

First Unitarian Church

June 5, 2016

**See readings first; attached at end*

Do you know: that anxiety dream about sermons recurred so frequently, I actually stashed a back up sermon in my file cabinet across the courtyard there, in the church office, in real life. It's not because I think I'd ever actually forget that I'm supposed to preach—trust me, there is ZERO chance of that, I mean my name is on a signboard outside that I drive by at least ten times per week— but because I hoped knowing the back up sermon was in there would make the dream stop.

You know what happened? I dreamed I was supposed to preach, and hadn't prepared a sermon, and couldn't get into the office to get the back up one.

(Sigh).

I guess it didn't have the literal meaning I thought it did.

But that's how dreams always are. They are not meant to be taken literally. Instead, they are creative, rich with messages from the unconscious mind, mingling with the thoughts and familiar images of the conscious mind. The result is storytelling in metaphor and symbols. Storytelling, that when we remember it, can reveal something to us that we were not conscious of before.

Jeremy Taylor is a dream expert and also a UU minister.

In his book, *The Wisdom of Your Dreams*, he says, "no dream ever comes just to tell you what you already know. All dreams carry new information and energy in their metaphors and symbols." He says all dreams come in the service of your growth and development, health and wholeness.

Even nightmares. Even those dreams in which the car is going right off the top of the mountain, or we are lost in the woods, or we are fighting like ninjas for our children during the apocalypse. (One person, when he saw the apocalypse dream mentioned on facebook, noted regretfully that he seems to only dream of things like doing the laundry). Well even that is a rich metaphor, actually.

But nightmares, nightmares are dreams that yell at us: pay attention! This message from the unconscious is important! They are flagged with adrenaline so we will remember them when we wake up.

Not because your car is really going to go right off the mountain, or your home is really going to flood, or whatever it is—but because there is something about that story—a of impending disaster— that is important to your growth.

Is there something unspoken or unaddressed in your life or in your family, that must be faced before it leads, as inevitably will, to chaos?

Are you afraid of what you cannot control, and need to work on making peace with it?

These are spiritual questions, by the way, because they have to do with what we call “the depth aspect” of life. The intangible stuff. Relationships, understanding, and meaning making.

Dreams, Taylor says, “reflect the dreamer’s inborn ability to solve life’s problems. Over and over again, creative energies and ideas emerge from even the most unexpected and obscure corners of the dream experience” (7).

Taylor has led dream groups for over forty years. He shares an example of a dream one woman brought to a group. The woman had been totally providing for her unemployed, college-graduate son who had moved back in with her, and she knew on an intellectual level that this was inappropriate.

In the disturbing dream she shared, she “sees her son drowning in a swimming pool filled with soup she knew she had cooked, while she watches ... from a lawn chair without making any effort to help him” (4).

When she awoke, she recognized that her “seemingly generous and loving action” of providing so much care for him was actually not just inappropriate but bad for him, and therefore, in its effect, uncaring. She was moved to begin loving him in a way that encouraged his long term well-being.

One of the most famous scholars of dreaming was Carl Jung. He said dreams are a window into the unconscious. He was fascinated by the universal themes and images in dreams—even people from very different cultures and places tend to share many dream themes.

One is the Persona, the image you present to the world in your waking life. In dreams this persona may be challenged.

In 2010, I arrived here in Albuquerque as an Assistant Minister, fresh out of Divinity School. I was excited to serve a thriving congregation known for its adventurousness and spiritual depth. I was excited to work with Christine Robinson, highly esteemed among our colleagues, and—at the age of sixty—part of generation that I had only a handful of years to overlap with. (Before they retired, not, you know, expired). As per our agreement, four months later, while I was still wet under the wings, Christine went on a much-needed sabbatical. She would be gone for four months, leaving me at the helm.

I have many good memories from that time. We held the annual meeting at which this congregation voted to raise the money that built this sanctuary. We launched an 18 month long immigration learning and action project, that involved about 100 First Unitarians as it progressed, and we got the president of the denomination to come and speak at our kick off!

I got to experience a congregation and a governing board that had just the right balance of faith and due process. You trusted this young new minister to take the reigns, but you companioned me, offering information and feedback, and tending to the healthy checks and balances in our congregational system.

It was a good experience. But one memory stands out as particularly emblematic of that time. It didn't happen in church. It happened in my sleep. I dreamed I had taken Christine's place leading a memorial service. I was at this pulpit, but instead of standing on my little step here, I was on top of a twenty foot high, wobbling, tower of square throw pillows. Trying to keep my balance while I sorted my pages. Some of which were missing, of course.

Metaphor. Not factuality minus, said the theologian Marcus Borg, but poetry plus. Metaphor is not less than fact, but more."¹

The foundations for ministry feel less than firm in the first couple of years, as we gather the practical skills that we did not glean from classes on Jewish, Christian, or Buddhist scriptures. And I was a bit wobbly, filling Christine's shoes just then.

What a difference six years makes.

I was managing fine. But there was something very, very true about that dream, and it was expressed better in the tower of wobbly decorative pillows than any words I might say about finding my feet in ministry. Metaphor is not factuality minus, but poetry plus. Not less than fact, but more.

When Marcus Borg said this, he was speaking, specifically, about the gospel stories about the resurrection of Jesus.

The bible is full of metaphors, and so, it makes perfect sense, that it also contains many dreams.

In fact, powerful dreams—and the waking dreams we call visions—were so common in biblical times, that when no one seemed to be having any, people got kind of worried. Sometimes it was due to not enough prophets walking among the people. (1 Samuel 3:1) Other times a lack of visions and dreams seemed to be the result of disobeying God. (1 Samuel 28:6).

In the Hebrew Bible, dreams can be protective—as when Abraham and his wife Sarah enter a new town. Abraham fears that the man in charge, Abimelech, will see how beautiful Sarah is and kill Abraham in order to take her for himself. So Abraham pretends to be her brother.

When Abimelech does force Sarah into his harem, he has a dream strongly warning him away from her. The next day he returns her to her brother. Or so he thinks.

¹ Borg, Marcus, and N.T. Wright. The Meaning of Jesus.

(Genesis 20:1-7) The dream protected her. (From Abimelech, if not from patriarchy.)

Abraham's son, Jacob, dreams of a ladder that connects heaven and earth, with divine messengers traveling up and down it.

And on and on it goes, with dreams and visions scattered all throughout the Hebrew bible.

Likewise, in the gospels, dreams also play an important role.

Remember the birth narrative in the gospel of Matthew? Joseph would have abandoned Mary when she became pregnant with Jesus if an angel had not appeared to him in a dream convincing him to stay. (Matthew 1:20; 2:13)

After Jesus is born, Joseph has two more important dreams: one in which he is told to take his family to Egypt to escape Herod, who wants to get rid of baby Jesus, and another telling him when Herod is dead and it is safe to return home.

During Jesus' trial, Pontius Pilate's wife has a nightmare that convinces her Jesus is innocent, and she tries to get him released. She asks her husband not to get involved with Jesus's case. (Matthew 27:19)

Spoiler alert. He doesn't listen.

And the entire bizarre, notorious, Book of Revelations, is a dream or vision of a man named John.

In many stories of the bible, dreams and visions are taken literally by the characters in the story. But the stories themselves contain many metaphors and often present themselves as literary works. The context itself is often dreamlike.

One of my favorite dreams in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures is another one Jacob has. After years of conducting himself with an appalling lack of integrity, Jacob finds himself camping alone along a riverbank. He is on his way to try to make amends with his family—and he is scared. Then in the middle of the night, the text says, a man “appeared” and wrestled with him. They wrestle all night long, until it is almost daybreak. They seem to be quite a match for one another: even when Jacob's hip is disjointed, the stranger is unable to prevail against him. Just before dawn's first light, the man gives Jacob a blessing, and renames him. He says now your name is Israel, which means struggles with God.

Did you know that Israel means “struggles with God?”

Who doesn't struggle with God? And here you can substitute other words or names for God, because I am not talking about a man in the sky, but about the deep wisdom of life and our deepest need as soulful human beings.

Who doesn't struggle—at some point in our lives—with a reckoning that the way we are *being*, and who we really *are*, are not in accord?

And HO are we a good match for the struggle. We can resist confronting the truth about ourselves for very long time indeed, even when it is obviously harmful to us! Even when our denial causes our lives to become *disjointed*. Why? Because we are scared.

To acknowledge our failings, and to fail again.

To try to restore right relationship with others, knowing that we might be rejected.

To let an old familiar mode of being die, and a new one be born.

When our dreams include metaphors for existential concerns—such as impending doom, or struggle with the divine or truth—those are what dream scholar Kelly Bulkley calls “root metaphors.” Root metaphors are images that express, “our ultimate existential concerns,” she says. They are “powerful and challenging, and... have deep transformative effects on our lives.”²

But, she points out, we do have to be careful about interpreting our root metaphor dreams too strictly. After all, the metaphors are ours, and therefore always partial.

She gives the example of Jacob's dream about the ladder, which connects the divine and earthly realms. It's a root metaphor for the connection between the holy and the earthly. But it's only partial, because it does not acknowledge the possibility that the divine is here all around us, that everything we are and see is shot through with the divine. That the concept of the divine is, itself, something we always only speak about in metaphor. It is itself a kind of metaphor. The vision of the ladder is partial because in its simplicity, it cannot acknowledge the simultaneous truth that there are not two worlds but one.

In our first reading this morning, Antonio Machado also speaks of a root metaphor dream, in which God is like a spring breaking out in his heart, with waters he has never drunk before; or like a sun radiating warmth and light that makes him cry; or God is like a beehive, making honey out of his old *failures*. In Spanish, the word is actually *amarguras*, bitteresses. God is making honey out of Machado's old bitteresses.

We need many root metaphors for a balanced life, Bulkley says, just as a tree needs more than one root. You can say the same thing for a balanced *spiritual* life, and that is the philosophy of Unitarian Universalism—that one story, one metaphor, will only ever be one piece of the truth. And so we look for for wisdom from many sources, and we do not have a creed.

² Bulkley, Kelly. “Dreams, Spirituality, and Root Metaphors.” *Journal of Religion and Health*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (Fall, 1992), pp. 197-206

As with religion, the best way to understand a dream is to ask a lot of questions. We love questions and even doubt in this church. Ask away!

With dreams, we might ask,

What is the felt sense of the dream? Or, you might imagine that you are every person and object in the dream.

This is what Carl Jung called the “subjective approach” to dream interpretation. Everything in the dream represents an aspect of the dreamer.

If you share it with a group, what feelings or images does it elicit in the group? Because so many motifs in dreams are so fundamentally human, shared by people everywhere, group dreamwork can be a very powerful way of uncovering the messages of growth and healing that our dreams deliver to us.

In his decades of leading dream groups, Jeremy Taylor has noticed that when the dreamer hears or thinks of an interpretation of the dream that is true, you can always tell because the person experiences an “aha” moment. Like a lightbulb going on. The interpretation immediately hits home.

That’s because we always already know, unconsciously, what our dreams mean. The meaning is already there from the beginning—we don’t make it up afterward. We know it already, we just don’t know we know. And then, when we remember it, it hits us all over again. Aha!

Only the dreamer knows for sure what his or her dream really means. Someone else can help you remember the meaning of your dream, but no one can *tell* you what it is as though they know better than you do. You should especially remember this if someone you love has a dream you don’t like! Trust the dreamer.

I’m going to close by saying that if you’d like to start a dream group here at church, we can help you do that.

We have resources on how to create and structure the group, and if many people are interested we can even start more than one group. Just stop by the Connections Table on your way out and mention it to Beth, or—for the members of our branches in Edgewood, Socorro, and Carlsbad—send us a message. We’d be glad to help.

Reading I: Last Night As I Was Sleeping, by Antonio Machado.

<http://allpoetry.com/Last-Night-As-I-Was-Sleeping>

Reading II: Dream Themes

A Question, posed on Social Media: What Recurring Dreams Do You Have?

I'm always **getting lost...in big cities and universities.**

I'm looking for something I've lost. There is architecture around me; some kind of abandoned place.

I journey through forests and vast landscapes with people from my life.

I am in the house where I grew up, but then I remember it's not mine anymore. I am afraid the new owners will catch me.

I'm in a large house with many rooms. I find a hidden door leading to more. It's familiar, yet strange. Do I live here? Did I live here in the past?

The only way out of a space is through an opening that looks too small for me... I wake up before venturing through.

I have falling dreams. They wake me up with a lurch as I 'hit' the bed.

Falling from space without a bottom.

I dream of flying.

Flying! Like walking, but my feet don't touch the ground!

I had a flying dream when I was a child. It was joyous!

Typical problem in *my* flying dreams: I have to dodge obstacles: power lines, trees!

My dreams involve disasters: nuclear or tornados or earthquakes.

I am being tossed out of control, by a wave or a rolling car.

I'm driving up a mountain with my family. We drive over the top and plummet to the ground.

I'm caught in a tsunami or flood!

Usually while driving a car...

and with someone unable to save themselves.

A truck crashes into the house.

I lose control of a machine: crash a plane or lose power to a winch.

Water flooding from walls or ceilings--broken pipes.

Mine are post apocalyptic and I have to protect my kids. Lots of hiding and shooting.

Zombies. Always zombies.

An animal is attacking the children in my care! I grab it by the teeth to protect them.

Someone is coming after me and I can't scream or yell.

I try to call 911 but I can't press the right numbers

The operator doesn't hear me.

I watch my spouse go around a corner and I don't see her when I get there.

Or she gets on a train that leaves the platform before I can get on.

She is clearly going on and not looking back for me.

I'm on a trip of some kind and have foolishly brought the cats along. I spend the whole dream frantically fighting to keep them from escaping the bus, or the restaurant, or the museum.

My teeth are falling out or crumbling.

I can't remember my high school locker combination.

It's finals week! **I forgot** I had signed up for a class and never attended it.

I forgot to put on my pants just as the school bus was arriving. Go to school as is? Or go home for pants and miss school?

I went to school wearing only a small towel, now I'm lost on my walk home and it's getting dark. When I run it is even slower than walking.

"No pants" is a classic. Another recurring theme is ... nope, not going there in public.

I arrive to substitute teach, and never find the classroom.

My train is coming and I'm on the wrong platform;

I'm on a train, and I miss my stop.

I'm on a train & the track runs out.

The mistake is irreversible!

I am waiting to go onstage for a play I never rehearsed. I don't know the lines.

It's time to preach, and I haven't written a sermon.