

Epiphany Sunday 2011

So Much for Dreaming

A sermon by Steven Epperson

January 2, 2011

© 2011 Unitarian Church of Vancouver

And so we begin a new calendar year together—2011! I remember being a kid in grade school—I can see it clearly even today, I’m sitting there in this desk—calculating in my head how old I was going to be in the year 2000—*forty-six*! Oh my god—that was so ancient! And here we are eleven years later!!? Can someone tell me—what’s eleven years *after* ancient? And how much of me today is the same kid sitting there in that school room decades ago, I wonder? I know we undergo extraordinary changes in our lives—with the rest of you, like Joni Mitchell, we’ve looked at life from both sides; haven’t we? And yet, at the same time, again in company with you, I feel myself as essentially the same person through these changes. And one of those constants of self through change is the fact that I, and we, continue to dream, no matter what we’ve been through. We spend nearly a third of every twenty-four day cycle sleeping; and each night, whether we remember it or not, we pass through what the ancient Greeks called the gates of ivory and horn, and journey along the corridors of dreaming—or what Freud called the royal road to the unconscious. “Angels,” wrote Iris Murdoch, “must wonder at these beings who fall so regularly out of awareness into a fantasm-infested dark. How our frail identities survive these chasms [of sleep and dream] no philosopher has ever been able to explain.” I don’t know how I survive the recurrent dream where I show up to give a sermon, only to discover when I look down.... that I don’t have anything to read, and I’m standing here in my pajamas!! They’re not all about my anxieties, my insecurities.

There have been exceedingly rare dreams that illuminated the dark in which I wandered; that even served to light the path of life that lay ahead. There have been nightmares aplenty—

and to what end or purpose, I've often wondered. Many dreams, however, as we all know well, are exceedingly mundane, ephemeral, weird, random, and seemingly pointless; rarely remembered or recalled, they either fail to linger as we resurface into consciousness or their fragments of images and traces of narrative dissipate on waking like wisps of fog smitten by the sun.

Curious that we speak so little publicly here of something so widespread in our experience. *Or not so surprising when you think about it*—decorum, our Canadian politeness, and a Unitarian sensibility that privileges reason and pragmatics—that is, what could the practical, positive consequences possibly be—no doubt these have something to do with the absence of public discourse on dreaming in settings like this. After all, dreams are so personal and subjective; they're laden with emotional content, occult symbolism, narrative incongruity, and, if Freud is even half right, tons of repressed sexual weirdness. And when, may I ask you, was the last time you turned for inspiration to the apocalyptic fevered dreaming recorded in something like the Book of Revelation in the Bible? (*I thought not.*) How could any of this serve as raw material, as building blocks for creating and cultivating religious and ethical community? No wonder we don't talk much, if at all, publicly about the contents of our dreaming lives here.

As well, a long standing scientific outlook that dreams are trivial at best would also count against dream work as suitable content for exploration in settings such as ours—it doesn't say anywhere in our Seven Principles that we covenant to affirm “a free and responsible search for dream interpretation” or “the right to each and all to expound upon our dream work with one another.” Over four hundred years ago, Thomas Nashe called dreams, “nothing else but a bubbling scum...of fancy, which the day hath left undigested.” And writing in the late 19th

century, the neurologist Carl Binz, summed up scientific orthodoxy of his age, and that held sway well into the 20th century, when he said, “*Traume sind Schaume*”—dreams are like froth on a glass of beer—“somatic processes which are in every case useless and in many cases positively pathological.” The novelist Julian Barnes puts it this way: “I have always been suspicious of dreams; or rather, of excessive interest in them....As a reader, I had long been irritated...and bored...by ‘significant’ [dreams], premonitions, and so on....and when I first started writing fiction, I laid down two rules for myself: no dreams, and no weather.” If Barnes is right, we may just not want to pester one another and embarrass ourselves about something others may regard as trivial and boring. ((Nashe and Binz, in *Dreams and History*..., Pick and Roper, eds., 2004, pp. 6, 126; Barnes, *Nothing to be frightened of*, 146-7)

And yet we continue to dream; and all that nighttime drama, the symbolic fecundity, the visitations from the departed, the rare rays of light that seem to illuminate the path ahead—is it just sound and fury signifying nothing at all?

Several years ago, I went to a local bookstore on a dream book field trip. More to the point, I wanted to know what was going on physically when we dream; what’s happening in the body and brain? And since human beings have been dreaming for who knows how long—accounts of dreaming are found in the earliest known human literature—what concrete purpose does it serve? Is dreaming a trait selected and maintained in the process of evolution because it was able to increase the survivability and fitness of our species? Did it give our ancestors an adaptive advantage? And if so, what was it? Or is dreaming mere froth; a freeloader, an epiphenomenon in the slip stream of sleep?

What I found was hardly surprising: scores of books dedicated to the subject of *dream interpretation*; and only *one* the physiology of dreaming. It’s not *how* we dream, but *what they mean*, that has plagued and fascinated women and men from the times of the ancient

Babylonians right down to present day residents of Vancouver. And a glance through the modern day books on dream interpretation was enough to confirm three things for me. First, little has changed from the 2nd century when the ancient Greek seer Artemidorus wrote his authoritative manual of dream interpretation—we share with countless others through the centuries the hope, the need that—beyond the anomalies, the confusion, the contradictions—our dreams *must* have some kind of order and special meaning for us. Second, that there will always be people who claim, for a price, that they can help us decode the meaning of dreams. And third, once decoded, the claim is that our dreams will help guide us to happiness, personal insights, riches, better health, and the actualization of our hidden potential. At least that’s the message conveyed in the dream books that fill the shelves of the Banyen Bookstore. In sum, the meaning of dreams, if we could but unlock their secrets, is about us as individuals. (I had a vivid experience of this years ago working on the grounds crew at a college. A number of the workers at the school were from the West Indies, and they gambled in the State Lottery. They swore to me that they dreamt numbers and combination of numbers that guided them in their choice of lottery combinations. And sure enough, playing the numbers that came to him in a dream, one of my colleagues won a half a million dollars.)

I want to return to this theme—self-realization and the unlocking of individual potential through dream work; but first, what about the physiology of dreaming? What’s going on physically when we dream? What is a dream and how does it differ from waking consciousness? Think about it for a minute. Rather than the product of conscious control, dreams *happen to us* when we are asleep. “When dreaming we are the spectators of an unfolding drama,” and only rarely do we have the impression of being in control. While there may be a more or less coherent plot in dreams, “events in dreams do not unfold in any steady progression—rather, there are

sudden changes in scenario, or scene shifts,” which can be really baffling. Ordinary logic is suspended. “We can find ourselves flying. People turn into animals. We encounter people who have been dead for years.... The oddness of dreaming is undeniable.” As well, think of the single mindedness of dreams—their imagery, plots, symbols, jump cuts, totally dominate our consciousness in sleep. “Dreams by their very nature impose a strait jacket” of a quite often incoherent stream of thought, “driven by visual images, which prevents the formation of the kinds of conscious intentions, evaluations, and recollections of memories” that occur in waking consciousness. (see James Empson, *Sleeping and Dreaming*, 2nd, revised edition, 1993, pp98-9.)

Scientists, like Allan Hobson at Harvard Medical School, who has studied dreaming now for four decades, claim that these traits of dreaming can be accounted for by neurology—the hard science of brain physiology. By analyzing thousands of reports of dreams carried out in hospital settings, and by studying brain activity with the tools of MRIs and other devices, Hobson and others have come up with some of the following tentative conclusions about the activity of dreaming states and their contents.

First, if you accept that the brain and mind are inextricably united, then dreaming is a distinctive form of conscious awareness caused by the brain in sleep. That is to say, the dreaming mind is not activated, programmed, or controlled by some exterior, hidden agency, occult force or being. (Hobson, *Dreaming: An Introduction to the Science of Sleep*, 2002, p19) Second, waking and dreaming are two, interdependent states of consciousness whose differences depend on brain chemistry. (Hobson, 64) When the brain self-activates in sleep, the regions of the brain and the chemical support systems associated with waking consciousness basically switch off, and other areas of the brain with their own chemical self-instructions switch on, and with it comes dreaming. In the brain we have two different systems of chemistry that trigger and enable two

quite different types of consciousness to take place; one for waking consciousness (aminergic), one for dreaming (cholinergic). That's not to say that a wall completely separates them. The content of dreams is dependent on the stuff we see, think, feel and experience while we're awake. But in the realm beyond the gates of horn and ivory the rules change; our minds behave differently there.

This helps explain the weirdness and emotional intensity of dreams. For example, in sleep, muscle action is inhibited—which accounts, in part for the feeling of being paralysed in dreams. As well, dreams can be particularly intense, instinctive, and emotional; they can change scenarios, symbols and make leaps in associations between things and characters because the brain regions—like that limbic, reptilian brain of ours—supporting these functions are more active, while those parts of the brain that keep track of time, place, and persons and that guide our problem-solving, analytical thought are switched off. (Hobson, 62-3, 69, 113)

Here, Freud was half right, in that he correctly emphasized the primitive emotional character of dreams, but half wrong in that there is a lot less sex than he assumed; and, according to Hobson and others, mostly wrong in dogmatically asserting that dreams are bizarre because they all conceal and censor unconscious sexual wishes. (Hobson, 149-51) Quite the contrary, dreams *reveal*; and by attending carefully to dream plots and associations, what's available in the dream could help us to meaningfully construct an honest view of ourselves; to learn more about the thinking and feeling parts of our mind that are important to us—including our abiding fears and anxieties, like my recurrent dreams about showing up to preach in pajamas.

Finally, contemporary dream science is telling us that that each night, by resting and restoring the neuro-chemical systems that support waking consciousness, we naturally and

unconsciously strengthen our capacity for healthy regulation of the body and the acquisition and retention of information—which surely serves to enhance our survival.

This brief overview, in a roundabout way, brings me back to that day in Banyen Books, all those shelves of books claiming to unlock the latent secrets of dreams, and that one slim volume on the physiology of dreams. I'm not as certain as the Unitarian writer Jeremy Taylor is that there is a clear, tight correlation between times that seem unusually chaotic, uncertain, and troubled, and an upsurge in the quantity of books and tracts on dream interpretation, and gatherings of people paying attention to their own and others' dreams. Every person's life and every age probably feel anxiety ridden and precarious for those who have to live through them; and thus, there will always be an abiding fascination for teasing out meaning from our dreams whether we locate ourselves in religious traditions or not. (see Jeremy Taylor, "The Ambiguities of Privilege," in *Dreaming in Christianity and Islam: Culture, Conflict and Creativity*, Bulkeley, Adams and Davis, eds., 2009, pp236-248)

I'm not really in a position to judge, or make a sweeping blanket pronouncement about this, but I want to make a tentative observation rising from a dream book field trip, reading a half dozen books about dreaming, religion and dreams, the science of dreaming, knowing some custodians who played the lottery as guided by dreams, and encountering the conventional use of dreams in literature, movies and the arts—and it's this, it has two parts: first, far more often than not, it appears that dreaming is mostly about the self, one's self; trying to figure out the individual and his or her physical and mental well-being; her fears and aspirations, his hoped for potential self-empowerment, self-esteem, and self-actualization. (see the individual-oriented value accorded studying dreams by Jane White-Lewis, "Dreams and Social Responsibility," in *Among All these Dreamers...*, Bulkeley, ed., 1996, pp6-7) In this view, the value of dreaming is assessed by its pay-off for the individual person. Perhaps it's the company I keep: my class, my race, my religious community, my choice of reading material and movie going.

This leads to the second observation about dreamwork—and it’s the flip side of the first one: why isn’t there more attention paid to the pragmatic, public consequences of dreams? In particular, there was only one essay in my, admittedly incomplete, survey that raised the issue of the conspicuous absence of people of colour in dream literature and in conferences like that of the International Association for the Study of Dreams. (see Anthony Shafton, “Black Dreamers in the United States,” in *Among all these Dreamers...*, pp 74-106) Not that there isn’t keen interest and attention paid to dreaming by people thrust to the margins of societies on account of class, ethnicity or race; quite the contrary. But the place and function of dreaming is radically different from what I encountered in my journey through dream literature.

The phenomenon of dream science, dream groups and dream work in therapeutic settings, if working class and non-white folk are aware of them at all, are perceived as luxuries that people who are struggling for survival cannot possibly afford. As well, the near universal emphasis on the intrapsychic, subjective, individualistic aspects of dreaming just don’t resonate or hold any water for people who turn to dreams for the well-being of others—for family, community, and society. The struggle for survival concentrates the mind and its dreams, not within but outward.

Harriet Tubman’s dreams showed her routes for safely conveying runaway slaves on the Underground Railroad. The community activist Marion Stamps dreamt of a four day feast in the early 1990s which galvanized her into action and inspired her to help establish a truce between warring gangs in Chicago. In the mid 80s, Corazon Aquino overcame her reluctance, because she was a woman and a political novice, to lead resistance against the Marcos dictatorship and become the democratically elected president of the Philippines, only after dreaming that her assassinated husband’s coffin was empty; Begnino, her husband, she felt, had been reborn in her. Martin Luther King Jr. preached “I Have a Dream” not just because he had a good idea, but as a

direct consequence of nighttime, visionary dream. In 1951, Mohammed Mossadegh, the Prime Minister of Iran, nationalized the oil industry after he dreamed of a radiant person who told him: “This is no time for rest; arise and go break the chains of the people of Iran.” (on Tubman see Shafton, “African-Americans and Predictive Dreams”; on Stamps, Aquino and Mossadegh, see Shafton “Black Dreamers...,” 85-93, 99; on MLK see *Dreaming in Christianity and Islam...*, xi, 51-4.)

“In dreams begin responsibilities,” wrote the poet Delmore Schwartz . “Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions,” says the Book of Joel. (Joel 2:28). And this from the Book of Leviticus: “Do not stand idly by when your neighbour’s life is threatened.” (Lev. 19:16). In many Unitarian congregations, we wonder why there are not more people of colour, more working class folk in our midst. Could less ego-centered dreaming create a different kind of welcoming space here; could our consciousness reach out more into the world so that our dreams, and unknown possibilities will follow? Could it welcome the building of dream bridges beyond ourselves and out into the wider community? Or must our culture of dreaming be turned within; must it be strait jacketed by preoccupations of the self alone? I don’t have ready, simple answers to those questions; I do, however, feel constrained to ask them.

In closing, a story:

Today is Epiphany Sunday; the traditional feast of the Three Wise Men. Three wise men, one of them black. They scanned the heavens and read the stars. There, or so the story goes, a great, lustrous star told them a new king had been born. They journeyed to pay homage. First they looked in the obvious place—they go a palace, the conventional seat of power, only to discover that the star was pointing to an altogether different kind of place and royalty. The kind you find among the poor, the marginalized; the kind where families can’t find a room in the inn and give birth to babies in barns. There they paid their respects and left their treasure. And then, perhaps that very night, they had a dream: “don’t go back the way you came.”

I don't know what stars we'll see, or the roads we will travel, or the dreams we will dream this year. Who knows what treasures we'll discover in our hands and heads, and to whom we will be a gift? May they be a blessing for us, and for others in the year ahead!