

Dreams and *Christian Holism*: Therapy and the Nocturnal Voice of God*

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This article develops the theory and practice of clinical dream work within the context of *Christian Holism*. *Christian Holism* articulates the idea that the Holy Spirit is clinically present and active during clinical work, and therefore plays a mysterious but real part in the unfolding of dream meanings. It is argued that dreams have played a positive part in human experience in Old and New Testament times and during formative epochs within Christian History. The point is made that insights from depth psychology and dream physiology are useful to practitioners of *Christian Holism*, in that such knowledge is engraced as the practitioner offers this knowledge base to God for the client's healing.

To dream is to hear the voice of God within the soul. During Rapid Eye Movement (REM) sleep the body and mind experience exquisite changes—an internal liturgy—that inaugurate the entrance of internal, meaningful visions. When invited, God enlightens the dreamer's mind to understand dreams in ways that are beautiful, coherent, and healing. God's Holy Spirit shows the dreamer the meaning of the dream, and God inspires the dreamer to know what good action he or she must take to do well. In the context of psychotherapy, God works to bless both client and clinician with dream interpretations that lead to Holism—a state of dynamic unity with self, others, creation, and the Trinity. At all times God wants us to do well, and dreams are avenues through which God blesses us. From within the divine imagination, God created dream processes so that we might thrive in all the ways that God seeks for us to enjoy. The good psychotherapy of dream work is founded in the Christian experience of holy dreams recorded in scripture, positive appreciation of dreams by the Church fathers, and positive encounters with God's blessings through dreams among contemporary believers. Finally, the goodness that comes into the lives of clients, when the Holy Spirit is invited to bless the dream work in the name of Christ, speaks to the value of dream work in the context of clinical psychology and *Christian Holism*. I want to show that scripture and church tradition are favorable to dreams. I then discuss *Christian Holism's* dream stance and offer cases that illustrate the healing value of dream work when the clinical situation employs faith that the Holy Spirit is lovingly involved in the dream and its interpretation.

Dreams in Scripture

Historically, God employs dreams, dream-like experiences, and dream interpretation to help his people. In Genesis, via a dream, God established a covenant with Abraham, promising descendants, land, and protection (Gen. 15:12-16). God renewed this covenant with Jacob during Jacob's famous ladder dream (Gen. 28:11-16). Joseph, whose future a divine dream foretold (Gen. 37), influenced Pharaoh through dream interpretation and reached the rank of viceroy, eventually bringing the Jews to Egypt. Advising the King of Babylon, Daniel interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's dreams, because God graced him with "the gift of interpreting every kind of vision and dream" (Dan. 1:17). Daniel referred to God as The Revealer of Mysteries who provides dreams so that dreamers might understand their inmost thoughts (Dan. 2:30).

In the New Testament, dreams are instrumental in the birth and protection of the child Jesus. An angel appears to Joseph in a dream, advising him not to divorce Mary, because she has conceived her child by the Holy Spirit (Mt. 1:20-21). A dream warns the Magi not to report to murderous Herod the location of the infant Christ (Mt. 2:12). A dream warns Joseph to avoid the Massacre of the Innocents by escaping with the holy family into Egypt (Mt. 2:13). A dream commands Joseph to return the Holy Family to Israel upon Herod's death (Mt. 2:20).

Important events in the lives of St. Peter and St. Paul occur in dream-like visions. In a trance, Peter receives God's declaration that all foods are clean, freeing Peter to eat with Gentiles and evangelize them as equals (Acts 10:16). In a night vision, Paul saw a man who begged, "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (Acts 16:9), inspiring Paul to immediately depart on a missionary journey. These examples show that God's will can often be gleaned from dreams and dream-like experiences.

Dreams in the Early Church

Some Church fathers thought highly of dreams, others did not. Emphasizing the Church fathers' positive disposition toward dreams in the first five centuries, Savary, Berne, and Williams (1984) write,

According to John Chrysostom, dreams are enough for God to send to those who are attuned to God, since they do not need vision or other more startling divine revelations.

Tertullian ... spoke of dreams as one of the *charismata* of God, and believed that dreams and visions were promised to people of his own day just as much as they were to the first apostles. Origin ... saw dreams as part of God's providence "for the benefit of the one who had the dream and for those who hear the account of it from him."

Cyprion, bishop of Carthage in 250 A.D., one of the father's of the Latin Church, asserted that the very councils of the Church were guided by God through dreams and "many and manifests visions." And in Gregory of Nazianzen's Church in Constantinople, according to Church historian Sozomen, "the power of God was there manifested, and was helpful both in waking visions and in dreams, often for the relief of many diseases and for those afflicted by some sudden crisis in their affairs."

Bishop Cyprian of Carthage wrote so much of his direct encounters with God in dreams and visions that twentieth century editors of his writing felt a need to apologize for them. Gregory Thaumaturgus, originally a student of Roman law, was led to the Christian faith in a beautiful dream that involved John the Evangelist and Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Dionysius ... received confirmation in a dream to study both pagan and heretical Christian writings: the voice in the dream assured him he need fear nothing because his faith was secure. Constantine, received an important dream-vision before his battle for Rome, which eventually opened up a new era of Western civilization.

"Dreams, more than any other thing, entice us toward hope," wrote Synesius of Cyrene, a fifth century Bishop of Ptolemais. "And when our heart spontaneously presents hope to us, as happens in our sleeping state, then we have in the promise of our dreams a pledge from the divinity (p. 39).

The Church fathers thought highly of dreams, because Christians experienced God's grace through them. However, some Church father's hesitated to become dream enthusiasts. They felt, because of the reality of evil, and the fallen aspect of human nature, that dreams needed to be judiciously considered.

While acknowledging that God could be experienced in dreams, [some Fathers] were also careful to note that dreams are often no more than the eruption of irrational emotions into one's sleeping consciousness. Gregory of Nyssa, for instance, asserted that many dreams reflect the animal side of our nature, the offspring of the passions of anger and desire—a view not far from Sigmund Freud's. He also noted a more mundane class of dreams that arise from traces of memory of our daily routines. Thus, the early Christian view of the significance of dreams can be described as generally balanced (Lewis, 1995, p. 47).

While valuing dreams, the early church did not overvalue dreams. Acknowledging that aspects of the fallen nature can come through dreams, early Christians also found God speaking through them. The following apocryphal dream exemplifies the early church's appreciation of the need to discern if God is working through the dream, and then the importance of acting on that information. In this example, the Emperor Constantine dreams of the innocence of three officers condemned for treason.

Three officers ... being falsely accused to Constantine were condemned to death. At night, St. Nicholas appeared to the emperor and his judge Ablavius and said to them, "Those three men are innocent; and, unless they are released in the morning, war shall desolate the land, and thou and all thine shall perish by the sword. I, Nicholas of Myra, forewarn you." When the emperor and judge met the next morning, they conferred together of the vision and caused the three officers to be brought before them. "Tell me," said the emperor, "have any of you three any skill in necromancy?" They answered, "No." The emperor then sent them to St. Nicholas with a present consisting of the four Gospels in letters of gold, and a gold thurible; and charged them with this message, "The emperor begs St. Nicholas not to threaten him, but to pray for him. (Brewer, 1992, p.119).

Importantly, this ancient story suggests that Constantine (and his judge Ablavius who co-dreamt of St. Nicholas' admonition) took it for granted that dreams can convey important information about what God

desires. Before treating the dream as utterly reliable, however, Constantine first discerned that the dream originated from no fallen source. Ruling out sorcery as the dream's origin, Constantine then could act upon the dream decisively. He released the innocent officers and asked St. Nicholas to intercede to clear the realm of the sin of injustice, and to restore God's favor to the empire. The dream provided Constantine with an impetus to avoid injustice and seek God's grace and was useful to him following discernment.

In the middle ages, some dreams were considered special signifiers of the divine will. The following important and holy dream, for example, includes the night vision of Bishop Bruno (1002-1054), who later became Pope Leo IX.

One day Bruno, Bishop of Toul, saw in his dream a deformed old woman, who haunted him with great persistency, and treated him with great familiarity. She was hideously ugly, clothed in filthy rags, her hair disheveled, and altogether one could scarcely recognize in her the human form. Disgusted with her general appearance, the bishop tried to avoid her; but the more he shrank from her, the more she clung to him. Annoyed by this importunity, Bruno made the sign of the cross; whereupon she fell to the earth as dead, and rose up again lovely as an angel. While pondering on the meaning of this vision, the abbot Odilo, lately dead, came before him, and said, "Happy man, you have delivered her soul from death." Wilbert, the biographer of our saint, and his contemporary, informs us that the old woman represented the Church, which at the time was in a most deplorable state, but Bruno in his pontificate was employed by God to restore it to its original beauty (Brewer, 1992, p. 119).

Allegorical and prophetic, this God-given dream shows Bruno that the church had entered a fallen state so personally revolting to him as to tempt him to escape facing the ugliness of the Church's problems. Next, he allowed his exasperation—with God's help—to propel him from escapism to action. As pope, he would commit spiritual and ecclesiastical deeds that would resurrect the church from the ugliness of her spiritual death. The dream used glorified (and thus spiritually credible) Abbot Odilo as a holy mouth-piece to exhort Bruno to assume a successful, restorative pontificate. In symbolic language, the dream charged and encouraged this pope to heal the church of her ugly spiritual ailments and restore her to the ever-beautiful life of grace. It also predicted his success.

God used dreams in both Testaments, the early church, and during the middle ages. God continues to speak to the church through dreams, and practitioners of *Christian Holism* address dreams directly.

Dreams and *Christian Holism*

Christian Holism views dreams as a manifestation of grace. Just as God graces our incarnated state with beating hearts and breathing lungs to bless our bodies with health, God naturally graces our sleeping minds with dreams to similarly bless our souls with health. We dream true things about ourselves, reflect on right and wrong, discover the subjective and objective future, uncover keys to psychological healing, and find our thoughts guided by good metaphors. All of this represents God's grace acting in the natural dream machinery of our souls. *Christian Holism* also finds grace contained in social science, through which psychologists continue to discover true, useful methods to understand the content of dreams. Psychoanalysts,¹ analytical psychologists, and research physiologists all advance truth about the way God naturally blesses our dreaming minds and how the content of our dreams might be beneficial to us. In *Christian Holism*, dream interpretation draws upon the truth and utility contained in psychological methods to understand the grace inherent in dreams. Yet *Christian Holism* does not look initially to dream content nor to specific psychological interpretive methods to find benefit for patients. While natural grace shines through creation, the Fall subverts that grace. For this reason, *Christian Holism* begins dream interpretation by explicitly asking God the Father to send the Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus Christ to take charge of the clinical situation and to assist the therapist and the patient in their consultation. *Christian Holism* places dream content and all psychological interpretive methods at the disposal of the Spirit. If the dream is valuable to God's purpose, it is believed that the Holy Spirit will provide discernment and guidance. This is true even of dreams that are quite disturbing.

... [E]verything in the universe is God's, [and] all dreams somehow reflect God's purposes and plans for our lives. Even the most demonic or terrifying presences in dreams can be worked with and their energy transformed. Dreams ... present us with what we really need to deal with to fulfill God's need and purpose for our lives (Savary, Berne, & Williams, 1984, p. 41).

The Spirit perfectly knows the dream's meaning and the best interpretive method,² whether social scientific or word of knowledge. Therapy enters a state of supernatural grace and the integrity of the dream interpretation is enhanced. Importantly, the Spirit can make even the nightmare redemptive.

What follows are clinical situations involving dreams and dream interpretations addressed in the Spirit of *Christian Holism*.

The Identity Changing Dreams of a Schizoaffective Man

In an inpatient facility, the attending physician referred a Schizoaffective man to me. Throughout his life his disease had tormented him and tempted him to despair. For years, this sixty-two year old Irish Catholic man had suffered both from the symptoms of manic depression as well as lapses into the delusions and hallucinations that characterize paranoid schizophrenia. Despite the fact that his psychiatrist had sensibly medicated him on antipsychotic medication, he feared relapsing again. His fear was not unrealistic. In the last five years, he had suffered relapses of mood and psychotic symptoms that left him frightened and in need of an overhauled regimen of antipsychotic medication. Two years before we began our work, he had gradually begun to reclaim his religious faith. Daily he read the catechism and weekly he attended mass. He was also faithful in his prayers. In therapy, he confided to me that, while he found the renewed practice of his faith comforting, he still feared his mental illness and had difficulty conceptualizing where God was in the midst of his affliction. Then he reported the following dream:

On a dark night, I walk through dimly lit streets. A cat-like creature stalks me in the darkness. I feel it gaining ground. The creature closes in on me. I am very nervous. Then I see a fence. A little, narrow entrance way is the only means through the fence. As I get closer, the night watchman undoes a security barrier to the entrance. I slip through the tiny gate. Then the night watchman closes up the entrance just before the cat-like creature catches up with me. Feeling safe from the creature, I relax and look about the protected, fenced-in compound. I realize that this facility is a power company's power plant.

We conducted the dream interpretation collaboratively, treating the dream allegorically and following his associations to find their meaning. The cat-like creature represented the devil, described by St. Peter as a "lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Pet. 5:8). This man had been tempted to lose faith and despair that God would protect him in the face of his recurrent mental illness. The cat-like creature represented the devouring quality of the bedeviling despair. The narrow gate, however, represented his escape from losing hope. Since this man had resumed his Christian practice, he had entered through the narrow way into the kingdom of God. Since Jesus watches over his flock, we recognized Christ as the night watchman, welcoming this man into the protection of the kingdom of God. Because the dream concluded in a power plant, the man realized that he was under the protection of God's kingdom, a kingdom that generates tremendous protective power on his behalf. For him, the most important point of the dream concerned the revelation that God protected him from despair in the midst of his recurrent illness, despite the fact that his illness remained a thorn in his flesh.

Six weeks after this dream, our interpretation was put to the test. The man's symptoms returned, and he was hospitalized in a psychiatric ward for some time. I felt concerned about him, but upon his return from the hospital, he in fact did not succumb to the faith-destructive belief that Our Lord had abandoned him. The Holy Spirit had arranged his dream and its meaning for him. The deep meaning inherent in his dream's symbols, offered him understanding, allegorically designed for him by the Holy Spirit, to ward off despair that would make him interpret his recurrent mental illness as God's abandonment. "To the contrary," he told me as we resumed our sessions, "God has been protecting me in the midst of this disease." As a practitioner of *Christian Holism*, I would have been satisfied at this statement. After all, my patient experienced the Holy Spirit's management of therapy so that he received an astonishing dream that warded off a spiritually lethal collapse of faith. But God's pursuit of this man's rejuvenation persisted. Just days after his discharge from the psychotic unit, he dreamt again.

I am aware of a Presence. I look and see Jesus. At first, I am afraid. Then I feel his love for me. It is enormous and strong. Jesus' love for me affirms me so completely that I love him back deeply. Jesus leaves me, but the experience of his love is indelible. Something in me has changed.

This dream did change him. While the first dream promised protection from despair, this dream left him with an unshakable understanding of his importance to Our Lord. Even weeks following this dream, the man felt deeply moved by his new identity—a beloved man of Christ. Together, these two dreams shifted him from the temptation to interpret his psychiatric situation as God’s abandonment, to the realization, not only of God’s protection and acceptance, but most importantly of his beloved status, his specialness to Jesus. A third dream in this series came shortly.

I enter a boxing ring. I wear boxing gear and am ready to fight. I hear my father yell, “Fight for Ireland and the faith.” When I wake up, I feel determined.

This final dream was important. Exploring the symbols, we agreed that his father’s voice represented God the Father’s encouragement for the man to spiritually fight for the liberation of human spiritual ground occupied by forces of darkness. By continuing in his acts of devotion, this man participates in the fight that ultimately liberates God’s creation from the forces of darkness—a fight that will also liberate him from his own illness, either in this life or the next. A beautiful point is that the dream dignifies the man with the status of a spiritual fighter. The dream provides him with an identity of a Christian soldier, rather than as a mentally ill man. This dream-given identity as an earthly fighter for the kingdom of God, preserved him (and me) from the temptation to lose his real identity to his illness. The dream prevented us from falsely basing his identity on his Schizoaffective disorder, as many survivors of mental disorders do. At this writing, he practices Christianity with dignity and aggressive faithfulness. He rightly believes that, despite the mystery of his suffering, he is under God’s protection, deeply loved by Jesus, and has been commissioned to fight the good fight through his devotions. Importantly, he identifies himself as a Christian soldier, rather than as a Schizoaffective.

The Unmasking Dream of the Therapist Thirsty for Love

A twenty-eight year old graduate student came to me for treatment. A disturbing dream upset his enjoyment of his postdoctoral work at a prestigious university. Prior to the dream, this bright Presbyterian man had enjoyed the mentorship of some of the most important psychologists in the world. He had access to them on a daily basis, discussed his cases with them, and enjoyed their confidence. He thought of himself as a future luminary in his profession. At times, he found himself feeling sorry for his patients who could not always understand his brilliant psychological analyses. At other times, he found himself impatient with clients’ failure to progress at the pace he had set for them. Despite such frustrations, he found his budding professional success satisfying, especially because he had come from an unpromising background that included poverty and humiliation in grade school due to an undiagnosed learning disability. The following dream, however, changed his relationship to himself and to his work:

I eat dinner at home. Two priests interrupt my meal. They tell me that a dying man needs my help. They take me to a room. I see two generals guarding a dying man. The generals wear tunics covered with medals. They look grand and self-satisfied. Then, I examine the dying man. He lies naked on a mat. Dehydration has so overtaken his body that parts of him have mummified. He looks at me and exudes misery. Then he hands me a newspaper advertisement. The advertisement reads, “Send away for an occult incantation. This incantation will help you to become a Superman. Then everyone will love you.” I realize that this poor guy has bought into this occult message. Hoping to become a Superman, he sent for the occult incantation only to find that the incantation brought a curse upon him instead of the love he sought. Superman was an idol, a false god. I realize that if decisive action is not taken for this poor guy on the mat, he will quickly die from lack of love. I start yelling at the priests and the generals to pray for the poor guy. The generals look like they can’t be bothered. They want to look good and disdain the distasteful task of praying for the dehydrated guy. The priests look more concerned, but they really don’t know how to pray for this poor, loveless guy. They’re clueless. Concerned for the abject misery of the naked dying man, I wake up horrified.

Emotional alarm and pain initially emerged in the wake of the dream. This man had a nightmare. His soul was in a state of emergency. His disturbing dream alerted him to the need for decisive healing action. Following prayer, we addressed the dream allegorically and used his associations to understand it. The priests interrupted his meal, his regular routine, to show him that a part of himself was dying. As he got close to the dying part of himself, he saw the generals. They symbolized his identification with the power

and prestige associated with his privileged academic status. He used his prestigious position to erect a false identity—an identity of an invulnerable person. The generals represented his defensive, false identity that guarded the real problem. In the dehydrated man, he recognized the hurt part from which he sought to escape. But the dream prevented him from hiding in the false identity of an impressive person. He saw within himself a part mortally thirsting for love and approval and deeply hurt from the school-age humiliation brought on by his learning disability. That this figure of lovelessness and humiliation embodied itself as dehydrated shows the need these wounds had of the healing, loving, refreshment of the Holy Spirit that Jesus described as “living water” (Jn 7:38). Unwittingly, he had succumbed to the occult notion that he could save himself from his woundedness and fallenness by achieving tremendous worldly accomplishment. In the midst of this accomplishment, God gave him this dream to show him that his ideal self was nothing more than an idolatrous pursuit. Even if he did become superman, superman would not bring love and healing to his soul. Superman would not earn enough medals or become so grand as to transcend the deeply human need for the living water of God’s restorative grace. This man realized that he needed God’s love to heal, not a lot of pompous, worthless worldly success. In the dream, the generals were impervious to this realization, and the priests did not know what to do about it. This showed that his false self was entrenched in his soul and that his Christian faith needed maturation before healing could occur.

My client and I identified this dream as a Big Dream, because it mapped the course of healing for some time to come. Quickly, however, the impact of the dream led to several therapeutic changes. First, he owned that he overvalued a self-image of professional success and brilliance as a way to gain acceptance and love from himself and others. When he acknowledged that this project failed and had almost killed him spiritually, he found that his relationship to his patients had changed. He no longer experienced disdain or impatience when patients did not understand or appreciate his “brilliance.” And when eventually, he gave up trying to be a brilliant therapist altogether, he was surprised that God had blessed him with the gift of compassion. Ultimately, his clients were just plain getting better, and he was less concerned with being “brilliant.” By being less the General and more the humble man in need of living water, he had become a better therapist and a more-healed person.

When he left treatment, he had developed much more genuine humility and presented himself as personally more real. Aware of his need to strengthen his faith, he began to pray and read the Bible more regularly. He also made it a point to develop fellowship with people who would support his project. Most importantly, he turned from seeking false ways to restore his soul and sought healing by repeatedly inviting the living water of the Holy Spirit to stream into those dehydrated soul-places in which he thirsted for healing love. He was healing and so were his patients. God used this dream in such a way that this young therapist gained powerful insight into his woundedness and his need for God’s Holy Spirit to refresh his parched core. Others in this young man’s healing care were direct beneficiaries of his abandonment of personal falseness. The dream helped him and others.

The Dream of the Woman Who Needed to Get Free from Her Dependency and Get On With Her Life

A colleague of mine asked me to consult with her on a case. She referred me to a distressed 55 year old woman. This client suffered from debilitating dependency issues that stemmed from her childhood. She had never known her father, and her mother, a distressed person in her own right, was unable to care for her. Her mother would go to “parties” for days at a time, leaving her very young daughter to fend for herself. Due to her unmet dependency needs, this woman grew up feeling that she lacked the strength to manage her life without someone to take care of her. In her mid twenties, she married, and the anxious dread that interminably plagued her subsided. For several years, she enjoyed a relatively normal life. She loved her husband, and they had a baby girl. By her early thirties, however, the marriage deteriorated and her husband left, leaving her emotionally devastated with a child to raise alone. As her own daughter matured, this woman clung to her more and more, depending on her daughter for constant reassurance and a social life. Temperamentally independent, the daughter increasingly recoiled from her mother’s neediness. Finally, in an argument filled with recrimination, the daughter broke with her mother, accusing her of making unreasonable demands and reversing appropriate mother/daughter roles. Hurt by her daughter’s rejection, she entered treatment with my colleague. In the course of therapy, she had difficulty owning that she relied inappropriately on her daughter, and she despaired of living a happy life without her daughter to closely rely upon. Therapy reached a standstill, and her depression became alarmingly acute. This woman’s therapist, my colleague, an immensely talented psychologist trained in both secular and sacred therapy,

then asked me to assess her client and to make treatment recommendations. (Relying on one another this way is customary in our practice.)

My colleague briefed me, and then I consulted with her client. We prayed, and the woman discussed her sense of discouragement with her life, and her wish that the therapeutic work in which she and my colleague were engaged would go faster. From a technical point of view their therapy was fine. They were engaged in “working through” early abandonment, reworking thoughts related to dependency issues, and modifying behavior that involved developing social supports apart from her daughter. Yet, her depression persisted. She had a sense that her therapy would not work if her daughter did not support her. She also had a sense that without her daughter’s help it was inevitable that she would be unhappy. This idea preoccupied her and was not susceptible to cognitive restructuring. In the midst of this discussion, she remarked that she had a dream and wondered if it was important to the topic.

I stand on a cliff above a river. With me on the cliff are seals. The seals are in single file. The first seal stands at the very edge of the cliff, the next one just behind, and so on. The line of seals stretches from the cliff to the horizon. Then the first seal jumps off the cliff and lethally smashes on the rocks below. Then the next seal does the same. The seals keep jumping off the cliff and dying on the rocks. They do this over and over. Next, I fall off the cliff. But I do not land on the rocks like the seals. I land in the river. The current is strong, and I think that I will be swept away. I see my daughter. For a moment I feel relieved. I know if I swim to her I will be safe. But she swims away from me. Then I feel sad and fearful. I think that I will drown. The current takes me down stream. I realize that I can float and ride the current.

Together, we interpreted her dream, associating to the symbols in the confidence that God would lead us to the meaning. The seals symbolized two meanings. First, they represented persistent suicide fantasies. In the face of her despair over reconciling with her daughter, the dying animals voiced the part of her that wished to kill the pain of her unmet dependency needs and her sense of abandonment. But the seals also had a life-giving meaning. This woman felt that with her daughter’s rejection her fate had been “sealed.” She felt that without her daughter’s support, she could not live a happy life. Yet, the fact that the seals kept dying suggested that her fate was actually “unsealed.” The “unsealing” seals repeated over and over the notion that she could thrive without her daughter’s support. The image insisted, “Your fate is unsealed. Your fate is unsealed.” The woman could live on her own. The next part of the dream put this idea to the test. She fell in the water, not on the rocks—another indicator that living without her daughter would not be as hard a let-down as she expected. Once in the river, though, she turned toward her daughter to keep her head above water. The daughter swam away—a dream sign reflecting what the woman already knew; she could not rely on her daughter to keep her from drowning in her fear of abandonment. The woman would have to depend on herself—and, in fact, she could. She did not drown. She rode the current. She had the capacity to go with the flow of her life without depending on her daughter as her life preserver.

This dream was important. In symbolic language, it showed to my colleague and her client that their therapy had been on track, that in fact the insights and interventions they had developed were in the right direction, taking the client from a death position to a life position. As it was, the dream gave advance notice regarding the direction that the woman’s life would take in response to treatment. In the weeks following the dream, my colleague and her client, continued to work, and the woman’s depression lessened. She began to focus less on her daughter. She began to develop interests of her own. And she found the ego strength to keep her head above water and to go with the flow without having to rely as much on others. As a practitioner of *Christian Holism*, I find it significant that this woman’s dream was dreamt in the context of prayer, interpreted in the context of prayer, and provided a lasting, healing metaphor to encourage and guide her treatment. These visible signs of grace suggested to me that the Holy Spirit was therapeutically present in my colleague’s treatment, the woman’s dream, the interpretative dream work and its aftermath.

The Exoneration/Healing Dream of the Bereaved Mother

A brilliant, thirty-eight-year-old professional Methodist woman entered treatment for anxiety. Talented, accomplished, and very smart, she presented as polished and poised; yet, a maddening sense of dread plagued her subjectivity. For months, she suffered from a feeling that something was terribly wrong. Her body was tense, and she had difficulty concentrating. She was easily startled, and, at night, insomnia tormented her. She searched her mind for what might be wrong, but she found nothing. In frustration, she sought psychotherapy. Initially, finding no source for her anxiety, we discussed the possibility that her

problem might stem from a physical cause, requiring psychiatric, rather than psychological treatment. Prayer and persistence, however, amount to powerful therapeutic virtues, and, finally, our therapy bore fruit. (The Holy Spirit always blesses faithful work.)

“You know,” said the woman. “I am not married. And over the years, I had several important, long-term romantic relationships with men I expected to marry. In three of these relationships, I fell so in love and felt so secure in the relationship that I allowed myself to become pregnant, expecting that we would marry and raise the child together. Each time, however, my pregnancy so overwhelmed the fathers, that they abandoned me. Feeling unable to raise children on my own and fearing social disgrace, I aborted each of the three pregnancies.”

Having a strong background in medicine, it was easy for this woman to rationalize that each fetus amounted to no more than a mass of tissue, not a real person. Yet, a part of her yearned to love her terminated pregnancies as children. She felt guilt and horror at the course she had taken during those earlier, desperate times. From a clinical perspective, her anxiety emerged from the conflict of what she consciously believed—that the abortions were necessary and justifiable—and what she believed in an unconscious, deeply maternal chamber of her soul—that she unnecessarily lost the opportunity to love her valuable children. When the Holy Spirit brought this insight to us, the woman’s pain became acute. She wept inconsolably as she took ownership of the guilt she felt for the abortions and for the grief she felt as she terribly missed her lost little ones.

She reflected that she saw her abortions as a mistaken path for which she would like to ask forgiveness from God. Importantly, I do not have a highly developed relationship to the issue of abortion, so her desire to address the problem of her abortions through forgiveness-seeking emerged from the Spirit’s work in the treatment process, rather than my own agenda. This made her prayer all the more meaningful. She asked God for forgiveness and experienced lessening of her guilt. Her grief, however, remained quite acute. She said that she still missed her children and wished that there was something she could do for them. We discussed the matter and decided that she could minister to them by committing their souls to Jesus in prayer. These prayers were both funereal and baptismal. In this manner, we prayed and this brave woman left therapy exhausted.

Following this breakthrough session, I reflected that the Holy Spirit had worked a dramatic amount of progress in her therapy. The Holy Spirit uncovered the source of her anxiety disorder—repressed guilt and grief emergent from three terminated pregnancies. The Spirit also convicted her of the wrongness of the abortions and blessed her with forgiveness. And the Spirit blessed her with a way to minister to the children by committing her children’s souls to Christ. Satisfied with her therapeutic progress, I was unprepared for the way God offered even greater healing.

In the next session, she told me that she left therapy and went home. Exhausted, she lay in bed, fell asleep, and slipped into a dream.

In the dream I look into heaven and see Jesus. He holds each of my children. With playfulness and love, he jostles them in his arms. My three kids love it. It is so apparent that everyone is okay, and they are having a wonderful time—and that Jesus himself loves and enjoys these kids immensely. Then I realize that my children and Jesus look to me. No accusation comes from the kids, and no condemnation comes from Jesus. They beam at me and smile. In words of thought, Jesus tells me that the guilt and grief I have felt about the abortions has ended. Jesus tells me that he has heard my prayer. He will raise my children for me in heaven. I see that he is doing this. Best of all, Jesus invites me to love the kids again. I do love them, and I love loving them. And the children love me from heaven.

We discerned that the Spirit had given her the dream for two reasons: one, to offer her a glimpse into heaven that confirmed that God had answered her prayer to care for her children’s souls; and two, to fully heal her guilt and grief by allowing her to love her children with maternal love. The dream was a therapeutic turning point. Her symptoms diminished, so treatment soon concluded. Later, she experienced occasional flare-ups of guilt and grief, but, by using the dream as an internal icon, she could recover from these symptoms and emerge to enjoy loving her kids. While psychotherapy helped her to recover from anxiety emergent from her repressed guilt and grief, the dream represented the Holy Spirit’s sovereign confirmation of her exoneration and healing—and blessed her to fulfill herself by loving her children. Recently, I heard that she lives quite happily and helps women with similar issues.

The Attorney's Dream of Shattered Narcissism and Christ's Healing

A 42-year-old, Lutheran attorney called for an appointment. Married with 4 children, he had for years striven to establish his law firm as the preeminent practice in his area. His motto was: "Nothing succeeds like work-a-holism"—and his firm grew large. He hired bright associates and enjoyed immense success. In his privileged position, he felt self-congratulatory and attributed his success to his shrewdness and brilliance. He enjoyed making money. He enjoyed being professionally on top. And he enjoyed (secretly) looking down on people of "poor judgment and low mentality" who hired him to defend their interests in the face of their ridiculous, pathetic mistakes. As Christmas approached, he threw an expensive, firm-wide party to celebrate a year of record breaking revenues. Dressed to the hilt, he showed up with his beautiful wife on his arm. But early in the evening, his introverted wife became tired and left. The attorney waved her off, made merry, and drank heavily. The drunker he got, the more convinced he became that a female associate was attracted to him. In a moment of clarity, he thought to check himself but drank another whiskey. Under the pretext of discussing a case, the attorney isolated her in a room adjacent to the ballroom and threw a clumsy pass at her. This repulsed and offended his associate. She dislodged his pawing hands and slapped her boss across the face. She wheeled away, remarking, "This is harassment, and I have a case." The attorney was devastated.

In the days that followed, the lawyer feared a scandal or a lawsuit that would jeopardize his professional standing. He further agonized at the disconnect between his exploitive, intoxicated lechery and his preferred self-image of a meritorious man whose urbanity allowed him to stand above the mistakes of others. Unable to metabolize his fear or to regulate his self esteem, he longed to confide in his wife, but he had betrayed her, so he remained silent. Finally, fearing that his distractedness would compromise his functioning, he sought consultation.

In therapy, we established rapport and defined the problem as crippling shame and guilt over his behavior. The fact that he had "behaved stupidly" wounded his self image, and he remained fearful of reprisal from his offended associate—and, hence, he suffered from anxiety. He also remarked—somewhat humorously—that he was "neither a good Christian, nor a successful sinner." This important remark triggered an association to the following dream he had dreamt the previous, fitful night.

I stand on the top of a mountain. I see in every direction. I feel exultant. Something goes wrong, and I fall into a slide of rough cement. Gravity pulls me. I slide down the mountain fast. As I try to slow myself, friction burns and bleeds my hands. Down the mountain, I plummet. At bottom, I fly from the slide and land hard on rocks. My spine snaps, and I am paralyzed. Pipes pour sewage around my immobile body. I'm splattered with offal. On near rocks, at eye level, a crowd gathers. People I judge as losers and fools comprise the crowd. A man stands among the derelicts and helps them. The guy is Sting, the rock star. I try to move but cannot. Sting fixes his gaze into my eyes and commands "Get up and walk." I am released from my paralysis and healed. I get up and run away, afraid of Sting.

Reflecting on the dream, the attorney realized that it symbolically condensed his current problem. Until recently, he thought of himself as above other people, on top of the heap. His professional success supported this narcissistic self exultation—the experience of being a high-up person high on himself. But neither his accomplishments nor his narcissism could protect him from the gravitational pull of his fallen nature. Drunk at his own party, he had gone ethically, morally, and professionally down hill. He could not check himself against the momentum of his intoxication and lust. The realization that he had jeopardized his professional standing, harassed an associate, betrayed his wife, and trespassed against his religious values, paralyzed him with shame, guilt, and fear. So damaging had been his mistake that he was incapable of healing or moving from his brokenness without assistance. Adding insult to narcissistic injury was the fact that he could no longer view himself as above others. Covered in filth at the bottom of the mountain, he was as dirty and low as the people he had judged unworthy. He was a person at the bottom of the heap among the refuse of human mistakes.

A practicing Christian, the attorney understood that forgiveness and healing (and guidance as to how to make restitution to his associate and wife) resided in Christ. And the Sting figure obviously represented the true Christ. But why of all the potential Christ figures, Sting? In high school, enthused by Police albums, the attorney recalled, he used to irreverently quip, "Sting is God." Recollecting this, the attorney felt sheepish and humbled and grateful that God had a sense of humor. For the attorney, the dream ultimately reiterated the ongoing Christian realization that we are not self-sufficient pseudo-gods, that we all sin, and

that Jesus Christ forgives our sins and heals us of the paralyzing brokenness which we sustain from our ruinous behavior.

With moving self-honesty, the attorney interpreted his *flight* behavior at the dream's conclusion in the following manner:

I'm desperate enough to accept Christ's healing, but I'm too allergic to my own shame to stay and talk with the guy who heals me. Even though spending time with Jesus would be good for me, the fear of what I might learn about myself or what Jesus might ask of me makes me run away. What if Jesus asked me to seek forgiveness from my associate or my wife? I couldn't handle it.

The attorney understood the dream as a metaphor for his true condition. He was called to abandon his pride, admit he had fallen, view himself as another sinner, and acknowledge that forgiveness and healing come from Jesus Christ. He reaffirmed his Christian commitment and vowed to be a humbler boss and a better husband. When his anxiety diminished, he left treatment. The issues of his obligation to his associate and wife, along with his fear of closeness to God, were left under-addressed. Whenever I hear Sting on the radio, however, I am reminded that God knows this man better than anyone, and that the Great Therapist knows exactly how to bless him.

Conclusion

Christian Holism values dream work. In scripture, dreams have been instrumental in blessing God's people. Important Church fathers thought highly of dreams and believed that God used dreams for good purposes. Both Pope Leo IX and Constantine dreamt important dreams in which they received divine communication. In *Christian Holism*, knowledge of scripture and tradition as well as social science informs the practitioner's understanding of dreams. Yet, the practitioner appreciates that it is the clinical presence of the Holy Spirit that blesses this knowledge, works with it, and even supersedes it. In *Christian Holism*, the Spirit works within the dream work between the therapist and the client to unlock the grace contained within the vision—all for the purpose of healing.

Reference Notes

1. Important neurologists have begun to re-appreciate the supposition regarding the therapeutic value of dreams. Solms (2004) writes, "psychological conceptualizations of dreaming have become scientifically respectable again" (p. 88). Hobson (2004) asserts, "We have always argued that dreams are emotionally salient and meaningful" (p.89).
2. In my own practice of *Christian Holism*, I find that cognitive-behavioral methods of dreamwork are excellent from the point of view of technique. The questions I ask are: "If the actions and actors of the dream are ideas that the client holds about herself in the world, what exactly are those ideas? And, once found, how can those ideas be leveraged or restructured to help the client reach her treatment goals?" An additional resource is the Spring, 2002 issue of *The Journal of Cognitive Therapy*, which is a special issue that deals with Cognitive Therapy and dreams

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