

“Releasing Angels”

John 1:29-42

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Anne Sullivan saw it in Helen Keller. Jaime Escalante saw it in the low income students in Garfield High School in East Los Angeles. Ron Clark saw it in his students in Harlem. What did these teachers see? They saw potential where others ignored or overlooked it.

Anne Sullivan taught Helen Keller to read and speak although she was deaf and blind. As a result, Keller became the first deaf and blind person to graduate from college and went on to have a distinguished career as an author, lecturer and activist.

In 1974, when Jaime Escalante began teaching math at Garfield High, he was so disheartened because almost none of his students understood even basic math principles. By 1990, over 400 students were enrolled in his math enrichment program and the number of students each year taking the Advanced Placement calculus exam was astounding.

You may recall in the movie about Escalante, “Stand and Deliver,” the Educational Testing Service asked fourteen of Escalante’s earliest students to retake the test because their scores were so high. Twelve agreed to do so and did so well they had their scores reinstated.

Ron Clark did the same thing for his students in Harlem. He enabled them to raise their test scores by using innovative teaching methods. Many of you are familiar with his story because he built the Ron Clark Academy in Atlanta and helps at-risk students in the inner city to excel in the classroom.

It is a gift to be able to see potential in other persons and devote your life to pulling it out of them. John the Baptist had it. Speaking about Jesus, he said, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” John 1:29.

What did John see in Jesus that impressed him and led him to give this Galilean carpenter such a grand introduction? At the very least, he saw someone with a pure heart that was open to the leadership of God’s Spirit and focused upon doing His will above all else. I think he saw much more, though.

Since he used the language of sacrifice from the prophets to describe Jesus, he must have felt that Jesus humbly valued others’ needs as much as his own and was intent on being their advocate. He had to believe that Jesus possessed the courage and determination to confront evil and pursue justice at all cost, even risking his own safety.

John was not the only one to see the potential Jesus had to change the hearts of men and the world. Two of his disciples did, also. After listening to John describe Jesus in such lofty terms, they turned their allegiance toward Jesus and followed him. One of those disciples, Andrew, went to his brother and said, “We have found the Messiah,” and took him to meet Jesus.

Upon meeting Andrew’s brother, Jesus said, “You are Simon, son of John. You are to be called Cephas” John 1:42. Cephas was the Aramaic word for rock. Evidently Jesus saw more than a Galilean fisherman when he looked at Peter, and he did. He saw the future leader of his disciples.

John, Andrew and Jesus all had the gift of seeing potential in others. They had the ability to see not only what people were, but what they could be with God’s help.

Do you have this gift? I call it a gift because I believe it is. It is by God’s grace that we are able to see potential in others that they may even be unaware of in their own lives. It is a gift of great value and significance that is cultivated through prayer.

If you have this gift, and I really believe all people do although some have not cultivated it, you need to use it. When you see potential in others, verbalize it. Point it out. Be bold and specific. John, Andrew and Jesus were. We must be, too. Follow their lead.

This is Stephen Covey's advice in his book, The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness. "Find your voice," he writes, "and inspire others to find theirs. Leaders see worth and potential in others and communicate it so clearly they will come to see it in themselves."

It is told that someone came upon Michelangelo while he was chipping away with his chisel at a huge shapeless piece of rock. This person asked the master sculptor what he was doing. "I am releasing the angel that is trapped inside," he replied.

Isn't this our task, too? I think so and believe we must be as committed to it as John the Baptist, Andrew and Jesus were. We need to help others see the potential trapped inside them that they may be overlooking.

There is something else we need to do, however. After pointing out others' potential, we need to help them achieve it. Do whatever you must to encourage, equip and empower them. Share your time, talents and resources with them. Become their John the Baptist and clear their pathway of any obstacles that would hinder them. Encourage them when they become discouraged. Be the first to pick them up when they stumble and fall.

This is what Anne Sullivan, Jaime Escalante and Ron Clark did. Jesus did, too and so must we.

This lesson is taught in Kathy Dobbins, Colin Harris and Doris Nelm's book, Klesis: God's Call and the Journey of Faith. It is their belief that every believer is a minister and every minister needs a community of faith that can help him or her identify, develop and use their talents. A support group is vital to effective ministry.

This is because ministry is highly personal. It is saturated with interpersonal relationships. "Come and see," Jesus responded when John's disciples asked where Jesus was staying. They did and it was a day they never forgot. They remembered every detail of it, including how much time they spent with the Lord.

Ministry is highly personal. It calls us to spend time with God in prayer in search of our own potential and purpose. It compels us to spend time with others helping them to see their own gifts and opportunities for service.

Perhaps this is why ministry is so fulfilling. Personally, I have found nothing that satisfies me more than helping someone discover his or her purpose in life and the gifts they have to pursue it. What a joy it is to release captive angels yearning to be free.

Who did this for you? Who helped release your angels? Was it your parents, a teacher, a coach, a minister or a friend? What did they say or do and what difference did it make in your self-esteem, level of confidence and the decisions you made about your future?

Who needs you to help them visualize their potential? Who is struggling to recognize their talents and how they can be used? Whose self-esteem and confidence needs a boost? How could you help them see what they are overlooking?

Talk to God about this. I am confident He will help you because He is an expert at releasing trapped angels.