

Reflection

Sisters of St. Francis of Mary Immaculate

Joliet, IL

Sr. Helen Zulka, OSF

By: Sr. Dolores Zemont, OSF, Friday, September 12, 2025

It is said that no two snowflakes are alike. They are all distinct, unique and beautiful. And such is the case with us – with humans. We, and our very souls are like snowflakes, all distinct and unique in our own beautiful way.

Our Sister Helen Zulka, was unique in all this world. She was individually distinct and totally authentic in who she was and how she was in our world. There was no pretense. She was open and direct in her opinions - sometimes painfully direct. She called it as she saw it and what you saw was what you got which was good for some, and could also be disarming. She was unique and always authentic! She was our Helcha!

Helcha did not appreciate surface conversations and loved engaging in those that were heavy, deep and real. She was totally interested in people and she connected with them with her total presence. She noticed and was aware of and appreciated all of life and saw it as gift. Helcha lived mindfully...even contemplatively.

Over the years, she and I would talk about what she would like me to say during her reflection. She said she didn't care because she would be dead and was fine sharing the not so good as the good. But ultimately, in her directive way, she said "but, make them laugh!"

Above anything else, Helcha wanted me to share her angel story. She and Vivian Whitehead had been friends since they were both in college at the College of St. Francis. When Vivian was

dying, Helcha asked her to send her an angel from heaven. Several days after Vivian's funeral, Helcha was meandering in the entrance of Heritage Woods when a group of men showed up, all dressed in dark colors so she wondered if they were Amish. But in the midst of them was a little boy about 6 years old, wearing a yellow coat, and he handed her an angel...this angel. She was absolutely sure that this was the gift she had requested, from heaven, from Vivian. The angel became her most prized possession and her dear friend Cindy Murphy bought this glass container to protect it.

I wondered...why an angel was so important to her and after her passing, discovered that angels were part of her life throughout the years. Back in 1995, she wrote a Christmas letter to Anna Marie Metz and said, "Have you noticed, too, the Christmas season filled with angels? They're everywhere, aren't they...doing what they do best...lighting up our lives." The angel theme permeated her thoughts throughout her ministry. She wrote that there are many indications of angels and light and wrote, "So I'm in my third career, working with a bunch of staff, doing Angel's work."

Living mindfully in every aspect of life, I believe that she was a contemplative, she was totally present to each moment and each person and really lived by what spiritualist Eckhart Tolle said "wherever you are, be there totally." As an example, she always said that she didn't eat, she dined and savored the gift of her food. Meals with her often took a long time. She noticed,

savored each moment and each person she encountered in her life and saw it all as gift. Always the artist, she had a flare for, noticed and appreciated things in the world – whether it was a beautiful painting, a Sausage McMuffin from McDonald's or a donut from the Donut Den, a beautiful flower or just YOU.

She could make instant connections with people that she met. When we would go out for breakfast, whoever our server was, became instantly drawn to her, because she was totally present and focused on the server who usually sat down to chat with her. She would ask about the person's life and listen with genuine interest and with her heart. She established an immediate and often long-lasting connection. It became invisible.

One year when she was in between ministries, she stayed at Guardian Angel with us for about 3 months and got hooked on Dan's taffy apples. When she went back to Bryan, Ohio, I bought the biggest taffy apple that Dan's had and shipped it to her. The next day, she still hadn't eaten it saying, "DZ, I'm waiting for the right moment. When my day is finished and I'm sitting in my recliner watching my favorite TV show, and all is well...I will then savor the apple." Mindfulness and gratitude for the gift.

If you are still questioning my emphasis on her uniqueness, just look at the readings she chose for her celebration! Acts of the Apostles, Revelation.

The reading from Revelation speaks so much of her care for the bereaved, the elderly, and those in need whom she encountered in her ministries. "For the Lamb...will shepherd them...God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." From this belief, she tried to be the angel who came and went in their lives, she wrote "I listen to the life's journey of the bereaved, give a little

assurance, and move on. Something like an angel." But she knew in her heart and believed that ultimately her God would be there shepherding them and leading them to life-giving water. Her gospel selection for today, reminds us that Jesus said, "I will give them eternal life, and they shall never perish." And in her choice of the reading from Acts of the Apostles, she reminds us of the light that we are called to be in our world. "I have made you a light to the nations" - the angel of light that she tried to be in her ministry.

In 1984, at the end of her day, she wrote the following prayer:

"Father, thank you for the gift of today and all the moments that were yours. I know that it is Your Presence that makes my pastoral ministry a fulfillment of your Son's mission here on earth. Your gifts to me have been more than I deserve. You know that I cannot continue this ministry without your love and sustaining support. To say "yes" to each day, to be your instrument each moment, is impossible for me without You, your Son Jesus and Your Guiding Spirit" and like the disciples, she went out to the world "filled with joy and the Holy Spirit." And she knew that they would be sheltered and shepherded to springs of life-giving waters and their God, her God, will wipe away every tear from their eyes. That is the spiritual essence of her life and her ministry and she was the angel with the message.

Helcha, we shall miss your humor, your faithfulness, your authenticity, directness and openness, your love of your God that you shared, and all the many reasons that you gave us to appreciate the distinct, unique and beautiful YOU. We are so grateful for the gift.

Sister Helen Zulka, may you be resting in the arms of Jesus.

Sr. Dolores Zement, OSF
Mass of Christian Burial
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