

DREAMS AND THE MYSTICAL PATH—
THE USE OF DREAMS FOR THEOLOGICAL FORMATION
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Connections are made slowly, sometimes they grow underground....More than half a tree is spread out in the soil under your feet....Weave real connections,....Keep tangling and interweaving and taking more in, a thicket and bramble wilderness to the outside but to us interconnected with rabbit runs and burrows and lairs....Reach out, keep reaching out, keep bringing in. This is how we are going to live for a long time. (Marge Piercy)

I have come to look at our capacity to form [dream] images as a way nature has of giving us the opportunity to examine whatever may be impinging on the state of our connectedness to others, for good or bad....Asleep we turn our attention to the reality of our interconnectedness as members of a single species. (Montague Ullman)

Sleep and see; wake, and report the nocturnal spectacle...Sleep like travel, enriches, refreshes, by varying the day's perspective, showing us the night side of the globe we traverse by day. The Person is One in all the manifold phases of the Many through which we transmigrate, and we find ourselves perpetually....'Tis the one soul in manifold shapes. Ever the old friend of the mirror in other face, old and new, yet one in endless revolution and metamorphosis. (A. Bronson Alcott)

*The single most important thing to understand about dreaming is that **all dreams come in service of health and wholeness.** (Jeremy Taylor)*

Dreams are internal myths. Myths are collective dreams. (Joseph Campbell)

Inside out, outside in. (From the film "Everything Is Illuminated")

In October of 1840 Emerson recorded a telling dream in his journal: "I dreamed", wrote Emerson, "that I floated at will in the great ether, and I saw this world floating also not far off, but diminished to the size of an apple. Then an angel took it in his hand and brought it to me and said, 'this must thou eat.' And I ate the world." (Richardson, Emerson The Mind On Fire, p.342)

Robert Richardson, Jr., Emerson's biographer, says of Emerson's dream about eating the world, that this was "Emerson's global Eucharist; he had come to take Communion at last." Emerson had discovered in the inner reaches of his own soul that we all carry the world and universe within us, but each of us must come to know it for ourselves. If eating the apple was Emerson's version of the temptation in the Garden of Eden, this time it was done, not out of ignorance and innocence, but out of knowledge and intuition of our connection to the whole of creation. To know that we are connected to all that is, that the laws of nature and the laws of love and justice are in our own mind and conscience, is to know the basis of all religion and morality, and our relation to the ultimate source of existence. What could be more expressive of this realization than to say, "I ate the world."

Emerson was deeply affected by the new cosmology that the science of his day was bringing to the fore. He could no longer believe in the anthropocentric scheme of salvation portrayed in the Bible. The universe was much more vast than the Biblical

writers had ever imagined and the forces and powers of nature were no longer earth bound. In our day we would say that they are no longer bound to a single milky-way galaxy. "The whole of nature," said Emerson "was a metaphor of the human mind." "I will lift up my hands and say 'Kosmos'". Though that cosmos is much larger than even Emerson thought, still we can affirm that it is present in the human mind, and, yes, manifest in our dreams.

For me the cosmic connection came in a very powerful dream I had while completing an intern year in the campus ministry at Oregon State University, as part of my theological education at Andover Newton. At the time I was reading both Tillich and Teilhard de Chardin's book on evolution and theology, hoping to find a theological orientation that would embrace both science and religion. I was at that time a confused Congregationalist in a religious and theological quandary, struggling with the conundrums of Christian neo-orthodoxy that made little sense to my mind and to my need for a larger more encompassing metaphysical perspective. I was also in the midst of some long overdue heavy duty psychotherapy. I received a partial answer to my quandary in what Jung once called "a Big Dream"—

*I am standing on the plains of Africa with my therapist Dr. Brody. Vast expanses stretch out in every direction. Wild animals roam freely. In the middle of the plain is an ancient road, well worn and packed hard, extending as far back as the eye can see. On one side of the road are lined up, one behind the other, as if in a series or progression, various species of animal life from the dark past of evolution, from prehistoric origins to the present—two by two like the animals on Noah's ark—concluding with the human form. Running down the road in great haste is a tall muscular Egyptian Nubian slave. He approaches an Egyptian throne set upon an intricately designed pyramidal platform with miniature red, black and white diamond shaped images, all shimmering with light—a feeling of the **mysterium tremendum**, both fascinating and scary. On the throne sits the king, who waits for the messenger. The king's back is to us. I cannot see what he looks like. The tall Nubian runs up an inclined stairway, and comes before the king. He kneels in homage and leans over to kiss the king's extended right foot. The Nubian delivers his message to the king in a language I do not understand, maybe German or Egyptian or an ancient dialect. Perhaps Dr. Brody understands, but it remains a deep mystery to me.*

My unconscious seemed to be saying that theology and evolution do in fact fit together, intelligent design or not. The roots of human consciousness extend back to the dark mysteries of life emerging from nature and forward to the religious impulse to the divine in reverence and awe. The collective consciousness of humanity recapitulates all that has gone before and brings life to a higher level of purpose and meaning. A historical theology, confined to the history of the Jewish Christian experience, and not also linked to the evolution of consciousness in nature, is an incomplete and truncated theology. No wonder I could not understand the language of neo-orthodoxy. For me all theology comes out of the mystery of being and consciousness in nature and history and ends in mystery. I'm not sure I would have interpreted my "Big Dream" in those terms at the time, but it felt important and significant and clearly indicated the direction I was moving spiritually and theologically. Today I call myself an evolutionary panentheist, a fancy philosophical and theological label. It was all there in the dream.

The images in my dream remind me of Carl Sandburg's moving poem "Wilderness" where he declares that he has a wolf, a fox, a hog, a fish, a baboon, an eagle and a mockingbird inside of him because the wilderness gave it to him "and the wilderness will not let it go." And he tells us that he got all these things, "before Noah, before the first chapter of Genesis." Or as Whitman put it, "Immense have been the preparations for me....I contain multitudes." Or as biologists tell us, "Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny." "O, I got a zoo," concludes Sandburg,

...I got a menagerie, inside my ribs, under my bony head, under my red-valve heart--and I got something else: it is a man-child heart, a woman-child heart: it is a father and mother and lover: it came from God-Knows-Where: it is going to God-Knows-Where--For I am the keeper of the zoo: I say yes and no...I am a pal of the world: I came from the wilderness.

Sandberg is right. We do have a menagerie inside our bony ribs and under our skulls. It is the wild untamed energy of consciousness, the long strong passion of life that animates our very beings and expresses itself in gender specific forms and patterns of culture. There is some danger to be encountered in stirring up this *elan vital*, but we are the keepers of the zoo, it is our task as civilized men and women to say yes and no to the expression of this vital energy. We know that without it we are shrunken hollow beings and only a truncated manifestation of what we might be.

A year or two earlier in the course of my theological education at Andover Newton I came to the realization that I was clearly out of line with the prevailing theological trend of the time—a Christ centered neo-orthodoxy with a Barthian twist. I simply did not believe that God was revealed exclusively nor even definitively in one religion, Christianity, in one book, the Bible, or in one person, Jesus of Nazareth. A course in comparative world religions had convinced me of the relative and partial truths found in all faiths. What was I to do with my unorthodox theological views? How could I go into the parish ministry and preach a theology and doctrine I no longer believed? My emerging religious universalism was confirmed in a dream that I recorded at the time. I dreamed I was in some kind of religious museum with traditional Christian symbols and paintings on the main floor. I am impelled to ascend to another room on the floor above, and there discover a display of ancient Buddha statues and Eastern religious artifacts. The room is bathed in a mysterious, subdued, greenish golden light. Images of the Buddha are all in gold and bronze. A voice from above begins to speak out of the surrounding dimness. An invisible but irresistible force compels me to my knees. I know I am in a holy place.

Many years later at a Star Island R. E. Conference at which I was the theme speaker on spirituality, I declared, "Don't let the charismatics and Pentecostals lay exclusive claim to the Holy Spirit, binding the Spirit in dogmatic chains of fundamentalist religious thought." That night I had the following dream:

I am in a large brick Pentecostal church like the First Universalist Church in Providence. I am attending services with three other UU colleagues. There is a large crowd. I don't want to get separated from my friends for fear of being converted by the

collective power of crowd psychology. We do become separated and I call after them, but they are lost in the crowd. I forget my fear and wander into a room for new initiates in the back of the church. Some kind of ritual motion and instruction is going forward. It occurs to me I might be detected - I don't really belong here - but I am curious to see what it would be like to be an initiate. Nevertheless, I leave and go out into the larger church where the formal service is taking place, but it doesn't hold much interest for me.

I think there is in many UU's a kind of unconscious, fearful curiosity, a secret wish to participate in the feeling of zealous evangelical religious enthusiasm, but without having to sacrifice the mind at the altar of fundamentalism. To have a taste, as it were, of the wine of the Holy Spirit without having to partake and digest the unpalatable theological dinner which always seems to be part of the charismatic religious menu. I believe it is possible to have a taste of the wine of the Holy Spirit and forego the dinner, as some of us did some years ago at GA when we danced and chanted to the pagan goddess on the quadrangle at Yale in the wee hours of the morning. We want it all, the rational and the emotional. We want what I and others have called, "a new transcendentalism."

In August of 1976, seven years into my ministry in Norwell, I had a taste of what that new transcendentalism might be like. I dreamed I was a participant in an interfaith dance celebration. A large group of us were locked arm and arm in a semi-circle, swaying and chanting prayers of peace, each of us in our own language and idiom. At the center of this celebration, standing on a raised platform, directing the pageant, was a kind of Angelic Masculine-Feminine figure dressed in robes and wearing a pointed hat. We seem to be in some kind of outdoor amphitheater. The crowd or audience is deeply moved by this spectacle and the fact that each could pray for peace in their own religious language and still be part of a unified spiritual whole. It was like a new Pentecost.

Some eight to nine months later in the spring of 1977 I invited a young parishioner, John Marsh, who was intent on preparing for the UU ministry, to attend an unusual ceremony with me at the Boston Armory building on Arlington Street. It was called "The Cosmic Celebration" and was to be led and directed by Pir Vilyant Kahn, the head of the Sufi Order of the West. What it turned out to be was a dramatic portrayal in word and song and colorful costumes of the major founders and teachers of the world's great religions. It was very well done.

The Boston Armory is a large gymnasium with the bleachers going up the sides and the main floor down below in the center, not unlike the amphitheater in my dream. Near the end of the ceremony I remembered my dream and I said to John, wouldn't it be interesting if the performers came up into the audience and invited us to join them on the floor below. Well, that is exactly what happened. So, there we were audience and performers, linked arm and arm— each of us from varying religious and faith traditions— swaying, singing and chanting together in unison, all part of a larger spiritual whole. And standing in the center on a raised parapet, directing the colorful pageantry, was Pir Vilyat Kahn dressed in religious garments and robes, and wearing a hat not unlike the one in my dream.

My dream premonition, followed by this meaningful coincidence, confirmed for me once again why I became a Unitarian Universalist minister. I needed a religion that welcomed and celebrated the spiritual ideals of many faith traditions and could do so with honesty, respect and integrity for all concerned, a religion of reason, freedom, love and tolerance. I think of every Sunday in a Unitarian Universalist church as a kind of cosmic celebration of humanity's oneness in the midst of the rich diversity of many traditions and viewpoints and values that comprise our congregations and our diverse membership.

Years ago in The Greenfield Group I shared a dream that was reminiscent of Robert Bly's Wild Man myth:

I am walking the streets of a city looking for a wounded gorilla, King Kong perhaps. A large dog picks up the scent of the gorilla from a cane I am carrying. He leads me to an old grammar school building in the city. The gorilla lives in the basement of the school in a cage. I suspect that he has or will come back to his cage. I go into the basement with a little girl towards whom I feel protective. We can see the large cage where the gorilla sleeps. The cage door is open. He is not there. We explore the dusty corridors together. I have a flashlight with me. As I turn it on I see the gorilla out of the corner of my eye. He is hiding behind some metal racks or shelves. I can see the wounded expression in his eyes. He has been wounded in the heart.

I suspect that my Unitarian Universalist male psyche is not that different from other men's psyches be they Unitarian Universalists or otherwise. There is a wound in us; a hole in our soul, that men especially must come to terms with if we are ever to become what Whitman called "a race of splendid and savage old men." What is this wound? It is the wound of our mortality, certainly, but more than that it is also the wound of our lost connections with our mothers, our fathers, our partners, our children, our lovers, and for us men, our lack of connection with other men as friends and companions, guides and mentors. How are we to restore our lost connections? There is both death and rebirth in this process. In another dream it happened this way:

I am watching a bulldozer expose a series of graves on a hillside cemetery. A tomb or coffin with a marble slab is exposed. It is the resting place of a former minister. The marble slab is removed revealing two bodies lying side by side. The bodies are not decomposed. Lying next to the minister is his young wife, dressed in her bridal gown, holding a baby in her arms. She has dark hair and is very beautiful. The sunlight shining on her face causes her to squint her closed eyelids. Perhaps she thinks it is time for the resurrection. I notice she is breathing very slowly. She stirs a little in her sleep. I draw near to her and whisper in her ear, "Are you awake?" She does not open her eyes. I take her hand in mine, lean down, and gently kiss her fingers.

Was this sleeping beauty the bride of my soul, my inner Beatrice, my better half, my feminine side, awakening to consciousness? Or perchance my encounter with the angel of death and transformation telling me that though life be short it is nonetheless sweet and the remembrance of beauty eternal? I cannot say, but I've never forgotten that dream.

Are we not all of us, at all times, interrelated and connected to one another? Women seem more able to feel this connection more readily than men. But in the ground of their being men are no less relational beings than are women. We have to dig in the grave yard of the deep masculine/feminine, open up a tomb, and awaken our connection to the primordial father/mother/, husband/wife/, partner/lover and child which is part and parcel of who we are.

I remember after my grandfather died, during my last year in theological school, a striking dream in which he seemed to be trying to communicate with me, but was unable to speak. Then I saw him climb into his coffin, rise up and get out, climb into his coffin again, rise up and get out. The message seemed to be clear--death was a resurrection of consciousness that transcended the demise of the body. At least that was what my unconscious seemed to be saying to me. And who knows where dream ends and reality begins.

I remember a friend of our parish in Norwell who died in his mid 40's of a brain tumor. We were all caught up in the tragic drama of his leaving behind a family of seven children. A Memorial Service was held in the church with close to 400 in attendance. A few months after he died I had a dream in which I saw him coming through an airport terminal from the other side into the lobby. His wife is there and greets him warmly. I realize immediately that he is dead and that this must be a dream. We see each other and shake hands and exchange greetings. I ask him how he is and what he is doing here. He answers, "I guess I came back to say thank you and goodbye." I put my arm on his shoulder and we ascend up some stairs. He disappears, the dream fades, and I awake. I've wondered ever since, was the dream an expression of my need or his? Who knows where dream ends and reality begins?

Shortly before my father died I had a dream in which I received a letter from him from the dead. In the letter he says now that he is dead he can express himself once again, which he was not able to do very well towards the end. He says how much he loved us and needed to say goodbye. I am puzzled how it is possible to receive a letter from the dead. Since his death dreams about him have continued from time to time. He continues to live in my thoughts and memories, in my dreams and imagination. And he is changing as I am changing. We are indeed part and parcel of one another.

I share these dreams about death and dying with you because I believe that what I experienced is not atypical. The dead continue to live in us long after they have left the physical plane. They are part of who we are and we honor them on Memorial Day and other days by remembering them in our conscious thoughts and memories and in our dreams.

Marina Abramovic, an artist and dream researcher, says, "Dreams themselves are art as they are happening." Emerson said as much when he declared, "In dreams we are true poets: we create the persons of the drama; we give them appropriate figures, faces, costume....I doubt if the best poet has yet written any five-act play that can compare in

thoroughness of invention with this unwritten play of fifty acts, composed by the dullest snorer on the floor of the watch-house.”

We can use our dreams and that of others for theological formation and for religious and spiritual dialogue and development, and the sharing of mystical experience. If we accept the premise that “All dreams come to us in service of health and wholeness” (Jeremy Taylor), then we can bring the outside in, and the inside out, and someday discover that everything is indeed illuminated in the evolution of consciousness within us, without us, and beyond us.

Appendix – Two Dreams from well known Personages for use in a Dream Workshop

(1) The Dream of a Young Man

On the night of November 10, xxxx, when he was 23 years old, a young man dreamed he was walking along on a tilt because his right side was too weak. He was spun around several times on his left foot by a powerful wind and tried to seek refuge in a college chapel, where he hoped to pray, but the wind forced him back. Then someone told him a man in the college courtyard had brought him a gift of a melon from a foreign country. The dreamer, still bent and unsteady in his gait was surprised to observe that those gathered around the man were upright and steady on their feet, and he was simultaneously aware that the force of the wind had now greatly diminished.

(If this was your dream how would you interpret it? Take a few minutes to think about it and to make some notes about your thoughts and feelings in relation to the dream. What does this dream tell you about yourself and your understanding of the world you live in? When you have done this you may proceed to the dreamer’s interpretation, and then on to whose dream it actually was.)

The Dreamer’s Interpretation

The dreamer interpreted the foreign melon as a sexual symbol. The dream thus suggested that he had been proceeding in an unbalanced manner but that the strong unseen forces causing him to lose his footing would diminish if he could learn to accept and become more familiar with the “foreign” physical side of his life. Religious concerns were also involved; the chapel entrance where spiritual communication (prayer) takes place was located away from where the melon was.

To reformulate his dream in an oversimplified manner, it seems the task posed by this dream to the dreamer was to reconcile the domains of the body and the spirit and to understand their interrelations in a scholarly setting (the college courtyard). His eventual solution was to develop a philosophical theory of dualism; man’s physical body functioned in a manner similar to that of other animals, but his mind operated on a nonphysical basis, under the influence of a soul.

(Whose dream was it? – Answer: Philosopher Rene Descartes in the year 1619)

From, Our Dreaming Mind, p. 34 - by Robert Van de Castle

(2) The Dream of a Second Thoughtful Man

In October xxxx, a thoughtful man recorded a telling dream in his journal: "I dreamed that I floated at will in the great ether, and I saw this world floating also not far off, but diminished to the size of an apple. Then an angel took it in his hand and brought it to me and said, 'this must thou eat.' And I ate the world."

(If this was your dream how would you interpret it? Take a few minutes to think about it and to make some notes about your thoughts and feelings in relation to the dream. What does this dream tell you about yourself and your understanding of the world you live in? When you have done this you may proceed to the answer and further interpretation and reflection below.)

Robert Richardson, Jr. comments that "this is X's global Eucharist; he had come to take Communion at last." RMF comments that X had discovered in the inner reaches of his own soul that we all carry the world and universe within us, but each of us must come to know it for ourselves. If eating the apple was X's version of the temptation in the Garden of Eden, this time it was done, not out of ignorance and innocence, but out of knowledge and intuition of our connection to the whole of creation. To know that we are connected to all that is, that the laws of nature and the laws of love and justice are in our own mind and conscience, is to know the basis of all religion and morality, and our relation to the ultimate source of existence. What could be more expressive of this realization than to say, "I ate the world."

(Whose dream was it? – Answer: Philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1840)

From, Emerson the Mind on Fire by Robert Richardson, Jr., p. 342

(Does Descartes' dream or Emerson's dream, or Chaung Tze's butterfly dream or Jung's house dream, trigger any thoughts or memories of any dreams or fantasies or "deep soul connections" in your own life? Would you share them with the group?)