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LICHTENBERG'S PROPHETIC DREAM



A prophetic or “big” dream extends outward in time and place beyond when and where it occurs. A number of prophetic dreams from various moments in history are on record. Their meanings can often be better understood with the passage of years. In the late 1700s, Georg Lichtenberg, Professor of Mathematics and Astronomy at the University of Gottingen, Germany, had such a dream. Though his name is not so familiar today, Lichtenberg was an eminent scientist, respected as a humane and independent thinker, admired and quoted by Kant, Goethe, Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, Freud. His writings combine a religious sensibility with passion for empirical science, especially experimental physics. Included in *The Lichtenberg Reader* (Beacon Press 1959) by scholars translating his Archives at Gottingen is an undated dream that seems to characterize the way Western science has come to treat the material world. The dream is stunning in its relevance to the state of our planet today. Since it is lengthy, I will paraphrase, but quote the main dialogue.

The dream opens with Lichtenberg soaring over the earth. He encounters an old man whose glorious appearance fills him with awe. The

man hands Lichtenberg a mineral, saying, “You love to investigate nature. Here you shall see something which can be useful to you . . . Test it and tell me what you’ve found.” It is a bluish-green sphere an inch in diameter; nearby are all the instruments he’ll need.

I shook it and put it to my ear. I raised it to my tongue. I wiped away some dust . . . rubbed it on my sleeve to test for electricity. I checked it against steel, glass, and a magnet, and determined its specific gravity . . . All the tests showed me that the mineral wasn’t particularly valuable, not very different from marbles I’d bought at the Frankfurt Faire for a farthing.

Lichtenberg finds it to be composed of clay, iron, silica, salt, and some unknown elements. As he finishes, the old man appears again, and asks, “Do you know, mortal, what it is you tested?” “No, Immortal, I do not know,” Lichtenberg said, casting himself at his feet.

“Then know: it was, on a miniature scale, nothing less than—the whole earth.”

“The earth? Great, eternal God! And the ocean and all that dwell within it—where are they?”

“They hang there on your cloth, you wiped them away.”

“And the sea of air and all the glory of the dry land?”

“The sea of air? That is probably left over in that cup of dis-

tilled water. And as to your glory of the dry land, how can you ask such a question? That was the imperceptible dust; some is clinging here to your coat sleeve.”

“But I didn’t find a trace of silver and gold, which rule the globe!”

“Know then: with your blade you cut away all of Switzerland and the finest part of Sicily, and you completely ruined a whole stretch of Africa . . .”

Lichtenberg was silent. He felt he would give nine-tenths of the life remaining him to have again his “chemically destroyed earth.” He begs humbly for another chance.

“Oh great immortal being, whoever thou art . . . enlarge a mustard seed to the thickness of the earth and allow me to examine the mountains and strata till the germ develops.” The wisdom figure answers that already on earth such a granule has been magnified, but “before your transformation, you will not reach that other side of the curtain which you seek.” Instead, the Immortal hands Lichtenberg a pouch and tells him to test what is inside.

Lichtenberg pledges to be more careful. He is surprised to find only a book with a simple binding. Its language is not known, but the title page has the same command: “Test this, my son, chemically, and tell me what you have found.”

Lichtenberg wonders what use it would be to chemically test a book, knowing that is merely rag and ink, while the contents of the book are its essence.

“Suddenly, things became clear in my mind and an irrepressible blush of shame came over me. Oh! I called, more and more loudly, I understand, I understand! Immortal being, forgive me; I comprehend your kindly reproof, I thank the Eternal that I can comprehend it.”

Lichtenberg was indescribably moved, and woke with that feeling. The dream ends here, with no further comment.

What was it Lichtenberg understood? That breaking down the visible world into its physical properties does not yield its essence? That dissecting can destroy what it studies? From high above the earth, Lichtenberg is shown a larger perspective. Referring to himself as a “man of feeling,” Lichtenberg is distressed over his destructive actions and wants to redeem them by tending a seed to germination. But the spirit guide or wisdom figure tells him that until he himself is transformed, he will not be able to see through the veil. A second chance is given, and a transformation occurs. In examining the book, Lichtenberg realizes that the

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essence lies in its *meaning*, not its physical composition.

This dream was three hundred years ago, at a time when the separation between heart and mind was not as severe as it is today. Like the visionary dreams Black Elk had as a youth, Lichtenberg's also seems to describe developments that would unfold in the coming centuries. Perhaps we are now at the close of the first scene, discovering just how destructive our handling of the world's natural

resources has been, and hoping we have a chance to mend our ways.

I wonder what sort of dreams Audubon had as he killed hundreds of birds to make his fine drawings, or the researchers today who infect chimps with AIDS to study the disease. Are there dreams that trouble scientists who cloned Dolly or who developed the cell phones that have resulted in soaring rates of brain tumors in children? Dreams are an ancient, evolved part of our species' internal guidance system; and they help us find meaning

behind the curtain of the visible world. The Immortal who invited Lichtenberg to chemically test two objects and provided the tools for doing so was simultaneously testing the man himself. He failed the initial test but his sense of morality led him to ask for another chance, and he then succeeded in solving the koan or riddle put before him.

In initiation rites, failing some part of a task is what activates humility in the seeker and transforms the hero into maturity. The hubris of our Western ways is finally being called into question; perhaps more hum-

ble ways of treating our globe will emerge. Dreams like Lichtenberg's encourage us not to take a short-term view of prophetic dreams or shirk a transformative process out of shame or despair, but trust that some greater beneficence may help us correctly read the book of life.

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