

Holy intrusion: The power of dreams in the Bible

by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [June 28, 2005](#) issue

We children of the Enlightenment do not regularly linger over such elusive experiences as dreams. We seek to “enlighten” what is before us and to overcome the inscrutable and the eerie in order to make the world a better, more manageable place. We do well in our management while we are awake, and we keep the light, power and control on 24/7.

Except, of course, that we must sleep. We require seasons of rest and, therefore, of vulnerability. Our control flags. We become open to stirrings that we do not initiate. Such stirrings come to us in the night unbidden. Dreams address us. They invite us beyond our initiative-taking management.

The ancient world and the biblical tradition knew about dreams. The ancients understood that the unbidden communication in the night opens sleepers to a world different from the one they manage during the day. The ancients dared to imagine, moreover, that this unbidden communication is one venue in which the holy purposes of God, perplexing and unreasonable as they might be, come to us. They knew too that this communication is not obvious. It requires interpretation.

Here are four familiar examples from the Bible in which the Holy Other addresses people in the vulnerability of the night:

The first occurs after Jacob has duped his older brother and is fleeing for his life (Gen. 28:10-22). He is alone, running to his mother’s relatives. But he must stop to sleep. In this condition, he is a good candidate for an intrusion from beyond. He dreams of angels coming and going, messengers and promise-makers. He hears God’s voice of promise. The God rooted in his family promises land. This odd holy voice of the night also promises to be with this fugitive and to bring him safely home.

The dream requires a total redescription of Jacob’s life defined by God’s promise. The place of his sleep is converted, by vision and by utterance, into a place of promissory companionship.

That disclosure requires a response. Jacob pledges to be allied with the God of promise, a pledge that entails accepting himself as a carrier of the promise. Quite concretely, Jacob promises to tithe (v. 22). When he awakes, the world is different because of this holy voice in the night.

A dream also invades the troubled sleep of the mighty Pharaoh (Gen. 41:14-24). Who would have thought that this manager of the daytime world would be so vulnerable? His dream involves a confusing scenario featuring cows and shocks of grain. He has no clue to the meaning of the dream. After Pharaoh's magicians and wise men, his "intelligence community," fail him, he summons an outsider, an Israelite, someone uncredentialed. Joseph tells Pharaoh the meaning of his dream: there will soon come a time when the empire will be destabilized. Truth in the night is spoken to the one who has power in the daylight. This dream, so the narrative reports, will cause settled power to become more aggressively acquisitive.

In this reading of the nighttime reality, Pharaoh is invited into an alternative world of need, trouble and deprivation. This reality, which comes to dominate the larger narrative about Joseph, was not even on the horizon of Pharaoh with all of his technical apparatus, his economic and military power and his intelligence community.

Too bad that Joseph ceases to be an interpreter and becomes a manager for Pharaoh! By his "Egyptianization," he signs on to the task of stabilizing the regime that the dream had worked to destabilize (Gen. 47:13-26).

Paralleling the story of Joseph at the beginning of the Old Testament is the story of Daniel at the end of the Old Testament (Dan. 4:19-37). It concerns a dream that assails power. Like Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar represents a settled life of exploitative power that expects not to be disrupted. Dreams are dangerous for such a ruler. They come in the night and declare God's intentions. The dream dispatches the king to a condition he did not intend—into a grass-eating beast.

The dream and the narrative about the dream deconstruct the king in his power. He had come to think of himself as autonomous and did not acknowledge that sovereignty belongs to whomever God may give it (Dan. 4:25). The dream asserts that Nebuchadnezzar had misunderstood his status in the world by disregarding the ultimacy of the holy God.

Daniel, the gifted Jewish dream interpreter—gifted, surely, because of his rootage in faith—counsels Nebuchadnezzar to practice mercy and justice (4:27). The dream is given because of Nebuchadnezzar’s “insanity.” The narrative goes beyond the dream to tell of a return to sanity: Nebuchadnezzar offers a doxology to the most high God and accepts his own penultimacy in the world of power (4:34-37).

Perhaps the best-known biblical dream appears at the conclusion of the visit by the Magi: “And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road” (Matt. 2:12). The Christ child is threatened by power (see v. 16; Exod. 1:16). In order to secure a future for the child, the voice of the holy intervenes in the night when the royal menace is at rest.

In all four cases, the course of public history, with its determined configurations of power, is disrupted by a hidden truth designed to create new possibilities. In the cases of Jacob and the wise men, the dream opens a way of well-being. In the cases of Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar, the functions of royal power are decisively shaped—in Pharaoh’s case by a resultant program of acquisitiveness, in Nebuchadnezzar’s case by madness that results from the absolute practice of power.

In the post-Enlightenment world, reason has sought to overcome all that is primitive, sacred and lacking in manageable credibility. The aim and outcome has been to control the “darkness” from which might arise disruptive or destructive voices.

This commitment to maintaining control through reasonableness did not eliminate the hidden otherness, however, but only drove it underground. It remained for Sigmund Freud to attend to that hidden holiness in both its demonic and angelic forms. Freud treated dreams as “the royal road to the unconscious,” a thesis that served his general conviction that consciousness, the reasoned control of life, constitutes only the surface part of the energies that propel or immobilize persons. This “master of suspicion” understood the unconscious as an urgent dissenter from the “enlightened” nature of humanity.

Freud, of course, did not link dreams to the holy, which he regarded as an illusion. He worked to put dream interpretation on a scientific footing, transposing the religious dimension of dreams into a psychological reality. Dreams were taken to be disclosure of the denied part of the self, particularly the self’s repressed desires.

Though he transposed dreams from religious to psychological realities, Freud nonetheless utilized a rabbinic-midrashic interpretive method, which involved a patient probing of multilayered meanings and the inscrutable, enigmatic dimensions of life. Dreams, like ancient texts, require imaginative interpretation in order for us to receive what they disclose.

For all the modernity of Freud's approach, it has important points of continuity with the perspective of the ancient texts. Dreams are recognized as disclosures of otherness, an otherness that may indeed open us to authentic reality and to a truth that lies beyond reason. For Freud, as with Joseph and Daniel, everything depends upon the blessed gift of interpretation. Dreamers like Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar often lack the imaginative powers needed for receiving disclosures about the hidden self and its repressed desires.

Freud invites us to the work of "archaeology," of uncovering the origins of the self in the unconscious, But Freud's interpretation of dreams is also, as Paul Ricoeur understood, a practice of "teleology," of anticipating what the self may become. The teleological or, perhaps better, the eschatological dimension of a dream may lead to wise choices, like that of the wise men in Matthew, or to the choosing of an alternative future, as in the case of Jacob.

Another kind of dreamer, perhaps the greatest dreamer of the mid-20th century, is Martin Luther King Jr. His "I Have a Dream" speech of August 1963 represented a defiant political stance couched in religious rhetoric. It is important that the address was presented as a dream:

I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal." I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. . . . I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today! . . . I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the

glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.

Surely there is something in this speech that cannot be captured by political pragmatism or dismissed as a political stratagem. King's dream was a gift of imagination from beyond the realm of political realism. And if we say "from beyond," then clearly it is something like a dream that carries a message from the holy. The substance of the dream is a world other than the one near at hand. There is indeed an otherness to the dream, for King is able to imagine a world that is radically discontinuous with the one we see around us. It is this imagined otherness to which the vulnerable and the oppressed appeal, an otherness to which the rulers of this age have no access and which they characteristically seek to critique or censor.

King's dream was the product of study, of suffering and of long-term nurture in the black church. But perhaps it came to him in a moment in the night, like his kitchen experience as described by Taylor Branch:

King buried his face in his hands at the kitchen table. He admitted to himself that he was afraid, that he had nothing left, that the people would falter if they looked to him for strength. Then he said as much out loud. He spoke the name of no deity, but his doubts spilled out as a prayer, ending, "I've come to the point where I can't face it alone." As he spoke these words, the fears suddenly began to melt away. He became intensely aware of what he called an "inner voice" telling him to do what he thought was right. Such simplicity worked miracles, bringing a shudder of relief and the courage to face anything. It was for King the first transcendent religious experience of his life. . . . For King, the moment awakened and confirmed his belief that the essence of religion was not a grand metaphysical idea but something personal, grounded in experience—something that opened up mysteriously beyond the predicaments of human beings in their frailest and noblest moments. (*Parting the Waters*, 1988)

King's dream, like every dream, is not simply the sign of a wish or projection but is the intrusion of God into a settled world. It has a holy intensity that reaches back into generations of suffering; it is a holy intrusion that reaches forward in sanity, continuing to generate a restless uneasiness with the way things are until the dream comes to fruition and a new world is enacted. The dream connects political

possibility and religious authority in such a way as to be beyond critical argument or political control. That dream continues to reverberate and be generative among us because its cadences are not those of reasoned discourse but of an elusive piety, perhaps the favorite dialect of the biblical God.

Dream interpretation, so Jewish in its imaginative attentiveness, pertains to psychological matters and the reality of repression. But it is not limited to those concerns. Dreams concern larger realities and possible futures. There are many voices in the night, not all of them noble. Among them, however, is the voice of the holy God, who “plucks up and tears down” what we have trusted, who “plants and builds” what we cannot even imagine.

We do not forgo the use of reason; but we know in our own troubled context that our best reason has around it—in, with and under it—gifts of the “otherness” that make for newness. Our technological achievements require and permit us to learn again what the community of faith has known—and trusted—from the outset: there is something outside our controlled management of reality which must be heeded. Sometimes that something turns out to be a miracle of new life.