

A NIGHT JOURNEY TO HEAVEN
Dreaming a Spiritual Practice

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The Text

Our revels now are ended, These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd tow'rs, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

Shakespeare's *The Tempest* Act 4, Scene 1

Engraved in stone at the Oracle of Delphi were two great precepts. The first was "know thyself." The second was "All in moderation." I suggest these fragments from the traditions at the core of our western way are in fact central to everything we do as Unitarian Universalists. Each contains the seeds of possibility, as true today as in the long gone past. Today I want to dwell upon that first precept, "know thyself" as a core element of our free faith.

It's obvious there are many ways to come to know one's self. There are the traditional disciplines already fairly common among us such as psychological reflection and various types of meditation. Like many UUs, I've particularly studied Buddhist disciplines and have a regular Zen meditation practice. But there are many other spiritual practices that seem to fit our particular UU needs, as well. For instance at the First Unitarian Society in Newton, where I serve as minister, that increasingly popular discipline among us Small Group Ministry which is a way of disciplined conversation, has become a wildly successful example of a particularly powerful way to study one's self.

And those simply begin the list. One thing we've long since learned as Unitarian Universalists is how one size never fits all. So, as religious liberals we're open to exploring the best way for each of us. And today, out of that perspective I want to reflect on another practice fairly common among us. I would like to hold it up, consider it, and encourage some among us to consider taking it on as a personal discipline. Today I want to discuss how we can dream a spiritual path.

You're probably aware how in some traditions sleeping at the tomb of one's ancestors or at a holy shrine are considered ways to invoke meaningful dreams. Here where we meet above the tombs of John and Abigail and John Quincy and Louisa Catherine Adams; we are at a shrine of dreams, of our sacred hope for a nation ruled by vote and law rather than by princes and fiat. A dream not always honored, of course. But here, in this sacred place, one can, I hope, feel that dream, that inspiration, palpable. By the bye, this reference is not an invitation to slip off right now into the arms of morpheus. But come back sometime, and rest easily here for a while, and see what visions come.

Certainly from the dawn of our humanity dreams have had great power. The real question often simply is only how will we encounter our dreams? Well, when I was in my mid-teens I discovered Soren Kierkegaard. I just loved him. What can I say, I was a troubled youth. He was, also, as many of us in this room well know a difficult writer. I still recall a footnote from the translator at one particularly convoluted passage asserting to the reader this wasn't just bad translating, it was awful writing.

But Kierkegaard also said some very compelling things, worth all the trouble. One, I recall, was about a wondrous dream from his youth. He told how he was caught up to the seventh heaven where all the gods sat in assembly and where he was told he would be granted a single wish. Mercury asked, "What do you want? Eternal youth? Beauty? Power or long life? You may choose from anything we have in the treasure chest. But you can choose only one thing."

Kierkegaard wrote, "For an instant, I hesitated. Then I addressed the gods: '...may I always have the laugh on my side.' At that moment the gods all burst out laughing, and I assumed my wish was granted..."

Perhaps, small wonder our English word dream seems to derive from the Old English word of the same pronunciation which means joy or music. It appears to be related to the Old Saxon *drom*, which means mirth. A fascinating origin and one I think worth holding in our hearts as we consider our contemporary usages. Today the *American Heritage Dictionary* defines dream as "a series of images, ideas, emotions, and sensations occurring involuntarily in the mind during certain stages of sleep."

Dreams as mirth, joy and music. Taken with this I began looking up sleep and dreams and humor. I quickly learned how most references I

found were not suitable for including in a sermon: dreams turn out to be an endless well of sexual jokes. On the other hand, perhaps that's the way it should be. When we discuss our dreams we're often talking of fundamental things, yes, of joy and mirth. But also we're visiting a land that sometimes is shadowed with nightmares. We're also inviting an exploration of naked fear and burning ambition, and of course, of sex and sexuality in all its permutations.

The clean stuff about sleep and dreams mainly featured puns or Fred Allen lines, like "he dreamed he was eating shredded wheat and woke up to find the mattress half gone." Or, like my anxiety about relating how one can find powerful dreams sleeping at tombs; Rabelais' "I never sleep comfortably except when I'm at a sermon."

Still, I did find something I thought helpful for us in our considerations today. Robert goes to his psychiatrist, "I had a dream, he tells her. "I saw my mother. As you know she's been dead for five years. The strangest thing was she had your face. This really bothered me and I immediately awakened. I lay there in bed for about two hours, finally getting up at six.

"I went downstairs, made myself a slice of toast and a pot of coffee. But I couldn't shake that thought of my mother having your face, so I made today's appointment. Can you explain the meaning of my dream?" The psychiatrist sat silently for a while, and then she leaned forward and said, "One slice of toast and some coffee? You call that breakfast?"

Sometimes our dreams are simply our mother's speaking to us, reminding us of the lessons of our ancestors. Get enough sleep; eat the right food; get a little exercise, for goodness sake. Sometimes our dreams are just the excess energy of the day, bits and pieces of events and encounters rehashed and played out again with no particular meaning. And sometimes we find our dreams are our deepest knowing bubbling to the surface.

We have to be careful. With everything in life, we have to be careful. That is we need to care. We need to attend. If we do, possibilities await. But, of course, if we don't attend, then we continue in the muddle, wandering in the dark, not sure of anything, or worse, taking the false for the true.

There is so much hurt in the world. We all know that. And, I hope, we all know our liberal religious path is one of engagement. We really are about healing, salve, the original and true meaning of salvation. Not saving for some future place, but healing right here, right now. Our spiritual path as Unitarian Universalists, I suggest, is about that possible healing, about rejoining the divided world, about reconciling self and other. This healing is for our selves, for our families, and for the world itself.

I hope we see this intuition of healing or reconciliation working in every social justice project we undertake. And, and this is so important,

in order to find our way, to do good work rather than damage, to help rather than perpetuate hurt, we need to constantly open our hearts and our minds. And so, we find ourselves, we who wish to be of use in the world, also called to reflect, to learn those arts of presence, that allow us that opening. And we need to remember this, allow us when we've forgotten, the possibility of reopening. I suggest dream work can be particularly useful in this enterprise.

A wise Unitarian Universalist minister, David Bumbaugh, once wrote "Dreams, you see, are to the human community what genes are to the individual body. Dreams define the limits of the possible. Dreams describe the inherent potential within any community. Without dreams there can be no cultural evolution, no better society. Without dreams we are limited to what has been."

So, how to do dream work? Well, the first thing is to remember them. There are some simple things we can do. As you drift off to sleep, just tell yourself. "I will remember a dream." Some people find it useful to visualize the event, as you lay in bed picture yourself waking with that vivid memory of a dream. Then, make sure you have a pen or pencil and some paper or a notepad at your bedside. These simple things, for most of us, will lead in days to our remembering our dreams.

From this begin a dream journal, where you can record your dreams. Many people find it useful to have something nice, hand made paper, that sort of thing; but keeping in mind Thoreau's caution to beware any enterprise requiring the purchase of a new suit of clothes, really the simplest notebook is okay.

Next and I believe a crucial step, join or start a dream group. I really like that bumper sticker "don't believe everything you think." Likewise, just because you dreamt it doesn't mean it is particularly worthwhile. A group helps to sort things out; other perspectives hold a mirror up to us, allowing genuine reflection.

For instance, I once belonged to a dream group as part of a graduate seminar, so we had the additional advantage of a professional moderator. If you're willing to be generous with yourself and the other, and check neither your head nor your heart at the door; sharing the dream can take one in powerful directions. So, for instance, in that dream group I belonged to one of our members described a dream fragment.

It was a particularly beautiful experience. A sage of some sort appeared to her and gave her a glowing ball. As she took it in her hands the ball began to expand, growing ever brighter, until every sense was overwhelmed with the glory of that brightness. I thought why don't I have dreams like that? The moderator, an old hand, one who probably really has heard everything, cleared her throat and asked the younger woman, "And what do you think all that light was hiding?"

If we're willing to be vulnerable, to be pushed, then this really can become a spiritual practice. Here we embrace one of the ancient

shamanic ways, those paths of direct personal experience. I was talking about my working on this sermon with some friends from the Zen group I guide, when one of them, Victor Lapuczynski, an old Zen hand who has also spent years exploring shamanic disciplines, said he recently had a dream that might be a useful illustration.

Just one important bit of background. Vic's parents both died this year. With that, the dream. "I was going through my mother's things and feeling vaguely guilty about it. (When) she asked me what I was doing with her stuff. I was astonished to see my mother quite alive, in a red and blue dress (one which with many other items of clothing I sent to Belarus for the poor). I told her I thought she was dead.

"How could you think that?" She asked. (I replied) "I must have been dreaming..." "So," she said, "You wanted me dead in your dreams?" I laughed and said "No, no! But it was such a realistic dream, the ambulance, the hospital, the body in death, the funeral. Boy, I rarely have dreams that realistic".

(Then she asked,) "How can you know you're not dreaming now?" (I replied,) "Because there's a difference in feeling between dreams and waking." I looked around. Everything was there and vibrant with reality – the sofa, the chairs, the TV, the windows, the wind through them... And I said, "Ma, in meditation there's a coming back to being aware of being aware that's the essence of wakefulness, and I can feel that now. How could I feel that in a dream? And I'm so glad you're still alive!"

Then Vic awoke. A contemporary, living version of Chuang-Tzu's famous story of the man who dreamt he was a butterfly, then upon awakening couldn't be sure he'd just dreamt he was a butterfly or was actually a butterfly dreaming he was a man. Truth and reality, our deepest truths and the real, pushing up against each other, challenging, hinting, winking: a dream. It contains sadness yes, but in facing it all without turning, finding joy, music, mirth. Finding our way.

Sometimes our dreams are simply our mother's speaking to us, reminding us of the lessons of our ancestors. Get enough sleep, eat the right food, get a little exercise, for goodness sake. Sometimes our dreams are just the excess energy of the day, bits and pieces of events and encounters rehashed and played out again with no particular meaning. But sometimes they give us directions for our lives. If we're careful, if we don't take ourselves too seriously, but we do take the dream as possibility peeking out from the shadows, then we are ready to receive a lesson, and maybe take some action.

Action. David Bumbaugh underscores how "Dreams are not enough. A religious community must also be a community of courage, willing to risk in behalf of those dreams." I think writing from a similar inspiration; Anais Nin tells us "Dreams pass into the reality of action. From the actions stems the dream again; and this interdependence produces the highest form of living."

So, let's take our dreams, our personal dreams and the dreams of our community, work them, engage them, and from the wisdom we glean in that looking, help to re-connect the divided world, to reconcile the divisions, to heal the wounds. It is the work of our way. And there should be no doubt it is the great way of joy.

Amen.