

IT CAN TAKE A VILLAGE TO UNDERSTAND A DREAM



Have you ever had a dream that seemed to be about people or events in the wider world? These dreams may be more common than we realize, but there aren't culturally available guidelines for recognizing them. If each of us is the center of overlapping, concentric circles—of family, friends and neighbors, colleagues and acquaintances, our geographical region, the nation, the world—why would we not, at times, dream about meaningful scenarios in the various levels?

In ancient Athens, the poet Sophocles—who claimed to not believe in dreams—dreamed of a gold vessel that had been stolen from the temple of Hermes. Three times this same dream repeated, giving the identity of the thief and the location where the vessel was buried. After the third one, Sophocles decided to report it to the Aeropagus. A search was made, and both the sacred object and the culprit were found. The dream didn't "belong" to Sophocles, but to his "village."

Harriet Tubman frequently had dreams and visions that showed in detail what routes to take as she led escaping slaves along the Underground Railroad. She once was leading four men down a country road and fell into a brief sleep, during which she was shown a

river to cross and a cabin in which to hide. They soon came to a river, but it looked too deep to ford. Tubman walked right in, and found a shoal; the men followed. On the other side was a cabin where a black family was living. They took in the runaways and, in doing so, saved their lives from the men and dogs on their trail.

The discovery of the white buffalo came about in a similar way. The animal was born to a farmer in Janesville, Wisconsin in 1993. Thinking that something was wrong with it, he kept it hidden and cautioned his family not to say anything. One day, two trucks pulled up. Indians got out and asked if the white buffalo was on this farm. They said they had driven all the way from North Dakota, following only the guidance from nightly dreams as to what roads to take each day. They assured the farmer they didn't want the animal, but simply came to honor it with prayers, as the white buffalo is sacred for many Plains tribes. Thousands have since made the journey to see the white buffalo and its white offspring.

These native Indians as well as Tubman came from cultures in which dreams were highly respected; their source was considered to be God or the Great Spirit. Although

Sophocles himself did not believe in dreams, he too belonged to a culture that valued them and could receive their guidance.

C. G. Jung had a series of powerful visions and dreams that preceded World War I, but, lacking the cultural template for

*"It seems to me,
in one of its
aspects, the
psyche is not
individual, but is
derived from the
collectivity, from
humanity even.
In some way or
other we are part
of a single, all-
embracing
psyche..."*

C. G. JUNG
(CW10; PAR 175)

recognizing them, he mistook them for personal dreams.

In autumn 1913, he had a vision of a monstrous flood covering all of northern Europe: *I saw mighty waves, the floating rubble of civilization, drowned bodies . . . then the whole sea turned to blood. A*

voice said, "Look at it well; it is wholly real and it will be so. You cannot doubt it." In the spring of 1914, Jung had a thrice-repeating dream in which a cold wave descended and froze the land to ice. (See *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, 175 ff.) Despite his extensive early experience with schizophrenia, or perhaps because of it, he did doubt, and decided that he himself was menaced by psychosis. Only when the war broke out in August, shortly after his third dream, did he realize these were not about himself but about his "village" of western Europe.

I too learned the hard way about having outward-facing dreams. During the 1980s, I was active in a professional organization, and, at one point, had a dream about being on a ship that was passing through a period of "bad air," and that I should hit the deck and "lie low." Within the year, a series of sexual misconduct reports came forward within the organization, creating a tense and troubled atmosphere. Neither the analyst I was seeing at the time nor I connected this "bad air" with my dream. Eventually, I learned that outward-facing dreams tend to come when I am first involved with a new organization and provide me with a symbolic

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portrayal of the atmosphere.

More recently, I had a contract to teach one course per semester at a particular graduate school. After the first class meeting, I had a powerful dream that referred to the locale and layout of the school itself: the dream showed that a tsunami was coming and that my job was to help move students safely away from the shoreline. Unsure how to understand the metaphor but confident that my dream was probably outward-facing, I went to a colleague who had been teaching there for some years and asked if she had any ideas to what it might refer. She said that a major reorganization was underway, behind the scenes, and that it was likely to cause considerable upheaval when the students found out about it; the ripple effects—waves—from the changes would permeate the classroom.

How can we recognize these big dreams about our villages? The dream itself may contain important clues.

Jung's dream showed a sudden and disastrous shift in "weather" all over northern Europe; the scope of it was not local, nor was it around his own home. The vehicle on which I was merely a passenger was a huge ship, not my personal car nor a local bus. The dreams Tubman, the Indians, and Sophocles had were all precise and specific, enabling them to follow the maps provided.

When do big dreams come? They seem to take place in the context of a cultural upheaval or transition, which will impact not only the dreamer but others in a wider circle. Transitions are always destabilizing at first, and we need help orienting to them. Dreams may tell us when a war is coming, when a sacred object has been stolen, or when a new route can be found. Today, in this time of enormous transitions, we need dreamers who can function as canaries in the mine, sensing what may be coming. From research following September 11th, we know that in the weeks preceding, many people had dreams of planes crashing

and buildings falling; they were not understandable until the event took place.

My title is adapted from the African saying, "It takes a village to raise a child." A dream is like a child in that input from more than one or two persons is often needed so that it can grow into its proper fullness. Our conscious mind has a limited bandwidth, but the dreaming mind, evolved over

millions of years, seems to have a much wider bandwidth, capable of perceiving changes in the wider circles around us. Whether for professional organizations, ethnic subcultures, or whole nations, we need elders' councils or forums like the Aeropagus where we can share big dreams so that their implications for our villages are understood.



*Jenny Badger Sultan, Dream of the Corpses in the Upper Room
(1995, oil, 24" x 20")*