

IN THE PRESENCE OF THREE: PROJECTIVE DREAMWORK and GROUP SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

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Rabbi Huna ben Ammi said ...: If one has a dream...go and have it interpreted in the presence of three...Bring them together and say: I have seen a good dream; and they should say: Good it is and good may it be...¹

I. Introduction

From the earliest times the significance of dreams has extended far beyond the inner life of the dreamer. The night visions of the Pharaoh in *Genesis* and Nebuchadnezzar in *Daniel* presaged events whose affect reached past the borders of their kingdoms. The list of personal dreams whose implications have shifted the course of history and culture is both long and fascinating.²

In addition to those private, transformative dreams, there are societies that gain collective guidance from their shared dream experience. Various Aboriginal cultures in Australia are based on a belief in “Dreamtime” or “The Dreaming” (alternatively known as *Tjukurrpa*, *Alchera* or *Alcheringa*), an ancient time when the sacred ancestors, whose spirits continue into the present, created all things. Not only can these ancestors now be contacted through personal dreams, but methods have been developed to facilitate collective journeys into “The Dreaming.” The purpose of these shared dream quests: to receive communal guidance, gain spiritual insight, and to rejuvenate the society’s fundamental life energy. ³

The Achuar people, who live in Ecuador’s Rainforest, share dreams as a way of shaping their waking lives. The people gather in small groups hours before sunrise to share both sweet tea

¹ Babylonian Talmud (BT) Berakhot 55A This passage describes a proto-dream group process through which a troubled dreamer can call together three friends for a dream amelioration ritual

² For but two lists of such dreams see “10 Dreams that Changed Human History” (www.world-of-lucid-dreaming.com) and “10 examples of how dreams changed the course of history” (www.abovetopsecret.com).

For a concise exposition on Jung’s theories of “Big Dreams” and “Collective Dreams” see Mark L Dotson 1996 essay “Jung’s Theory of Dreams” (<http://members.core.com/~ascensus/docs/jung1.html>)

³ Kelly Bulkeley, *Dreaming in the World’s Religions* (New York University Press; New York, 2008) pp 234-239

(*Wayús*) and their dreams. This custom (*Wayusa*) reflects the conviction that people dream both for themselves and for the entire community.⁴ By the 1980s, Achuar elders began dreaming of peril to their lands and culture due to the incursion of the oil, lumber and rubber industries. Motivated by these foreboding visions and their ancient prophecy of “The Eagle and the Condor,” the Achuar have formed alliances with formerly hostile neighboring tribes and with individuals from the industrialized world. Their goal is to ensure the long-term wellbeing of their tribal lands, establish the right to self-determination and to develop a sustainable economy.⁵

In our own society Jeremy Taylor, a pre-eminent dream authority, has demonstrated how shared dreams can reveal unconscious biases as a prelude to healing group rifts and interpersonal wounds. In 1969, he was called upon to lead a volunteer re-training exercise devoted to "overcoming (liberal) racism" as part of the work of Unitarian Universalist - Project East Bay, (UUPEB). This community organizing effort, centered in Emeryville, California's African American community, had faltered due in large measure to the “impersonally unconscious condescending attitudes and behaviors” of its well-meaning Caucasian volunteers. The re-training series proved transformative only after Jeremy suggested that the volunteers shift from didactic learning and sharing their community organizing “war stories, to “telling dreams to one another, paying particular attention to those dreams that have racial incidents and racial feeling as part of their manifest content...”⁶ He continued to uncover how shared dreams can be a potent tool for personal and social change during his tenure as Director of the Marin County, CA Headstart in the early 1970's and through his work with youth in correctional facilities, including San Quentin.⁷

Many an important essay has been written about the efficacious use of dream work as a feature of individual spiritual direction. Among the more recent is Charlotte Still Noble's “The

⁴ Marilyn Schlitz and Frank Pascoe, “The Achuar Dream Practices” (www.mysticalcompany.com/Achuar)

⁵ In Achuar lore the Eagle signifies the way of intellect and mechanization; the Condor represents the path of intuition and heart. The prophecy foretells of a split between these two paths: for a period of 500 years (beginning around 1490) the Eagle People would all but extinguish the Condor Folk of Central and South America, and; at the end of that period potential would arise for the Condor and Eagle to soar together for the benefit of all. See www.pachamama.org

⁶ Jeremy Taylor, *The Wisdom of Your Dreams* (Tarcher/Penguin; New York, 2009) pp 89-100

⁷ For a transcription of Dr. David Van Nuys' interview with Jeremy Taylor (Shrink Rap Radio # 51-- September 10, 2006) see www.zurinstitute.com/dream6.pdf

Usefulness of Sacred Dreams in Spiritual Direction.”⁸ In “Melting the Iceberg,” Br Don Bisson describes new male directees who are able to begin opening to the Spirit by facing their dream images of snow drifts and icy landscapes, reflecting the layers of their frozen emotions that are just sensing the possibility of thaw.⁹

Beyond its implications for individual spiritual direction, I’ve become intrigued by the possibilities that dream sharing can hold for the work of direction in group contexts. As a spiritual director and now as a certified dream group leader, I’ve become ever more convinced that we do dream both for ourselves and for others, for the dreamer personally as well as for the collective. My own Jewish tradition has long believed that *Shechinah*, the guiding, feminine Divine Presence, dwells within and among the community.¹⁰ Early Christianity understood the community to be the Temple in whose midst God’s spirit dwells.¹¹ The Sufi poet Rumi claims that Allah created “we” and “I” to enter into a game of divine self-courtship so that the collective might, as one soul, “drown in the Beloved.”¹² Given the centuries of ambivalence and at times hostility that the Western traditions have shown towards dream work, perhaps the moment and possibly the Spirit are calling for a fuller exploration of sharing dreams as a potentially powerful modality for Group Spiritual Direction in a variety of faith settings.

II. Projective Dream Work and Scriptural Interpretation

In 1979 Montague Ullman and Nan Zimmerman published *Working with Dreams* (Delacorte Press), a text that details an emotionally safe method for engaging in group dream work. This projective process unfolds in four stages: **First**, the dreamer shares the dream and the members of the group can ask questions of clarification; **Second**, the group symbolically accepts the dream and always prefaces their comments about feelings and associations the dream has triggered with the words, “if this were my dream...” to amplify that these are their own

⁸ *Presence* December, 2012 (Volume 18 #4) pp 6-9

⁹ Nick Wagner, editor *Spiritual Direction in Context* (Morehouse Publishing; Spiritual Directors International Series, 2006) p 30

¹⁰ Exodus 25:8. For the *Shechinah* dwelling among the People Israel even amid impurity and exile see BT Yoma 56B and Megillah 29a respectively. For *Shechinah* inhering among 10, 5, 3 or even 2 gathered for sacred purposes see Ethics of the Fathers (Avot) 3:7.

¹¹ I Corinthians 3:16

¹² Mathnawi | 1779-1794-*The Rumi Collection*-Kabir Helminski. wahiduddin.net/sufi/sufi_poetry.htm

projections and are not necessarily valid for the dreamer; **Third**, the dream is “returned” to the dreamer, who may comment or not as s/he wishes, and; **Four**, the dreamer is asked to carry the dream process home and contemplate reactions and realms of meaning that might unfold between sessions. In this way the dreamer remains in control of the dream at each phase and is the final authority over the dream’s meaning. While always respecting the dreamer’s privacy, the group helps the dreamer discover for him or herself meaning and personal insight that might have eluded the dreamer if working alone.¹³

I was first introduced to an adapted version this projective methodology during my training at the Haden Institute.¹⁴ There it occurred to me that this process corresponds to the elements of a fourfold Jewish interpretive methodology that first appeared in Spain in a late thirteenth century Torah commentary. These four hermeneutical approaches include: *Peshat*, the “Simple,” literal meaning of the text; *D’rash*, “Inquiry,” the exploration of questions arising from biblical passages whose responses are proffered as homiletic or legal expositions; *Remez*, “Allusion,” allegorical or philosophic meanings inferred from the images, characters or actions found in Scripture, and; *Sod*, “Secret,” the mystical or Kabbalistic rendering of the Sacred Text. Recombined, their initial letters spell *PaRDeS*, (literally a “Pleasure Garden”) which the early Talmudic sages identified as the most profound, inner most realm of the divine.¹⁵

III. Entering *PaRDeS*

The following represents my adaption of the projective dream group process which I’ve facilitated at synagogues and in Jewish retreat settings since 2013.

¹³ For a synopsis of Ullman’s work see Robert Van De Castle. *Our Dreaming Mind* (New York: Random House, 1994) pp. 199-202

¹⁴ Robert Haden Jr. *Unopened Letters from God* (Hendersonville, NC; Haden Institute Press, 2010), pp.183-4. Robert Haden adapted his method in 2013 to allow each dream group member, after the dreamer shares reflections, to briefly comment on an aspect of the dream that had special import or emotional valence for them. These they might later contemplate as aids to their own inner work

¹⁵ BT Hagigah 14b www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/3263-bible-exegesis:

The Opening Prayer
(recited together)

*Sovereign of the Universe, I am Yours as are my dreams. I have dreamed a dream and know not what it is. Whether I have dreamed of myself, my companions have dreamed of me or I have dreamed of others, if they be good dreams, affirm and reinforce them like Joseph's dreams; if they require remedy, heal them, as our teacher, Moses, healed the waters of Marah, as Miriam was healed of her leprosy, Naaman of his leprosy, Hezekiah of his sickness, and the waters of Jericho by Elisha. As You transformed Balaam's into a blessing, so turn all my dreams into something good for me.*¹⁶

After the welcome and selection of the opening dream, the group process begins

1. **PESHAT**. The Dreamer recites the literal, manifest dream twice. The group may take notes during the second recitation and usually hand them to the dreamer at session's end
2. **D'RASH** (Inquiry). After the second recitation the group inquires about the various aspects, settings and characters in the dream to shed light upon them, seeking objective answers rather than the dreamer's personal associations
3. The Dreamer symbolically passes the dream to the group.
4. **REMEZ** (Allusions). Group members project their own associations onto the images or elements of the dream as if this dream had been their own, always prefacing their remarks with "If this were my dream..." or "In my dream..."
5. When finished the group "returns" the dream to the Dreamer
6. **SOD** (Secret). The Dreamer, to the extent s/he wishes, may disclose any previously concealed insights that have emerged from the dream group process or need not comment at all. The Dreamer is encouraged to reflect on that day's shared process at home and to track the unfolding of dreams and life experiences, particularly between sessions to see if further hidden aspects of the dream's message might be revealed.
7. Members of the group may then comment briefly on what aspect of the dream held particular energy for them individually

¹⁶ BT Berakhot 55b. For a full exposition of this third century dream amelioration prayer and its contemporary implications see Howard Avruhm Addison, "I Have Dreamed a Dream," in the forthcoming anthology, *Birkat Kohanim: The Priestly Benediction* (New York; Matrix Press)

Before moving on, the following adaptations of two scriptural verses are recited to mark the unique sanctity of the group encounter with this dreamer and dream:¹⁷

DREAMER: Through this dream may my soul find wholeness and release
(Psalms 55:19)

GROUP: Peace, Peace unto you and we who support you: May God always be your aid
(I Chronicles 12:19).

Once the group has treated those dreams it is going to process during the session its members seal the sacred nature of their time together by chanting four times in unison the Hebrew word for Wholeness, Wellbeing, Peace and Farewell, *Shalom*.

IV. Are We Going to Have Silence?

Those who have participated in the dream group process detailed above indicate that it sanctifies their disclosing sensitive aspects of their personal lives. The ritual provides a holy container for their shared dreams that feels at once religiously authentic and emotionally safe. It helps to hold them as a spiritual community while contextualizing their unique inner experiences within the ongoing sacred tradition of the Jewish people.

A transformative element was added to this process when I facilitated a dream group for a gathering of Jewish Spiritual Directors, including some who work in multi-faith contexts, early in 2015. After introducing the methodology and ritual, an experienced and well respected colleague asked: Are we going to have silence? While I have always included silence prior to the opening prayer and between dream presentations, I hadn't before conducted the entire exercise as a fully contemplative practice. We all quickly assented, pausing in meditative stillness between the two tellings of the dream that was shared and after each phase as the process unfolded.

That morning was graced in so many ways:

- The group was composed of sensitive, thoughtful spiritual seekers who themselves also serve as spiritual guides.

¹⁷ BT Berakhot 55A The antiphonal recitation of these two verses, together with seven others, form an important constituent of the Talmudic dream amelioration group ritual cited at the beginning of this essay.

- The dreamer presented a powerful three part dream, filled with: personal emotion and private associations; archetypal images of natural disaster, pristine snow covered rolling hills, a majestic earth-brown horse, and; a mysterious connection between the dreamer, who shoots a rifle, and the “longshot,” impossible trajectory of a “magic’ bullet, whose ricochet strikes the horse in the thigh, felling but not killing the magnificent creature, who mysteriously reappears prone next to the dreamer in a restaurant during the dream’s final scene.
- The inquiry that revealed the dreamer is trained and works at times in disaster relief, is an outdoors person who owns and shoots a rifle and, perhaps most interestingly, has some physical problems with the left thigh, the same thigh in which the horse had been wounded.
- The allusions projected by different group members onto the dream included: how the horse could symbolize an instinctual aspect of one’s life force which might be unnecessarily sacrificed by trying to shoot it off with a “longshot;” the collective import that could be found in the image of a world shaken by natural disaster being followed by the grand rolling openness and solitude of the “new” that could come, and; the resonances of the horse’s wounded thigh with the biblical scene of Jacob wrestling the angel, which mirrors the struggle with ambivalence between wishing to help and being “miffed” during the disaster scene, the emotion laden struggle of whether or not to shoot the horse in the second vignette and the contrast between feeling comfortable with two long time life companions in the restaurant while being embarrassed by the presence of the prone horse in the third

Once the group symbolically returned the dream, the dreamer shared a number of previously hidden associations that had been revealed during the process. It turned out that the dream had occurred during the dreamer’s birthday, which had been spent during a spiritually powerful retreat weekend. The image of the wounded Patriarch Jacob personally resonated because that retreat had been filled with ritual and a wrestling born of prayer and questioning, exacerbated by the dreamer’s need to leave the retreat at times to perform previously scheduled pastoral duties.

New implications of collective meaning had also been disclosed. Through the dream the dreamer sensed discomfort at being used by others to do their work and unease over sacrificing aspects of life in ways that the intended beneficiaries might not even appreciate. Hidden future potentiality inhered in an unopened box the dreamer was carrying during the disaster scene, the possibilities of new synthesis, represented by the three of the three hundred yards distance between the horse and the dreamer in the second scene and new birth, reflected by the nine of the ninety degrees which the horse had turned. The mystifying path of the “Magic Bullet” resonated

with the unknown trajectory and possible woundings of the future, while the scene of being next to the prone horse in the restaurant revealed a sense of embarrassment that even faithful, longtime friends might be unsettled by the dreamer's unfolding transformations.

The dreamer revealed that previous contemplation of the horse image led to recognizing a desire to live in complete authenticity as "the Horse," who, in the dream, felt like a gift from God. This led the dreamer to relate this desire to the story of a Hasidic master who only feared that after death God would ask him why he had not lived fully as himself. The group brightened with the realization that the name of this master, depending on its pronunciation, was *Zusya*, "Divine Sweetness" or *Susya*, "God's Horse!"

V. Reflections for the Collective Future

The consensus that early January morning was that projective group dream work, contemplatively led and expressed through the vocabulary of scriptural interpretation, holds great potential for the practice of Spiritual Direction. When framed within the same schema employed by centuries of religious exegetes, the work of spiritual direction dream groups can more fully claim an authentic place within the unfolding interpretive heritage of religious tradition. Moreover, this practice affirms in a very real sense that one's dreams help compose the innermost Scripture of one's life.

Interestingly, the first articulation of a fourfold interpretive approach to the Bible, as mentioned above in Section III, is found in the writings of the eighth century Christian exegete, the Venerable Bede. His method of scriptural elucidation included: the **L**iteral or plain sense of the text, the **T**ropological or figurative connotations, the **A**llegorical or philosophical allusions and the **A**nagogical, from which one could infer the secrets of life everlasting.¹⁸ Similarly, Ja'far al-Sadiq (d.765 CE), the last Caliph before the Ismaili- Imani schism, taught that the Quran has four levels of interpretation: *'ibāra*, the literal expression, *ishāra*, allusion, *laṭā'if*, the subtleties and *ḥaqā'iq*, the deepest realities.¹⁹ Thus it would seem that the steps of projective dream work can be correlated

¹⁸ Robert H. Stein. *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1981) p 47

¹⁹ *Spiritual Gems: The Mystical Qur'an Commentary ascribed to Ja'far al-Sadiq as contained in Sulami's Haqa'iq al-Tafsir* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2011), trans. Farhana Mayer, p. 1

to the interpretive schema of all three major Western traditions and could be used to provide spiritually meaningful frames for Christian and Muslim as well as Jewish Spiritual Direction Dream Groups.

The prophet Joel foresaw a time when God's spirit would flow upon all people, when the elderly would dream dreams and the young would see visions (Joel 2:28) For one Sunday those of us gathered felt as if the Spirit had graciously flowed among us, revealing that blessing and divine guidance can be found when a collective sits contemplatively with a dream and that our shared dreams can be sacred gifts to the Collective.

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It seems all but certain that Bede's and al-Sadiq's schema were known to Bahya ben Asher, author of the Torah commentary mentioned above in Section III. See note # 15