

Perchance to Dream

the Reverend Edmund Robinson

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My brother Allen lives in Asheville, N.C. with his wife Maggie. Maggie is originally from New Hampshire, and recently she went to New Hampshire to be with her dying mother, a remarkable woman named P'chi, who was then 103. Maggie sat up with P'chi in the room at the nursing home all night, and then her brother came to relieve her in the morning. Maggie went to her brother's house, and lay down in the guest bedroom to take a nap. There was no clock in the room. During her nap, Maggie had a vivid dream that she was in that room and it was a stormy day outside, but at a certain point, the storm abruptly ceased and the sun came out. In her dream, Maggie looked at a clock and it said 12:35. She kept on sleeping until her sister-in-law woke her to go back to the nursing home a few miles away. When they got there, Maggie learned that her mother had died peacefully at exactly 12:35.

What are dreams? Where do they come from? And most importantly, what truth is there in them? What is their relation to real life? There is nothing in our experience that is more familiar and more intimate than dreams, but there is also nothing that is more mysterious and alien, more upsetting to our systems of meaning.

I realize that in preaching about dreams, I face the danger that some of you may take this as a lab class and start experimenting right there in the pews. That's OK. Seamus Heaney once described a poetry reading as a "guided daydream," and maybe a sermon is the same. Peter Gomes, the great minister of Harvard University, once addressed the state legislature and said words to this effect, "now for the next twenty minutes, my job is to speak and yours is to listen. If you finish doing your job before I have finished doing mine, please take care not to snore too loudly."

I take delight, as may many of you, in the fact that dreams are one of those bits of experience that refuse to be tied down and put in a box, to be understood. And yet while we know that we will never make sense of everything, we are compelled to try, and so this morning, I'm going to suggest four frameworks, four mindsets by which we might understand what dreams mean, and then lay out some real dreams from folks here and elsewhere that we can chew on. I call them no message, message from within, message from beyond and message from the source.

The no message approach says that basically dreams mean nothing. A dream is just your brain's process of purging and cleaning itself of the flotsam and jetsam it has accumulated during the day, memories of sight, sound and smell, and emotions. It's like your computer defragmenting its hard drive once a week. The very Shakespearian title of this sermon reflects that dreams have a large element of chance in them.

This point of view has a lot to recommend it. If you meditate or otherwise observe your mind at work, you will know that while awake, you don't usually think in complete sentences or follow one train of thought rationally to its conclusion. For most of us most of the time, the waking mind is like a bubbling stew of ideas, memories and emotions constantly clashing with one another. In sleep, the mind is able to slip any constraints of coherence and go off it own toots.

A second way of looking at dreams is messages from within: dreams tell us something real, not about the world, but about what is going on in our unconscious minds. We associate this idea with Freud, but it's older than him: Ruth Treen brought to my attention a review in yesterday's New York Times about a library exhibit on Seventeenth Century ideas about sleep, and one of the quotes in a 1634 publication, one Owen Felltham argued that "*Dreames are notable meanes of discovering our owne inclinations.*"

Freud invented the idea of the unconscious, and his first book was on interpretation of dreams. Freud saw the personality as three warring entities, the id, the ego and the superego.

The superego is always trying to repress the hostile and sexual instincts of the id, and our dreams are where this repression can be seen most clearly. Dreams also serve as a kind of protection, for we can let our desires loose in dreams without adverse social consequences. When you have a dream about a repressed desire, you are making Freud happy.

And the third approach, messages from the beyond, is frankly supernatural – it posits a world of discrete spirits, gods, angels, witches, deceased loved ones, spiritual entities which can communicate to your mind through dreams and visions, and enable you to know facts that you can't know with your five senses, see the future and even have influence on the course of events: Messengers from other worlds. The original meaning of the word angel in Greek is messenger.

The fourth approach, messages from the source, combines Jung and transcendentalism. The idea of this approach is that the dream tells you about something real and that that something is something inside you, but that something is also connected to something outside you, and the connection is through a common source by which we are all connected to the universe. To explain what I mean, permit me a short detour into philosophy, and how transcendentalism fits into it.

Our modern scientific view of the world is basically a product of the Enlightenment, and the Enlightenment changed the way humans understand how they know anything. The Empiricists – Locke, Berkeley and Hume – said that everything we know we have learned through our five senses. Kant said what you take in with your five senses is filtered and organized through categories in your mind such as time and space and causality. You may learn something about a thing as filtered through these categories, what we call a phenomenon, but you will never know the thing as it is in itself, which Kant called the noumenon.

But Kant allowed that there may be one category of thing which we could know as it is itself, and that is God, and God would be known not through the five senses but through another pathway. Emerson and his transcendentalist friends seized on this idea and called this sixth sense intuition, direct knowledge of the divine. Transcendentalists hold that the mind has powers to perceive things in the divine realm which are independent of the five senses. This indwelling divinity is well expressed in the reading we did today (#531).

Jung was a younger disciple of Freud who broke with his mentor over the interpretation of dreams, among other things. Jung said that dreams are not always about wish fulfillment or repression, but sometimes can be a connection to what he called the collective unconscious. I put Jung and the transcendentalists together because I think Jung's idea of the collective unconscious, something vast that exists in the interconnected minds of many people, is a lot like what Emerson a generation earlier had called the oversoul.

So we have four possible ways of looking at the relation of dreams to reality: no message (naturalism), message from within (Freud), message from beyond (spiritualism) and message from the source (Jung and transcendentalism).

Let's return to my sister-in-law's dream. If we take her account at face value, the no-message cognitive naturalism cannot account for it; there is no way she could have dreamed the accurate time of her mother's passing. Freud also cannot account for this; whether she has repressed desire for her mother to live or to die, neither scenario would supply that little bit of time data. Was it a message from beyond? But there is no angel in the dream, no figure telling her this information. To me the transcendental/Jungian model can help if we assume that there is a psychic umbilical connection between Maggie and her mother – many of us have that sort of connection with our parent – so that Maggie's mind could somehow intuit both the fact of her mother's passing and the time, despite a physical separation of several miles.

When I told Maggie's dream at the Religion and Science group last month, the reaction was rather remarkable. Most of us were skeptical about how this could have come about, but Merylle-Lee Thompson proceeded to tell us about many dreams that she has had over the course of her life which predicted actual events, usually involving great danger or possible death to someone. We all sat spellbound as she related probably five such episodes. I didn't make a

recording, so I can't give you any more details; suffice it to say that her accounts are all hard to square with a naturalistic framework or a Freudian one; they all seem to point to a person with great psychic sensitivities, a person who perceives things beyond her five senses.

In the same vein, consider another dream, submitted by one of you:

My first husband died long ago. He was 27. Before his death, I had a recurring dream in which I saw a snow covered hill and a lake.

His burial service was Dec 3rd. I recognized the place. A snow covered hill and a lake. There were details. I normally foo foo tales like this, but it was exact..

This again does not seem to be either a random firing of neurons or a suppression of wishes. Rather it is a visual premonition of an emotionally laden scene. Again, no specific messenger figure from beyond, but somehow an intuitive knowledge of facts she could not have known.

Last week John Tierney, the science writer for the New York Times, had a report on some research on dreams coming true, and one of the findings was that we tend to remember the dreams that come true and not the dream that are bizarre and remain bizarre. If one dream out of a thousand gets confirmed by real life in some way, we tend to say to ourselves, see, dreams really DO come true.

Consider now this one from another woman in the congregation:

"Once again I have returned to the same place, a huge wooden structure sturdily placed atop a gently sloping hill. ... Inside, all of the contiguous rooms are large, all with single paned windows overlooking a welcome view. No matter what window one looks through, on all sides of the house, the view is exactly the same. An enigma that the hundreds of "guests" don't seem to question.

"As I begin to look around for a familiar face, I soon realize that most of the people have no faces at all. No familiar means of identification; no eyes, no nose, no mouth: Simply a flat countenance surrounded by a gray mist. Quiet conversation is present, as well as selections of uncomfortably somber music piped throughout the house.

"Each room is decorated with wide, striped wallpaper. A variety of vivid colors throughout, all stripes placed perfectly perpendicular to the ceiling and floor. As I wander through the many rooms, I eagerly look for a familiar face. A composite face: A face with eyes, a nose and a mouth. Eventually I always see my deceased mother, my father, my brother and my first real love, and lover. They are not together, but in various locations throughout the building. All four appear to be looking for someone they know. Could it be ME? As I approach each one, with my arms open to embrace and be embraced, each one quickly disappears between the stripes they have chosen on the precisely applied wallpaper, in the room where they were found."

What a powerful image of social isolation! A description of a house yields to a faceless throng and when a loved one is finally found, they disappear! There seems to be a lot of repressed desire in this dream, desire to know and be known by people, desire to reconnect with departed loved ones, but instead of the dream allowing fulfillment of these desires, it seems determined to raise them only to frustrate them. Or does this dream intuit a larger primal reality?

Now we've heard from several women, let's hear a dream from a man in this congregation:

"I dream fantastic dreams all night every night. Sometimes it is about a problem I am having in the shop. I solve it in my dream, wake up in the morning, go to

the shop and fix the problem.

“Other times, there is a group of people (boy scouts, soldiers, employees, etc). I am always the leader. There is always a situation which I solve.

“There are two recurring dreams I have had all my life. One, more often than the other, is that I am lost. Usually in a city. Maybe New York. I wander and wander, oftentimes seeing a busy familiar square with four or five streets leading off. I select one and wander some more. Still lost. Never found and never a solution.

“The other is when I am faced with going through a space too small for me to fit. I panic. Then I wake up. I attribute this one to getting born.”

It is very interesting that a man first relates the dreams in which he is successful and in charge, but then he gives us two that are more threatening: lost in a big city and forced to go through a tight place. I myself have had dreams of getting stuck in a cave while spelunking, and until I read this dream story, it hadn't occurred to me that this might be some primitive throwback to the birth process. Perhaps Dr. Freud would say that we all carry this basic terror, but those of us who were born by c-section shouldn't have it, and I wonder if a study has ever been done correlating fears of small spaces with those who were born through the birth canal.

Let me finish here with two of my dreams. The first occurred in my early childhood. I had asthma as a young child, and once I dreamed that my baby sister and I were alone in the kitchen of the house we lived in and the afternoon was very dark and no lights would come on and there was no one there to look after us. I got scared and tried to cry out, but no sound would come out of my throat. I woke up and was thrashing around in my bed because I couldn't breathe. My mother came and got me breathing again.

The second dream was two nights ago. My bed was in an intersection in the middle of a rural village somewhere in the British Isles and there were young adults all around my bed engaged in some kind of sport which involved tossing an irregular-shaped inflated leather object around. I was bit embarrassed to be out in the village in my PJs, but I decided to be a good sport, and wanted to do something to participate, but I didn't know the sport, so I found a wooden box which contained a set of bagpipes I had forgotten that I had. It was designed so that if you set it up right, it would look like a musical sheep. It took me a long time but with the help of my daughter who was miraculously nearby, I got the bladder and bellows and pipes assembled, but hard as I pumped, I couldn't get any sound out of it.

I think these two dreams represent a kind of convergence of the frameworks we have been considering. From the point of view of cognitive naturalism, we know that the brain had a bunch of very important autonomic functions, and breathing is about the most important. When my four-year-old brain sensed that there was something amiss about my breathing, it reacted by generating some fearful images for my cognitive mind, images that were designed to trigger my flight-or-fight responses, get the adrenaline flowing, and wakes me up so I could take some action to clear the airways.

We don't need to posit an unconscious, an oversoul or spirit worlds. This early dream of mine can be seen as simply the reptile brain getting the attention of the cerebral cortex. But it was not random; the images had a purpose, orchestrated from somewhere within my brain. It was not a no-message situation: the lower brain was sending a highly urgent message to get the lungs working again.

Now the more recent dream is striking because it also involves a situation where my well-being is threatened, I try to react to it but in the end I can't make the sound I want to make. A Freudian reading would emphasize my shame at being in improper attire, my desire to overcome that by fitting in with the social milieu but the cross-cultural difficulties in doing that, and my attempt to use music to cross the cultural boundaries. I don't know what the game is but I want to be part of it and somehow music is the way but I can't make the music. I think it might have had something to do with the fact that I knew I wanted to sing a song in this service

but didn't know how well I could do that with the sore throat I have had for the last fortnight.

There are many more that we don't have time for, dreams of a friendly, comforting, inspirational frog, of a man who walks hunched over, of a house with five pianos and as many corpses, of an iceberg which turns out to be made of gnats. There are more things on heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamed of in your poor philosophy. My philosophy and attempt at distinct approaches clearly fails to capture the subtlety and richness of the dreams. Thank you to all who submitted dreams, and keep on dreaming them. May your good dreams all come true!

Amen.

Readings

The Logic of Last Monday Night, by Lee Robinson

At the end of the runway
the fetus kicked. My sister
is on that plane. Flames lick
at the edge of the electric
blanket and if I turn it off
maybe the cops will quit
their neighborhood drug raid
or whatever it is
they are up to out there,
red lights flashing.
My sister is on that plane,
but she left the ay before,
already an aunt. This churning
in my gut, at least, is not a dream
waking from its dream,
wanting out.

The Oversoul (Reading 531, SLT)

Let us learn the revelation of all nature and thought; that the Highest dwells within us, that the sources of nature are in our own minds.

__As there is no screen or ceiling between our heads and the infinite heavens, so there is no bar or wall in the soul where we, the effect, cease, and God, the cause, begins.

I am constrained every moment to acknowledge a higher origin for events than the will I call mine.

__There is deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is accessible to us.

Every moment when the individual feels invaded by it is memorable.

__It comes to the lowly and simple; it comes to whosoever will put off what is foreign and proud; it comes as insight; it comes as serenity and grandeur.

The soul's health consists in the fullness of its reception.

__Forever and ever the influx of this better and more universal self is new and unsearchable. Within us is the soul of the whole; the wise silence, the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One.

__When it breaks through our intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through our will, it is virtue; when it flows through our affections, it is love.

Ralph Waldo Emerson