

Connections



A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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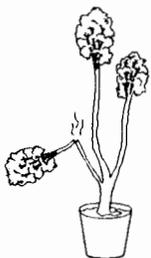
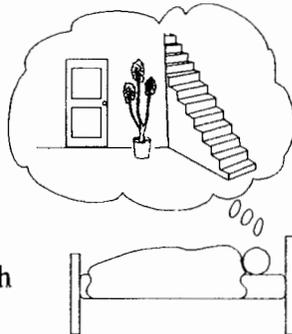
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A life-changing dream

One day after nearly fifty years of never telling my parents anything I thought they would disapprove of or disagree with, I dared to step out of that pattern. I acknowledged to them that some of my interests, views, and beliefs were different from theirs. I told them about some ways in which I had recently gotten help in looking at my life, had seen how my personality was different from theirs, and had seen the need to start relating to them as an adult instead of a permanent child. Because these insights were exciting for me, I wanted to share them with my parents because we had always been close. But they heard what I said as a betrayal and a shocking rejection of the loving upbringing they had provided for me. That night I had the most memorable dream of my life.

A surprising tree

I dreamed I was entering the front door of a lovely house. Its rooms were arranged like the house I grew up in, but this house was much larger and more elegant. In front of me was a beautiful tree growing in a large round pot. The tree had three main stems topped with healthy green leaves. It obviously had been skillfully pruned, giving it a striking shape that was perfect for the spot it occupied.



Stairs on the right led upward into darkness. A closed door was on the left. Reaching for its knob my right arm brushed one of the tree's three stems. To my surprise it snapped in two, yet the broken top did not fall off. It opened like a hinge, exposing surfaces that were crinkly orange-red, with wisps of smoke rising from them. The wood was burning, and somehow I knew that the whole tree was full of fire inside! Then I woke up.

(continued on page 2)

Dreams in the Bible



An angel of God appeared to [Joseph] in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be

afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

—Matthew 1:20-21

In the Bible we often find God using dreams and other dream-like experiences to guide people. In the early centuries of the church, too, dreams were recognized as important sources of God's guidance for individuals and for the church as a whole. Throughout history dreams have also been highly valued in most other religious traditions and most of the world's cultures.

Ours is the exception. After the Middle Ages, western Christianity accepted Aristotle's and Thomas Aquinas' claim that reason and the concrete, measurable information that we get through our senses were the only valid sources of knowledge. The church lost its earlier awareness that truth could also come from intuitive, spirit-based sources such as dreams. But in recent years many Christians have reclaimed this valuable source of God's guidance.

It has been a life-changing one for me. If it's not yet for you, I urge you to consider it. Ask God to show you what you need to know.

While [Pilate] was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him."

—Matthew 27:19

Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile, and there came up out of the Nile seven sleek and fat cows ... Then seven other cows, ugly and thin, came up out of the Nile after them ...



Joseph said to Pharaoh, "... God has revealed to Pharaoh what God is about to do ..."

—Genesis 41:1-36

One night the Lord said to Paul in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent, for I am with you and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people."

—Acts 18:9-10

(A life-changing dream, continued from page 1)

When I left for home that morning, my mother was furious and all three of us were in tears. I felt terrible about having hurt my parents. But I also felt that a huge burden I had been carrying needlessly for years had been lifted.

For weeks I stayed so concerned about my parents' pain and anger that I couldn't think about much else. But I couldn't forget the fiery tree. And I still can't. Even now, more than ten years after the dream, the scene is still as clear and as real to me as any I have ever seen in waking life.

God speaks through dreams

In the months before that dream, I had read a lot about the many dreams and dream-like experiences described in the Bible, and about the language that dreams use. For the first time in my life I had realized that dreams had meaning, and that God sometimes gave guidance through them. This discovery was part of a strange but intriguing custom-designed course of study that I had found myself led through without knowing why.

Jacob ... dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven ... And the Lord stood beside him and said, "... The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring ..."

... Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it! ... This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

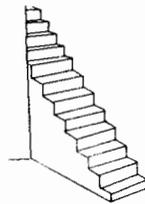
—Genesis 28:10-17

A tree of life

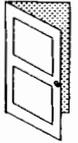
Because of what I had read, when I began to think about my dream I could recognize some of what it was saying. I saw that the tree pictured my life and the house represented a new period I was entering—one that would resemble the earlier parts of my life but would be more beautiful and more expansive. The three stems pictured my parents and myself, and the break was the break I had just made from my long-time way of relating to my parents.

I had learned that in the language of dreams circular shapes often portrayed wholeness, symmetry, and balance, so I recognized the soil-filled circular pot as a way of picturing the wholeness and down-to-earth aspects of life that are the basis for a

healthy and well-balanced life. I saw that the dark stairs pictured an opportunity to climb to higher levels that I could not yet



see (somewhat like the ladder in Jacob's dream described in the Bible). The door that I was about to open seemed like a door to a hall closet—the kind of place that often contains a lot of junk that needs to be cleaned out.



God's presence and power

The fire was the main focus of the dream. Fire changes whatever it touches. It is dangerous but it is also a valuable source of power and energy. I remembered that in the Bible God's presence was often shown by fire. And I realized that a fiery tree is similar to a burning bush, familiar from the story of Moses in the Bible.



Through my dream God was making me aware that my life was full of God's presence and power, which I would never have found without making the break from my former childlike way of functioning. My dream also showed me that I was now ready to clear out a lot of unneeded, stored-away junk within myself, and to climb to new heights that I couldn't yet see. It was scary but exciting!

I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me.

—Psalm 16:7

Still more to discover

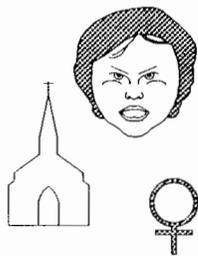
For a long time that was all I saw, and it seemed like more than enough. But eventually I realized that the fire also pictured anger. I was full of anger, but I hadn't seen that I was.

Like fire, anger is both destructive and useful. Smoldering within, it leads to bitterness and meanness, but when the reason for it is identified it can be a powerful motivation for needed change.

How do you know an interpretation is right?

- Something clicks. You get an "aha!" feeling of insight.
- You've become aware of something about yourself that you hadn't previously been aware of.
- The new insight leads you to move forward.

Only you can say when your dream has been interpreted correctly.



All my life I had been taught that anger was not permissible—that nice people didn't get angry, and that of course I must always be a nice person—so I had convinced myself that I was never angry. Now I could see

that I really was seething with anger. I was angry about the church. I was angry about not using my main abilities and pursuing my main interests. And the list went on and on. Once I saw and acknowledged that I really was angry, I could begin addressing the issues I was angry about. That's how anger becomes a God-given incentive for action that leads to needed change. ❖

Understanding your dreams

Dreams use symbolic language—the same picture-story language that often appears in art, literature, religious ritual, and scripture. In this language a thing, person, or action pictures something non-physical like a personality trait, an attitude, a feeling, or a concept.

The pictures and events in our dreams usually represent the different aspects of our selves. By including a person whom I consider arrogant, my dream shows me my tendency to be arrogant. By including a person of a different race or nationality, my dream shows me a part of myself that seems foreign to me—a quality I dislike or am not aware of. Or my dream may show my relationship with a certain person by picturing that person. So here's how to look for a dream's meaning.

- List every ingredient in it—each person, animal, thing, shape, word, and action.
- Describe each one as if you were describing it to someone who had never heard of such a thing.
- Think what aspect of yourself or your life or your typical way of functioning that description might fit.
- Pay special attention to images that appear in several dreams. And pay special attention to recurring dreams—they often contain important messages you are ignoring.
- Look for puns, wordplays, and proper names that have meaning as words—a town named Trinity, a man named Power, or an action that literally pictures a figurative expression like “throwing in the towel.”
- Think of the dream as a play with several scenes or acts. Give a title to each scene and then to the whole dream. How do these describe you or your life?
- Converse with one of the characters or things in the dream. Ask it questions. Write or speak both parts.

A dream unexamined is like a letter unopened.

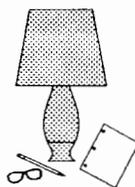


[from the Talmud]

A dream is a fragment of life, broken off at both ends, leaving us with one end of it in our hands.
— John Wesley

Remembering your dreams

Researchers have found that everyone dreams. We dream during about one-fourth of our sleep, so we have many more dreams than we remember. By using these suggestions you can probably remember more.

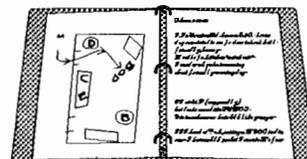


- Don't use the radio as an alarm.
- Before going to bed, put a pencil and paper (and glasses if you will need them for writing) by a light that you can turn on in the night. A dream usually vanishes within 5 minutes of waking if you don't record it, and having to hunt for writing materials after you wake can make you forget it. Use looseleaf-notebook paper to make saving your dream description convenient and to let you add thoughts about it easily later.

- Just before going to sleep, ask God to help you remember and understand what you dream during the night.

- When you first wake, don't move any part of your body and don't say anything. If you remember any dream (even a tiny fragment), mentally review it to fix it in your mind before you move.

- Then get up and immediately write down everything you remember, before saying anything, doing anything else, or hearing any talking.



Get your dream on paper in the fastest possible way. Don't take time to write complete sentences—just jot down the dream's main events and characters. Draw quick diagrams to show shapes, arrangements of people and things, and directions of movement. Then go back and add every detail that you can remember. Record everything, no matter how crazy or embarrassing it may seem. Use initials or some other personal code for people's names and any other words you wouldn't want someone to see accidentally. Add the date when you finish. Put the paper in a private place and save it.

- As soon as you have time, add a few sentences about what was happening in your life and what you were most concerned about on the 2 or 3 days just before the dream. Also add any other details that have come to mind, and any thoughts or feelings you have about the dream. If you use a looseleaf notebook you can easily add a page for this.

A gate to heaven

Scientists suspect that dreams somehow promote our physical and mental health even if we make no effort to understand them. Evidently people long ago knew this intuitively. The Hebrew words for dreams and other such experiences are based on a word meaning "to be made healthy or strong." And our word "clinic" comes from a Greek word that was sometimes used for the sacred stone on which people lay in a temple to seek a divinely given dream. Just as a



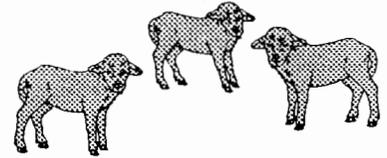
clinic can provide diagnosis and treatment for our bodies, our dreams do it for our souls and spirits.

When we recognize the healing God offers us through our dreams, we can say with Jacob, "Surely God is in this place, and I was not aware of it! This is a gate to heaven."

Barbara

Next month . . .

Who's feeding today's sheep?

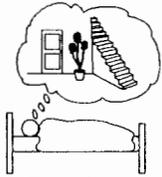


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God speaks through dreams

Want to know more about your dreams? Try these books

Dreams: A Way to Listen to God, by Morton Kelsey (Paulist Press, 1978). This is a very small easy-to-read book—a good one to start with if the subject is new to you. Kelsey's *God, Dreams, and Revelation* (Augsburg Fortress, 1991) goes into more detail.

Dreams: God's Forgotten Language, by John A. Sanford (HarperSanFrancisco, 1989). Sanford's *The Kingdom Within* (HarperSanFrancisco 1991) shows how similar symbolism appears in Jesus' parables. Both Kelsey and Sanford are Episcopal priests.

Living Your Dreams, by Gayle Delaney (HarperSanFrancisco, 1988). This book gives specific, thorough, easy-to-read instructions for interpreting your own dreams or helping someone else with theirs. Delaney writes from a secular standpoint, however. You may disagree, as I do, with her statements that dreams are strictly our own creations, but don't avoid this helpful book for that reason. Eat the fish and lay the bones aside.

The Dreaming Brain, by J. Allan Hobson (Basic Books, 1988). Hobson, a Harvard neuroscientist, is a leading researcher on sleep and dreams. His book is not easy reading, but it is an interesting presentation of how dreams relate to the mind and the brain.



A dream is like a dynamic living scrapbook.
J. Allan Hobson