LEARNING THAT IS NOT TAUGHT

Spirituality and the Dreams of Children

Gerard Condon

THE DEBATE ON THE MERITS of dreaming as a source for spirituality has a long history. Jacob declared that he had found Bethel, a house for God's presence, having dreamt of a ladder reaching up to heaven (Genesis 28:19). However, Deuteronomy condemns the use of dreams in divination as the attempt to access mysteries that are reserved by right to God alone (Deuteronomy 13:2–6). Elihu, one of the Gentile consolers of Job, asserted that God can open a person's ears to divine instruction in dreams (Job 33:15–18). Elsewhere the Wisdom literature took the view that dreams were an idle vanity (Ecclesiastes 5:2–7).

Tertullian (*c.*160–*c.*220), the first Latin theologian, held that 'the majority of people derive their knowledge of God through dreams'.[1] On the other hand, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) allied himself with the mainstream of classical philosophy and understood dreams as a refuge for the irrational self. Dreams were not to be trusted as they could be employed by demons as well as angels.[2] Jerónimo Gracián (1545–1614), a spiritual director of Teresa of Avila, listed dreams as the tenth of twelve ways of the Spirit.[3] However John of the Cross (1542–1591) argued that God-sent dreams were only common in the Old Testament era because direct revelation through Christ had not yet been established.[4]

Following Aquinas, theology was identified with official dogma accessed through reason. Dreams were considered too personal and

1 Tertullian, *De anima*, 47.2.
2 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 2.2, q.95 art 6.
3 Jerónimo Gracián, *Peregrinación de Anastasio*, obras 3, dialogo 5, 'Sueños'.
4 John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 2.22.3.

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irrational to be sources for an orthodox spirituality. By the nineteenth century that Western emphasis on reason, even in matters theological, itself created an interest in the imaginative language of dreams. The Romantics and the Modernists yearned for a return to the sense of personal encounter with God evident in the Bible.

The nineteenth-century Romantics had a considerable influence on Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and the early psychoanalysts. Carl Jung (1875–1961), more than any psychoanalyst, revived the spiritual interpretation of dreams. He argued that dreams remind us not just of forgotten or neglected aspects of our personal lives, but also of fundamental human propensities or *archetypes*, including that for God. We are likely to become mentally ill by mid-life if the spiritual predisposition is not honoured and integrated.[5] Children's dreams, in particular, 'are a mine of archetypal lore'.[6] The child's mind is relatively free from the influence of conscious experiences. Yet it is not a *tabula rasa*.

Children's Spirituality

David Hay and Rebecca Nye also explore the intriguing hypothesis that children have an innate spirituality, evident even in the absence of a religious upbringing.[7] Its general characteristic is the child's 'relational consciousness', a sense of connection that extends beyond family and friends. Children associate God with experiences of oneness with creation, self-forgetfulness, freedom and gratitude. They are also aware of God when they fail to act according to moral standards.

Hay and Nye stress the validity of the child's spirituality in itself, rather than as a stage on the road to an adult faith. They criticize *developmental* models of religious formation, which esteem intellectual and moral reasoning.[8] They agree with the gospel insight that children are the model for adult spirituality, rather than the reverse (Matthew 18: 2–3).

[5] Carl Gustav Jung, 'Psychotherapists or the Clergy' (1932), in *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, edited by W. McGuire with translations by R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1954–1979), volume 11, n. 509.

[6] Carl Gustav Jung, 'Analytical Psychology and Education: Three Lectures' (1926/1946), in *Collected Works* volume 17, n. 210.

[7] David Hay with Rebecca Nye, *The Spirit of the Child* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2006), 18.

[8] Hay and Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, 56–59. They refer, for example, to James Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980).

As her research tool, Rebecca Nye held qualitative interviews with children about the things that matter to them. The aim of my study is to look for signs of a latent spirituality in the every-night dreams of children. I began by noticing that the characteristic qualities of the child's spirit are epitomized in the dreaming state. Children have a sense of wonder and awe that is richly open to experience. Dreams, too, have a tendency to fascinate and are encountered with childlike *naïveté*. Children's awareness has a vibrancy that comes from savouring the present moment. In dreams, thoughts are likewise fixed on the immediate. Dreams characteristically use an image-based language (in German, *Traumbildsprache*) that conveys both content and emotion. Children typically express themselves in this imaginative way.

For this study I met the senior class pupils (aged nine to twelve) of four rural elementary schools in County Cork in Ireland, and invited the children to remember and narrate a dream.[9] I was careful to avoid the expectation of religiously toned dreams. One week later, 63 children submitted a recent dream together with ancillary information. There was an even split between boys and girls. Using my background in oneirology (the study of dreams), I read the dream narratives bearing in mind firstly the findings of science, including psychology, and then theology.[10]

[9] I am grateful to the teachers and pupils of Ballindangan National School, Curraghagalla NS, Glanworth NS and Glenahulla NS for their generous co-operation.
[10] See Gerard Condon, *The Power of Dreams: A Christian Guide* (Dublin: Columba, 2008).

Science

The scientific study of dreams was revolutionised during the 1950s with the development of an adapted electroencephalogram (EEG). Dreaming was identified as part of an elaborate sleep cycle made up of four stages. In the 1960s William Dement went on to associate Rapid Eye Movement (REM) with dream sleep. This typically occurs five times each night and totals ninety minutes. More recent research, using fMRI and PET technologies, has established that the brain's emotional and image-receiving centres are most active in dreams than in dreamless sleep.[11] This lends credence to the notion that dreams are emotions in picture form.

Sleep laboratory studies show that children sleep more deeply (more Stage 3–4 sleep) and dream for longer than adults. Around 50 per cent of infant sleep is spent in REM. This reduces to 25 per cent during later childhood and 20 per cent in adulthood. Most animals also display the characteristics of dream sleep. It is notable that mammals born in a developed state (for example, the giraffe or the horse) demonstrate far less REM than those born helpless (dog or cat), like the human being. This suggests a function for dreams in personal development.

Content analysis, another facet of the scientific study of dreams, is exemplified by William Domhoff of the University of California. His 'dream bank' establishes patterns from thousands of dreams submitted by subscribers.[12] Very young children tend to describe their dreams as momentary situations. Around the age of six a sense of narrative develops. At first the child is a passive figure in the dream, becoming a more active participant by the age of seven to eight. Family members figure prominently. By the age of nine to twelve, peers are added to the mix of relationships imagined in the dream and the narrative becomes more complex.

Three further salient topics, highlighted in the content analysis approach, were corroborated by my sample of children's dreams.

[11] Mark Solms, *The Neuropsychology of Dreams: A Clinico-Anatomical Study* (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1997).
[12] See www.dreambank.net. David Foulkes, *Children's Dreams: Longitudinal Studies* (New York: John Wiley, 1982).

Gender

Girls' dreams are more detailed and concerned with relationships. Their mood is often bright, with friendly social interaction. Situations involving fashion and popular entertainment were frequently imagined by the children in my study. In some of the dreams a broader 'relational consciousness' shines through. For example:

> I had come up with a new recipe for brown bread with white icing on top! I could hear and see lots of people … everyone started coming over … shouting at me: 'I want bread'. I didn't think I would have enough.

Boys' dreams are less complex and more concerned with solitary action. A sporting achievement or act of military heroism was common. The circumvention of rules and the evasion of authority figures were other typical themes. The cultural stereotype that power is a characteristic male concern and intimacy a female one was reaffirmed.[13] These gender differences could stem from socialisation, which is established by the age of nine to twelve, as well as innate factors.

Good and Bad Dreams

Happy dreams, from my sample, involved playing with friends, enjoying delicious food, being on holiday, and scoring the winning goal at a football match. Bad dreams included being attacked by spiders or zombies, having a sense of foreboding, and the risk of death. My worksheet included the question: 'On a scale of 1–10, was this a happy (1) or a scary (10) dream?' The average score from the 63 dreams was 5.6. This medium result concurs with the consensus among dream analysts that children have as many pleasant as unpleasant dreams.[14] Their bad dreams tend to be more reported and make a greater impression on adults.

Many of the dream narratives in my sample convey the sense of fun and adventure that adults associate with childhood. The vulnerability

[13] On the question of gender and personality see Rollo May, *Love and Will* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969).
[14] David Foulkes, 'Children's Dreams', in *Encyclopedia of Sleep and Dreaming,* edited by Mary A. Carskadon (New York: Macmillan, 1995), 113–114.

of being a child is also evident. One girl dreamt that she was publicly criticized by a friend's parent. Then 'everybody in the school was looking at me … I started crying'. Children are not very able to influence the outcome of life's events or circumstances. This powerlessness is reflected in their dreams.

Animal Life

Animals feature more frequently in children's dreams than the adult norm. Until the age of four, up to half of children's dreams contain an animal figure. That proportion tapers off to less than 10 per cent of adult dreams. Almost 30 per cent of the dreams in my sample featured animals or fish. A wide variety of creatures was featured, from African wildlife to domestic pets. Some made delightful company while others were menacing. One boy dreamt that,

> It was a dark night and I was alone walking down a narrow road. Then I heard something running. I stopped and looked back and there I saw a bull. It started running straight at me at full force.

Dream analysts generally explain the incidence of animal imagery as a projection of the child's proximity to instinctual living. Like animals, children initially give free rein to their natural energies. Then they are gradually socialised or 'domesticated'. In one boy's dream this trend is evident:

> I was in a huge place …. Every animal in the world was there and I got to look after them all. It was amazing. And I was rounding them up: possums and dogs and Serbian tigers, rabbits and every sort of animal. I brought them to their own enclosures and houses for the night and fed them all.

This could be interpreted as a survey of the vast richness of the interior life. Like the animals gathered into Noah's Ark (Genesis 7:14–16), the dreamer's energies were being contained and nurtured.

Psychology

Sigmund Freud launched *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1899, but with a publication date of 1900 as he intended it to be a seminal work for

the twentieth century.[15] Classical philosophy had defined the human being as 'an individual substance of a rational nature'.[16] Freud emphasized the influence of non-rational factors over which we have little control. Most dreams, he held, are led by perceptions from the sleeper's environment and events from the preceding day, the 'day residue'. However he understood these *manifest* images as a cover for much deeper and darker *latent* desires that date from childhood and include the Oedipus complex. In order to guard sleep, the mechanics of dreaming (*Traumarbeit*) express the unresolved wishes under the guise of relatively innocuous images.

Carl Gustav Jung

Carl Jung agreed with Freud's fundamental insight that the images in dreams have a complex significance.[17] But whereas Freud directed that surplus of meaning regressively, towards the dreamer's past, Jung adopted a progressive interpretation that included three positive functions.

By the *complementary* function, dreams create a sense of personal identity. They process perceptions by reflecting on the values that we hold. Children's dreams, like those of adults, largely mirror the preoccupations and aspirations of their waking lives. (There was a notable absence of school-related dreams in my sample.)

By the *compensatory* function, dreams express something missing from conscious life or propose a counterpoint to it. The emotional nature of dreaming itself counterbalances the highly controlled circumstances of daily life. Dream compensation is tailored to the

[15] Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, edited by James Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth, 1953), volumes 4–5.
[16] Boethius, *Contra Eutychen et Nestorium*, chapter 3.
[17] On Jung's dream theory see Carl Gustav Jung, *Dreams: From the Collected Works of C. G. Jung* (London: Routledge, 2001).

individual's particular situation. It brings down the proud and raises the lowly (Luke 1:51–52). In Genesis 37, Joseph was reviled by his older siblings on account of being Jacob's favourite child. In compensation, he had two dreams of being exalted by all creation (Genesis 37:6–10). I noticed that many of the dreams in my sample also showed a positive compensation, to counteract the child's actual sense of unimportance. One girl dreamt that to touch a photo of Disneyland magically transported her there. When a flag fell from the palatial complex, she scaled its walls to hoist a replacement: 'I broke a world record for climbing! Everyone was cheering my name!'

By their *prospective* function dreams guess the future with a mixture of hope and trepidation. They speculate about a wide variety of outcomes, mostly outlandish. A few of the children dreamt about guessing the winning numbers of the National Lottery. On extremely rare occasions such conjectures can be apparently precognitive, usually with reference to proximate events. John Bosco (1815–1888), the founder of the Salesian congregation, had several such dream premonitions as a child.

Archetypal Dreams

Jung distinguished between two types of dream. The majority are 'little' dreams, which react to waking life concerns and events. Little dreams are tied up with the individual's life. They are *semiotic*, as they point to conscious elements in the dreamer's life. The 'big' dream, on the other hand, stems from the archetypal contents of the collective unconscious.[18] These are rare, numinous and impart a message which transcends individual experience. Big dreams are *symbolic* in that they connect with the invisible or mysterious dimensions of human existence.

Augustine had made a similar distinction between *phantasie*, by which he meant ordinary dreams, and *ostensiones* or manifestations.[19] He associated the former with everyday concerns or physiological

[18] Carl Gustav Jung, 'On the Nature of Dreams' (1945/1948), in *Collected Works*, volume 8, nn. 553–556.
[19] Augustine, *Confessions*, 6.13. And see Simon Legasse and Martine Dulaey, 'Sognes-Rêves', *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique*, volume 14 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1988–1990), columns 1061–1062.

stimuli whereas the latter were divinely inspired. The book of Ecclesiasticus had also discriminated between ordinary and God-sent dreams (34:1–8).

Jung identified hundreds of archetypal figures and scenarios. They have formed part of the human experience, in every place, since time immemorial. As well as occurring in dreams, they have found expression in myth and fundamental beliefs. Fables are attractive to children because they resonate with a wisdom buried deep within their own unconscious and dream experience. Jung's dream analysis typically made associations between client's dreams and medieval literature. He attempted to show that people sometimes have dreams concerning themes and topics about which they could not have consciously learnt. By way of illustration, here are some of the Jungian archetypes which are evident from the children's dreams.

Hundreds of archetypal figures and scenarios

The Shadow

The shadow is a projection of what the conscious ego rejects about itself and considers inferior or bad. It also has more universal aspects, just as in Christianity evil is both a personal responsibility and possesses an objective dimension in the figure of the Devil.

Quite a few of the children's dreams included monsters and lurking strangers, which could be interpreted as images for the shadow in their lives. In one girl's dream:

> I was in a cave, a huge damp one with a tiny entrance. All my family were with me. We listened to the water dripping and a fluttering sound: cave bats. A dark shape had somehow fitted through the micro-entrance and was lurking in the distance.

Our first instinct is to flee from the evil force. But it might be argued that the grip of the shadow only increases when it is denied. There is wisdom in advising a child to 'stand up to the monster' the next time it appears in a dream. Jesus confronted his Adversary in the desert and decisively disarmed its power (Matthew 4:1–11). Many of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius include a frank acknowledgement of evil, in order to oppose it more effectively (for example, Exx 325–327).

The Trickster

One of the children had the following dream:

> A big clown captured me and put me in a vault. I fell asleep or else he put me to sleep. Later on we went out on to the water in a huge indoor swimming pool. The walls were orange with pink spots. Finally he put me on a wooden pole in the middle of the pool. He tied my legs to it. He went away home. I reported it to the Guards [police].

Such arbitrary changes of luck and upsets are the hallmarks of the Trickster. Like Hermes in Greek mythology, this figure is elusive and mocking, and acts in a largely amoral way. The Joker in a pack of cards, with its unpredictable effect on games, is another manifestation of the archetype.

The perception of the Trickster helps us to realise that human existence is subject to sudden changes that may appear arbitrary. The image of God in the book of Job bears some resemblances to this archetype. Job's faith in the hidden wisdom of God remains steadfast, even as his fortunes are summarily transformed. Other parts of the Bible balance this focus on divine inscrutability with an emphasis on God's fidelity.

The Hero

This figure is well known from its many faces in cinema and literature. Its activity in dreams may be as a rescuer or liberator for the dreamer. More often dreamers assume the role themselves, especially as a positive compensation for powerlessness. The hero takes on nearly impossible challenges and often has companions or helpers.

Self-identification with this archetype can lead to disaster. The hero is prone to self-destruction through the sin of pride. One should not take too many risks, even in a good cause, as this boy's dream warns:

> I was in CNA-occupied Cork. I was with the rebels. I was trying to get to the toy store on Oliver Plunkett Street which was the armoury for the CNA …. I managed to steal a couple of rifles. I got back to the rebels and gave them the rifles. Now we had to attack their HQ at the Opera House. We snuck up the back alleys. They suddenly ambushed and captured us. Then they executed us.[20]

[20] The 'CNA' is an organization invented by the boy.

The Self

Jung referred to the archetype of God's indwelling presence as the Self (*das Selbst*).[21] It is the most mysterious and profound of the archetypes. It can be perceived as a sense of kinship with creation, as the centre of the totality, or as a 'supraordinate personality', such as a king or divine child, that is superior to the ego.[22] Jungian literature most frequently associates it with circular images of wholeness that carry a numinous aura. None of the children's dreams in my sample convey this sense of a supreme being, although many did reveal the attitudes of responsibility, gratitude and respect that can be associated with 'relational consciousness' and an implied faith in God.

When asked in a BBC television interview if he believed in God, Jung replied, 'I *know*. I don't need to believe. I know.'[23] The problem with this theology is that it bases the image of God entirely on human experience. Children may well dream of God as an awe-inspiring, grey-haired Olympian. In Christianity, however, the divine image is proposed by revelation and exceeds that generated by perception alone.

Narrative Structure

Jung observed that dreams generally follow a narrative structure. He associated it with four parts of classical Greek drama: *exposition* (of the setting and cast); *peripeteia* (a 'turning around' of the theme); *crisis* (an impasse) and *lysis* (the final denouement).[24] One of the girl's dreams, reminiscent of the story of Hansel and Gretel, unfolded as follows:

> **Exposition**: 'I was living in a big candy world. Trees were giant lollipops, houses were ginger bread. It was cool with paths made of chocolate. *Everything* was sweet.'
>
> **Peripeteia**: 'I didn't know anyone in the dream because it was only me and chocolate rabbits. The sky went dark and it started

[21] Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychological Types* (1926/1946), in *Collected Works*, volume 6, nn. 789–790.
[22] Carl Gustav Jung, 'The Psychological Aspects of the Kore' (1949), in *Collected Works*, volume 9, n. 314.
[23] C. G. *Jung Speaking: Interviews and Encounters*, edited by W. McGuire and R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princetion UP, 1977), 428.
[24] Carl Gustav Jung, 'On the Nature of Dreams' (1945/1948), in *Collected Works*, volume 8, nn. 561–565; E. C. Whitmont and S. B. Perera, *Dreams: A Portal to the Source* (London: Routledge, 1989), 69.

raining liquorice. That meant the return of Chocky the monster.'

Crisis: 'All the rabbits ran. I felt a shiver down my spine. It was up to me to save the island'.

Lysis: 'I hit the monster with a big lollipop and to my surprise he started bleeding syrup. After all the chaos the rabbits and I had a big feast since it was my last night staying there.'

Understanding dreams as stories makes them familiar territory for children. Children love stories because they stimulate the intellect and allow the imagination to flourish, and they especially enjoy the element of risk and danger. As a story is recounted the child is seated comfortably, perhaps in a parent's lap, and he or she knows that it is 'only a story'. In that most reassuring of contexts, storytelling fulfils the important function of familiarising children with the realities of life and even of death.

In this way even negative dreams can have a purpose. One boy dreamt that he was on the run from the law. He had stolen a tractor. Eventually 'the Guards caught me and I was sentenced to a lifetime in jail'. His dream provided a safe outlet for fulfilling the wishes he would not dare to act out in waking life. It pointed out the consequences of theft and it brought into relief the motives for a moral way of life.

Karl Rahner associated our ability to fall asleep with an intuitive belief in God.[25] The relinquishing of our autonomy in sleep is facilitated by the belief that we are being cared for by God. In our five dream-stories each night we are by turns scared and enthralled. Divine love provides the place of safety (the parent's lap) from which we can watch, hear, feel and learn.

Late at night, parents usually look in on their children before going to bed themselves. They share in God's delight over life. If the child awakes because of a bad dream, the parents will say that everything will be fine. That promise sounds more convincing when based on their faith in God. They will tell the child, 'Go back to sleep, it was only a dream'. It is a relief to know that every dream is merely a figment of the imagination. But it is also more than just a dream.

Theological Reflection

'We are', as Shakespeare put it, 'such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep'.[26] Remembering and working with dreams contributes to a richer sense of personal identity. And spiritual theology traditionally links self-knowledge with the ability to experience God. As Augustine prays, 'Ever constant God, let me know myself that I may know you'.[27] Faith in God, like every relationship, demands a level of self-awareness to be authentic. The insight into the interior life provided by dreams uncovers some deeper truths about ourselves and draws us closer to God, whose Spirit dwells in the depths of human nature (Romans 8:14–16).

Dreams can also make us aware of God's movements in our lives. The relaxed state of the ego during sleep enables God's voice to be heard (Job 33:15–18) and hidden mysteries to be understood (Daniel 2:28–30). The divine presence may be manifest in dreams through a symbol that graciously embodies aspects of the invisible God. The presence of God can act as our conscience, independently asserting

[25] Karl Rahner, 'A Spiritual Dialogue at Evening: On Sleep, Prayer and Other Subjects', *Theological Investigations*, volume 3 (London: DLT, 1967), 220–236.
[26] William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, IV.1.156–158.
[27] '*Deus semper idem noverim me noverim te*' (Augustine, *Soliloquies*, 2.1).

what is right. Even in the chaotic landscape of the dream, there is a sense that we are *sub specie aeternitatis*.[28]

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[28] 'Under the aspect of eternity'. Carl Gustav Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (New York: Random House, 1963), 3.