

Dreams and the Body

Ways of Hearing God Speak

An attempt to tie together some of the threads of experience in an eight-day retreat in 1996—for my own sake and for others who sometimes get caught in a spiral of introspection, trying to figure out “what’s wrong” and thereby being paralyzed and stuck and unable to move out of a rut into new growth. I focus on two refreshing elements I find to be perennial sources of help, because both are out of my control - dreams, and the wisdom of the body.

Dreams fire the imagination, work on so many levels, seem to be a way for God to speak through our unconscious unimpeded.

The body cannot be denied. What it feels or experiences is real to it.

These, combined with and tempered by the wisdom of Scripture, and other discerning people (in books and in person) came together for me in an integrated way during Retreat.

Issue #1 : Disciplined spiritual practice. A daily quiet time. Time for contemplation.

A quiet scream was building up in me about this. My practice was dead, at least in the way I had been taught. Yet, the discipline is universally propounded as essential.

On top of all this, 95% of people coming for spiritual direction had the same issue.

I gained a temporary peace with this twice in the past:

(1) Therapy introduced me to “ultimate doubt” and a new concept of God in relationship to me as an adult. I threw out my religious codes and systems. God and I were put into direct communication. I dared to believe that this would not be contrary to Scripture.

(2) The past couple of years, I was introduced to the Catholic spiritual tradition, where I could be led by (attracted by) joy, love and desire, rather than being pushed by obligation, duty, and discipline.

But doubts linger. Was this o.k.? And, by extension, was I o.k.? - the larger question.

This erupted in our Supervision group Monday morning at the start of retreat. I was gently led through my experience to examine my feelings and connotations about three words: sin, guilt, and prayer. I was told: “Your descriptions feel/sound similar.” Sin could be forgiven. Neurosis is harder and more complex to deal with for me. Guilt can be the pointed finger of false

guilt. True guilt relates to what is - our human condition and very connected to grace. Prayer is attending to God, listening, and waiting.

Something happened. The weight lifted. What had been intellectual was *felt* in my body. Oh Yes! Of course. It is in the moment of our brokenness that we spontaneously open to God. Sin and prayer are intimately connected.

I can't fully explain how that began to answer my question about the spiritual disciplines, but it opened a door to what was to follow, so that the issue can no longer be phrased as it was. The *constancy* of my connection with God is more important than set-aside times and unless the focus is on God, any decision about regimen is meaningless.

The way this works out in actual daily life experience is through my body (often using a process called "Focusing"). What is happening *right now* becomes the issue. As I sit here writing, with my cat on my lap, the rain coming down gently outside in the early morning, Don asleep in the next room. To pause, breathe, and for a moment, take in God, by realizing in my body (which is where all realizations take place!) what I am experiencing.

For example, I am feeling some tension about the writing itself, despair at being able to express it clearly, in a way others can relate to, truly, forcefully.

Can I - at this moment - *let go* of control? That is the issue at a deeper level, for me.

For me, to decide to enter upon a regimen of spiritual discipline, would be to stay in control. Right now, I am being asked to let go and allow God to control my growth. This is especially important because of my particular personality - my tendency to monitor my inner growth through introspection, to try to measure it, to feel *in charge*. That may not be true for others.

By listening to God speaking through my bodily experience, I am drawn to the truth for *me*. It will never be in contradiction to the deepest wisdom of scripture and spiritual tradition, but it will be applied for me at this particular stage of growth in my life.

Issue #2

I am finding it hard to separate the issues because they became so integrated and so many interconnections occurred.

I have struggled for years with the meaning of my experience with my mother. I did some basic work in therapy twelve years ago. There seemed to be two major movements that were helpful then.

(1) Facing and accepting the negative aspects of her influence on me. I had previously denied there with the result that I took all the blame and wound up with colossal self-loathing. I see this self-hatred in others. I believe that until I can see where this comes from, I will neither be able to understand the human condition, including my own, nor deal with it in a loving and effective way psychologically or spiritually.

(2) The other movement was toward separation - seeing how I am *not* my mother, and—essentially—growing up into my own person.

I was very retarded in this process. I was in my 40s. It seems to me this is a developmental task more appropriately done in one's 20s. But better late than never.

The combination of my father's death and mother's moving to live nearby has raised the issue again on a new level. I was distressed to learn that the issue was not "over" for me, despite the work I had done in therapy and following.

It was my body that told me this - in a dramatic way. I really did feel warmly welcoming to the notion of having Mother move back East. What I didn't know was the tensions this would raise within me, specifically, that I would again attempt to "be the perfect child" by attending to her every need as completely and effectively as possible. The old bod just conked out. In November of 1984, I landed in the hospital with a serious asthma attack (Asthma, according to Franz Alexander, is "the suppressed cry for help from the mother.")

I will never know how I "happened" to take Alexander Lowen's *Depression and the Body* with me on retreat. (Lowen is "father of bioenergetic therapy.") I had looked at this book years ago and found it boring (my major dynamic is not particularly depressive). But for some reason, I began devouring it. I was struck by his beginning thesis: that the roots of depression are in the loss of sufficient love from the mother.

Let me hasten now to say that almost *no one* gets enough. I think Lowen thinks that if kids were breast-fed for three years (as in primitive societies in the past), this would help. But at this point, such ruminations become theoretical. I think, this is another way that God, who is our Father and our Mother, has chosen to wean us from our dependency on the natural order to understand our deep deep need to be nourished by God. But not God as Mother substitute - though that imagery works for a while. But a more intimate connection with God within our own being (yes, our body). I hesitate to say, we learn to nourish ourselves, for fear of being misunderstood, as leaving God out. It is just that I am experiencing the presence of God deep

within (in my gut) these days, so it doesn't feel so much like sitting on God's lap (metaphor from Psalm 131), as the God in me taking my hurt child on my own lap and *loving me!*

I know - we all hear the psychobabble about "loving myself" and "taking care of myself" that usually refers to taking a vacation, or a bubble bath, or time to do what I want instead of performing some obligation. But that's simply not quite *deep* enough, not integrated enough.

Here I must pause again in writing. I am feeling afraid that I can't ray it "right" or be understood accurately. Silly.

Because what I want to say is that I have had one or two glimpses of what it feels like to have enough love, and it is sorta combination of feeling loved by God (no judgments about my spiritual disciplines), and resting in that by loving myself. And the two are one experience - God loving me and me loving me. That is an experience worth going for - in whatever form you are led to pursue it. The lack of this sense of lovedness and worth is at the root of so much

loneliness (poor me)

anxiety (am I ok, God?)

restlessness (trying to please)

harshness with others (friends, spouse, children)

But I do not think this experience can be attained by following any system, be it prolonged or a "spiritual shortcut (I think *sometimes* people are drawn to "healing of memories" or quick therapies, hoping in the magic of a quick cure). Because I think the *process itself* contains the seeds of the resolution - the process being the opening up of one's life to God. For me, the way that I could trust in doing this had to go beyond my conscious control, which is why dreams and the body were reliable vehicles for me.

Along this line, then, has come this latest work in my life about my mother. I was distressed when I found I still was carrying a burden around, unconsciously, and enough to put me in the hospital for the first time since my birth.

On retreat, I had decided to do some writing for my mother. She was to celebrate her 90th birthday a week later, and I had been preparing a scrapbook of memories, composed of pictures and greetings from about 100 of her friends through the years. I planned to write one memory a day on retreat, as my contribution to the book, and looked forward to doing this as a gesture of positive feeling and love.

A dream the first night focused something for me. I saw the image of a crossword puzzle and was placing the word “*early*” in one row of spaces. But - too many spaces - so *earlier*. Still one more space, so changed it to *earliest*.

Upon awaking, I got to thinking about “earlier” experience, which I often see as painful. But what about *earliest*? Ah, these are *beyond* memory. And suddenly, I was in Psalm 139. “When I was knit together in my mother’s womb. . .Thou wert there.”

Suddenly, I realized with a leap of joy that my true origins are in God, that my being, my existence, have their deepest roots there. I could feel the absence of tension in that earliest relationship in the womb, and then even before the womb, in the mind of God. No wonder the psalm ends, “How precious are your thoughts to me, O God.” I am one of those precious thoughts.

Somehow this opened up a pathway of love to Mother. With that, I began to understand something Ken Larson (a Jungian analyst) had said to me, about accepting “the Mother.” I can’t reject my mother without rejecting my mother in me, and rejecting *the* mother (principle) in me, the part of me that can nurture and give unstintingly. It was just words before, but words that hung there in the space of my mind until the right time for experiencing their meaning appeared.

Issue #3

What emerged during my retreat was the dominance of a different image of my relationship to God. I have often said that at spiritual turning point in one’s life, often a new metaphor helps. I don’t need to turn my back on other meaningful metaphors (like the one cited here about sitting on God’s lap), but the new one draws me to a new dimension. It is that of Song of Songs 5:2-8. The imagery is of those moments when I saw the Beloved’s hand through the door, and then of rising and coming to the door, expecting the embrace of the Beloved, and finding him gone into the night. I felt myself to be standing on a threshold, and although the scene has the character of disappointment about it, this does not seem negative to me. I do not yet know what this “night” means; it feels like a cloud. But one that is palpably surrounding me.

I awoke one night during retreat to the words of chapter 3. “Upon my bed by night, I sought him *whom my soul loves*.” The feeling is that of seeking the Beloved, but the love is coming from deep within my soul, not so much from my heart in an expressive way, but from deeper down.

This part of my experience coincides with my sense of becoming more grounded, rooted. Of being lower, of getting down, of letting go and letting down. . .all of which feel good, solid, and not depressed or sad.

I did some bodily exercises with my legs and feet designed to develop more sensation in that part of my body and requiring full and deep breathing flowing throughout the length of my body.