

Order of Service
The Meaning of Our Dreams
Sunday, February 8, 2009

Declaration (unison reading)

Love is the spirit of this fellowship
And service is its law.
This is our great covenant:
To dwell together in peace,
To seek truth in love,
And to help one another.

James Vila Blake

--

Call to Worship and Chalice Lighting Michael Trujillo

We bid you welcome, who come
With weary spirit seeking rest.
Who come with troubles that are too much with you,
Who come hurt and afraid.
We bid you welcome, who come
With hope in your heart.
Who come with anticipation in your step,
Who come proud and joyous.
We bid you welcome, who are seekers of a new faith.
Who come to probe and explore.
Who come to learn.
We bid you welcome, who enter this hall as a homecoming,
Who have found here room for your spirit.
Who find in this people a family.
Whoever you are, whatever you are,

Wherever you are on your journey,
We bid you welcome.

Readings

"Acting Out Daydreams," by Richard Lewis Michael Trujillo

A number of years ago, I had the opportunity of working with some children in schools in New York, in which I organized a series of workshops around the idea of "dreaming." I was not interested in using the "dream" in any therapeutic or analytic way, but in simply recognizing it as a manifestation of human thought that had significant ties to the poetic and imaginative process.

Perhaps part of my desire to explore "dreaming" with children came out of my reaction to the kind of rigid thought processes impressed upon children through most of their schooling life. Factual ideas, the classification of concepts as right or wrong, and sterility of feeling and perception were what children, for the most part, experienced in school. Little attention, it seemed to me, was being paid to the part of childhood in which dreaming was related to fluid inner consciousness that, like playing, was a necessary means toward understanding and expressing the meaning of experience.

The love that small children have for topsy-turvy nonsense, their delight in believing in the "lives" of inanimate objects, their leaps between the fantastic and the real—were simply not, at least in school, seen as nurturable elements of their personalities. It seemed to me a fascinating challenge to make "dreaming" then, in the broadest sense of the process, a legitimate way for children to move through learning and into the equally important realm of imaginative expression.

"On Dreams, Myth, and Social Change," by Jeremy Taylor

The scientific evidence is overwhelming and unambiguous: all human beings dream, whether they recall these nightly adventures upon awakening or not. ...The scriptures and sacred narratives of all the world's many religious traditions also speak with a single voice on this question: human beings are in closer and more direct communion and communication with the Divine in our dreams than any other state of consciousness.

Curiously, at the same time, the actual practice of paying close attention to, and analyzing dreams with an eye to discovering their deeper spiritual significance is generally disparaged and/or forbidden in the practices of all the more prominent religions, (although it still remains a regular element in the customs and procedures of many less widely accepted, occult, nativist, and "fringe" churches and religious communities.)

Perhaps the most important reason for this curious state of affairs is that all dreams, (even the nasty ones we call to call "nightmares"), come ultimately in the service of physical, emotional, and spiritual health and wholeness. Dreams shape and deliver their healing messages in a universal language of symbol and metaphor. The Swiss psychiatrist and historian of world religion, Carl Jung, (q.v.), called these repeating symbols and metaphors "archetypes of the collective unconscious" (q.v.). It is this ubiquitous healing and wholeness-promoting quality of dreaming is primarily responsible for the unambiguously privileged position that dream wisdom holds in the sacred narratives of the world.

Sermon *"The Meaning of Our Dreams,"* Rev. Bruce Davis
(2078)

I'm standing in my kitchen with my wife, Mary. It's late in the evening but there's still a half-light outside. It's a quiet and tender moment. Suddenly I catch a glimpse through the kitchen window of a prowler outside, looking for a way to get into the house. The stranger seems to be made of darkness and appears to me in his movements to possess that frightening dullness and derangement of mind that we call psychopathic. I feel very vulnerable. How can I protect my family?

He comes up the back steps to the kitchen porch and peers in the window of the door. I know that his intention is to come into the house and take our things. Again I feel defenseless and deeply afraid. I have no weapon. I try to speak, to threaten the intruder, but my mouth won't form the words. Yet, I must do something to protect us.

Then a power fills me. A threatening glare comes into my eyes, and I bare my teeth, which seem now more like fangs, and a deep guttural snarling growl begins to rise from my throat. The sound becomes more forceful, in and out with my breath, with my glaring eyes concentrating on the enemy at our door. My fear has turned into raw, wild power and becomes his fear; and he retreats into the night as fast as he can.

Next thing I know Mary is shaking me awake. She is frightened, but not of any intruder. She's frightened by the wolf-man that thrashing around next to her. The glaring face and forceful growling had shifted across the threshold between dreaming and waking. I'd become, for a moment, the very ferocity that I'd just experienced in my dream.

I brought this dream to my spiritual director to see what he thought about it. After I'd shared some of the meanings that I took from the dream, he offered his own interpretation. The dark shadow of a man, he suggested, represents those whose greed initiated the collapse of the world's economic system. Threatened by loss, I rise up from that deepest, wildest part of my emotional nature, protecting myself and my family, keeping us whole, in spite of the threat of financial loss. That's what he said. The beauty of dream interpretation is that there is no one right answer. I found what he said helpful, but I also know that it's only part of the value of this dream in my life.

I am a dreamer, and I owe Mary many apologies for dreams at night that carry over into the waking state of consciousness. This carry-over doesn't surprise me because who we are in the dreaming state is who we also are in waking.

I remember a night some years back when such a dream occurred. In that dream the world situation had disintegrated. Nations were at war with other nations, and in the madness of the time, all restraint was abandoned. I was dreaming that Mary and I were sleeping in our bed, when I was, in the dream, awakened by distant explosions. Closer and closer they came, shaking the house. Then a great explosion very nearby convinced me that a nuclear bomb had just been dropped. My fear was of the fallout that would settle insidiously, killing us slowly but surely. In the dream,

I grabbed the sheet and pulled it up over my head and Mary's, to provide at least temporary protection from the deadly dust as it fell.

That's the last thing I knew in the dream, because suddenly, again, I was shaken awake by Mary. "What are you doing?" she shouted. "I can't breath with the sheet over my head." Again the reality of the dream consciousness had crossed over into my waking consciousness as I was holding the sheets like a tent over our heads.

We spend a lot of time dreaming. Even if you don't remember your dreams, a sleep lab will document the rapid eye movements that characterize the state of consciousness called dreaming. If we spend so much time at the activity of dreaming it must be important. But important in what way?

Once answer here comes from studies that have deliberately prevented subjects from experiencing the REM part of sleep. Whenever the rapid eye movements begin, the subject is wakened, but during deep, non-REM sleep, the subject is allowed to take their needed rest. In time subjects become disoriented, confused, and depressed—symptoms that disappear quickly when the subjects are allowed again to experience their REM sleep.

Yes, dreams are important for our mental health. But most of us pay them little attention. No doubt poets and artists notice their dreams, seeking in them creative inspiration, but can dreams serve the rest of us in a similar manner? I'm thinking for example of Mary Oliver who wrote the lovely book of poems entitled *Dream Work*. In this book an image from a dream is expressed as poetic vision. Notice how like your dreams or mine this vision is, rich with symbols.

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice --
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.

"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do --
determined to save
the only life you could save.

Dreams like this set a vision of meaning for the dreamer. The vision is a gift to the dreamer, but who has given us that gift. Of course, the gift comes from our selves. Dreams arise from within us and inform us, guide us, console us, or goad us into action.

I asked Mary the other day what she thought was most important about dreams. She said, “Listen to your dreams. Because it’s you telling *you* something important about yourself.” Dreams are about you revealing to yourself exactly what you need to live life better, more successfully, and more abundantly. Dreams are for the learning. We ignore them at our peril.

But how shall we take meaning from our dreams when we are not aware of dreaming? Obviously this is the first step, to begin to notice our dreams. I have a minister friend who told me a few years ago that he never dreamed. I tried to convince him that, physiologically, he was surely dreaming during his sleep, but he would have none of it. Then, for reasons of health and spiritual growth, he began a practice of morning meditation. He’d get up, make his coffee, and sit down for a half hour each morning. It wasn’t his intention to remember the dreams from the night before, and yet that’s what happened. Through meditation he attuned himself to a quiet level of consciousness that was confluent with his dream life.

Those who promote dream work have a fool-proof way of helping people begin to remember more of their dreams. When people wake up, shifting from dreaming state of consciousness to waking state, it’s as if a heavy curtain drops between them. But the curtain takes a moment to solidify. If in the first moments of waking you grab a notepad and pen and write down the images or rough story line that you remember, you will steadily lessen the weight of that curtain. Over time the curtain becomes more like a light veil, separating the two states of consciousness but allowing us to reach back into our dream state from our waking state when we choose to do so. This practice of writing down a dream right when you wake from that dream is a powerful practice in dream work.

I’ve found another practice helpful, called “recapitulating.” I first encountered this practice in the teachings of Ignatius of Loyola, the mystic who formed the Jesuit Order in the year 1540. The practice is very easy, yet very profound. When you are beginning to fall asleep, reflect lightly on the events of the day. Run through the day as if you are watching a movie. Notice what activities were fun or meaningful, and notice what activities drained you. It is not a time of problem solving, just a time of watching the flow of your day. Then, let it go as you fall

asleep. Over time it becomes very natural to recapitulate your day in this way.

It is as if you are strengthening the muscles of subtle, imaginative memory by doing this practice. As you get better at it, you will notice that you begin to remember dreams in the morning, with that same subtle, imaginative memory. Then using your journal or moments of contemplation through your day, you can consider the meaning and guidance of your dreams.

One practice of dream work that is very helpful is to consider your dreams in a Dream Circle. This approach to dream work, favored by many authors, including the Unitarian Universalist minister Jeremy Taylor, sets up a small group of trusted people to share in the experience of dream interpretation. There are strict rules for such dream groups, to ensure effective work in a safe and comfortable setting. This group work is not psychotherapy but is directed instead toward personal and spiritual growth. The group needs a good facilitator to get started, but she or he need not be a professional.

Taylor talks about the value of exploring dreams in this way:

As a long-time dream worker myself, I always begin with the assumption that whatever dream the dreamer has is, in some important sense, the best possible dream that person could have had at that moment. There is always a kind of best fit quality to dreams; they give symbolic shape to the deeper truths of the dreamers life in a way that is uniquely reflective of the dreamers true circumstances, above, below, and beyond his/her conscious convictions about life. The old folk tales say it best: the Magic Mirror never lies. In other words, if there were a better dream for the dreamer to have at any given moment, she/he would have it.

The dream can do anything it wants. It doesn't have to come in under budget. It doesn't have to follow the laws of physics. It doesn't have to respect the opinions of society, or even conform to the dreamers own waking conscious beliefs and opinions. All the dream has to do is tell the truth about the deeper reality of the dreamers life in a symbolically compelling way. In so doing, the dream also reveals connections to the deeper evolving life of the species as a whole.

Taylor travels widely to get communities started in the practice of group

dream work, and there have been dream groups in many of our UU congregations for decades. The success of this approach depends on six simple tools that Taylor shares openly to all who would value this work. Stick with these tools, and the rest will go by itself.

One

All dreams speak a universal language and come in the service of health and wholeness. There is no such thing as a "bad dream" -- only dreams that sometimes take a dramatically negative form in order to grab our attention.

Two

Only the dreamer can say with any certainty what meanings his or her dream may have. This certainty usually comes in the form of a wordless "aha!" of recognition. This "aha" is a function of memory, and is the only reliable touchstone of dream work.

Three

There is no such thing as a dream with only one meaning. All dreams and dream images are "over-determined," and have multiple meanings and layers of significance.

Four

No dreams come just to tell you what you already know. All dreams break new ground and invite you to new understandings and insights.

Five

When talking to others about their dreams, it is both wise and polite to preface your remarks with words to the effect of "if it were my dream...", and to keep this commentary in the first person as much as possible. This means that even relatively challenging comments can be made in such a way that the dreamer may actually be able to hear and internalize them. It also can become a profound psycho-spiritual discipline -- "walking a mile in your neighbor's moccasins."

Six

All dream group participants should agree at the outset to maintain anonymity in all discussions of dream work. In the absence of any specific request for confidentiality, group members should be free to discuss their experiences openly outside the group, provided no other dreamer is identifiable in their stories. However, whenever any group member requests confidentiality, all members should agree to be bound automatically by such a request.

So far I've been talking about paying attention to dreams for the sake of the meaning and direction that we can derive from them. But I've hinted at a further, and even more important, implication of dream work. Sometimes our dreams slip into our waking state, as when I growled like a wolf, where there is a flow between dream images and waking realities. Sometimes the shaking of the house from a passing truck reminds us of the earthquake dream from the night before. That heavy curtain between the dreaming and waking states of consciousness can with time and practice become more like a translucent veil. That deeper, imaginative, creative nature that comes out in our dreams becomes more available to us all the time. Just think about the creative potential for our work and our relationships!

The intuitive and psychic physician Judith Orloff asserts that the most powerful way to increase our own intuitive capacity is by regularly paying attention to our dreams. It is not the dreams themselves that strengthen our intuition but the *process* of our noticing them—flexing those intuitive muscles, so to speak, as we notice and work with our dreams.

Another physician author, Deepak Chopra, indicates that opening these intuitive qualities through dream work confers yet a further gift: the awareness of synchronicity. That's the experience when just the right person, event, book, or whatever shows up in your life, at the very moment that you need it. For Chopra, the process of opening to our dreams is one and the same as opening to the spontaneous occurrence in our lives of these synchronous events.

Dreaming keeps us sane. But a spiritual practice of dream work does more than just maintain our sanity, because it opens us to realize a dimension of our lives that we tend to consider the exclusive realm of the spiritually gifted. The subtle experiences of knowing, characterized by synchronicity, intuition, and meditative states, are part of the deepening consciousness that is the birth right of every human being. They will grow naturally. All we have to do is notice them.

May it be so.