10-2005

A Boy's Dream

Dan Dunn

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/inscape

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/inscape/vol25/iss2/6
I began praying for the interpretation of dreams when I was nineteen. In earlier years, bedtime meant that point at which squirming and flying and fear commenced until the switch was flipped in the morning and my “other” life would start over. There were musical climaxes, checker-faced men, leprechauns with violins, things that shouldn’t ever leave the ground, red balloons, gerbils I’ve let die, mermaids, and of course anything associated with Scooby-Doo. The mere chaos of everything made me wonder in later years if there were ever any physical implications as to why I wet my bed almost into my teens.

I often forget dreams. They are fascinating creatures because they can live and be mastered, or slouch and rise at will just beyond our reach. Some are goals we strive for voluntarily, those that are conscious goals or aspirations we feel a movement towards. The other side of dreams, the involuntary dreams, happen in that moment of sleep when it seems reality ceases or is clarified. For the goals we set while we are awake there are processes and procedures to follow. But once in awhile God sends dreams in the night that embrace our reality in order for our ultimate dreams to come true.

My dream map (what I’ve nicknamed my personal history of dreams) is diverse and parallels the vicissitudes of my life. With time I realized that some dreams call us forth to greater maturity, while others are disguised diversions. Sometimes a dream comes along that carries with it a greater purpose, such as a prophecy. Usually though, sweaty palms and what I like to call “random frivolousness” define most nights. In any form, even in the odd form of a solicitous kiss from a seventy-five-year-old African woman, dreams are intriguing. I developed an apprehension for each night’s ups or downs, and deeply desired the gift that unites dreams with reality.
Someone told me that if you retain hope in trying to think about things that you want to dream about before you fall asleep, the thought processes would naturally continue into R.E.M. That didn’t seem to work really, because girls turned into pumpkins and my striving for musical inspiration turned into the murderous “Blob” from that classic ’50s B-movie. I always jumped far out of bed when I woke up in the middle of the night, fearing that the grape jellylike creature was anxiously poised just beneath me, ready to consume my ankles. But it was all illusion, like many of those vivid dreams that seem so real to touch. Our dreams mature with us, thanks to a God who cares that we find respite from such villainy, and we sprout up inexplicably like trees ever reaching for the sky.

A boy’s life picks up as he gives it up. So it is with dreams. The more I de-centered myself, the more options my mind had for creation beyond the tight circle I drew around myself. In the MTC, my companions told me stories of how the field across the street from the barrage of buildings we stayed in was filled with invisible devils, how every window at the MTC was guarded by soldier angels with swords and white robes that flowed majestically in the wind. The legend was that someone saw it in a dream. Sometimes I’d hear scratching at our window that would wake me up in the middle of the night, causing whispers in my mind:

“Angels? Or devils!”

Of course it just turned out to be a tree. My mindset was such that I believed anything spectacular and spoken by a reliable source. I guess it didn’t matter if I believed a reliable source could be embodied in a nineteen-year-old budding missionary companion just as naïve as I was. Talk of nightmares about girlfriends marrying best friends or strangers they had known just a few weeks often filled our free time. Squeaky, shaking beds and sweaty foreheads sometimes plagued the night. When all the training and spiritual cramming was finished, the most remarkable experience was a dream that I had immediately before I left.

People push empty shopping carts, as if expecting someone to fill them. Faces pass in front of my eyes. A slew of strangers, mostly foreigners: Africans and Latinos. Their eyes drawn out, longing for something to happen.

These faces stuck with me until I started recognizing some of them on my mission to Québec. They would pop up as random people in the streets, people who were interested in our message, or Church members who invited us over for tortière and sugar pie. One little African girl began to reappear in dreams I had just weeks before I was transferred to the area she lived in. She was the center of a dream that involved a group of other kids.

Little children line up to be seated in a room in our chapel. We teach them how to be superheroes. All are dressed up in their favorite capes, hoods, and masks, but as they learn from us, they exchange clothes for white baptism jumpsuits. One girl keeps following me around, not necessarily by foot, but everywhere I turn she is before my eyes.
Although I knew I wouldn’t always have dreams in answer to prayers, I found out more about how God has a personality and recognizes the fact that I have one too; he spoke so I could understand. It’s a rare blessing that I know I can’t control, but that comes as a clear manifestation that someone’s listening.

Straightforward dreams that come to positive fruition in reality are easy to interpret. Nightmares are the tough nuts to crack. Often the darker side of the night springs from subconscious fears that may or may not always apply to our present condition. Past fears, developed in childhood for any number of reasons, surface sporadically and can be taken at face value or brushed off as conquered. Reoccurring nightmares tend to arise when belief is founded on a lack of knowledge about a certain event or relationship. Personally, and so it may be for everyone, I didn’t find this out until I was ready.

My childhood was obscured in some ways. Life was full, but unknowingly repressed. I lived happily and peacefully, despite the inevitable knock of sadness at our family’s doorstep. My youth is reminiscent of an item on a conveyor belt, moving along while adding all the right parts: smiles, shine, and compliments. By no means was I a cookie-cutter child, but there was surely an element of lackadaisical attitude. Looming over these carefree years were night-visions of steel—large structures that squealed and roared through my head. These nightmares continued on up to my twenties, but I never knew how to view them.

There’s a large roller coaster and I’m on it. Sometimes there are other passengers, but their faces are blurred. A thick fog is in the air, so much so that it mixes with my mood and causes a feeling of overcast. Roller coasters never boast heights too intimidating or spins and loops too numerous for my tastes in reality, but this one is different. It seems abnormally plain, no corkscrews or sheer drop-offs, just a car going towards unfinished tracks.

These nightmares were like sealed pockets of information that really didn’t surface until I returned from my mission. The mission breezed by and I clung to the memories that I had made among a people so in need of me and I of them. I came home with high hopes that a life much like the one I had left two years prior would await me. Expectations were for a life that was easy, one that was full of other stops along the conveyor belt. The next stop was meeting my wife.

Relationships presented themselves initially, but I stumbled for two years after my homecoming with several opportunities to commit. Life was much larger than I expected, much deeper and filled with uncertainties. Every time I would get close to a girl, feelings I described as “negative swellings” that seemed to be deeply anchored within hindered any thought of moving on. It was surreal. The choice was mine, but the consensus in my mind attributed complete control to unknowns. Instinctively, for an LDS male that is, I figured God would tell me when I could get married and who was right. I remember
pining for answers a lot, not knowing why God wouldn’t let me choose. Nightmares came like a deluge. The roller coasters spilled over into the days.

I often found myself in a spot I had designated as my own, staring at a tree indignantly, longing for answers. Usually people just climb or chop them, or pass them by, choosing to either gain a sense of awe at their miracles or remain in ignorance of their majesty. When I met this one I noticed its deeply grooved bark was worn and blackened with weather. Crispy brown leaves had gathered around its trunk, but its branches still bore alternating shades of golds and greens. I came to stand with it in a clearing that allowed sufficient respite from distraction. I came to purge with it. I heard its leaves falling all around me, heavy with beads of rain. Some still roared above like the ocean would if it were in the sky, hanging on with their stems despite the strong breeze. I wondered what was going on inside though. I learned about how trees work once, but I forgot.

Truth was here somewhere; in the leaves, at the base of the trunk maybe. Perhaps I could find a meaningful voice in the sprigs fashioned reasonably in circular motion around the tree, but I really wanted silence. Consolation about something of this magnitude could come only this way, I told myself. Perhaps tomorrow my situation would improve.

Surely enough, when I least expected it, I met a girl. Her name was Stephanie. I proceeded with caution this time, but inevitably negative intimations came again from a source I labeled “God.” I resolved this time to not let go of someone I deemed worthy of loving, but I still didn’t know exactly how to hold on. We tried and failed. Often we cried together. Months passed without speaking. During that time my anxieties dictated that to go forward after feeling so wrong about things was not the answer. God probably knew that I could be shaken back to my senses only in his own way.

One night I fell asleep debating whether I should ever see her again. She had offered to pick me up from a flight back into Salt Lake from Oakland, where I was working for the summer. I fell asleep unresolved:

A gigantic mural, a bas-relief sculpted into an immense wall stands to my left as I walk towards a meeting I came to attend. I stop to look at the scene and marvel at the intricacies of detail. The stone depicts a scene that I am told represents “The Lord’s Side of the Line.” People are sculpted throughout, but their expressions and actions determine on which side of the thick diagonal line they stand. Choirs and angelic beings, smiles and joyful expressions define the left side of my view, while false priests with malicious faces, demonic rites and wicked practices pile up on the right. I soak in the images for a moment and then start towards the building where I am supposed to meet someone. Through the double-doors I see a modest auditorium where sporadic seats are filled by those in attendance and a speaker stands behind the podium. The occasion feels familiar, like a church meeting. The left aisle is nearly empty, but I can make out a silhouette in a chair down a few rows. As I approach the person, I sit next to her and she puts her arm around me. It’s Stephanie.
I flew home the next day to see her. Most of the conversation was about whether our hindrance was due to the question of if we were right for each other or simply my own anxiety. Time dictated to me that I was the cause. For weeks I sought wisdom from teachers, speakers, and scripture, all the while fighting off a feeling that grew more intense as I drew nearer to the truth. I clung to her as I realized I needed to delve into my past. Although uncovering the mysteries of a childhood that seemed a blur brought uncomfortable times, I was accompanied by a much-needed optimism.

The images began to sharpen in my mind. The facets of my father’s life were disturbing and led to his premature death, but these facets were never explored, or rather considered by my psyche. I had no idea that these details would lead to deep anxiety until they could be sorted through and purged. The reason for my anxieties was basically deep obscurity. I was kept from the truth about my family for ten years of my life.

I remember writing a paper once about my dad and how his death had never bothered me. I reported how I never used his absence as an excuse for anything, I never questioned it. The scene of a little thirteen-year-old boy at a funeral, dressed in a green suit and looking down at his dad’s coffin with a dry, emotionless face replayed in my mind sometimes, but life was otherwise too wonderful to imagine it any other way. I felt nothing then. I was too young to understand, too young to guess, too young to imagine what was wrong.

I heard that my father was a good man. He directed and produced theatrical productions at the university in our hometown. He did some good things. Often, he would let me play Legos in his office and he would make good lunches before we went to the library. I don’t hold too many memories, but I know he bought me a Game Boy once for Christmas and I cracked the screen, so we sent in for a replacement. That was probably the year before he bought me my pet gerbil with the three-story maze that it eventually broke its neck maneuvering around in.

His life remained a mystery to me, as well as his death. I grew up in the Church loving my surroundings, passionate and confident, with what I thought was the model of a full, wonderful life. I was extremely optimistic about everyone. I dreamed about becoming a great musician someday, someone who would make waves in the world. Although I lived under the supervision and care of my mother, I never lacked for a father figure. I never knew I needed one until I discovered why I didn’t have one.

The summer before my senior year in college became the summer that actually provided the chance to change my life. My friends and I would always guess before every summer how our lives would metamorphose, usually alluding to the typical find-a-girl/land-a-dream-job conversation. That summer I actually landed a nightmare job peddling door-to-door in the burning heat of California, but I did one thing right—I asked Stephanie to marry me.
I felt great that day. The temple was especially bright, the sky especially blue, her smile especially inviting, but the next day it all went away. I was back to feelings of darkness. That same week I was working as a counselor at EFY, where I met some people that smiled warmly and shook hands firmly. There was so much exchanged euphoria that it was hard for me to fit in. On Tuesday I proposed to her. The very next day we were both looking at each other in the car with tears and dark feelings. We could have easily given up and abandoned all possibility of even remaining friends if Thursday night, after some more difficulty, I wasn't sitting in a meeting that came as an answer to all these inconsistencies.

The speaker was testifying of the Atonement and its proposal for change. He stopped his remarks in the middle and surveyed the crowd that had been fixed on his comments. My prayer for a miracle the night before surfaced in my memory at that moment because I was searching for something that distinguished itself in his remarks. I began to see one unroll before my eyes. He explained that he was prompted to say something to one of us. I had never spoken to this man about my anxieties before, but he went on to disclose a parallel experience to mine. Before he married, he had to overcome fear that came from having an abusive father. I thought about my dad. I knew he wasn't abusive, but I didn't know much else. A sign that came from heaven with such impenetrable force that it pierced the ceiling and planted itself firmly in the ground in front of my face reading, “Dan, this is your sign,” couldn’t be any clearer than what I got. I needed to talk to him in private.

The man was kind. He told me that until I found out the reasons of my parent’s separation, I probably wouldn't be able to progress. That seemed easy enough to understand, just too simple I suppose for such a flippant mind as I had. I was expecting some deep, doctrinal answer to wipe away all fear and set me straight on the plain way. After a phone call to my mother and some serious words, I knew the answers were much deeper and out of reach at that point than I had thought.

Visits to the tree became an everyday ritual. I knew before long that I wasn't looking for anything—it was the void that I needed. Back behind me, people shuffled between destinations as robots on fixed courses. I wondered if anything was crossing their minds at all, if they felt sharp pain or deep joy. But then I remembered how I had always lived before these few sad moments. My eyes fell apologetically on the tree planted solidly in front of me. How was I to know the inner workings of such a majestic figure? Something so stoic and rooted on the exterior must have hidden reasons for being such. I needed those reasons.

I always knew my dad died from a strange disease called AIDS. Back then, the disease had not reached the level of worldwide epidemic and everybody thought of it in terms of a horrible, new scourge. For reasons every boy deserves to hold sacred, I always gave my dad the benefit of the doubt.
when I heard stories of how people contracted it. I was too young to guess that my dad had lived a very different life. I don’t know a lot of details, but he was abused as a child, along with his brothers and sisters so that confusion resulted on his side of the family. He had married and divorced once before my mother, which fact I never knew, and then married my mom and divorced for the same reason again. Once I knew he was a homosexual, ten years after the fact, a lifetime of peace was swallowed up in sad moments of surfaced repression.

Fortunately, friends are golden in hard times. Sadly enough, the day after I spoke to my mom on the phone, I left Stephanie for three weeks to go on tour in Nauvoo. Stephanie gave me a note that day:

Don’t be afraid of that roller coaster in your nightmares . . . some sharp pains . . . your joys shall be lived on greater heights than the depths of your sorrows.

I read this note over and over through the stressful times of the trying Nauvoo weeks, sorting out thoughts and gaining a greater perspective on life and love. I couldn’t help but think of the trials the Saints had in that sacred place, and how appropriate that that place and period would hold similar memories for me. I had to wonder though why she would mention my nightmare so specifically. I almost felt like she had some gift to know my life so intimately considering that we had known each other only for a couple of months. A few months later, she told me that she had felt strongly prompted to write those words and to remind me of powerful truths when we had phone conversations in Nauvoo. Ironically, we later discovered that we came from similar families.

As clouds began to clear up and I gained my life back in greater form, a thought came: When I was little and our family used to go to Indiana Beach on vacation, there was a roller coaster there called “The Galaxy” which my father always wanted to ride with me. We often fed enormous catfish in a sealed-off portion of the lake near the ride. Then the inevitable order of events after gorging the catfish was walking towards the coaster and debating whether to ride. I remember standing there, my head up to his waist, approaching the wooden beast in fear. Nothing he could say could move me to ride it with him. Somehow my dreams transformed this tangible image from my childhood into the representation of my knowledge of him, and there it was; I found the missing tracks in my nightmare. I didn’t know that there was a reason why I didn’t have a close relationship with him, that I couldn’t ever quite understand him or look up to him. Without those tracks in place, the obscure reason why my parents divorced, my mind could not move into an eternal relationship regardless of the best intentions of my heart.

The remedy was aligning my nightmares with reality, and then came catharsis. The months of purging and recovering from shock made me realize
that coming out of a trial is like carrying a backpack through the Uintas for miles and setting it down once the peak is attained, only to realize that you still feel it for several moments even though you see it on the ground, completely removed. Muscles adjust and the sensation of carrying the pack slowly fades as you relax and heal. Possibly the best way to do it is to have someone share the load. That way when you get to the top, you aren’t alone and too weak to descend. I don’t think I would have made it up or down without Stephanie.

Learning about your father helps you see why you do things the way you do. The difficulty in growing up with a man that you have to see through filtered lenses is discovering the positive qualities that you may have inherited. However, I grew to appreciate that my father gave me sensitivity, a sense of passion however channeled, and creativity. In giving me creativity, he actually helped me find ways to vent while grieving his life. I wrote a poem about how difficult the news of his life and death was to ingest:

A father’s figure:
Such as one I never saw,
Fades and appears.
It cannot be touched.
I purge and plead and find its features.

Slouch,
Stand,
Rise to its height!
Discern its dance rippling through water.
In,
Out,
It breathes and moves to grip your heart.

Thoughts boil and pop.
Then one refuses and all are bathed in it.

Those were dark times, everything relating to the vices of his life. But I learned to be patient while overcoming the racing of a boy’s mind harrowed up by his father’s problems. Honoring our father or our mother, regardless of what they did, isn’t just good advice, it’s necessary for our own peace. My father gave me the right to life in the gospel of Jesus Christ. He gave me a creative mind that helped me woo my wife with music and discover a deeper reason for cherishing true love.

I wrote a song for my burden-sharer, my future eternal companion:

Bells will ring and we’ll sing with an unending hope into forever,
And you’ll kneel to see the stars as they burst
As we drink from the fountain of life,
Free as it comes to us.
Dreams come and go, there’s no controlling them, unless we harness their meaning. I always hoped and prayed for love, and it seemed so lucky in the end, but it ultimately came because I chose to follow my dreams.