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Most Christians believe in the potential value of dreams - but only in theory. My experience went beyond theory - and it all began in a home meeting at a little church in Kent.

Dreams with meaning

Voice by voice dropped out of the babble of conversation until Joyce was the only person speaking. Coffee cups were set down on the carpet as all attention focused on her story. She'd had a dream. It wasn't an ordinary dream, but a cascade of fantastic images – wreaths made out of cream cakes are the one that remains strongest in my memory. They were ridiculous concepts that seemed strangely meaningful. Meaningful especially to me; for, by some mind process that I could never explain, her dream was taking shape in my brain - just as if I had dreamed it myself. I was seeing the same actions and images that Joyce had seen the night before, but in my version each frame had subtitles. No. I couldn't literally see the text, but the impression of meaning was so powerful that I read it out to the silent room, relating each stage of the dream and explaining its relevance.

"Yes, Derrick, that's just like my dream", said Joyce naively.

"Shush, Joyce, he's giving the interpretation", cautioned a student who was visiting from another part of the country and was more accustomed to such oddities.

I don't have miracle powers that I can call up on demand, but that experience was real and it became typical in that small Kentish fellowship for a short, but exciting period. Though our Bible Study meetings did not always end so dramatically, we experienced many dreams during the ensuing months and heard reports of others in the years that followed. Those were the early days of the Charismatic Movement back in the 1970's and, while others prophesied or spoke in tongues, our young men and women saw visions or woke up remembering peculiar dreams. People would write their dreams down and bring them to me for interpretation. Sometimes I would dream myself, and would either spot the meaning myself or would send them to a friend in Canterbury who seemed to have a similar gift. On one occasion I had a dream that enabled me to interpret someone else's night vision –

I was at work one morning, looking through some files, when the memory of the previous night's dream resurfaced in my consciousness. I had dreamed of a walk along a towpath, where I peered into the canal and noticed a large fish swimming slowly along the edge. I bent low, reached out a hand, caught the fish by the tail and lifted him out of the water. This brief scene ended with me striding along the path swinging the fish beside me.

"That's too short to have any special meaning." I told myself.

Then came a second thought – *"Take it by the tail!"*

I reach into my inside pocket and pulled out the envelope containing the account my friend had given me of their strange and complex dream. I turned to the back page and began reading the closing sentence. It was the key to the whole dream, which then unlocked easily, revealing truths that my friend found intriguing and valuable.

You could be justified in asking what point there was to all this. Why should an untrained amateur succeed in a task that challenges qualified analysts and professional psychiatrists? Are we to believe that God plays silly games with dream-enclosed messages? In answer to such challenges I can only affirm that it happened. For people with knowledge of the Bible it ought not to be surprising that it happens, since many examples of significant dreams litter both Old and New Testaments. What is more, the prophecy that Peter recalled before the multi-national crowd on the first Whitsun made strong reference to dreams as one of the means by which God would choose to speak to his people in "the last days". Our God is not a dumb

idol and I make no conditions about which ways he is allowed to speak when he chooses to communicate with me.

Dreams have a special quality that has fascinated prophets, psychics and psychologists over the ages, whether in a religious or secular context. That quality lies in their uncensored nature. By “uncensored” I do not mean “erotic” and would instantly discount that kind of dream from being in any way seen as a message from God. Our bodies affect our minds at least as much as our minds affect our bodies, so physical desires and hungers are as likely as anything to crop up in our dreams from time to time. No, the point is that our logical, analytical, conscious minds do not interfere with the imagery or the subject matter that features in our dreams. They are messages that well up from our sub-conscious minds and often reveal matters that we have not been willing to consider or admit when we were trying to be rational.

Of the dreams that passed through my hands, the majority revealed what was going on in the mind of the person who had the dream. They might have doubts that they did not dare admit to themselves consciously, but which were eating away at the deeper regions of their thinking.

They might be seeking guidance, but missing answers that were staring them in the face. On several occasions I was sent dream accounts from people who were unknown to me and returned answers that amazed the recipients, who marvelled that I should have such insight into their circumstances. It was not magic. The answers were all in the dreams but, not being encumbered by personal knowledge or prior opinions about what they were or should be doing, I was able to see the important keys that unlocked their current problems. There are occasions when dreams carry a predictive message, but that is an area for potentially dangerous speculation. Several of my own dreams have mapped out a series of events that I have seen unfold over subsequent years. I take that as an encouraging affirmation of my faith, but I have learned not to attempt to interpret such dreams prior to their fulfilment. The danger is that I might manipulate events in order to fit the dream or, more likely, my interpretation of the dream or my preferences that I have forced into the mould of the dream-story. When I have a dream that appears to be predictive I write it down and put it away, perhaps just sharing it with my wife. As the story unfolds over time I simply wonder at the delight of being in touch with a God who has such interest in the intimacies of my insignificant life.

Significant dreams are not just a feature of my past, because I still occasionally have similar experiences. The pattern is unpredictable but, whenever it happens, I wake up knowing that what I have dreamed is in some way important. I don't think that makes me special, except that every child of God is special and that includes me! However, I do treat the experience as special and make sure that I write down the details of such dreams when they happen to me. When I have done that I put the matter to one side and carry on with the rest of life. I do not attempt to pick at the images and I resist the temptation to fit them into some contrived interpretation that 'proves' my opinions or justifies my intentions. The message of the dream is likely to demonstrate some insight that my reasoning mind failed to perceive, but my unconscious sensed and is bringing to my attention. The meaning will become clear if it is important.

These dreams may not be from God, but from a normal function of the human brain that we understand poorly at this stage of our knowledge. From a scientific point of view it is not possible to test such experiences because they cannot be replicated. We never know when we will wake up remembering a dream, nor can we predict when our dreams might be out-of-the ordinary or in some way significant. What is more, we don't see each one another's dreams. They are private experiences formed inside our heads where there is not even a screen to display them! What are pictures when they are experienced inside the brain, where there is no light to see by? The significance of 'special' dreams can neither be proved nor explained but, to those who experience them, they are fascinating and real. They have played an important part at key stages in my life, which is enough proof for my purposes.

I do not advocate that anyone should promote dreams as a major element of communion with God. The promise of the Holy Spirit is not a pledge of conjuring tricks and party amusements to titillate our religious fancies. God is present in the normal realities of everyday life and is more likely to communicate through the medium of common sense or through normal human relationships and conversation. Just occasionally

we need an extra bit of help, especially when we are struggling over difficult decisions or coping with some of life's challenging problems. At times I have said that it would be nice to have an answer by means of an unmistakable message dropped from heaven, wrapped round a brick. If the answer comes in a dream, I am not surprised.

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(NB The story which begins the above article is true. Everyone who was in that room was changed by the experience. Joyce went on to live a life of simple, winning faith and died in East Sussex at the age of 93.)