

BOTH SIDES OF THE FENCE

Sue Talbot

'I have dreamed dreams, that have gone through and through me and changed the colour of my mind.' (*Wuthering Heights*, by Emily Bronte)

More than ever before, this age needs people who can see through both eyes, who can use intuition and reason, who can integrate knowledge and faith. We need men and women who can inhabit more than one world, who can contain and hold in creative tension some of the profound paradoxes of the Christian way.

At the heart of our faith is the living paradox of a human being who was one of us and yet 'other'. In the Easter account is a terrible death, a terrible betrayal, a scarring that lasts into eternity and yet a life that could not be extinguished. Within the passion and the power revealed in the Gospels is the mystery and paradox of spirit in flesh, of divinity joining with the human condition.

And at the heart of the call to priesthood and ministry is the challenge to bear witness in our lived experience to an eternal realm, to the incarnating of something of the powers and knowledge of the kingdom which is not of this world, that is nevertheless manifested *in* this world.

Yet the Lord of Life has not left himself without signs and portents set deep within the fabric of our everyday life, even in our increasingly secular society. Despite the continued fall in formal religious observance and church commitment, there is evidence of the Spirit's work in the most unlikely and yet most human and everyday of places. It is a place that we cannot avoid, a door that can open when we sleep and when we pray, into dream and vision that have an atmosphere that compels attention.

As John Polkinghorne says in his book *Religion and Science*, 'in other ages they may have been more open to a wisdom and certain experiences of God that we may need to rediscover.' But that wisdom of the past will have to be relearned in the present. And the contemporary mind will need to keep in creative tension the knowledge gained by science and reason, alongside a humility and

an awareness that each age has its own arrogance and rigidities from which it needs liberation. Each age has its strengths and weaknesses. Each individual needs to draw water from the wells of the past as well as the wisdom of the present.

It is not common in our secular and psychologically sophisticated age for most people, going about their everyday lives, to give much attention to their dreaming consciousness. A few professional groups of people may well give attention to the recurrent images and patterns in the dreams of their patients, but they are very much in the minority.

Carl Jung described in his writings a phenomenon well documented in the records of religion - the phenomenon of 'the voice'. After studying hundreds of the dreams of his patients, he noticed a repeating and, to him, highly suggestive pattern of experience that occurred usually at the end of a dream series or at a crucial turning point for the individual concerned: 'the voice revealed itself during the course of many hundred carefully recorded dreams as an important and even decisive representation of the unconscious' (Yale, 1938, p.45).

In disagreement with much current analysis, which tends towards a preference for a biological or chemical assessment of inner states (e.g. Healy, 1991), Jung noticed that the phenomenon of 'the voice' in dreams challenged many contemporary assumptions: 'the voice is unorthodox, it is even unconventional to a shocking degree: it takes religion seriously, puts it upon the very apex of life, of a life containing 'either side' and thus upsets the most cherished intellectual and rationalistic prejudices' (Ibid.p.51).

For many years, first for BBC Radio 4 and currently as part of a PhD study, I have been involved in research into 'altered states of consciousness', particularly, although not exclusively, within the dreaming consciousness. These experiences have not fallen easily within the now normally accepted psychologically determined categories. Some of those encountered have had characteristics that would put them within the area of religious experience. They are 'mysterious' in the sense that Rudolph Otto uses the term: 'Taken in the religious sense, that which is mysterious is the 'wholly other' that which is quite beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible and the familiar, which therefore falls quite outside the limits of the 'canny', and is contrasted with it, filling the mind with blank wonder and astonishment' (quoted by Jung, 1938, 26).

The question of how experience may inform, challenge or even ultimately destroy cherished opinions and even the philosophy on which we build our value systems and practical actions is an issue that arises within the artistic as well as the scientific sphere. One could argue that in both genres there is a searching attempt to understand the nature of what it is to be human, of what is authentic, of what is veridical.

It seems that one of the characteristics of our humanity is the need to understand both the universe within our own selves and the external universe which we inhabit. But how to interpret those influences that impinge upon our consciousness from our inner and outer worlds may become a vital, pragmatic and pressing question.

Experience can change a philosophy. Experience which is observed to occur in a regular or consistently repeated pattern may have an impact on the mind of an alert observer such that a new view of internal or external reality begins to be framed (Kuhn, 1978). The very distinctions and categories that formulate our thought and interpretations of experience may themselves come under challenge.

Jung, whose observations led him to separate from the Freudian school of psychology, did so in part because he had observed phenomena occurring within the lives of his patients which did not fit the newly-minted Freudian psychological world-view.

One of the most crucial aspects of Jung's work and observations is his description of the experience and phenomenon of 'the voice': 'the voice is a frequent occurrence in a dream series. It always pronounces an authoritative declaration or command, either of astonishing common sense and truth or of profound philosophic allusion. It is nearly always a definitive statement, usually coming towards the end of a dream, and it is, as a rule, so clear and convincing that the dreamer find no argument against it' (45).

On considering this phenomenon over a period of time, Jung concluded that 'the unconscious mind is capable at times of assuming an intelligence and purposiveness which are superior to actual conscious insight'.

The overlap between religious and psychological experience is thus brought into sharp focus through the phenomenon of 'the voice'.

Much of Catholic 'mystical theology' also concerns itself with the assessment and description of similar phenomena, but in this context 'the voice' can be experienced by a person in a state of contemplative prayer. In Catholic thought, this has been categorised as a *locution*, meaning that something has been heard or communicated by an experience that appears to have the same or similar qualities as a human voice.

Such experiences of the 'inner voice' are claimed to be caused by an intelligence external to the contemplative. Such a claim, although foreign if not out of the question for our secularised culture, is not beyond the boundaries of Jung's cosmic world view and theoretical framework. Indeed, as Professor Frances Young, of Birmingham University', pointed out in a Radio 4 programme transmitted in December 1988, 'all the major world faiths have their inception in the experience of revelation'.

Such experiences of visionary seeing, of angelic presences, of glimpses of the things of eternity, are however not only to be found in ancient religious texts, but also in current and contemporary experience.

The following account was related to the writer by the Church Missionary Society interpreter who had first heard it from a Hausa man of native background. He had come to the Christian community in which the interpreter, Sue Davies, was working in Northern Nigeria. His journey to find the community had in fact been prompted by the dream/vision he related, and he underwent a major life-change as a result of his experience. Subsequent outcomes of the original visionary phenomenon were verified to the writer by an Anglican clergyman living in England, but who had contact with the Christian work of that area. According to Sue Davies, the experience of this man was not untypical of a culture where numinous dreams often led to a change of religious commitment. These dreams were deemed to be of such impact that all custom, family loyalty and the power of the tribe could not resist their authority.

He came from a remote village, whose nearest neighbours were Muslim. The tribe to which he belonged had no contact with Christianity, as the nearest Christian community was a considerable distance away.

The man told how one night as he was lying on his bed, it seemed that the whole room was filled with light. And he opened his eyes and looked and saw an angel, bringing him a book. And the angel said to the man, 'Read this book'.

'But I can't read,' said the man. 'You read it to me'.

So the angel read to him from the book. And what was read was all about the kind of man that God wants to work for him in great detail. The angel then closed the book and went away and the light died down.

The man, not surprisingly, was disturbed and could not sleep, and as he lay pondering on what he had seen, the room again filled with light and the angelic figure repeated the same words. The vision was repeated three times in all.

Across the centuries, common motifs and experience appear with intriguing parallels and similarities. For example Bede describes the story of the cowhand Caedmon, a lay brother at the monastery of Whitby. Caedmon, who was not musical, had retreated to his cell when the time for passing the harp round had come after the meal in the refectory. There he 'lay down at the appointed time and fell asleep, and in a dream he saw a man standing beside him who called him by name. 'Caedmon,' he said, 'sing me a song'. 'I don't know how to sing,' he replied. 'It is because I cannot sing that I left the feast and came here.' The man who addressed him then said, 'But you will sing to me'

In another contemporary experience, an interviewee told how he had been gripped and held by a vision of an angelic visitation of such overpowering intensity that when it was over, all physical strength had left him. As he was on a train at the time, this caused him some difficulty! He did not have enough strength to alight at his proposed destination. As with other visionaries, such experiences appear to have marked physical effects.

In the overwhelming effect of these 'seeings' are echoes of experiences repeated in the lives of those who have become founders or key figures within the world faiths:

And I heard a man's voice from the Ulai calling, 'Gabriel, tell this man the meaning of the vision.' As he came near the place where I was standing, I was terrified and fell prostrate While he was

speaking to me, I was in a deep sleep, with my face to the ground. Then he touched me and raised me to my feet. (Daniel 8.16-18)

Although it could be argued that experience is the ground base of our being and forms the primary data of our consciousness, it is not always obvious as to how particular experiences may be either understood or interpreted. This was true in ancient as well as modern times - the question of how to assess phenomena of altered states of consciousness concerned St Paul as well as the spiritual directors of today. Even for those who acknowledge no spiritual part of themselves, the question of whether our experience is pathological or healthy, to be acted upon and integrated into our lives and understanding or put aside as irrelevant and lacking in purpose, is ever present. These are practical issues that form only a tiny part of the welter of experiences through which we move in every hour of a human day.

In our present age there is a need to avoid credulity as well as cynicism. There is, I believe, a middle way.

To find our way through the maze of possible illusion, projection and wish-fulfilment, we need the analysis of reason and the humility to learn from the wisdom of all who have gone before. We need the communion of the saints, to learn from those who have studied ahead of us in the annals of Catholic mystical theology as well as the knowledge of Puritan, Pentecostal and contemporary Protestant understanding, drawn from a profound knowledge of the biblical texts. We need the scepticism of the scholar and the careful attention and profound listening heart of the saint. Together, in time, we may begin to be wise.

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