

Dreams and Epiphanies

UCOT - Rev. Gary Kowalski, 1/5/20

It's been said jokingly that if you took all the people who sleep in church and laid them down end-to-end, they'd all be a lot more comfortable. Maybe the statement is made only half in jest. For sleeping in church has an ancient and curious history. Among Greeks and Romans, the practice had a technical name. The custom was called "incubation," and it involved entering a temple for the express purpose of slumbering inside the sacred precincts in hopes of receiving a dream or nighttime visitation or portent of the future. Pagan inscriptions abound giving thanks to the goddess or god for dispensing wisdom not available to the worshiper during ordinary waking hours.

Dreams were highly regarded by the authors of the Hebrew Bible also, the Psalms declaring that "God's gifts come to his loved ones as they sleep." In the Book of Genesis, Pharaoh dreamed of seven lean cows and seven fat cows, forecasting coming years of feast and famine, and it was by interpreting Pharaoh's nocturnal visions that Joseph, who had been sold into slavery in Egypt for an overbearing dream that pictured his siblings bowing down in adulation before him, came to be named the Egyptian chief's privy counselor.

In Christian tradition, Epiphany became associated with the visit of the Magi, who brought gifts to the Christ child in Bethlehem: gold, frankincense and myrrh. "And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. Now when they had departed," Matthew goes on, "behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream," telling him to take his family and flee, while the New Testament Book of Acts envisions a coming day of gladness when "your sons and daughters will prophesy, and old men dream dreams."

Eastern religions regarded dreaming even more highly than those of the West. In India, the cosmos itself arises from the sleep of the deity Vishnu, who rests upon a great serpent Ananta, whose name means "endless." And as he slumbers upon this bed of eternity, a dream unfolds, growing like a beautiful lotus from Vishnu's navel. All you see

around you, this world of light and dark with birds and trees and clouds, so various and vivid—deep down, all of it consists of stirring ripples in the subconscious of Vishnu. For the universe that we observe is simply the lucid dreaming of the Creator.

In China, meanwhile, the Taoist scholar Chuang Tzu is remembered for his mystical ruminations. Having awakened from a dream in which he imagined himself to be a butterfly, happy in the sunlit garden, he could no longer be sure if he was a Chinese sage, dreaming he was a butterfly, or a butterfly, merely dreaming to be a man. It's worth noting that sleep comes through what the Taoists would call the law of reversed effort, or wu-wei. The harder you try, the more difficult it becomes. As Lao Tze says of the wise man,

He doesn't think about his actions;
they flow from the core of his being.
He holds back nothing from life;
therefore he is ready for death,
as a man is ready for sleep
after a good day's work.

All of which gives a fresh perspective on those who nap during the occasional sermon, and sheds new light on the story of one famous court preacher of eighteenth century London, Reverend Robert South, who in the midst of his homily paused to admonish the British Prime Minister to moderate his snoring, lest he snort so loudly that he awaken the King!

Sleep comes naturally to all of us, Kings and commoners alike, making dreams the most democratic of oracles. For reasons that are unclear, we all spend approximately one-third of our lives dozing, usually more than eight hours a day when we're very young or old and closer to the primordial mystery of things. Scientists can't really explain it. Physiologists say we save only about 120 calories for the enormous chunk of time we spend snoozing—the food equivalent of one good-sized banana--so the theory that we need to sleep to revivify the body hardly adds up. Nor is it likely that sleeping is evolution's way of keeping us safe from predators that prowl at night, since even very

large animals like horses, who can't possibly conceal themselves on the wide open prairie, will spend about three hours sleeping each day, at least part of that time flopped down horizontal, unconscious on the ground—not a very good survival strategy if you're worried about wolves or other hunters with a taste for horse-flesh.

No, sleep is not a requirement for the body. Rather it seems to be demanded by the mind, which needs a regular “time out,” so to speak. All vertebrates dream, and even the brainier mollusks like octopi experience something very like REM sleep. Humans, of course, experience cycles of Rapid Eye Movement and non-REM sleep over the course of the night in 90-110 minute intervals, with about a quarter of that time spent in dreamland. And whereas psychologists once looked upon dreams as nothing more than a confused jumble of infantile fears and suppressed desires, a plunge into the irrational, researchers have now begun to understand that dreaming is a necessary ingredient for sanity itself. So that sleep deprivation has rightly been classified as a form of torture, leading to memory loss and mood swings, and in its more extreme forms to disintegration of the personality and hallucinations resembling psychosis.

Dreams frequently appear to arise from some plane of higher consciousness, rather than from the murky shadows of the mind's basement level, so that many of the last century's greatest scientific discoveries had their origins there. Nobel-prize-winning physicist Niels Bohr once dreamt of a pleasant day at the races, all the ponies running eagerly round the circular track. When he woke, he realized that the marked lanes where the horses were required to run were analogous to the fixed orbits that electrons occupy as they race around the nucleus of an atom, an insight that led directly to the formulation of quantum theory. Albert Einstein, asked to recall exactly how and where the concept of relativity had popped into his head, said he could trace the beginnings of his brainstorm back to a dream he had in adolescence. In the dream, he was riding on a sled, and as the sled accelerated, rocketing faster and faster, approaching the speed of light, the light from the stars on his journey began to shift and distort into an amazing kaleidoscope of prismatic colors. Einstein concluded by saying that his entire scientific career could be understood as an extended meditation upon that singular dream.

Einstein, of course, did more than any other individual to reframe our everyday understandings of time and space, suggesting that such seemingly “objective” references as distance and duration could shift and stretch, depending on one’s viewpoint. And dreams, I think, can transport us beyond our ordinary perceptions of reality as measured by the yardstick or the ticking of the clock. For every dream takes place in the present tense, where yesterday and tomorrow are forgotten or blend into an immediate sensation of the now—a tense grammarians might call the “subjunctive eternal,” where every event has a timeless, non-linear quality. And in addition to this, every aspect of the dream takes place in a vocabulary that wordsmiths might call the “first person infinite,” which is to say that everyone and everything you encounter in the dream is an aspect or projection of your own more spacious self. Like Vishnu, you are the creator of the landscape you inhabit, the lotus, the endless serpent you rest upon, all of it.

The Unitarian Universalist minister Jeremy Taylor suggests that this is one reason that it is often so hard to remember dreams. In the dream, you may be in two places at once. You may be two people at once. You may actually see and experience events from several, simultaneous perspectives. When the alarm clock rings, you suddenly pop back into the humdrum three-dimensional awareness of waking life, and the dream evaporates. It’s impossible to recall, just as it’s impossible to see our own blind spot—unless, that is, you’re sleeping.

For one of the gifts dreams can offer is revealing truths that are usually hidden from our eyes, both weaknesses and strengths. This is why I often encourage people who come to me for counseling to pay attention to their dreams, to consider them as sources of guidance and insight. Not always, of course. Sometimes dreams are just inane, or boring, or obviously related to stress or performance anxiety. I do occasionally have some variant of the dream that every preacher has, for instance. It’s Sunday morning, eleven o’ clock, I’m buck naked, can’t find the door to the church and seem to have lost my sermon. But sometimes dreams can be more interesting, and more suggestive.

For example, I once had a dream that I’ll call “The Silly Machine.” In the dream, I’m standing in line waiting to use one of those devices you sometimes see at carnivals and

museums. You put a coin into the machine, turn a heavy crank, and the coin is turned into a commemorative medallion of some kind, usually inscribed with a legend like, “I Rode the Chama Toltec Cog Railway” or some other profound statement. Fifty cents will typically turn a penny into what is either a shining memento or worthless piece of scrap metal, depending on how you look at it. Well, I was almost ready to put my coins into the slot when some woman, a stranger, cut into the line ahead of me out of turn. “That’s not very polite,” I shouted, feeling very annoyed and aggrieved that this interloper had usurped my rightful spot and delayed my intended moment of commemorative medal happiness. And there the dream ended.

When I woke up, I began to think about it. I began to wonder how many of the priorities that seem so pressing to me are really all that urgent. I questioned how many of the tasks and projects that seem so all-fired important are rather like that Silly Machine—churning out products of dubious value. I began to ponder how much of my time I spend waiting in line for satisfactions that never really match my expectations, how much effort and energy I spend chasing after relatively worthless trinkets. I had to ask why I feel envious or frustrated when others seem to be advancing more quickly than me—when really there’s nothing so special or fabulous about being at the front of the line. There’s nothing really there, except another turn of the crank.

Now I don’t know if that was a message from God or the Goddess, from a higher plane or just stuff bubbling up from the Id, but the dream did make me pause. And I have no doubt that you, too, have dreams that can speak to you, bringing light from the dark places. For beyond breakfast time and lunch time, Mountain Standard and Daylight Savings, you exist in another time zone altogether, the Dream Time, where you are older than you thought and smarter than you realize. If you seek there, you can find. If you knock, the door will be opened. If you ask, you will receive. And if the meanings that emerge aren’t immediately apparent, I’d advise you to sleep on it.