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**The Usefulness of Sacred Dreams**

***By Charlotte Still Noble***

*When I had the vision of the flood in October of the year 1913, it happened at a time that was significant for me as a man. At that time, in the fortieth year of my life, I had achieved everything that I had wished for myself. I had achieved honor, power, wealth, knowledge, and every human happiness. Then my desire for the increase of these trappings ceased, the desire ebbed from me and horror came over me. The vision of the flood seized me and I felt the spirit of the depths, but I did not understand him. Yet he drove me on with unbearable inner longing and I said:*

*“ My soul, where are you? Do you hear me? I speak, I call you- are you there? I am here again, I have shaken the dust of all the lands from my feet, and I have come to you, I am with you. After long years of long wandering, I have come to you again….But one thing you must know: the one thing I have learned is that one must live this life.*

*This life is the way, the long sought-after way to the unfathomable, which we call divine.*

 *C.G. Jung*

 *The Red Book (Liber Novus)[[1]](#footnote--1)*

Carl Jung certainly is not the first to describe encountering the Divine through dreams. He stands with the long Judeo-Christian tradition that includes many sacred stories of humans encountering God in dreams and visions. When I look back over my fifty plus years I can identify a handful of dreams that have a distinct set of qualities – qualities that have led me to describe these dreams as sacred dreams. Some of these sacred dreams I would describe as *numinous,* while others seem to provide *guidance,* while still others have *prepared* me for some upcoming event of significance. Like others before me, these dreams have called me back into the depths, where I have re-found my soul and been met by the Divine.

My purpose in writing is not to define sacred dreams. Rather, I hope to deepen appreciation of the power and usefulness of dreams in the course of spiritual direction and pastoral care. As I share the experiences with my own dreams and the dreams of others, and as I share some of the ways the gifts of these dreams have shaped, changed, and guided life, I encourage you to invite your directees or parishioners to pay attention to their own dreams, and to share dreams within the context of spiritual direction.

*Numinous Dreams*

I was a junior in college when something luminous and divine came to me in a dream. The dream was different than others I had had. This dream had a vivid presence; it was light infused; it left me with bone deep reassurance. Now I dare say it was of God.

*A pale but bright field of blue was in front of me…almost like the sky but a bit more three-dimensional. Into this field tumbled a transparent orange isosceles triangle, spinning gracefully. From the other side of the field of blue, a second orange triangle spun into view. These two triangles twirled artfully around one another, dipping and swaying in a splendid dance. Then they started to spin around each other, getting closer and closer until they became one vibrant triangle.*

Today, some 35 years later, I cannot remember whether two triangles became one, or whether the two triangles came together with a third triangle. What I do remember was a profound sense of reassurance, a sense of balance, knowledge that things would find their rightful, harmonious places.

I was probably 18 years old at the time, and the issues around which I sought reassurance involved a young man friend of mine about whom I had feelings so strong that they startled me. Somehow this dream conveyed a deep assurance that all would be well with us, and that he and I, together and separately would find our rightful places.

And we have.

The dreams I call *numinous* have a strong spiritual quality, indicating or suggesting the presence of the Divine. Often numinous dreams seem accompanied by a special light, a calm radiance. Often numinous dreams instill a sense of fear and trembling while at the same time igniting fascination, compelling the dreamer with the images and feeling contained therein. Each dream often remains in the dreamer’s memory long after dozens if not hundreds of others have faded. Numinous dreams often leaves the dreamer deeply comforted, profoundly reassured that all will be well, irrespective of sad occurrences that may come.[[2]](#footnote-0)

I now believe that in these dreams, God was and is vividly present. Dreamers encounter the Divine and are changed. These numinous dreams often give a glimpse – just a glimpse- of a transcendent reality that exists concurrently with the everyday existence in which we regularly live.

Looking from the outside, it would appear that I spent the large part of my twenties building a career. In my early twenties I completed divinity school, was ordained in the United Church of Christ, and began pastoral service in a parish north of Boston. In time, I left the parish to go serve on the staff of our denominational headquarters then based in New York City. Looking from the outside, it would appear that my twenties were spent establishing and building a career.

In fact, my interior life had something entirely different going on. Inside, I was beginning to grieve my aging parents. I often cried privately as I witnessed my father losing his mobility to arthritis, and as more and more of his days were spent resting and sleeping. I felt him fading out of this life, and I was wrenched with sadness and a sense of impending loss.

I also grieved for the life partner I had never found. I yearned to find my soul mate. Heck, at times I would have even settled for a steady, sober, employed heterosexual boyfriend with whom to go to an occasional movie. As unhip and unliberated as it may sound, I would have readily traded my professional successes for a life companion. But wish as I may, he was nowhere to be found. And I looked…and the more I looked the more I found myself amid legions of frogs with no prince in sight.

My familiar if flawed family of origin was ebbing and unlike my older brother and sister, I had no family of my own. Although I was blessed with a fabulously loving and welcoming collection of friends and colleagues, I still ached for a life companion who eluded me.

Amid these soul challenges came a numinous dream.

*It was as if there was a platform built among lush treetops. The platform looked to be a perfect wooden square. On this platform, my mother and my father lay, side by side. I was also there, lying beside them and my life partner was lying beside me. A perfect, balanced square, resting in these heavenly treetops. The feeling was of profound rest and peace. It also seemed that my consciousness was separate, and able to witness this palette of peace. As I watched, the most beautiful music I have ever heard begins to permeate the dream. The music is both quiet, serene and yet awakens everything and connects everything, and infuses everything with sacredness. The part of me that was observing this scene heard a calm voice confirming for me that this music was indeed the “music of the spheres.”*

Upon awaking, I knew all would be well. I knew that by the time my parents died, I would be at home with myself, in a place of balance and health. As the subsequent years unfolded, it happened that I went on my first date with who was to become my husband two nights before my father died. By the time my mother died some seventeen years later, I was well established in a family of my own. It was as if there was a cosmic balance that was kind in nature.

A friend and colleague shared a *numinous* dream of her own.

*I flew on the back of an eagle, soaring high and high and high…so high that I could see the continents, and there in the region of southern Central America I could see people of all races and nations streaming toward each other in their own dances and with their own music.  Though I was “high and lifted up”, I could see not only the patterns of the dances and the way they flowed together even though different, but even the tiniest needle on the hemlocks and firs of the mountains, the flowers on the cacti, the tiniest lizards’ eyes.  A tear of rejoicing fell from my eye, and splattered into a lake…*

Following this dream, the dreamer knew in her bones what previously she had believed intellectually: that God made all the peoples of the world, loved all the peoples of the world, and infused the world with Divine caring. This dreamer went on to become a key denominational leader who effectively called the Church to live more justly, to be more inclusive, and to be caring stewards of God’s marvelous creation. This dream that came to her in the early years of her ministry showed her that toward which she spent the rest of her life working.

*Guiding Dreams*

*Guiding* dreams are dreams that provide some image, or feeling, or direction that continues call me to my truest self long after the dream itself is past. In some instances, a guiding dream has pointed me in a particular direction when I was at a decision point. Other times, guiding dreams offer an image that feels like some desirable future place and the image with its accompanying feeling stirs imagination and draws the dreamer forward toward it.

One such dream came at a point in life when I was debating whether to establish a private practice in a mind/body awareness method in which I had received extensive training. The following dream came to me.

*I was in a large garden behind a grand old estate. My husband was with me as were two of the more prominent leaders in this particular method. Although the garden and the house had once been beautiful – both were now in disrepair. The soil in the garden was sandy – without richness. There was a single rose blooming – but it looked straggly.*

The dream seemed to imply that this estate, this place was not a place that would nourish me. Over time, that has proved to be the case.

*Preparatory Dreams*

Some other dreams that have a sacred quality prepare us for some upcoming event: the death of a loved one, the loss of a hoped for opportunity, meeting a person or situation that may be important.

One directee in her late thirties applied for a new position in ministry, which would entail a significant expansion of her responsibilities. Consciously, she felt God was calling her to this position. Her unconscious, however, seemed to be cautioning her.

*I am standing quietly – and then in an instant I see a speeding train inches from the right side of my head. It seems to come out of nowhere.*

A week later she had another, similar dream.

*I was with my whole family at a ski lodge. The lodge was built against the side of a mountain, like a large lean-to or glass tent. I hear rumbling, and I realize that an avalanche in coming. I know I must get my family and myself out of there or we will meet with disaster.*

The woman continued toward this new position, gaining the recommendation of the search committee. After her selection was publicly announced, seemingly out of nowhere a small group with the power to veto, vetoed her nomination. As she dealt with the blow, she recalled her recent dreams where she had been warned about being blindsided.

Although the young woman was deeply hurt, she also felt that God had used dreams to prepare her for what happened.

*Exploring Directee’s Dreams*

A first step in integrating dreamwork into spiritual direction sessions or into pastoral work within a congregation is to invite and encourage people to recall their dreams and to share them with you. In one congregation I served, I mentioned the power of dreams while preaching on an Old Testament text about Jacob and his dream of a ladder to heaven. I invited members of the congregation who felt they had had a sacred dream to share it with me in the coming weeks.

Over the next weeks, more than a dozen parishioners came forward sharing dreams that had profoundly touched their lives, often shifting their sense of who God is, and offering guidance and wisdom at a key life moment.

In settings where I am invited to explore someone’s dream with them, I typically do several things.

First, I invite the parishioner or directee to simply linger with the dream in a spirit of prayer; to open their hearts to what God may be saying to them through this dream; and to pay attention to the various elements of the dream and to honor each element prayerfully.

Second, I invite the dreamer to tell me about the various elements of the dream. “Tell me about triangle.” “ Tell me about eagles.” “Tell me about the train.” In time the dreamer’s associations with the various dream elements come into view.

Third, I invite the dreamer to reflect on what message or meaning they feel the dream may be bringing them. It is important not to force or push the dreamer to come up with some meaning, but rather to invite them into the inquiry of what God may be saying to them, or showing them through this dream.

*Conclusion*

I hope to pass along some inkling of the reassurance and comfort that can come to us while we sleep, sent from the Divine beyond and yet within us. Exploration of dreams can help deepen the work done in parish ministry and in spiritual direction sessions, and, on some occasions, be the place in which we most directly encounter the Sacred.

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*Charlotte Still Noble is a pastor in the United Church of Christ. Previously she served on the national staff of the United Church of Christ as Minister for Church Life and Leadership. She has enjoyed a life-long interest in dreams and has recorded over 400 of her own dreams.*

Call Outs

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1. C.G. Jung, *The Red Book: Liber Novus,* Edited and Introduced by Sonu Shamdasani, (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009) pp. 231-232 [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. The concept of the *numinous* is more thoroughly developed in *The Idea of the Holy*  by Rudolf Otto. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)