

2008-5-24 Dreams

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Opening Words

We are here

after a week of cool, bright sun

to worship, to welcome the fullness of our lives

and to strengthen our compassion,

and our community. Here, let the dream

of a just world be as life-giving to us

as the beat of our own hearts. So we say:

Mindful that a growing vision of a just world calls us together, that a community of commitment, courage and care sustains us, and that a life transformed by depth of spirit may illumine our way, we have kindled this light as the sign of our circle of life and love.

Sequence

Maybe, one day, yellow roses will lose their power to prompt my deepest thanks that I am alive to enjoy them. But not yet. Not yet.

Maybe, one day, the power of the wind to suddenly change, completely independent of me, will cease to remind me of how small I am in the scheme of things. But not yet. Not yet.

Maybe, one day, the hurts of the world will not affect me so, the inequities, the sadness. Maybe one day my heart will beat without the syncopation of sorrow. But not yet. Not yet.

Maybe one day, the silence which heals and restores will dwell with me at my center, day in, day out, without me having to set time apart for it. But not yet. Not yet.

silence

Maybe one day I will think of myself as independent of every community. But not yet. Not yet. Family and friends, loved ones and lost ones crowd around my heart, and breathe on it to keep it beating steady. Those that call to me now most clearly I name within or without, to bring them into this circle where my independence is always upheld by the interdependence of community.

naming

Maybe, one day, the miracle of music growing like a rose in a composer's mind, which then becomes music printed on paper with ink, which then becomes music coaxed from instruments by both breath and hand, and which at last turns into music which pulses and glows in my own heart, will cease to amaze me. But not yet. Not yet.

Readings

The First Reading is from Toni Cade Bambara, from her essay found in *Sturdy Black Bridges*, 1979

When you dream, you dialogue with aspects of yourself that normally are not with you in the daytime, and you discover you know a great deal more than you thought you did.

The Second Reading comes from the Torah, put into final edited form about 2500 years ago. This story, much older than that, is one of the great novellas of the ancient world. As I like to do, I use the Hebrew forms of the names.

Yosef dreamed another dream. He came to his gathered family and said: "Here is what I dreamed. The sun, the moon and the stars were all bowing down to me." His father cried: "What?" and began to berate him. "What kind of dream is this? Do you really think your mother and I, and your brothers here, are going to bow to the ground before you as if you ruled over us?" His brothers too expressed their rage about this dream, and his father remained deeply troubled in his heart.

One day, when his brothers were pasturing their flock at Sechem for a few days, his father sent Yosef to find out how they were doing. His brothers saw him when he was still far off. "Here comes the dreamer!" they said. And they conspired to kill him. When he came close, they tore the ornamental cloak off his back, and threw him down the shaft of a dry well. Then they sat down and ate as if nothing had happened.

But his brother Reuven, seeing that his brothers intended to actually kill Yosef, wanted to save him. "Do not shed his blood!" he begged.

Just then, in the distance, they saw a caravan of Arab traders going down to Egypt. So Yehudah said "Reuven's right, you know. Let's not kill him. Let's sell him as a chattel slave for the slave-markets of Egypt. After all, what would we gain by killing him? We just want him out of our hair. And, he *is* our brother, flesh of our flesh." His brothers were convinced by Yehudah's argument. So they lifted Yusef out of the well, and sold him to the traders for twenty silver pieces.

Sermon

I don't know about your family of origin, but mine is soaked in enough legendary stories to rival the American myths of Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox.

There was that story of my grandfather Umberto and the octopus in North Africa. And there was the Paul Bunyan strength tale of my grandfather Nazzareno lifting a 500 lb barrel with his bare arms and hoisting it to the level of the bar where he was having a beer. There was the strange tale my father told about the day when his platoon buried a whole tank because they had one too many on their supply list and they had to get rid of it before inspection. And there was the story of my grandmother's dreams.

When my father went into the armed services in the early 1940s, my grandmother quite understandably was worried. He was her only child, after all, and he was in training to serve in the air in a B 52 bomber.

She dealt with this worry by reciting many rosaries and by busying herself with crocheting day after day. Some of the products of her crocheting, lace tablecloths, are so gigantic and complex that the sheer intensity of her fretting is still plainly visible to the eye.

One night, she told me, she had a dream. She dreamed of her own father, who had died some time before that, but back in Italy. Her father spoke to her, saying, “Fear not, Carmelina, for your son Louis will not be harmed in the war, for the war will end in May of next year, before he is finished training.”

Sure enough, the war in Europe ended in May of 1945, and my father never went overseas, his training only finishing that month.

My grandmother was completely convinced that her dead father had come to tell her this to alleviate her worry. For her, these were visitations, visions you might say. I can see how someone could feel that way. My dreams often leave me with the same feeling of reality that reality itself bestows me.

But I don’t see it that way.

I see dreaming as coming from our own selves, our own minds, and not from somewhere beyond the ocean or beyond the edge of life.

I see dreams as emblematic of who we are as *whole* persons, not fragmented persons.

In other words, I see my grandmother expressing her whole self in that dream. I see her living with the fact of my father’s training; which would have ended in late April, the fact of her own father’s death and her sadness that when she left Italy, she never saw him again; the fact of her understandable motherly worry; and the fact that her worry consumed her and drove her to distraction 24 hours a day. All of these fragments of her self were bound together in her beautiful dream, which lessened her worry, helped her grieve her father, and released the strangling grip that her concern for her son had on her. Her dream pulled her away from the edge, and helped her get back to her center.

That’s a pretty good achievement, it seems to me, for just a few hours of sleep.

In the words of our First Reading by Tony Cade Bambara, my grandmother was “dialoguing with parts of her self” as she slept. All those aspects were already in her in the daytime, but they were not connected to each other. But at night, they had a conversation, and my grandmother’s worries were lessened by the power of that conversation.

In other words, I think dreams are part of our wholeness as human beings. I think this is true whether or not we remember them, which I don’t always do by any means. Sleep scientists used to say that we were dreaming only when there was this fidgety motion under the closed eyelids of the sleeper: the famous Rapid Eye Movements, or REM’s. Now, through further study, we know otherwise. We dream more often than that. But, there does seem to be some evidence that dreams which occur during REM’s are more easily remembered the next morning.

We also know now that we *learn* how to dream as we grow older in the same way we learn anything in school. We practice. And the older the person, supposedly, the better and clearer the dreams. And, the fewer nightmares, apparently.

Jeremy Taylor, the Unitarian Universalist minister whose writings on dreams have traveled around the world, used to teach at my seminary. The course was *Dreams and Dreaming* and pretty much everyone took the course, one semester or another. What this meant for me was that every morning at the school I would find my classmates gathering before class to discuss their dreams from the night before. Over coffee or tea, the clatter of this conversation filled the school until classes began. But when I first moved to Berkeley in 1975 to start school, I felt completely out of it, since, at the time, I really didn't much remember my dreams. And, I hadn't taken the class. And, I hadn't even known that anyone ever studied things like dreams.

But when I finally screwed up the courage to mention that I felt like was out on the periphery of things, several folks immediately suggested to me that I could remember my dreams anytime I wanted to remember them. All I had to do was, before I went to sleep at night, tell myself four or five times that I was GOING to remember my dreams the next morning no matter what.

Now to me, that seemed *way* too simple. But I tried it, and it worked. I was also counseled to have a little notebook next to my bed so I could write the dream images down right away, since they did tend to evaporate pretty quickly.

Pretty soon, I found I was able to gather useful wisdom from my dream life, insight that did not seem to come to me in the daytime. Since all of my dreams come from my brain, it seemed fair to assume that all of the images in my dreams were mine to work with. There was no universal cipher, like Sigmund Freud's famous, and not terribly useful, suggestion that if you dream of a train in a tunnel you are dreaming about sex in some way. None of that nonsense.

But in conversation with others who also remembered their dreams, I learned a lot about myself through my dreams, gleanings that were validated over and over in my waking life.

I was still myself in my dreams, mind you...everyone is, I think. Shy people don't become chatterbox extroverts when they sleep. Talkative sorts don't suddenly sit in silent meditation when they dream. You are who you are in your dreams. But you can be yourself *developing insights about yourself* in dreams.

But here I need to say more: dreams have played *an amazing part in human history*, and not just in the more private area of personal spiritual growth and psychological integration. Dreaming, after all, is a form of thinking. I remember being very impressed when, in college, I made a study of the great Michelangelo, painter, sculptor, architect. He was having a difficult time coming up with a blueprint for a library he was commissioned to design. The site set apart for this library was completely odd, and no ordinary structure would work. One night he had a dream about hat-boxes. When he awoke, at first he was perplexed by the strange dream, until he noticed that the roundish hat-boxes could be taken for an unusual staircase design, one that might, in fact, fit an odd site. If you are lucky enough to get to Florence one day, and find the Laurentian Library, you will actually be able to climb the solid steps of Michelangelo's dream come true.

The tune to *Yesterday*, (sung: Yesterday, All My Troubles Seemed So Far Away...), one of the most famous tunes by Paul McCartney, and a jewel of twentieth century music, came to him in a dream, every note of it. Elias Howe's invention of the sewing machine developed in his dream life. The central idea in Mary Shelley's famous *Frankenstein* came to her in a dream. C.J. Walker, the first African American woman to become a millionaire (back in the days when being a millionaire actually meant something), made her fortune by producing the formula for a hair product that came to her through her dreams. The Indian math genius, Ramanujan, actually dreamed entire mathematical formulae with Greek letters, which he claimed were handed to him by the Hindu goddess Namikkal. When he awoke, he wrote them down, and they earned him his deserved international reputation. And, it's timely to point out during this weekend of the Memorial Golf Tournament that the deservedly famous Jack Nicklaus claims that when he dreamed of swinging the club in a totally new way, he put it into practice the next morning. It was the success of that dream-generated swing that MADE Jack Nicklaus famous, in fact.

And of course, the second reading this morning, from the Torah, reminds us of the oft-told tale of Yosef, or Joseph, of Egypt, one of the finest novellas to come down to us from ancient times from any culture. The handsome young Bedouin teenager reports some rather narcissistic dreams that really irritate his family, so much so, some of them actually are bristly enough to want to kill him, a drastic response to be sure. Still, sold as a slave to an Egyptian family, the young man clings to his capacity to dream astonishing dreams. And, using his knowledge of dream interpretation as a social tool, Yosef eventually becomes the viceroy of Egypt, second only to the King in authority and power. And he uses this political power to save his own furious family from death during a famine.

Dreams fill all the religious stories of the world, both written and oral from Yosef of Egypt, to Joseph of Galilee, to Muhammed, dreaming of leaping to heaven on a horse.

The Senoi people of Malaysia reportedly made a whole culture out of dreaming. Like the girl in the young story you heard this morning, they supposedly were able to control their dream life, something called lucid dreaming. They chose what to dream, in other words, and could change their dream plots at will.

Modern anthropologists dispute the findings of the man who first reported the Senoi dream culture, Kilton Stewart. This Mormon Elder made great claims for them, you see, saying that they discussed their dreams every morning just like we did at seminary. And they supposedly had no crime in their community, no mental aberrations or psychoses, and he assumed that this was true because their dream culture was so central.

As far as I can tell, most of this is, sadly, a fabricated story, made up by a man famous as a tale bearer, and unfortunately, a man with little or no anthropological knowledge, someone who didn't even speak the Senoi language, and who only lived among them for two weeks.

It is true that the Senoi people have a dream life, just as we do. All human beings do, as I said earlier, and it makes no difference if they are hunter/gatherer types like the Senoi, or post-Industrial Information Addicts like we are. And it is true that some of the Senoi people enjoy lucid dreaming. But some of us do too. I have several friends who routinely change the plots of their dreams, or fly off when they want to while in their nighttime dream world. And it is true that the Senoi people live in a relatively peaceful non-neurotic way. But apparently they don't spend their mornings talking about their dreams, nor do

they use such dream work in any way as an organizing principle of their society as far as modern anthropologists can tell, so their peaceful mental health must stem from some other source or worldview.

But here I need to say that rooting a reverence for the power and gift of dreams in the social life of a remote pre-industrial society doesn't make much sense to me in the first place. You don't have to practice peace in the world on the authority of Jesus' famous beatitude, "Blessed are the peacemakers," but, rather, because it's simply self-evident, rational, and experientially true that peace is better than bombing babies and burning cities to the ground. The social, creative, spiritual and psychological gifts which careful attention to our dreams can provide us...that's enough for me. In order to develop and grow as whole persons, no part of our life can be lopped off as unimportant. We do, after all, spend on average approximately six years of our lives dreaming. To work with individual dreams, as so many dream groups associated with this congregation do so successfully, has to do with our wholeness, our fullness, as human beings.

Paying attention to our dreams is humane, human, and even holy.

Some of my poems and sermons have risen from my dreams. At one time I used to preach almost entirely from themes organized by my useful dreams. Novels and formulae have arisen from dreams. Part of Einstein's influential theory rose from a dream he had, a dream he discussed with the famous dream-psychologist, Karl Jung himself. And you and I both know that Martin Luther King Jr. even used the word "dream" to imagine a world of justice and honesty. He didn't say, after all, "I have a blueprint. I have a plan. I have a scheme. I have an outline." He used the most appropriate, accurate and strong and yes, *useful* metaphor he had: "I have a dream!"

But beyond such grand and more social uses, I've known many people whose lives have been deepened, turned, comforted, challenged and taught by their dreams, ranging from my beloved grandmother Carmelina, to at least two dozen people in this congregation who have shared their dreams with me over the years, and who have benefited from that sharing. For Tony Cade Bambara is right, I think. If we take dreams seriously, personally and socially, creatively and fearlessly, in the end we'll discover that "we know a great deal more than we thought we did."

Offering

The trees give off oxygen by which we live.
The sun gives off sunshine by which we live.
The land gives of its fruits, by which we live.
The sea gives of its bounty, by which we live.
The heart gives us our dreams, and dreams
give us a chance to know ourselves.
All of the universe gives and gives and gives.
May we, who are part and parcel of that universe, join in that unending process. The
morning offering of pledges and gifts will now
be given and received.

Memorial Day Prayer

Does anyone look up at the noon sky,
and say: "I hate you, because you belong
to another nation now?"

Does anyone look at any child and say:
"Let this one perish for being in the wrong
place at the wrong time?"

Does anyone look at the full moon
silvering the needles of a distant pine at midnight and say: "You are hideous, because you are growing
on the other side of the border?"

Can anyone look into the eyes
of a bereaved parent, a parent of anyone, young or old; and say:
"Your tears are not as good as mine.

Your sorrow is an affront to me?"

No. Amen. No. Amen. No. Amen. No. Amen.

Let us therefore on this day of remembrance, remember them all.

Let us therefore remember them all.

Let us therefore remember
and not forget. Amen.