

NICODEMUS TODAY

"Jesus answered and said unto him . . . Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee. Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God."

JOHN 3:3-5

If dreams are as important as I have indicated, then why should there be such ignorance about them today? Why are people so deaf to the voice that comes to them in their sleep, and why are there so many misconceptions about the meaning of the dream experience? We do not hear about them in our seminaries, or from our Christian pulpits, or from our doctor. The reason cannot be laid to ignorance. We Christians have our Bible, which as we shall see tells us clearly of the importance of the dream. And we all have had the opportunity to read Freud and Jung, who have spoken to us in a modern way about dreams.

One of the many reasons why we close ourselves to the message of our dreams is fear. It is frightening to think that our dreams have meaning, for they might compel us to consider all kinds of unpleasant or surprising facts about ourselves. An encounter with the unconscious can be an agonizing, relentless dialogue, which we may often wish to avoid. But another reason, which we will discuss at length in this chapter, is that "Nicodemus" is still alive today in the thinking of modern people.

Poor Nicodemus. He had gone to Jesus because he had heard about the renowned teacher, and instead of something he could understand, Jesus only talked to him about being "born again." Jesus of course was speaking symbolically, not in order deliberately to obscure things, but because this is the only way the reality of unseen things can be conveyed. But Nicodemus was too encased in his literal, material point of view to understand. He could only say, "Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb?"

It is this literal, materialistic, preconceived kind of thinking Nicodemus represents that blocks us from the messages of our dreams. With Nicodemus's attitude possessing us, we will not understand the dream's spiritual aspect. But unfortunately his thinking is typical of our age.

This Nicodemus-like point of view, which blocks us from our dreams, is what we can call "collective" or "mass" thinking. It appears whenever our minds and hearts are not our own, but are conditioned by generally prevailing opinions.¹ Collective thinking consists of all those attitudes and prejudices we acquire from our parents, compatriots, teachers, and our present overly intellectual and material culture. It throttles our individuality and prevents us from hearing the creative voice within. Its extent and effects are far more subtle and prevalent than we realize, for from the time of our birth we have breathed it in, like a subtle poison in the air.

Collective thinking persistently influences our ideas and philosophies. But it also affects everything we say or do, and our entire life and being. It may come from preachers whose ideas are not their own but belong to the invisible host of their supposed spiritual authorities. But it may equally well exist in the people who live their relationships, not in accordance with their true feelings, but as though the opinions of their parents were standing by whispering to them what to do.

Our possession by collective thinking results in both psy-

chological conflicts and spiritual sicknesses. I could cite instances where specific clinical symptoms—such as acute depression, or possession by compulsive ideas such as that of having a cancer—were caused primarily by collective thinking that possessed the individual. In these cases the source of the specific psychological symptoms is not to be found in past trauma, but in the present inhibition of the individual's creative urge. Looked at more broadly the possession of our whole culture by collective attitudes is better described as a spiritual sickness. For us it has taken the shape of dictatorial systems involving us in spiritual struggle against them.

Nowhere is collective thinking more conspicuous than in the way it causes us to ignore, or distort, the meaning of our dreams. In the case of the church dreams are not considered at all. During my years of training to be a priest there was not one single word spoken to me about the dream. In biblical commentaries there is scarcely a thought given to the significance of the dream to religious experience—and this in spite of the great number of dreams in the Bible, and the high regard in which they were held by the early church. And as for preaching on a dream from the pulpit, it is virtually unheard of. But the situation is equally bad in secular disciplines, where dreams, though not so completely ignored, are misunderstood and distorted by the preconceived viewpoint of collective thinking.

Consider this following example. I select it because it is typical (but not the worst) of the prevailing attitudes toward the dream. In an article in a health magazine a medical doctor answered the following question:

I have a dream from time to time in which a ferocious lion is chasing me. It hasn't caught me yet, but I usually wake up with my legs aching from having run so hard. What do you suppose is the cause?

The doctor gives this answer:

In general, there are two types of dreams. One is caused by influences to which the dreamer has been exposed, usually during the preceding day, although on occasion considerably earlier influences may suddenly produce a dream. The other type is what might be called spur-of-the-moment dreaming. In this virtually anything may be responsible, such as some strange noise that is not enough to waken one but is noted by the subconscious mind. With incredible rapidity, the mind constructs a situation to fit the noise or other disturbing influence. It is amazing what intricate details may be "thought up" in this way even by persons who are not ordinarily very imaginative.

In your case, there is a rather strong suggestion that the chase sequence is due to pain in your legs. Your mind, recognizing this pain, has you chased to explain it. It would be a good idea to have studies made by your physician, to determine whether there is some physical cause of the pain. If there were no pain, you might still have this type of dream because of some frightening earlier experience, the lion representing perhaps an individual of whom you are afraid. The subconscious mind often uses symbols in reliving disturbing experiences.¹

Notice what the doctor tries to do. First, if possible, the psychic event of the dream will be reduced to a physical stimulus; that is, the whole thing is due to a pain in the leg. This facile answer is passed off without explanation and with glib authority. What possible scientific basis there could be for such a statement is difficult to imagine; it is in fact not a scientific statement at all but a collective opinion. Second (just in case no physical ailment turns up) is the resort to the most mundane possible psychological explanation. In this case the lion does not any longer equal the pain in the leg but "someone whom you fear." Third is an explanation from external stimuli: The dream might be due to some strange noise not sufficient to awaken the dreamer but loud enough to affect the subconscious. We know dreams sometimes do include an external stimulus in their story, but this is rare, and even in such cases the dream uses the stimulus in its own way and for its own purpose.

These explanations all leave great questions staring us in the face. The doctor himself asks one without realizing it when he says naively, "It is amazing what intricate details may be 'thought up' in this way even by persons who are not ordinarily very imaginative." What about these "amazing intricate details" that occur even in "unimaginative" people? Do they have no meaning? This seems to be taken for granted here without further examination. Another question concerns the lion. Who is this lion? Why does the dream select a lion to pursue the dreamer? If "lion" equals physical pain, why dream about it? If the dreamer is afraid of a person, why not dream of the person instead of the lion? By remaining rooted in a concrete interpretation the dream cannot be understood at all. What seems like a rational explanation explains nothing, and the dynamic nightly encounter that takes place between conscious and unconscious remains unrecognized.

For reasons that will appear in a later chapter, it is perilous to try to analyze any dream without knowing the dreamer, the dreamer's circumstances at the time, and the dreamer's associations about the dream symbols. It is interesting, however, how often people do dream of lions, which often depict a devouring, instinctive aspect of the unconscious realm of the psyche. In this case the dream captures the same image as did St. Peter, who warns us, "Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour" (1 Peter 5:8).

Quite probably the dream depicts the dreamer's relationship to his or her unconscious instinctuality. Because the dreamer rejects it, it takes on a devilish, devouring aspect. In what more pointed way could a conflict between conscious and unconscious be described than in this repeated dream of a lion chasing the dreamer? Such a dream would amount to an invitation for the dreamer to recognize the inner adversary. Similar, or possibly deeper, more symbolic meanings to the

dream, depicting a vital relationship between ego and unconscious, have the door shut upon them because of a point of view that insists on reducing psychic things to concretistic terms.

So it is that we are possessed today by collective thinking, and this results in a serious spiritual sickness. But what do the dreams themselves say about this problem? Are they aware of the situation that exists in our conscious minds? To see this let us return to our friend Margaret.

Margaret continued her counseling even after the first problem of forgiveness for her past misdeeds had been resolved. She is one of those people who are engaged upon an insatiable search for God and their own true self. But in the course of her counseling she seemed to have run into a block of some kind that prevented her from proceeding further, although no special psychological problem or unresolved human relationship seemed to be standing in her way. In this situation she had the following dream:

The dream began in an average-size room with a rectangular table, at which three or four people were seated, working with paper, letters, and other clerical materials. It seemed to be near the close of the day, as things were being done in a rush in order to stack the loose papers according to size into orderly piles. During this rush we were discussing the subject of TB. Although I was among the group I didn't see myself. Suddenly Dr. X appeared in the doorway and came into the room. He appeared to be very angry and began to denounce me for having TB and not revealing it to the proper authorities. He said it was a terrible thing to do. He was very hostile and angry and looked at me with piercing eyes. I was afraid, but tried to explain that I had complied with the rules, and that a chest X-ray had been taken every year. I told him I had some old scars from pneumonia which I had many years ago, but that I was not aware anything was wrong.

The scene suddenly changed. Now the subject was not TB but a mishandled telephone call. The only person I saw or heard was Dr.

X, who was still very angry at me over this particular telephone call in regard to TB, which I had presumably handled very badly. I tried to explain that I had not taken the call, but that I did know who did. D. X then asked me who the doctor was who had taken the call. I refused to give him the doctor's name and Dr. X threatened he would find out for himself. But how would it help to give him the young doctor's name and involve another in my difficulty? I said, "I will leave, but we all know I am telling the truth and this alone is important to me."

The dreamer adds: "This dream was very vivid and more like a nightmare. I awakened with tears in my eyes, feeling unhappy. I was not excited but seemingly resigned to the situation. Dr. X in the dream is not at all like this in real life. I have never seen him angry. He always appears to be calm, kind, and gentlemanly. However, there was no mistake: it was Dr. X."

This is a long dream that centers around a confrontation between the dreamer and an angry doctor who criticizes her for ignoring her TB. The dreamer attempts to defend herself, but the doctor is not to be moved. In the second sequence the doctor's anger is directed against a "younger doctor" who does not appear directly in the dream but is alluded to. The dreamer defends the young doctor and insists that she is telling the truth. We have here a good illustration of the *auseinandersetzung* (dialogue) that takes place between conscious and unconscious. The point of view of consciousness is expressed by the dreamer herself; the point of view of the unconscious is taken by the doctor.

Why should the doctor be considered the spokesman for some of the dreamer's unconscious thoughts? In chapter 7, "The Nature and Structure of Dreams," I will talk more completely about the meaning of male figures in the dreams of a woman. For now we must content ourselves with some essentials of feminine psychology. Women often dream of women figures, who reflect different aspects of themselves. We had oc-

casions to discuss this kind of figure in our chapter on the shadow. But we also find male figures who play quite a different role. From our experience in dealing with the feminine psyche we know that the feminine unconscious also contains certain masculine components. But the average woman will consciously identify herself with her femininity; she remains unconscious of her opposite polarity. The woman's unconscious masculine characteristics are extremely important for her psychological development, and they reveal themselves to her in her dreams, personified as a man. This masculine ingredient of her personality is termed by Jung the *animus*. (One might suppose by this experience and reasoning that a man has within himself an unconscious set of feminine characteristics, and a correspondingly feminine dream figure. Such is the case, and she is termed by Jung the *anima*.) In our dream the doctor is the dreamer's own unconscious *logos* or judge, who expresses a point of view within the unconscious part of her mind.

The point upon which Dr. X insists, in spite of the dreamer's denial, is that she had tuberculosis. What is the meaning of this tuberculosis? Since the dreamer did not actually have tuberculosis, the tuberculosis referred to must by symbolic of an inner or psychological sickness that is somewhat like TB. Consequently it must be an insidious disease that does not betray its presence by conspicuous symptoms until it reaches a highly developed stage, relatively painless but deadly. Now the characteristics of tuberculosis as a disease of the body correspond exactly to the characteristics of mass thinking as a disease of the spirit. Tuberculosis attacks the lung, the area of breathing; mass thinking attacks the capacity for spiritual breathing (*pneuma*). In both cases the danger of being infected is great; both overpower us unnoticed. Tuberculosis can be diagnosed in good time only through exposing ourselves to X-rays; similarly mass thinking can only be recognized when we "X-ray" our own selves.

This dream wants to tell the dreamer that her realization of herself is in danger of being destroyed by mass thinking. The dreamer is so unaware of this condition that she objects strenuously (it is well known that the more valid an accusation is the more excited is our reaction), but it did not escape the attention of her unconscious. Fortunately the creative centers of the unconscious are forever beyond such infections; these centers perceive the truth.

Why is Dr. X so very insistent, even angry, in this dream? We learn this in the second part, where a young doctor is accused of mishandling the telephone calls. Here I will confess to the reader that I recognized myself in the figure of the young doctor who was not receiving the phone calls correctly. Telephone calls are communications from a more or less distant source. I understood them as previous communications from the dreamer's unconscious which I, as the counselor, had not understood correctly and so had failed to pass on the message to the dreamer. My failure angered the dreamer's unconscious logos. In her loyalty she did not want to admit that she doubted my abilities, but in her dream these doubts did find expression. I went into all this with Margaret, and perhaps as a result of my increased awareness, her future dreams accepted my competence.

After this dream Margaret's development progressed well. The astonishing realization—"God is actually speaking to me!"—was no longer blocked.

From this helpful dream we can draw certain conclusions:

1. Our dreams are not limited to data from our personal life, but by a symbolic thinking relate us to issues in life beyond ourselves. In this case, the dream was not about sex, or persons the dreamer knew, or memories from the past, but about a hidden spiritual disease that has gripped our whole culture.
2. By taking into consideration our hitherto unconscious attitudes, we grow towards wholeness.
3. Where the ego and the unconscious move in separate directions, a sort of enmity springs up between the two, as, for instance, in Tom's case. Clinically this results in a state of tension or anxiety. But the ego can learn to cooperate with the unconscious psyche in a process of creative growth and this process is shown in the dream. The essence of the process is an *auseinandersetzung* or dialogue be-

tween the ego and unconscious world within, through which the ego is brought ever closer to the psychic center. Jung saw in this process a striving to become one's true self and called it *individuation*.

4. The dream shows us what seems like an unconscious source of wisdom. Clearly the unconscious psyche has access to a superior kind of knowledge. But notice also how important the ego is in the dream. Our psychological and religious growth depend equally upon our unconscious and our conscious mind. The unconscious sometimes possesses greater insight, but in the last analysis it all must go through the ego to be realized.

Inner growth is a walk. If we were to try and walk only with one leg we would make little progress; at best we might manage a wearisome hopping. Only if we step first with the right leg, then with the left, can we walk. Similarly we must draw upon both the conscious and the unconscious to get on spiritually and mentally. If we exclude our unconscious reality we become blocked and frustrated in our progress; if we include it we have an essential and helpful partner, but a partner with a will of its own.

Margaret's dream is unusually important because her problem is not unique to her but belongs to all of us. Like Nicodemus, our thinking is thoroughly conditioned by the literal, shortsighted attitudes of our time. The diagnosis the dream gives her of a spiritual tuberculosis is a diagnosis that belongs to us collectively, for like Nicodemus we suffer from the inability to understand the life-giving symbolic language of the unconscious. But there is evidence in the Fourth Gospel that Nicodemus was cured of this incapacity, as also was Margaret. At least we are told in the nineteenth chapter of John's Gospel that Nicodemus had a hand in the risky business of burying Jesus after the Crucifixion, which suggests that Jesus' symbolically expressed message of spiritual reality found its mark at last. Through the same living Voice of God we too can be released from collective opinions and attitudes, and breathe a life-giving spiritual air.