

Memorial Service for Angelina Thys

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Angelina Thys

April 27, 1937 - June 4, 2021

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Memorial Service

**September 18, 2021**

### Minister Benjamin Yudin's Introduction

We are here today to honor the life of our beloved friend, Angelina Thys.

We are here to hold Angelina in our hearts for this brief period, and then release her, together transforming our sorrow into presence.

At the death of a friend, we can see their play as a perfect, complete, and realized destiny. Now we more clearly understand the payment and contribution that Angelina made, and we are grateful for her gentle strength, her unassuming and poetic essence, and her unfailing love for her teacher and her friends.

Let us stand and remember Angelina in silent presence.

*(Silence)*

Thank you.

Rilke wrote, "Praise, my dear one. Let us disappear into praising. Nothing belongs to us." Angelina's life seems to embody these words.

She recognized the scale and rarity of a conscious school and a conscious teacher, addressing Robert in her letters as "Dear Benefactor." As her health declined, she told him, "I will not give in; on the contrary I hope to serve as much as will be asked." And she seemed as angelic as her name when she wrote, "Let us rejoice in unending gratitude!"

Angelina takes with her the presence that she has gained in this lifetime, and her connection with Influence C. Our teacher has said, "That is all we can take with us, but it is more than enough."

**[Reading: Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus, II, Sonnet 13***  
**(Reader: Stefano Petrizzo)**

Be ahead of all parting, as if it were already  
behind you, like the winter which is almost over.  
For among winters there is one so endlessly winter,  
that, wintering through it, may your heart survive.

Be forever dead in Eurydice – and climb back singing,  
climb praising, as you return to pure relation.  
Here among the disappearing, in the realm of decline,

be the ringing glass that shatters as it sounds.

Be – and yet know the condition of Not-being,  
the infinite ground of your innermost movement,  
that you may bring it to completion this one time.

To that which is used-up, as to nature's abundant,  
dumb and mute supply, the unsayable sums,  
joyfully add yourself and cancel the cost.

**[Music: Maria Theresia von Paradis, “Sicilienne”]**  
(Musician: Noah Horstock, violin)

**[Eulogy: composed by Engelbert Goethals and delivered by Robert MacIsaac]**

January 1996. A wintry street in Brussels, Belgium. We are walking to a student's apartment to give a prospective student meeting. We plan on arriving very early to prepare flowers and refreshments. Approaching the apartment, we see a little car with a little lady inside, sitting quietly. Seeing her creates the third state. A feeling of familiarity. Much later the doorbell rings. We open the door and the prospective student steps in. It is that same lady: Angelina. From now on, 'Angelina' will never be just a name again. She later told us she knew that this was the most important moment of her life. “I didn't want to risk missing it,” she said. “I had read in Gurdjieff that you may only get one chance, so I decided to leave Bruges very early and arrive very, very early.”

Many years later, Angelina would reflect on that same moment. She said:

When I discovered *In Search of the Miraculous* I read it three times in a row, to be able to absorb it and reflect on it. And then I put it aside, thinking, “Well, that was what *he* found. He was lucky. What am I going to find?” I was not convinced that I would ever find people who were so exactly occupied with the same work, just as it was written. To me, Ouspensky had been lucky. Then I found the Fellowship—the answer to all the questions I had ever had.

I almost do not dare to say it – I never felt as good as I do now. And what can you say to that? For me the work is true, and it is like my prayer – I say always, “Thank You.”

Angelina was 59 years old when she joined the School. In private conversations, she offered glimpses of her life before the School: the war years as a child, her life in Vienna, and most importantly of all, the experiences surrounding the death of her husband, Jan Vercammen, a well-known Flemish writer and poet. Jan was the love of her life. He was thirty years older than Angelina, and already had health problems when they first met. Should they marry, he told her, he could only promise her two years. They got married, and indeed, after two years their happy marriage was cut short by Jan's death. Years of depression followed, and Angelina spoke of "staring into the actual *horror vacui* – the fear of the empty," as she tried to describe this experience. All this shaped the lovely being we came to know as Angelina.

Her life had prepared her to quickly grasp the enormous value of being present, and to take as much advantage of the teaching as possible. She made her first month-long visit to Apollo in 1997, the year after she joined the School, and she returned in 1998 for much of the year. Many other visits were to follow.

Angelina's last visit to Apollo was in October 2015. She said, "I did not come with expectations, but I could not have expected this. It is beyond .... beyond ...". And again, "I feel young again—" "I really want to move here. It is the only place that makes sense."

Angelina was a talented poet and letter writer, and she particularly loved Rilke. Once, after reading a letter from Angelina, Robert said, "She expresses the inexpressible, like Shakespeare."

In one note, she conveyed her love for Robert and told him how inspired she was by the way he was handling and transforming the friction of his failing eyesight. On her 82<sup>nd</sup> birthday, she returned Robert's birthday wishes with a warm embrace and all her love, adding, "It is a privilege just to think of you." And two years ago, she said to a student visiting her, "Tell Robert that I love him. If there is one thing that I am sure of it is that I love him."

One of her friends recounts: "One day Angelina told me that we were friends. I had never thought of it that way, but it was true. We then spent many moments together. The breakfasts in her house were very memorable, just the two of us at ease with each other, and a jovial feast on the table before us. She was happy, smiling, generous, and presence permeated her world."

Another friend shares these recollections:

“I remember most dearly how committed Angelina was to her aims and her friends. Her standards were exceptional: the careful way she folded her napkin, used her knife and fork, and many other simple things.

“She showed us her love in many ways, and her generosity will always be remembered — not only by me — but by all those who have had the very fortunate luck to have known, appreciated, and loved this very exceptional woman.”

And another friend recalls: “When Angelina had just joined the School, we spent a few nights together by the sea. During one early morning breakfast we watched the sun rise. Angelina said this was a sign that the Light had come into her life, and she was very, very happy. We often returned to this moment in later years, during times when she wasn't feeling well, as a way of reminding her that the sun is inside of her and always in her life.”

As her health failed, Angelina had to exchange her beloved Bruges, with its chiming belfry bells, her apartment with its library, her external independence and freedom, for the confines of a nursing home. This final journey into a foreign and new kind of loneliness was a difficult transition, but one that she came to accept.

During this period, a signed copy of Robert's book *Awakening* arrived for Angelina, with its beautiful cover of a swan on the water about to take flight. Influence C arranged that a poster of the very same swan photo was used to decorate some far corner of the nursing home. Angelina would often make a detour past that poster – both as a reminder of Robert and for the extra effort it required (which consistently stunned the nurses who were taking care of her). The white swans of Bruges had followed her there.

Students who called or visited her felt afterward that they were the ones who had been helped and who had, in fact, received the most from the interaction. She was always grateful to receive calls and to be remembered. One friend recalls how she would sometimes quote the prayer from the New Testament, “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.”

After she completed her role, Robert was asked if he wished to choose the thought for the ribbon on the flower wreath for Angelina's interment in Belgium. Robert replied, “She had the right name: Angelina – Angel.” Robert's response mysteriously reflected an exchange with Angelina

at a teaching dinner in 1998. Robert had asked her, “Are you back for a while?” and Angelina replied, “Yes, I am. But I feel you everywhere.” He then told her, “You value the School. Everything is in your name – Angel.” And she responded, “I hope I can be worthy of it.”

After Angelina’s death, her niece, while cleaning her room, found what she called a “somewhat strange spiritual poetry collection by Rumi that Angelina loved so much.”

Her niece read the following lines from Rumi at the funeral service in Belgium:

*Death is a wedding with eternity:  
Don't weep over me,  
Don't say how sad;  
To you, my death may seem a setting  
But really, it is a dawn.*

Her niece commented: “I believe, Angelina, that you see it that way, and that it is good. From the bottom of my heart I wish you a beautiful loving marriage.”

In a similar spirit, in the opening poem of her book of poetry dedicated to her dear Jan, Angelina wrote:

*Over the secret night  
the bridal veil of the first morning.  
Lamps die out,  
Light awakens.*

*Over de geheime nacht  
de bruidsluier van de eerste morgen.  
De lampen doven:  
het licht ontwaakt.*

### **Minister’s Conclusion:**

The death of a friend reminds us that we each inhabit a fragile and temporary vessel, through which presence emerges and connects us.

May Angelina’s efforts to transform the sorrows of her life deepen our understanding of the profound nature of our work;

May her humility and acceptance in the face of old age, disability, and loss of independence inspire us as we face difficulties in our own lives;  
And may her gratitude and love for her teacher and her school nourish the flame of our valuation.

The task of this lifetime has been fulfilled. The role of Angelina is complete, and the soul that played the role is released to continue its divine journey.

Dear Angelina, we thank thee.

Friends, please stand now, and follow me to view the plaque that has been placed for Angelina.

**[Minister leads participants to the memorial column.]**

**[Minister:]**

With this plaque we bring Angelina home to Apollo, a place she loved dearly. And the words inscribed on it are from Rilke, a poet she loved dearly.

**[Reading: Rilke, "Sonnets to Orpheus, II, 10"]**

(Reader: Ingrid Claes)

Words gently end at the edge of the Unsayable . . .  
And from the most tremulous stones music, forever new,  
Builds in unusable space her deified temple

**[Music: Vivaldi, "Cantabile" from flute concerto]**

(Musician: Diana Yudina, flute)

**[Minister:]**

Rumi wrote, "Uncover in silence your soul's own rose garden." Let these rose petals remind us of the sweetness of our departed friend, and of the rose garden of her soul.

**[Minister and participants scatter rose petals.]**

**[Participants move to the table for the toast.]**

**[Toast: Ann Douglass]**

Let us raise our glasses to the ascending soul who played the role of Angelina, to the timeless moments that we shared, and to the joy of presence with angels.