

Let my people go that they may make a feast unto me in the wilderness
—Exodus

The message of psychoanalysis—four words: go dream world feast

Introduction

This book—written from a patient’s perspective—attempts to describe what can happen in psychoanalysis: how one can grow and change in unexpected ways and how creativity can emerge from the unconscious mind, where beauty and linguistic exuberance flourish.

Being in psychoanalysis is surprisingly akin to religious experience. Both call on faith. Both offer hope. In both, we may seek protection, communion, release—we seek the promise of blessings. To my way of thinking, psychoanalysis is a blessing.

In treatment, patients hearken to the analyst’s message, which is as old as *Genesis* itself: *Go forth—and journey to the land that I will show you*. And by hearkening, patients journey home to the land of the self—that vital and undiscovered country. In the process, they learn what often proves to be a new and foreign language: the prickly language of the heart. This is the language spoken in psychoanalysis and the role of the analyst is to help restore patients to the heart of themselves. The role of the analyst is to help allow the patient to develop her own nurturing inner mother—to allow the patient to incorporate the analyst’s goodness and compassion into herself, forever, so that the patient will not be at a loss living her life. She will know what to do with her life. And because the analyst’s goodness is so vital to the process, it is absolutely essential that the analyst be a good analyst.

When I entered treatment, I had no idea what psychoanalysis was or how it worked. I trusted no one, least of all a so-called healer. But I knew right away that I'd more than met my match in Dr Priestly. And it was her interest in me, her active pursuit of what was going on inside me (inside? I really had an inside?), that meant to me I was sufficiently worthy—sufficient despite my impoverished beginnings and unabated outbursts. I could put my rage and pain, all my sorrows, into the hands of this devoted being. She would help me start anew—resuscitate me, raise me up, even at this late date—to become a happier, livelier person, and to recover untapped gifts apparently overlooked before.

It must be said that I was no light lunch. I was a complicated oddball—and it would take years of evening sessions to even me out. I was constantly up in arms, resisting her, refusing to look in the mirror, hating to look at myself. I didn't want to see. Contemptuous and stuck, cut off from the goodness inside, I didn't want her to interpret anything painful or frightening. I wanted her to just shut up. But she didn't shut up.

It was clear that I hadn't been raised up right (I'd hardly been raised up at all). I didn't know how to talk. Suspicion colored my perception. I lacked social grace and moral compass. I didn't even know what religion I was until I was eight and it cannot truly be said that I've found religion since.

I had no dream, no dreams. In my entire life before treatment, I could count on five fingers all the dreams I'd ever remembered. But under pressure from Dr Priestly, I promptly began remembering them, much to my amazement.

Not only at the outset but through nearly the full course of treatment I had read virtually nothing in the bible. Yet, the dreams I brought Dr Priestly often invoked religious imagery. I dreamt of Moses on the Mount, of dancing with Christ, of stigmata—in visceral ways that nearly took my breath away. But it wasn't until late in treatment that the question arose in my mind: where did these religious images come from?

One conclusion was that psychoanalysis and the bible tell the same story: the story of human development. Looking back, it seems a natural part of the treatment process—working on the formation of the self, the development of the child within, birth, rebirth, the growth of the moral and spirited self— that spiritual metaphors might spontaneously occur.

While everyone knows that the interpretation of dreams is central to psychoanalysis, the role of dreams and visions in the bible is arguably just as important. In fact, it might be said that the bible itself is one long dream. Perhaps we are all dreaming about the bible without realizing it.

Thinking makes me nervous. So on the infrequent occasions that I do it, I do it slowly. But the more I thought about the dreams I'd had in treatment, the more it seemed that psychoanalysis parallels the story of Exodus: hard-hearted Pharaoh stands for the "bad mother," a bully man-in-a-skirt, he's an indecipherable Egyptian sphinx mother; while Moses is the remote father as well as the midwife of the children (in a sense, he's akin not only to the psychoanalyst but also the *transforming* patient who learns how to bear the child within herself). And the children, the children of Israel, are the understandably resistant patients—impatient, recalcitrant, skeptical, backsliding, confused, and exhausted from the birth pangs of Passover and forty years of wilderness wandering, striving to be released from inner bondage and borne into a better life, craving to reach the promised land of love.

Carl Jung noted "the peculiar fact that the dream is the divine voice and messenger and yet an unending source of trouble." I couldn't have agreed more about the trouble. I constantly fled from my dreams. I constantly felt betrayed by them—sizzled and fried in their saucy reduction. In the beginning, they'd seemed like thunder bolting into me from somewhere outside. But later, I determined that, behind my back, Dr Priestly had formed a rather special relationship (a covenant?) with my dreams. Together, they were having some kind of fling, an outrageous affair during which she snuck in through the back door of my head and somehow turned them on. And then somehow those wanton dreams took me by the hand like a mother—a wild and ruthless mother who rattled me up and flung me around like a rag doll baby (all of which was approximately my sense of how, in actuality, my own mother had behaved and treated me during my childhood)

Of course one could surmise that the religious imagery in my dreams was due to the strong impact of my particular analyst, Dr Priestly, whose name so aptly befits her. I believe that my dream imagery was, at least in part, a result of my susceptibility to her influence, to the influence of her consulting room with its sacred paintings of Christs and Madonnas, and to my catching what she *un*consciously transmitted. In this sense, I feel that my dreams were *our* dreams, a kind of transporting duet between patient and analyst—a series of riffs and tiffs and love songs and catches.

Still, despite my lack of religious upbringing and despite the fact that I am not a believer in normative religions, it seems I entered treatment strongly predisposed to the grandeur of religious imagery. It was from the outset that I brought Dr Priestly dreams filled with such imagery. And throughout my years of evening sessions, I struggled to be 'blessed' by her. I fought tooth and nail, I fought like Jacob with his Angel, to wrest, wrangle, extract, or otherwise elicit (all quite unsuccessfully) from her the title of most wonderful patient, a chosen one. More accurately, I fought tooth and nail to become true to myself. I longed to be as true to myself as I felt she was to herself, as full of spirit in the best sense—to possess what struck me as her brand of generosity of spirit, her warmth and wisdom and hospitality, her unconventionality, her brave soul. I suppose that in the playhouse of my imagination I dreamt that she stood for—I **needed** her to stand in for—a cavalcade of living myths, of culture heroes who I could look up to the way a child looks up to tall tales, godlike parents. I think I felt that if she could stand for all this, then I—in the shadow of her wings—I, by association, would be the recipient of such powerful and beneficent grand standing.

And so she stood. She stood for my varied notions of heroism even as she withstood my idealizations, balking and bashing. And all the while, she stood by me helping me to resurrect myself. She stood up for me, for the lost parts—the thwarted parts—of me. She had an enduring faith—not only in her own ability to teach but also in her patients' capacity to respond.

For me, coming of age in psychoanalysis, Dr Priestly was my midwife, my poet of riddles, my rabbi. Of course, one's unconscious mind "does its thing." Its inner force is incredibly powerful—as powerful as a god—and perhaps more potent than any relationship. But I couldn't have done the work on myself alone. It was Dr Priestly's fierce insight and unrelenting insistence that helped compel me to face reality. Both stranger and angel—paradoxically elliptical and confronting, tormenting and uplifting, she delivered to me the message of what it means to be human, what it means to join with others in the human community.

Near the end of treatment, as the trance of treatment was ending, when at long last I started wondering where the biblical imagery in my dreams came from, I began reading small portions of the bible and was utterly startled by how many of its elements, previously unknown to me, seemed to mirror my dreams. And it was then that I read that most fascinating book, *The Book of J*, in which the literary critic Harold Bloom had this to say about the bible's first author, the J writer:

“In Jerusalem, nearly three thousand years ago, an unknown author composed a work that has formed the spiritual consciousness of much of the world ever since. We possess only a fragmentary text of that work, embedded within what we call Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers.... My assumption is that J (the J writer) was...an immensely sophisticated, highly placed member of the Solomonic elite, enlightened and ironic. My primary surmise is that J was a woman (and) essentially a comic writer....It is one of the multitude of extraordinary ironies concerning J that this author upon whom Western religious moralism ultimately must rely is herself the least moralistic of writers.”

How very thrilling—because if the author of the bible is a woman, maybe God, if there is a God, is a woman. And all of this is to say that the deepest strand of the bible was written by an artist.

And reading *The Book of J*, I felt that the J writer and Dr Priestly had certain qualities in common: nobility, elliptical irony, originality and artistry. And later, as I began reading about Jesus of Nazareth who, as Harold Bloom put it, was “a poet of riddles,” I could see that he was an extraordinary artist, a fiercely here-and-now teacher and healer, a rabbi whose words are fire. And this too reminded me of Dr Priestly.

As I thought more about it, I could see that the J writer and Jesus of Nazareth had something very much in common: an unflinching capacity to show us who we are. To hold up the mirror to ourselves and say: Look, now look.

And this also is a quality Dr Priestly possesses. The capacity of a warm and gifted human being, a psychoanalyst who can't stop helping save her patients—by seeing who they are and by imaginatively conceiving who they have the capacity to become—by helping them dream of coming to life, of being pregnant with life, helping them struggle against the threat of a miscarried life.

Preface on Structure, Illustrations & Sources

Each set of left-and-right-hand facing pages (each spread) in this book is intended as a unit—with the left hand page referring to something scriptural and universal, and the right hand referring to the specific experience of my psychoanalysis. One might say the left functions as a kind of Greek Chorus in relation to the right. And perhaps the right—while presenting a highly personal portrait, occasionally acts as commentary, as midrash, in relation to the left.

The visual images that punctuate the text are miniature perhaps because they represent the long ago faraway world-in-little of childhood. This seems only fitting since much of psychoanalysis involves the child within the self, a “shrinking back” in one’s head, to the child inside. And too, much of our religious heritage springs from the childhood of humanity.

At the same time, something in these tiny images feels to me like a strange cross between the miniature pictures found in medieval **Books of Hours** and the illustrated poetry of **archy and mehitabel**—archy being the dung beetle-ish creature who processes words with his entire body but who’s so small he can barely stretch far enough to type in upper case or use punctuation—and mehitabel, the alley cat who claims to have been Cleopatra in a former life.

The dreams presented (chronologically) in my text occasionally appear in hexameter. Although I obviously don’t dream in hexameter, I confess to having previously experienced most of my dreams as a *hex*. Having learned to better tolerate them over the years, I’ve subsequently re-written most of them in prose.

My biblical sources are of a magpie variety: among them are **The Book of J** by Harold Bloom with David Rosenberg’s translation; William Tyndale’s translation of the **New Testament** (Worms edition of 1526 in original spelling, The British Library); the Soncino edition of **The Pentateuch**; and the text of the **Gospel of Thomas (The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholar’s Version)**.

A complete list of sources, biblical and otherwise, appears at the end of this book.