deb Solon for inviting me to speak today, even if I wasn't her first choice! But more about that in a moment!

Ruth and I spent this past winter in AZ in our grandson Dan's condo. He had been recalled for his third tour in Iraq and needed some financial support with his condo. At great sacrifice, we rented his condo in Mesa for four months. We had a wonderful time. Dan just got home after serving six years in the Army (37 months in Iraq) on what he had assumed to be a three year commitment. We are so grateful he is home.

If you ever need someone to live in your home, Ruth is the person to choose because she will buy all kinds of good things for your place...Furniture, Dishes, Bedspreads and even pack your freezer with meals... as well as paying exorbitant rent. But back to Deb's invitation to speak...because I don't want to give a speech of preliminary remarks!

While we were in AZ, Deb invited Ruth to give this presentation...but since Ruth hates giving speeches (although she is great at it...she gave the eulogies her

Mother's and Sister's funerals...something I couldn't do)...but she doesn't like giving speeches and is much better at conning someone else into doing it on her behalf...and that someone is me. "Oh Glenn...I will buy you a lamp for your study, I will get you some golf lessons," and so it went. I didn't need any of those things...well maybe the lamp...so here I am hoping to be an able substitute.

As folks who have lost our parents and an eighteen-year old son, Ruth and I know how hard it is to lose someone near and dear to you. The sadness which comes from loss can be overwhelming and the only thing that can minimize those feelings of sadness is involvement with others. Having someone care for you...and you caring for others.....being altruistic, is about the only cure for the losses we suffer and the sadness we feel.

Many of you in this room have been THAT PERSON in the life of the person we are here to celebrate this afternoon. You have been their angel. They may have been the person you could count on...and in turn...you were the person they could count on to be there when they needed someone. You were, in fact their angel.

This afternoon, I want to tell you about an angel in Ruth's and my life...one who has inspired me to be a better person than I would have been...had I not met him.

I use to think of angels being winged, ethereal beings, swathed in white robes. They would flit around helping others and guarding them from troubles. They kept watch

over someone in need of assistance. The angel I met didn't fit these standard descriptions of an angel.

The angel I got to know was named John. He was blind in one eye, had only a second grade education, couldn't read or write, limped because of a bad knee, had little money, seemed a little slow (probably because of his lack of education), couldn't drive let alone fly, and had a heart of gold! In his early years he contracted an eye infection, and, left untreated because of a lack of family funds, lost his sight in one eye. He fell behind in school and dropped out in early elementary school.

He spent most of his young years in various family and foster homes. As an adult, he worked as a custodian in a large city court house until economy downsizing cost him his job. He spent the remainder of his life doing odd jobs and cutting hair for friends for several bucks . He always seemed to have just enough money to get along.

Ruth and I met John when he lived in an apartment next to Ruth's sister, Mary. Mary struggled with an adult life of mental illness...severe manic-depression... and was finally placed in low income, assisted living housing. There she got proper medication and medical attention. Later, she spent the last ten years of her life in a nursing home.

Early on, loving good food, next door neighbor John would give Mary money to prepare his evening meals. It was a good fit, as Mary had little money and loved to cook and socialize with friends. They became very

close...partners...although they maintained their separate apartments. Not everyone in Mary's circle accepted John because he was African-American, and so in the early years there was some family tension in our extended family. Judy, Mary's daughter, embraced this relationship because she saw how happy Mary and John were when they were together. Ruth, the most accepting and loving person I have ever known, encouraged this friendship, this love... and Mary thrived.

There were many humorous moments dealing with John...some cultural and some because of his lack of education.

Once, Ruth was taking them to lunch, and John, who never drove a car, said, "Turn here!" in a loud voice. Ruth turned and found herself on a one way street...going the wrong way. She said, "I can't go this way, it is a one way street." And John said, "No, it's OK, we go this way every day." They did, but of course, but they walked.

Another time, John, who was afraid of snakes because he had seen a story about snakes on TV, refused to come to our home because we live on a lake and he was sure he would encounter a snake. We had taken John and Mary to see Ruth and Mary's mother near our home, but 150 miles from where Mary and John lived. We insisted they visit our home for dinner but John was adamant. "I am not going to your home because I don't want to run into no snakes," he said. We mentioned that we had lived in our home for over fifteen years and had never seen a snake. John was

undeterred. And so, we drove them back the 150 miles, stopping for dinner on the way. When we got home the sun was setting and we had our customary drink on our deck. After several minutes of admiring the sunset, Ruth said, "Glenn, look there!" I looked where she pointed, and low and behold, it was an eighteen inch garter snake! Every time someone mentions the word "snake," Ruth and I look at one another, both thinking of John and his snake phobia.

Some years later, we found out John was having a knee replacement and drove there to visit him. Upon arrival at Mary's, we were surprised to see John there, and not in the hospital. I asked about his operation and he told me how the doctor said he would remove his knee, and put an artificial knee in place of his old knee. John asked how it would stay in place and was told by the doctor that he would use cement to hold it in place.

After the doctor, left the room, John got dressed and skipped out of the hospital because, as he said, "They ain't putting no cement in my knee." He had confused concrete with the cement they were to use to hold the new artificial knee in place and concluded that this procedure was not for him. I explained that the cement the doctor was talking about was like glue...and was used to "glue" the new knee in place.

He seemed surprised and agreed he would give the surgery another try. When I explained the problem to the doctor, he laughed and said, "We wondered where he went." A large part of my career involved teaching counseling skills to medical students and this was yet another example of being

astute enough to know how to explain procedures in a way that the patient in front of you might understand. I don't think the surgeon I talked to understood that he had not explained the procedure well, but rather, chalked it up to another patient not smart enough to understand his medical explanation.

I once asked a noted scientist to explain liquid crystals to me and he said, "Glenn, I don't think I can explain liquid crystals in a way that you can understand them." Well, thank you! I am a firm believer that an intelligent person can explain almost anything they know to anyone. But again, I digress. I am not telling stories about John to make fun of him, because I respected him so. But I do want you to know John and some of his underdeveloped logic.

The years passed, Mary and John remained partners and the family grew grateful for everything John did for, and meant to, Mary. And then Mary became so sick that it was necessary to place her in a nursing home. John came to visit her two or three times each week, even though it meant taking two different buses and then walking ten blocks to the nursing home. I knew they cared for each other, but I wondered how long John might be willing to make this lengthy trip once a week, let alone two or three times.

But he continued for ten years... to the very end of Mary's life. The last few years he picked up her underwear each week to launder because the nursing home detergent irritated her skin. He would sit by her bedside when she no longer talked. He sat by her bedside when she no longer

recognized him. He never stopped coming until the day she died.

He did not want to come to the funeral, but had Judy tell him all about it. A few months later he died. We were out of town and did not know he had died until we returned. Judy attended the funeral and the few in attendance did not even seem to know why she was there. Ruth wrote a letter to John's sister at the address provided by the nursing home, and it was returned because there was no such address. We were unsuccessful contacting any family member listed, to express our condolences.

Maybe John was an angel. Maybe he had no other home. Maybe he was just here long enough to care for Mary during her troubled life. This angel did not have wings, was not swathed in white robes, did not read, did not write, could not spell, didn't understand most rules, always smiled and laughed, never had a bad word to say, didn't need money, was stronger than a horse, and had a heart of gold. I will always think of John as Mary's... our family's... Angel...and try to be more like him...for as you know, Angels Come in All Sizes, Shapes and Colors.

My hope is that each of us will use our angel powers more often to help others in need

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