

Transfigured existence and recovery of the dream

Mary Grey

Awakening from the bad dream

AT THIS MOMENT OF HISTORY, we appear to be locked into a society experienced as *bad dream*. One might, therefore, question whether it is possible to recover the positive, visionary dream. With what justification do I characterize the current dominance of global capitalism as bad dream? First, because of the overload of materialistic fantasy that is generated by the media machines: endless images of what we ought first to long for, then acquire, take possession of our imaginations and then our desires. From boxes of chocolates to the latest model of car with built-in fridge; from fashion to exotic food; from war-games to mobile phones – all with accompanying sexual overtones – fantasies of what we might possess grip the imagination with (mostly) unattainable yearnings.

Second, cyberspace has increasingly become the arena where these desires are first stimulated and then kept continuously titillated. Virtual space, virtual relation, keep us from authentic, embodied existence. And yet this ‘virtual’ aspect masks the fact that vast sums of money change hands daily across the globe, causing the enrichment of a few and the impoverishment of thousands. How do we awaken from what I am calling bad dream, but what others see as the vanishing of the very possibility of dreaming?

Neither day-dreaming nor fantasizing with nostalgia for ‘the good old days’ can be adopted as the way forward: this so-called golden age, when communities were cohesive, women and men enjoyed egalitarian relationships with each other and the earth, and peace instead of violence reigned, probably never existed. It has to be recognized as a fantasy, just as the nostalgia for primeval innocence in the Garden of Eden at the dawn of creation has to be recognized for exactly that: nostalgia for a state of innocence, possibly for an infantilism which fears the complexities and ambiguities of mature existence with its difficult choices. After all, the rebellious Israelites in the desert of Sinai even fantasized over life in Egypt: ‘If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our

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fill of bread' (Exod 16:3). Yet the stark reality of Egypt was oppression and slavery.

For the direction I seek, namely, the recovery of God's dream for creation, it is necessary to step outside the trap in which the dream of global capitalism ensnares society. At the same time, I know I myself am not completely free of this bad dream, of its fantasies and wishful thinking, for it seems to have hijacked desires at the deepest level.

The Christian's dreams

Christians live from two dreams. The conviction that God's dream can offer wholeness, healing and a flourishing that is more transforming than anything offered by the global supermarket is not obvious. Yet it is the recovery of the power of this dream that needs to be sought, not merely for individual satisfaction, but as dream for community and society. What gives hope is the recent, newly sprung confidence in the power of dreaming itself. Since the speech of the late Martin Luther King, 'I have a dream', the recovery of community dreams has been steadily acquiring more power. The late Cardinal Hume frequently prefaced his talks with 'I have a dream'.¹ For the training of shamans among North American Indians, the quality of dreams has an authorizing role.² And the authority of dreams plays a vital role in the Bible for the transmission of God's message. Joseph the Dreamer (the subject of another article in this issue) in the Hebrew Scriptures is counter-balanced by Joseph, husband of Mary, to whom God spoke through dreams.

I have suggested elsewhere that dreaming is an important – and neglected – task for the Church.³ To become *dreaming ecclesia* is part of the recovery of the prophetic Church, because this demands *giving priority to the vision over and above any structures of government and administration*. To begin to recover God's dream we need the tools of both hope and imagination. Hope is what sustains in the midst of the loss of all possibilities.⁴ It is the most basic energy enabling us to survive from one day to the next, even to take the next breath. For the people from the so-called 'liberated countries' of Eastern Europe, deeply depressed by the economic situation in their countries, the dream has gone, but hope does not preclude new possibilities. To move forward, however, one has to imagine these alternative possibilities, to refuse to allow that the status quo is the only way to live as 'civilized' society. This task of imagining is not at the level of abstraction from

reality but is linked with the action necessary to embody the imagined futures as lived possibilities.

Recovering whose dream?

If God's dream is not the Garden of Eden, which dream shall we recover?⁵ In one sense the answer is clear. The dream of the Kingdom of God, first found in prophetic texts, continually re-contextualized, then proclaimed by Jesus as the heart of his ministry, has a privileged place. The 'peaceable kingdom' of Isaiah (see especially chapter 11), where animals are in harmony with each other and with nature – 'and a little child shall lead them' – can be very appealing. The painting by Edward Hick is a good example of the way this dream functioned, for example, to inspire William Penn and the first Quakers to make peace with the American Indians on their arrival in Pennsylvania.⁶ This is unquestionably the foundational dream for Judaism and Christianity, because to live from this dream is to experience the faithfulness of God to the Covenant. This dream of the Kingdom of God was the inspiration for Martin Luther King's dream speech – but he himself was led to it because of its inspiration for both Gandhi and Tolstoy. The book of Isaiah is itself a wonderful example of the dream of the blossoming of the desert, along with the blind seeing and the lame 'leaping like a deer' (Isai 35); a dream which is recovered and put into a new context to restore hope to the Jewish people in captivity in Babylon (Isai 58); and a dream which again becomes their hope as they are allowed to return to Judah (Isai 61). It is exactly these texts which are again inspiring the present context of hope that the Jubilee of the year 2000 will bring a cancellation of debts for the poorest countries of the world.⁷

But because of the current hopelessness and the conviction that unbridled capitalism is victorious, here I take a different approach. I want to explore how the dream of 'existence as transfigured' can function as a dream for the Christian Church – and beyond its boundaries.

Transfigured existence

What does it mean to speak of *existence as transfigured*? Is this a possibility for real communities in their embodied life on earth? I first cite a story of the 'tree with lights' to see if it offers a clue. This is an autobiographical story by the American writer, Annie Dillard. She was inspired by a girl, once blind, who had seen a tree with lights in it, and then set off herself in search of it:

Then one day I was walking along Tinker Creek thinking of nothing at all, and I saw the tree with lights in it. I saw the backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame. I stood on the grass with lights in it, grass that was wholly fire, utterly focused and utterly dreamed. It was less like seeing than being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance. The flood of fire abated, but I'm still spending its power . . . [T]he vision comes and goes, mostly goes, but I live for it, for the moment when the mountains open and a new light roars in spate through the crack, and the mountains slam.⁸

'Less like seeing than being seen', says this writer-poet, capturing something that is at the core of transfigured existence. It is easy to link the story with Moses' revelatory experience of the burning bush (Exod 3:1-12), and with the motif of trees revealing the sacred power of creation. Thus, the Cretan writer Nikos Kazantzakis says evocatively:

And I said to the almond tree:
 'Sister, speak to me of God'.
 And the almond tree blossomed.⁹

The experience of existence as transfigured is described by philosophers and poets who speak of an encounter which not only qualitatively changed their lives (as in conversion experiences), but one that could always be recalled, its impact always remaining influential.¹⁰ It is reminiscent of Buber's I-Thou experience. He speaks of it as having a transformative effect on the way of relating to others.¹¹ But it is also reminiscent of the children's story, *The Secret Garden*, where the self-centred cripple child, Colin, learns to walk again, in the coming-to-life of the spring garden, lovingly cultivated by Dickon (a 'child of nature'), and Mary Lennox, herself a rather disagreeable little girl, yet orphaned and lonely. In sheer delight, Colin cries: 'Mary! Dickon! I shall live for ever and ever!' And the theologian Rosemary Haughton adds sensitively: 'Beginning from now'.¹² The core of transfigured existence seems to bring a mutuality in relating to the whole of creation. It brings newness, delight and an enhanced sense of well-being, sensitivity and perception. But it also brings a sense that 'This will last. This is for ever.' This newness, this completely transformed state of affairs for the entire creation, is what is expressed by the Christian mystery of resurrection.

This, of course, was prefigured by the story of the transfiguration on the mountain. Matthew's version of the story (Mt 17:22–28) follows Peter's confession of Jesus as the Son of God. Jesus begins to speak of his need to undergo suffering. Impending death is the context, but the experience is one of revelation. In fact here is a threefold trinitarian revelation. Not only is there a triad of Jesus-Peter-James, and Jesus-Moses-Elijah, there is also the classic Trinity presented in the form of the beloved Son, the voice of God and the cloud – suggestive of Spirit-Shekinah. Overwhelmingly, the experience is one of *enhanced presence* – 'Lord, it is good for us to be here' – even if the brightness and glory bring awe and fear. Luke's version of the story (9:28–36) is also in the context of Peter's confession. But the fact that Peter and his companions only received the revelation because they had battled with sleep (v 32) makes for a link with the Garden of Gethsemane. Here the disciples failed to stay awake, thus beginning the process which would lead to the betrayal of Jesus at his hour of need. Gethsemane was the total opposite of the fullness of presence and the transfiguration of existence. The relationships which Jesus had tirelessly built up let him down at a moment of great vulnerability.¹³ Forsakenness, as contrasted with presence and glory, was his experience.

The third element is the link with the holy mountain. This invites us to link the mountain of transfiguration with the mountain of Isaiah (Isai 25), where there will be a feast, with food and wine for everyone, and no more sorrow; with the mountain of Sinai, the sacred place of the giving of the covenant; with the Sermon on the Mount and the mountain of the feeding of the five thousand. And, finally, with the New Jerusalem, the Holy City, certainly not described as a mountain, but linked textually with Isaiah's holy mountain.¹⁴

But the real Christian dream of transfigured existence is that of resurrection. It is to this that all these texts are pointing, namely that the experience of glory and enhanced presence, prefigured in the transfiguration story, is what Jesus offers to all his followers through the resurrection experience. Glimpses of this gift of transfigured life are actually seen on different occasions. 'Lord, to whom shall we go?' says Peter. 'You have the words of eternal life' (Jn 6:66). The disciples on the road to Emmaus, who had recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread, felt their hearts burning within them (Lk 24:32).

And it is through the resurrection stories that this gift of transfigured life is seen more clearly. First, the vision of the risen Christ is Paul's criterion for being an apostle (1 Cor 15:8) – and we do not know exactly what form this took.¹⁵ Second, the resurrection appearances are

inclusive of women – something which the transfiguration stories are not. In fact, women are specifically told by the angel and by Jesus to proclaim to the brethren that he is risen (Mk 16:6; 16:11; Mt 28:10; Lk 24:10–11; Jn 20:17). Third, something of the meaning of transfigured life is demonstrated by Jesus' actions in eating with his disciples after the Resurrection. We are told that he ate broiled fish (Lk 24:42–43), that he ate with the disciples at Emmaus (Lk 24:30), and that he cooked breakfast on the shore for the disciples (Jn 21:12). Even if these references are not numerous, yet, if taken with the eating practices of the ministry of Jesus, they reveal a consistent affirmation of bodily life.

But it is not simply that Jesus wants hungry people to be fed – a crucial prophetic theme, where priority is always for the downtrodden and marginalized. Nor is it only that Jesus chose to eat with outcasts – sinners and prostitutes – a clear sign of the priorities of the Kingdom of heaven, as Luke's wedding feast story tells us (Lk 14:12–24). It is the meal as occasion for welcome, hospitality, friendship and sharing, of affirming people's dignity and building community. The sacred meal of all religious traditions is the occasion for remembering beginnings and for pride in culture and identity, for telling the story and handing on precious traditions.

In some of the meals described in Scripture God and angels are entertained – a tradition maintained by the contemporary Indian belief that 'the guest is next to God'. The meal can also be an occasion of an I–Thou encounter, a time when existence is transfigured. For instance, in the meal described in the film *Babette's feast*, even though the extensive preparations and lavish nature of the feast are way beyond 'normal experience', yet something is captured here of *existence as transfigured*. In that embittered community, where people were alienated from each other, something was released by the festive meal, so that they go out into the starlight completely changed.

The meal is only one example of transfigured existence. The resurrection of Jesus, understood as gift for all, has significance for the entire cosmos – as is expressed so beautifully in the Easter liturgy. St John Chrysostom recognized this very well as he saw the transfiguration of the whole cosmos through the death and resurrection of Jesus summed up by the tree:

The Tree is my eternal salvation. It is my nourishment and my banquet. Amidst its roots I cast my own roots deep; beneath its boughs I grow and expand; as it sighs around me in the breeze I am nourished with

delight. Flying from the burning heat, I have pitched my tent in its shadow, and have found a resting-place of dewy freshness . . . This is my straight path, my narrow way; this is Jacob's ladder, on which the angels pass up and down, while the Lord in very truth stands at its head. This Tree, as vast as heaven itself, rises from earth to the skies, a plant immortal, set firm in the midst between heaven and earth, base of everything that exists, foundation of the universe.¹⁶

Here, the tree of the cross is seen as yielding cosmic regeneration, existence as transfigured, permeated with the holiness and newness of life even amidst brokenness, fragmentation and the threatened web of life in the current environmental crisis. This is an invitation to experience and reverence all living things as radiating the holiness of creation. Trees have already been mentioned as participants in redeeming grace. But water, earth, fire and spirit or breath are the elements of creation which can all be experienced as transfigured, because they form part of the fullness of being, offered as God's dream for all living systems reaching their own completion – even recognizing that we always start from the fractured, fragmentary broken web of life. Transfigured existence can take wings from one unique moment, like Annie Dillard's tree of lights, a sunrise with intimations of new promise and hope, from one encounter with someone in whom Christ is glimpsed, one moment of healing when the darkness is lifted and there is a reaching out and being completely understood.

Redeeming the dream

But how can transfigured existence function as recovery of dream in the political-economic situation of unregulated capitalism with which I began? Amidst the despair and hopelessness felt in such different situations as the failure of the Nicaraguan revolution, the descent into poverty of the former communist countries,¹⁷ the postwar turmoil and wreckage of the war in the Balkan countries and the swelling numbers of refugees from many parts of the world?

I have come to understand that to recall what might be termed the 'grand dreams' of the tradition (for example, the dream of the Kingdom of God as it is constantly re-contextualized), can seem to be hopelessly utopian at certain moments of history when hopes have been brutally crushed. I wonder whether there are smaller steps that can be taken towards the recovery of a dream that can revitalize energies of broken communities. The prophet Habbakuk seems to advocate such a step when he writes:

And the Lord answered me:
 'Write the vision;
 make it plain upon tablets,
 so he may run who reads it.
 For still the vision awaits its time;
 it hastens to the end – it will not lie.
 If it seems slow, wait for it;
 it will surely come, it will not delay.'
 (Habbakuk 2:2–3)

That the vision is slow in coming does not matter, says the prophet. We can rely on the fact that it will come. What does matter is that we receive the moments of grace and vision that are offered now for this moment. It is for this reason that I suggest that the revelation of *transfigured existence* – the graced reality ushered in by the Resurrection – offers us a way forward.

Concretely, this has to be rooted in bodily experiences, in the body experienced as God's good creation. For women, this means that risen life must be experienced through the revaluing of women's sexuality and the transforming of the oppressive circumstances in which so many women have to struggle to survive. When the reality is that there is nothing to eat, or what little there is must be given to the children, to speak of the feast on the holy mountain may be little comfort. But small acts of friendship and kindness, affirming encounters which link communities in struggle with others in similar situations, may act as a catalyst to break the hopelessness. Groups which are able together to light candles in the darkness, to tell stories of their struggle for survival, may not yet be able to recover vision. Nevertheless, they may experience and cherish moments where existence becomes transfigured, where loneliness and isolation are broken, where a new mutuality is established, and hope is reborn.

Implications for Church

'A people who walked in darkness have seen a great light,' said Isaiah. But it may be that all that is now possible is to light a candle. It may be that the light of a thousand candles flickering can rekindle the dream. But, the Church as *dreaming ecclesia* in a socio-economic context of the loss of a dream has a crucial task of building bridges daily between the realities of people's lives and the recovery of God's dream for creation.

First, liturgy is, above all, about re-mem-bering, about anamnesis. It is no coincidence that across the world, in places of the suffering and violence, 'memory projects' assume great cultural meaning. In Guatemala, this forms part of a process of healing. In the former communist countries, such a project for women tries to uncover another history of time under communism – a story of how women survived. The task of *dreaming ecclesia* is to activate *sacramental imagination* for the recovery of the dream. It may be – as I have been arguing – that the *shalom* of the peaceable Kingdom and the promise of the mutuality of the covenant relationship seem beyond the grasp of this society at this moment. Yet in the community's liturgical celebration sacramental imagination can offer moments when existence is transfigured. 'Liturgy', writes David Toolan, 'is the big clue.'

Here we regularly take fossil fuels, stone, metals, silicon, water, fire, grain, grape, animal stuffs, air – waves and sound – indeed, as much space-time as we can sensuously lay our hands on – and convert it into a gathering of voices, a ceremony of praise and thanksgiving.¹⁸

It is true that in the context of violence and repression in Chile, Guatemala and Central America, *torture* best expressed the imagination of the state.¹⁹ In contrast, however, the eucharist is the imagination of the prophetic Church. Sacramental imagination offers a different meaning of sacrifice to inspire a simplicity of living, because of our love for the earth and all her creatures.²⁰ In a context where memories are overwhelmed by failure, destruction of home, community and bodily integrity, loss of dreams, hospitality denied, life forms killed off, increasing eco-piracy in terms of the patenting of life-forms, sacramental imagination can stimulate moments of transfigured existence.²¹ Eating practices, the healing of bodily life and the mutuality of sharing are valued. It is urgent that the Church recover eucharistic hospitality as one possibility for this transfiguration. The risen Christ may still evoke burning in our hearts.

When Francis and Clare of Assisi shared a meal together, all who were with them were caught up into the rapture of God's presence:

And while they were sitting there, in a rapture, with their eyes and hands raised to Heaven, it seemed that . . . the entire district of the church of St Mary of the Angels and the whole place and the Forest which was at that time around the place were all aflame and that an immense fire was burning all over them.²²

The forest of Assisi, like Tinker Creek and the rapture of the tree with lights in it, is an experience of existence as transfigured. But moments of transfiguration are present in the most simple of experiences. When Jesus proclaimed that in offering a cup of cold water to the least of the little ones, he himself would be encountered (Matthew 25), he was telling us that in these most basic actions the transcendence of God is experienced and life can be transfigured. Liturgy gives wings to sacramental imagination, demanding that this be earthed in concrete practices of hospitality and healing. In sharing the bread of freedom, in hearing the pain of the stories of the death of dreams, in the litanies of repentance for all that is lost, there is an opening up to the other's life situation, her memories, losses and struggles for survival.

Liberating imaginations forever seek embodiment even in the most oppressive conditions. Like children who drew butterflies in the ghettos of Theresienstadt when the Nazis occupied the former Czechoslovakia, like the children who drew birds of peace as the bombs fell over Sarajevo, liberating imagination summons through both the table-praxis of eucharist and *life-praxis* of re-conversion to human and earth communities. But it is my hope that the celebration of such small moments of existence as transfigured will usher in a breakthrough to the recovery of the dream of the peaceable Kingdom and the memory of the covenantal relationship. It is only by embodying these small glimpses of the dream that society will reawaken to God's great dream for creation, to the healing of the Tree of Life in the redeemed city (Apoc 22). Then we shall be healed from collective hopelessness, despair, and the hijacking of our dreams by the capitalist pseudo-paradise.

Mary Grey, formerly Professor of Feminism and Christendom at the Catholic University of Nijmegen (1988–1993), and Professor of Contemporary Theology at the University of Southampton, is now Scholar-in-Residence at Sarum College, Salisbury, and Honorary Professor in the University of Wales. Her publications include *Redeeming the dream* (1989), *The wisdom of fools?* (1993), *Beyond the dark night: a way forward for the Church* (1997), *Prophecy and mysticism: the heart of the post-modern Church* (1997), and forthcoming (January 2000), *The outrageous pursuit of hope*. She is co-founder and Trustee of the NGO, Wells for India.

NOTES

- 1 The dream which I remember being most frequently used concerned the Church. It was after the Second Vatican Council, and the Cardinal would contrast 'fortress Church' with his own dream of a more open Church.
- 2 I omit here dreams as a central part of Jungian therapy.
- 3 See M. Grey, *Beyond the dark night: a way forward for the Church?* (London: Cassell, 1997), ch 8.
- 4 See M. Grey, *The outrageous pursuit of hope: prophetic dreams for the 21st century* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, January 2000).
- 5 It is not that I deny that the dream of the Garden has an important place: it is the suggestion that we return to the Garden in nostalgia for an innocence that never existed that I cannot accept.
- 6 Hick painted several versions of this picture, which is now in the Museum of Pennsylvania. This is not to deny, of course, that in this case the dream went sadly wrong in the way that native American Indians were exploited.
- 7 The crucial Jubilee text is Leviticus 19.
- 8 Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), pp 33–34.
- 9 Nikos Kazantzakis, *Report to Greco* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), p 234.
- 10 This is a discussion coming from the sixties and early seventies, when the question of the verification of religious language was an issue. Writers like Basil Mitchell, Ian Crombie and Alasdair McIntyre were involved.
- 11 Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2nd edn, 1958).
- 12 Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden*, cited in Rosemary Haughton, *Tales from eternity* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1973), p 162 and p 186.
- 13 That is, unless we count the legend of Martha and her women companions sitting and faithfully praying outside the gates of the garden.
- 14 The New Jerusalem is a place where God dwells among mortals; where 'he will wipe away every tear from their eyes' etc. (Apoc 21:3–4) – a direct link with the Isaian text (25:6–8).
- 15 Here I am accepting the usual interpretation of the Damascus experience, namely that Luke is presenting the familiar prophetic call genre of the Hebrew Scriptures.
- 16 St John Chrysostom, Good Friday Homily, cited in Bishop Kallistos Ware, 'From creation to Creator' in *Ecotheology* 2 (January 1997).
- 17 For example, women in Albania now face 86 per cent unemployment.
- 18 David Toolan, 'Praying in a post-Einsteinian universe', *Crosscurrents* vol 64, no 4 (Winter 1996–7), pp 468–469.
- 19 William Cavanaugh, *Torture and eucharist* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).
- 20 The Dominican theologian Richard Woods calls this an asceticism not of mortification but of care, care for the earth and all vulnerable creatures, all vulnerable human bodies who suffer with the earth. See 'The seven bowls of wrath: an ecological parable', *Ecotheology* 7 (July 1999), pp 8–21.
- 21 There are of course some encouraging signs that communities with their bishops are making themselves accountable for the ravaging of land and plight of indigenous people. I think of the lifelong work of Bishop Helder Camara in Brazil (see Bishops' Conference of Brazil, *Liberate the land* (London: CIIR, 1986), the lifelong work of Sean McDonagh in the Philippines (see Sean McDonagh, *Passion for the earth* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994).
- 22 *The little flowers of St Francis*, trans and ed Raphael Brown (New York: Doubleday/Image, 1958), p 73.