The Stuff that Dreams Are Made Of

Rev. Joseph J. Driscoll  
Executive Director

Holding her arms tightly around her abdomen, she rocked forward and back, wracked by sobs and shrieks of a pain unspeakable. Minutes ticked loudly in the intermittent silences. Michele, 26, sat with her head erect, seemingly farther away than the end of the hospital bed, her body curled tightly into this ball of anguish.

The chaplain knew only that she had delivered a stillborn child. His few words were as quiet as her cries were loud. Black lines, presumably the remnants of makeup from an earlier time of the day when life was good, now tracing the course of her bitter tears. The silences got longer.

After a time, Michele hoarsely whispered, “I have this dream. It’s an awful dream. This monster stands in front of me with tentacles and eats my babies, one after the other.” She closes her eyes as if to chase away the monster itself. The chaplain gently coaxes her back to the dream and she continues. “It’s the same old dream. This monster is a hideous-looking woman, a she-monster... I have the dream every time I end up losing one of my babies.”

The dream becomes the road by which the chaplain enters into the land of this woman’s story. In Carl Jung’s understanding, it’s “the royal road to the unconscious.” Through the night pictures, the day narrative takes on a clearer light of insight and understanding.

This is Michele’s seventh or eighth pregnancy. She cannot carry a child to term, and the doctors can find no reason. Now the chaplain understands why she said, “Every time I end up losing one of my babies.” Do the doctors know about this dream, he wonders.

The chaplain and the pale, worn patient cross back and forth from night into day. “This monster is a ‘she-monster?’” the chaplain asks. A shrug. “Who do you think she is?” he continues. Another shrug. A very long pause and the subject changes, or so it seems. “I never knew my own mother,” she says.

Her mother died giving birth to her. Now the day narrative is shining light on the night picture. Sure, this she-monster kills the babies before the babies kill this mother. The chaplain bets that the doctors don’t know about this dream.

Several visits lifted up the relationship between her dream and her story. The chaplain helped this patient explore her unconscious terror
of giving birth, which in the deep recesses of her mind—and in her own mother’s experience—means death. Was not her body protecting her from the child, who far from innocent was in fact an unjust aggressor? Such was the interpretation of the psyche anyway.

The chaplain set up a meeting with the doctor and shared this information. The doctor did not know about this recurring dream, nor unfortunately was it of particular interest to him. He could see only that there was no physical explanation for the woman’s inability to give birth. Nursing and social service were much more amenable, and each sought to support the chaplain’s recommendation for counseling after discharge.

The chaplain’s world has language as technical as the doctor’s world. The language of symbol is a very different language than that of science, however, but no less “true.” Symbol is ethereal, at once visible, at another moment, invisible. Science is rock solid, spelled out precisely, and drawn in equations. Life is ethereal and life is rock solid, and at times it is both, and at times, one or the other.

A doctor can be lifted away from the jetty on which he stands at the ocean’s edge by the sight of a now coal black gull racing in front of a hot pink sunset, and minutes later not realize that he left his rock-solid world. So too a chaplain can sit in front of the Discovery Channel and be fascinated by the brilliance of a physics equation that can so direct a laser into a pin-dot area of the brain with absolute precision. Why? Simply put, both symbol and physics are true.

Another chaplain tells of the time that she was visiting Henry, a dying man in a long-term care facility. Days and then weeks went by, and the resident would talk about anything except his imminent death. Finally, he exhausted all his digressive chatter and the two sat quietly.

Out of the solitude of the shared silence, the 70-year-old man began to tell her that he had dreamt about his parents the night before. “Really?” inquired the chaplain. “Yes,” he replied, “and they have been gone an awfully long time.” He continued, “It was a strange dream, really. They were in the ocean and they kept waving for me to come in, but I didn’t want to. And then I looked and they had turned their backs and were going out deeper. I saw my mother look back again one more time.”

“What was her look like?” the chaplain asked. “Oh, she was smiling. I think she was hoping that I would still come in.”

“What do you make of the dream?” the chaplain continued. “Oh, I am not sure,” he said, obviously still puzzling over the dream now
hanging above them like an early morning fog.

“Do you want to know what I think?” the chaplain asked. “What?” said the man. “I wonder if your mother and father were not assuring you that where they are is good. And I wonder if they didn’t come to help you across to the other side.”

The pause was again long; the old man’s brow wrinkled and then a slow smile came over his face. “Wouldn’t that be something,” he declared.

The man died peacefully two days later.

Dreams are potent allies to both the patient and the chaplain in their conversations. Dreams finish the incomplete sentences of day conversations. There is a lot of stuff to dreams.

A skilled chaplain, it seems to me, needs some familiarity with the world of dreams. There are a couple of guiding principles that are foundational to working with dreams.

First, again to Carl Jung: The best interpreter of the dream is the dreamer. A key question then is “What do you think the dream means?” Seldom will there come a compact, neat answer, for dreams are neither compact nor neat, which brings us to a second point.

The language of dreams is almost always cryptic. People often react to their dreams as if they are some foreign matter that does not belong in there. “I had a weird dream last night.” Or, “I don’t know what she was doing in my dream.” Befriending the “stranger” is an important admonition to the skeptical dreamer.

Third, dreams will often appear insignificant, even silly; yet a single strand, a little yellow thread that one may want to brush or pick off, could be the most revelatory moment in a person’s story. Ask those who have worked long with dreams how many a waking thought, barely worth mentioning, pulled a thread to a tapestry of a whole rich life.

Fourth, a way of approaching a dream (one dream can be teased out in many different ways) is to see all the characters in one dream as representing the self. For example, in the story of Michele, the woman who could not give birth to a live child, was she in fact the victim of the monster who comes at her and eats her babies (one character in the dream), but is she also the monster who “kills” these babies because she cannot let them be born lest they kill her (like she “did” to her mother)?
Fifth, a helpful approach may be to explore the emotional content of the dream. What was the dreamer feeling in the dream? What corresponding feelings are present in waking life?

Sixth, dreams exist on multiple levels, of which the least important is the literal. Some dreams are more traceable as stress or anxiety dreams. The imagery of other dreams taps into the deep waters of “the collective unconscious” with pointers in the archetypes that arise in the dark.

Finally, and I believe most importantly, dreams can be an important channel of grace. The pure psychologist would stop before this point. But for those of us who walk by faith we know that biblically God’s messengers come in the night. So for Henry, was the night visit from his long-deceased parents a reach of the right hand of his God to help him over the last climb?

This is the stuff that dreams are made of.

The chaplain’s ears are as acutely attentive to the beating of the spirit as is any doctor’s stethoscope is to the beating of the heart. And sometimes this beat is accompanied by a movement of the wind in the darkest hours of the night. A chaplain learns to listen to the night dreams as well as the day narratives. ✏