

ANGELS on EARTH



Inspiring Stories of Fate, Friendship
and the Power of Connections

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*To all the angels on earth who are changing lives and
making a difference by sharing kindness through human connections.*

INTRODUCTION

My first act of kindness, or at least the first one I can remember, was putting money in the collection basket during Sunday mass.

I was too young to really understand what the money was for, other than it was somehow helping the less fortunate. I just liked the act of dropping some coins my mother gave me into the basket when it finally reached me. I also remember that not eating or drinking all morning before mass—a requirement back then—usually caused me to pass out in my pew not long after my little act of kindness.

As a young girl I also really liked angels, and I'd wonder if I'd ever be able to glimpse one, hovering over me, feathery wings fluttering in the air. Much later, as an adult, when my mother passed away, I began to think about angels again. In the years after I lost her, I still felt my mother's presence in my life, watching over me, helping me, rooting me on. I could believe my mother had *become* an angel—my protector, my guardian, my guide through both the good times and the hardships of life.

Kindness and angels—I still spend a lot of time thinking about those two things today. In a way they've become the theme of my life, and certainly the theme of the book you are reading right now. Now I'm not any kind of expert in these matters. I've never

studied angelology (yes, there is such a thing), nor do I have any special training in the psychology of kindness. The reason I am writing to you about them now is that over the last five years, I have been on a kind of journey that has given me a new understanding of the role of kindness and angels in our lives.

Of what it means to *be* an angel.

You see, I still believe in angels in the traditional sense—celestial beings with beautiful, fluffy wings.

But I've now learned there is another kind of angel, and over the last five years I have seen these angels everywhere.

These are the angels on earth.

And one of them is you.



In 2011 I wrote a book called *An Invisible Thread*. It was about an extraordinary moment that happened in September 1986, when I was thirty-five and a successful ad sales executive living and working in New York City. That day, I passed a homeless eleven-year-old panhandler begging for money on the corner of 56th Street and Broadway.

“Excuse me, lady,” he said to me. “Do you have any spare change? I am hungry.”

I kept walking. There were lots of homeless people on the streets in New York City in the 1980s, and it was easy just to keep my head down and ignore them. But as I walked away from the boy, something clicked in my head. It was his words, his simple declaration to me.

“I am hungry.”

I stopped in the middle of Broadway, turned around, and went back to the boy, whose name was Maurice Mazyck. I offered to buy him lunch at a McDonald's around the corner, and I asked if

I could join him. I soon learned he hadn't eaten anything in two days. That was our first meal together—Big Mac, french fries, and a chocolate shake, extra thick—but not our last. We wound up meeting for dinner the following Monday, and every Monday for the next four years, and hundreds of times after that. We lived only two blocks apart—me in a luxury high-rise, Maurice in a notorious welfare hotel riddled with drugs and crime—but we might as well have lived on different planets.

Even so, Maurice and I became friends, and that friendship is still going strong today, exactly thirty years later.

The story of how our unlikely friendship grew and changed both of us is the story I told in *An Invisible Thread*. The title is from an ancient Chinese proverb: *An invisible thread connects those who are destined to meet, regardless of time, place, or circumstance. The thread may stretch or tangle, but it will never break.* I chose that title because to me, it perfectly captured the essence of the friendship I share with Maurice. In a busy city of eight million people, on a street corner where literally thousands of people passed Maurice every day without so much as a glance, somehow we found each other at just the moment we most *needed* to find each other.

And everything that was to follow started with the simplest and smallest of gestures—me turning around and going back. Nothing dramatic, certainly nothing heroic. Still, that one, tiny moment changed everything. Some people call such a moment fate. Some call it destiny. Some refer to it as the hand of God at work.

I chose to think of it as an invisible thread—something larger than either Maurice or me steering us into each other's paths, pulling us together.

Our meeting had a profound effect on both our lives, but what I would come to learn is that the real gift of that moment was not

from me to Maurice, though I helped him chase a dream he never thought he could have.

It wasn't even from Maurice to me, though his friendship has been one of the great blessings of my life.

No, the real gift of that moment was the gift we gave each other.

The gift of angel wings.



In different religions and traditions, angels are assigned different roles. Some are protectors. Some are messengers. Some are guides. Some are meant to carry out God's tasks.

But think about it—every single one of these angelic functions is something that we, as human beings, are more than capable of.

The dictionary definition of an angel is “a spiritual being believed to act as an attendant, agent, or messenger of God, conventionally represented in human form with wings and a long robe.” So—take away the wings and the long robe (at least for me; I don't own one), and that definition can apply to all of us.

We can be one another's protectors, and messengers, and guides. And we can carry out God's tasks—charity, compassion, forgiveness, assistance, and love.

We can be the angels we so desperately need in our lives.

This is not some idle theory I've cooked up. It's not some kind of wishy-washy spiritualism. The existence of angels on earth is real—very, very real. I have seen them, and met them, and heard their stories. I have experienced the powerful impact they can have.

I have seen them work *miracles*.

You may not be able to see their beautiful, feathery wings.

But you will know when one of these angels comes into your life.

After *An Invisible Thread* was published, hundreds of people were inspired to share their own “invisible thread” stories with me. The constant theme of all the letters and stories was that these people hadn’t even recognized how meaningful certain moments and gestures had been in their lives. They didn’t have a name for the unlikely connection they forged with someone unexpected.

But then, thanks to the story of Maurice and me, they were able to look back at their own moments and gestures and see them for what they were—huge turning points that altered the course of their life’s path. And they found a name for their own powerful connections: these were invisible threads.

Most important, it was as if they were finally able to recognize and appreciate the incredible power they possessed—the power we *all* possess—to change the world simply by sharing our innate goodness as human beings.

As angels on earth.

Just imagine how it made me feel to hear from all these people. When I wrote my book, I had no idea what to expect. I just sent it out into the world and waited to see what would happen. Then I began receiving letters and emails from people across the country and around the world, thanking me for sharing my story and telling me how much it meant to them. People thanked me for helping give a name to a special relationship in their lives. People read the book and re-bonded with old invisible thread connections. People were inspired to go out and discover new ones.

This is when I began to understand that the story of Maurice and me wasn’t just about the two of us.

It was about the deep, spiritual longing *all* of us have for meaningful, authentic connections in our lives.

What followed for me, in the five years since *An Invisible Thread* came out, was a remarkable journey that helped me

develop a brand-new way of looking at life and love and friendships and, yes, angels.

The starting point of my journey was a recognition of the invisible threads that connect us all. But over time, I realized these threads were only a part of a bigger, more powerful equation. Because what truly matters is that we *honor* these connections—and the way we honor them is through kindness. It is a simple yet beautiful model, and it is built on three basic truths:

1. Everyone has invisible thread connections in their lives.
2. We honor and activate these connections through kindness.
3. Honoring our invisible thread connections makes us angels on earth.

You will see that I didn't have to overhaul my life, or even make any radical changes, in order to experience the great blessings of this new view of the world. All that changed was my *perception* of how the world works—my way of thinking about everyday events. About what truly matters in our lives, and what doesn't. About how we all fit into the great, big tapestry of existence.

And that change in perception has changed everything else in my life.



Now, that change didn't happen overnight. It happened over the course of the five-year journey that followed *An Invisible Thread*.

About two weeks after the book was released, I received a phone call from Vicki Sokolik, the founder and executive director of an amazing organization in Tampa called Starting Right, Now. Vicki has taken countless high school students under her wing and been like a mother to them. She sets up each teen with a dedicated mentor, and together they help the students find jobs

and housing and deal with school and life issues. On top of all that, Vicki gives the students her unconditional love and support. As a result, these teens have thrived, breaking generational cycles of poverty and homelessness.

Vicki told me her charity was hosting a big event in October 2012, and she asked if I would come and give a speech about my story. I immediately thought, “Are you sure you have the right person?” It had never dawned on me that I’d be invited to talk about my story in front of groups of people.

Honestly, my whole life, I have been terrified of getting up and speaking in front of large crowds. In grade school I stayed away from plays, where I would have to talk, and settled for dance recitals. For a dance recital in the second grade, there was just me and another little girl dancing to “Oh, My Darlin’ Clementine.” I was terrified and tried to make myself faint, so I wouldn’t have to do it. A few grades later, every student had to read the day’s announcement over the school loudspeaker. When it was my turn, I went up to the microphone, froze after the first few words, turned around, and walked away in tears. Thankfully, the principal excused me from the announcement.

This wasn’t just stage fright. I absolutely dreaded the idea of speaking in front of large groups of people. Later on, when I became an ad sales executive for media companies like Time Inc. and Condé Nast, I worked hard to be able to address small gatherings of clients and colleagues—my comfort level was no more than ten or twenty. But any group larger than that was still a nightmare for me. When I had to deliver an important presentation to fifty coworkers in a big conference room, I stressed out about it for *weeks*.

So naturally, after *An Invisible Thread* came out, what was next for me?

Public speaking.

My first speaking event was at St. John's Episcopal Church in Ivyland, Pennsylvania. I drove two hours and somehow managed to stay on my feet as I shared the story of Maurice and me with the thirty or so people who turned out.

But then the crowds started growing.

I was invited to speak at the Greater Houston Conference for Women, in front of hundreds of people. I told my story at a School Nutrition Association Conference in front of five thousand attendees. I was asked to participate in a global conference called Leadercast Live, which took place in an arena in Atlanta's Gwinnett Center in front of eight thousand people—and was simulcast to 120,000 others around the world.

At that event, I was one of the main speakers, and *I had to follow Archbishop Desmond Tutu!*

I wound up traveling all over the country, from Boston to Hawaii, sharing the story of *An Invisible Thread*. In all, I've given more than one hundred fifty speeches, at corporate functions and charity events, in churches and synagogues, in front of local book club get-togethers. I have also been asked to speak in many elementary schools, middle schools, high schools, and universities, and I found that students of all ages were a huge audience for the message of my book. Through all these events, I have met thousands of people, and I've had hundreds of one-on-one conversations about a subject that was becoming the theme of my speeches and, indeed, my life.

Kindness.

And what I heard over and over, everywhere I went, was this: "The world needs more stories like yours."

Followed, often, by just such a story.

That is how this book was born—in conversations with people

from all different walks of life. In the incredibly heartwarming letters and emails I received from readers around the world, and in the inspirational stories they shared. In the realization that there was a simple, powerful message common to all these stories: that to live our best, happiest, most fulfilling lives, we need to open our eyes and our hearts to the invisible thread connections that are all around us—and we need to *honor and activate* these connections, so we can become angels on earth.



The chance to share some of the stories I've heard with you—and to introduce you to some of the extraordinary people I've met—is one of the best gifts to come out of my five-year journey around the country. The woman who saved a life just by buying a book; the man who made an incredible sacrifice for a total stranger; the boy who found his miracle while selling tacos in a dangerous neighborhood—I simply can't *wait* for you to meet these people.

All the stories in this book came to me through meetings, emails, and conversations; most of them have never been told in print before.

I'm also sharing the insight of some truly remarkable thinkers who crossed my path—people who made subtle shifts in their perception of the world and who beautifully articulate how you, too, can change your life with a simple change of attitude.

As you'll see, I've arranged the stories into seven parts: Kindness, Yesness, Outwardness, Awareness, Uniqueness, Clearness, and Connectedness. I found that different stories spoke to me in different ways and taught me different things about invisible threads and angels. Some stories taught me smaller truths, others taught me really big truths, and all of them put together changed the way I look at the world. These seven parts represent a kind of

blueprint of my journey—the step-by-step path I took to a new understanding of why we're here.

The opportunity to share all of this with you now is the continuation of the miracle that started when I met Maurice on a busy street corner thirty years ago. And I hope that when you read these stories, you will react the way I did—with joy and wonder and amazement and hope.



Of course, all of us already have important people in our lives. People we love, people we work with, people we run into while walking our dogs. Relatives, friends, spouses, confidantes. These connections are the very fabric of our lives—they give shape to who we are. And we all try our hardest never to take these connections for granted.

But sometimes we do. Sometimes we get lost in the routines and schedules of everyday life. We allow our world to get too narrow—we draw the circle tighter and tighter around us. Bit by bit, our focus turns inward—and all of a sudden we stop looking outward altogether.

And in this way we miss potential connections that could lead us to our best and happiest selves.

I know this happens, because it happened to me.

When I walked past Maurice on 56th Street all those years ago, my focus was as narrow as it could be. I was turned completely inward, busy with my job and my overscheduled life. There was no time in my hectic days for genuine gratitude and no room for someone like Maurice. And so I kept walking.

I almost failed to see the angel in Maurice.

I know now that there are millions of Laura's and Maurice's out there—people brought together by strange and wonderful

circumstances; people bound forever across oceans and decades; people who, through the power of an invisible thread, became angels on earth.

This book is a collection of stories about some of them. And as you read them, be on the lookout for the turning point in all of them—that tiny moment when a simple gesture, a simple act of kindness, changes everything.

That's all this book is—a challenge to you to recognize, and honor, the invisible thread connections in your life, and a guide to appreciating the ways you can be an angel on earth.

The philosopher Seneca once said, “Wherever there is a human being, there is an opportunity for kindness.” My journey has taught me that this is true.

But it has also taught me that wherever there is a human being, there is a potential angel on earth. None of us can become angels on our own—it is the *interaction* between two people that creates angel wings.

What I hope more than anything is that, with the stories and inspiration in this book, you will tap into the transcendent power of people being angels for one another.

