

Dreamwork: A 21st Century Christian Spiritual Discipline

Excerpts from a thesis for a Master of Arts in Theology degree at General Theological Seminary in New York City, 2003.

AS CHRISTIANS WE SEE the whole of life as a gift from God. And because God counts the very hairs on our heads (Matt 10:30; Luke 12:7), we can be assured of God's integral involvement in every aspect of our lives, conscious and unconscious. Since dreams are no exception, it follows that Christians have a responsibility to open themselves to the possibility that God communicates through dreams – sometimes quite directly – and to the honing of dreamwork skills.

SIMILAR TO MOST GOOD HABITS, the practice of dreamwork calls for an attitude of stewardship, both in desire from the heart and in the requirement to use self-discipline. In their book *Working with Dreams*, Montague Ullman and Nan Zimmerman stress that dreamwork “requires a major commitment of time and energy” (p. 96). Perhaps it is this very commitment that discourages the majority of people from working on their dreams.

BY THEIR VERY NATURE and means of presenting material, dreams have a way of teaching that is at once gentler and more direct, kinder and yet more brutal, than any other way of learning.

OVER YEARS OF RECORDING DREAMS and practicing dreamwork, I have observed that my attitude about the strangeness of material from the unconscious is imperceptibly changing. Gradually, perplexity lessens and a certain familiarity develops with the myriad and, often, surprising images and symbols that dreams produce, and there emerges a level of comfort with the expressions, realities and raggedness of the world of dreams. This willingness to embrace ambiguity may potentially lead to a state of preparedness for and acceptance of the non-rational, numinous realm of the unconscious. Thus, in faithful dreamwork there may be an inherent potential to become “passionate knowers” (Mary F. Belenky et al., *Women's Ways of Knowing*), to elevate one's life above the material, enabling the acceptance of experiences that do not fit neatly into the rational world.

IT IS MY BELIEF that 21st century Christians will seek a deeper interpretation of dreams and visions in Scripture, one that goes beyond patterns of rational thinking and moves closer to the underlying mystical meaning of such passages. No longer will “the church [remain] insensitive to if not terrified of the symbolic world” (Urban T. Holmes, *Spirituality for Ministry*, 2002, 121) by avoiding or ignoring such numinous verses, but rather it will make a “new and earnest search for some sense of transcendence and mystery” (Douglas J. Hall, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity*, 1997, 61).

The discipline of dreamwork offers a means for the fulfillment of this hope, and an opportunity to learn about our spiritual selves by experiencing our spiritual selves through dreams. If such an exploration is not supported by the Church, there is a danger that Christians may turn elsewhere to satisfy their spiritual hunger.

THERE IS A PROLIFERATION of information on dreams and dreamwork in popular books and on the Internet, indicating that dreams and their interpretation and application are of increasing interest.

In keeping with the generalized spirituality of today, much of the material about dreams – whether books or information accessible on the Internet – does not, in the main, contain any references to God, nor has it a Christian basis. By way of example, one book speaks of dreams as “messages from ourselves to ourselves but as we see from history, literature, religion and scientific investigations, *no one is sure who sends them*” (Nerys Dee, *A Dream in Your Pocket*, 2001, 73, emphasis added).

The popularity of this type of material indicates that the subject of dreamwork has been commandeered by our increasingly secularized world, and it may be that Christians are called to offer a different understanding. Augustine, among others, taught that “dreams and visions are one of God’s methods of revelation to man” (Morton Kelsey, *Dreams, the Dark Speech of the Spirit*, 1968, 144). Therefore, our attitude is not mere curiosity about dreams or a desire to satisfy a hunger for ‘spiritual’ knowledge but, rather, a Christian excitement about them, an eagerness and awe and realization that God is in this. If our evidence points to the fact that God speaks to us through our dreams, then dreams can be seen as an instrument of God which is given for our use and to His glory, for they shall about dreams or a desire to satisfy a hunger for “spiritual” knowledge, but rather a Christian excitement about them, an eagerness and awe and realization that God is in this. If our evidence points to the fact that God speaks to us through our dreams, then dreams can be seen as an instrument of God which is given for our use and to His glory, for they shall draw us nearer to Him.

New York, NY *Annette Thies*

Annette Thies is a spiritual director living in New York City, where she leads dream groups and workshops. Trained in group dreamwork by Dr. Montague Ullman, she has maintained a dream journal for twenty years. Annette loves to swim and write poems for her friends who say she hasn't quite lost her English accent. It is her hope that as more Christians honor their dreams, there will be a revival of interest in the dreams of the Bible.