

A Time to Dream
Rev. Dave Hunter
Unitarian Universalists of Gettysburg
March 27, 2016

Here's a story about a young boy, Samuel, and an old man, Eli.

2 One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place.

3 The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was sleeping in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was located.

By way of background, the boy Samuel here would grow up to be the prophet Samuel in the Bible. The story is from First Samuel, chapter 3. Eli is the priest, who's grown old and is practically blind. The young boy, Samuel, is his servant. How Samuel got to be his servant is quite a story; I'll strip it down the best I can.

Fertility problems and conflicts are common in the Bible. Hannah, a married woman, was upset that she couldn't get pregnant, while her husband's *other* wife had *lots* of children. As a result, Hannah, in a prayer, makes the reckless promise that if she gets pregnant, she'll dedicate the child to the LORD. Her prayer is answered. She has the kid – that's Samuel – and as soon as he's weaned, she drops him off at the temple.

This story could be the basis for a sermon on family values, and on the Bible as the foundation for morality, but that's not what I have in mind this morning. You might note some parallels between Samuel and Jesus. That's relevant: it's Easter after all, but that's not my topic either.

What I do want to share with you this morning are dreams, four dreams – dreams that can have a message for us today. Dreams are both real and unreal, which makes them a fitting topic for Easter Sunday.

Let's go back to the story of Samuel. Thanks to his mother's rash promise, Samuel is stuck being the priest's servant, from earliest childhood. Eli and Samuel have both gone to bed. The story continues:

4 Then the LORD called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and Samuel answered, "Here I am."

5 And he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." But Eli said, "I didn't call you; go back and lie down." So Samuel went back to bed.

Samuel obviously doesn't recognize the voice of the LORD, and thinks it must be Eli calling him, since no one else is around. When Eli tells Samuel that he doesn't need him, Samuel goes back to bed.

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6 The LORD called again, "Samuel! Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But Eli said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again" [and stop bothering me.]

8 The LORD called Samuel a third time, "Samuel! Samuel!" and Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me. You must have called me." Then Eli understood that the LORD was calling the boy.

9 So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you again, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

10 Now the LORD came yet again to the place where Samuel was sleeping and called as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."
[1 Sam. 3:1-6, 8-10, NRSV, revised]

This is the story of Samuel's call to prophecy. As I understand it, it's the story of a dream, a vivid dream. Later on, the adult Samuel, as a prophet, speaks on behalf of God to the people of Israel. He's instrumental in the founding of the kingdom and in the selection of the first two kings, Saul and David.

What's in this story for us? Can we extract any lessons from it? I'll try.

The LORD came to Samuel and was calling his name, and Samuel didn't catch on. That reminds us that sometimes it's hard to figure out what to do, or what to become. It takes some effort, but it's worth it. Samuel had some help. Eli was older and wiser; he figured out what was going on. We, too, should not hesitate to consult with others. We don't have to figure out everything completely by ourselves.

But our skeptical side responds to the story as well. How did Eli and then Samuel know that the voice Samuel heard was really that of the LORD? People make mistakes about that sort of thing. We have to use our head – don't abandon common sense; don't abandon judgment and reason. *Do* consult with others.

But some messages – call them messages from God, if you'd like – some messages are so clear, so persuasive, that we *must* pay attention to them. I'm not going to spend the rest of my time ranting and raving about the climate crisis, or the plight of the Syrians, or the plight of those living in Flint or in Detroit, but it's time for us servants to listen.

* * *

Here's another dream. It's Dmitri's dream from Dostoyesky's novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. Somehow I managed to read this 940 page epic when I was a freshman in college. I don't claim to remember it that well, and I certainly haven't reread it lately, but I think Dmitri's dream is worth recalling from time to time.

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Dmitri is the oldest of the four Karamazov brothers. He's badly treated as a child, and the life he leads as an adult is one of debauchery and violence. He returns home to his father, Fyodor, to claim the property that he believes is rightfully his. Fyodor is murdered, and Dmitri is the prime suspect. The old man had mistreated Dmitri, and his other sons, and most everyone else. Dmitri has the opportunity and the motive and the means.

Here's what happens at the conclusion of a hearing relating to the murder.

Mitya – that's Dmitri's nickname – Mitya got up, moved from his chair to the corner by the curtain, lay down on a large chest covered with a rug, and instantly fell asleep.

He had a strange dream, utterly out of keeping with the place and the time.

He was driving somewhere in the steppes, where he had been stationed long ago, and a peasant was driving him in a cart with a pair of horses, through snow and sleet.

Dostoyevsky here describes a scene of abject poverty and desolation.

“Why are they crying? Why are they crying?” Mitya asked, as they dashed gaily by.

“*It's the babe,*” answered the driver, “*the babe is weeping.*”

“But *why* is it weeping?” Mitya persisted stupidly, “why are its little arms bare? Why don't they wrap it up?”

“*The babe's cold, its little clothes are frozen and don't warm it.*”

“But why is it? Why?” foolish Mitya still persisted.

“*Why, they're poor people, burnt out. They've no bread.*”

“No, no.” Mitya, as it were, still did not understand. “Tell me why are people poor? Why is the steppe barren? Why don't they hug each other and kiss? Why don't they sing songs of joy? Why don't they feed the babe?”

And he felt a passion of pity, such as he had never known before, a passion of pity rising in his heart, and he had an urge to cry out that he wanted to do something for them all, so that the babe should weep no more, so that no one should shed tears again from that moment, and he wanted to do it at once, all of it at once, regardless of all obstacles, with all the recklessness of the Karamazovs.

[And then his nap was over.]

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“Who put that pillow under my head? Who was so kind?” he cried, with a sort of ecstatic gratitude, opening his eyes, as though some great kindness had been shown him.

“I’ve had a good dream, gentlemen,” he said in a strange voice, with a new light, as of joy, in his face.” [book 9, chapter 8, edited]

Dmitri is subsequently convicted for his father’s murder – although in fact he is innocent, innocent of *that* crime – but the dream marks a turning point in his life. The new Dmitri is a sympathetic, transformed character.

What are we to make of this? I don’t know of anyone who’s ever been transformed by a dream – that doesn’t seem likely at all. But realism isn’t the point here. What I find in this story is the possibility of transformation – no matter what one has done, no matter how irredeemable a person seems to be, change is possible. We are all people of inherent worth and dignity. Don’t give up on anyone, no matter what. Especially yourself.

What led to Dmitri’s conversion experience? Did he just happen to have a dream which finally touched his heart and opened him to human suffering, opened him up to the reality that he’s not the only one, that there are other people out there, and that they’re suffering? Or was it the pillow? Some kind, unidentified person put a pillow under his head. Did the pillow influence the dream, or influence Dmitri’s response to it? Or was it Dmitri’s recognition of the kindness that had been done for him – a kindness done for him without his requesting it, without expecting anything in return – was it the recognition of that kindness that led to his understanding of the dream, and thus to his transformation?

Of course, I don’t have the answers to all these questions. But I will suggest that small acts of kindness, to strangers, make the world a better place.

Dmitri has had a good dream, a dream that turns his life around, but what about the starving villagers, what about the crying babe? They’re still cold and hungry and miserable.

And that leads me to the third dream.

* * *

When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir.

You may recognize here the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. He had a dream on behalf of the American people, on behalf of *all* of us.

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This promissory note was the promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men – King would certainly have included women if he were speaking today – [that all] would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy;

Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice;

Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood;

Now is the time to make justice a reality for *all* God’s children.¹

Martin Luther King spoke these words more than fifty years ago – “now is the time,” he said, in 1963. It was already nine years after the Supreme Court, in its decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, after the Court had told the nation, “now is the time” – the time to end segregation, inequality, and racial oppression.

But here we are in 2016, in 2016, and the beloved community of King’s dream is still, still just a dream.

In particular, we, as a society, we still leave blacks behind. Having an African American president has not changed this reality. Look at the data for employment, education, housing, health, incarceration. Blacks are still way behind whites.² And a lot of whites aren’t doing that well either – just consider the support for Donald Trump.

I could go on, but you get the point. This is not the occasion to explore how we got into this mess, or how we might get out of it, but it makes me very sad, and angry, too. I spent more than 30 years, as a lawyer, in the struggle for equality, and this is what I have to show for it?

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches That Changed the World* (James M. Washington, ed., HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), pp. 101-06, “I Have a Dream.”

² For example, a few years ago, among black male high school dropouts in their 20’s, 72% did not have a job. The comparable rate for whites was 34%. And more than half of all black men do not finish high school. And that was before the great recession that we’re still struggling to escape. Here’s another discouraging item: among black men in their 20’s who did not attend college, 21% were behind bars. [New York *Times*, 3/20/06, pp. A1, A18] Unemployment among black teens is 41%. [NPR, *All Things Considered*, 4/2/10] Among black men, aged 20 to 34, one in nine is behind bars. [Bill Moyers Journal, PBS, 4/2/10, citing Wash. Post, 2/29/08, p. A1]

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But, obviously, this isn't about me, nor is it just about the young black men who are disconnected from the mainstream. This is about American society generally; this is about all of us. Our nation cannot be considered healthy, our future cannot be secure, so long as so many are disconnected, alienated, left out, and left behind.

So I say to you, my friends, [King continued,] that even though we must face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed – we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men – and women – are created equal.

And King concluded his speech on that summer day before the Lincoln Memorial, in Washington, D.C.–

And when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and hamlet, from every state and city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children – black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Catholics and Protestants – will be able to join hands and to sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, we are free at last."

* * *

Martin Luther King's dream of a beloved community, of a land of equality and freedom, is still – a dream. And this brings me to another dream, our fourth and final dream of the morning – another dream that is still a dream, not yet a reality.

It is Easter Sunday, so you probably know where I'm headed.

Jesus had an idea; he had a dream. He called it the kingdom of God. We might call it, with King, the beloved community, or the realm of peace and justice. Jesus saw this kingdom so vividly, he felt it so passionately, that he said it had already arrived. Well, maybe it had, but only as an embryo, an embryo with a gestation period of indefinite duration.

Jesus was responding to the oppression of the Roman Empire. The Jewish kingdom had come under the domination of the Romans the century before. In an empire, military and economic power is used to shape the world in the interest of the imperial state.³ The interests of the oppressed peoples are irrelevant.

But Jesus was not so much focused on the expulsion of the Roman rulers, and on the overthrow of their local collaborators, as he was on what kind of society should we strive for. He

³ See M. Borg & J. Crossan, *The Last Week* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), p. 213.

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avored nonviolence; he favored generosity; he favored acceptance of all, even those who are generally despised, even those on the margins of society.

With such an agenda, can we be surprised that the powers that were had to have him removed? They not only had to eliminate him, but they had to make an example of him, to warn the Jewish masses of the danger of stepping out of line. Jesus did not expect to be allowed to live for long. He anticipated that the end might come in Jerusalem.

But his dream did not end with his crucifixion, with his death. His ideas lived on, influencing millions, inspiring, among others, Martin Luther King.

After Jesus's execution, some of his followers had visions of Jesus, a Jesus who spoke to them, who told them not to give up, but to spread his message. Some who had not been his followers, like Paul, also had such visions. The gospel writers put this in concrete terms, of God's victory over death, in the resurrection of Jesus, but we can strip away the mythological layer and still find inspiration and power in the vision, in the dream.

* * *

Let us, on this Easter Sunday, find strength and nourishment in all of these dreams.

Samuel, in his dream, heard what he and his master Eli understood to be the voice of God. Now, most of us rarely hear the voice of God speaking to us, and I expect we're quite suspicious of those who claim that God speaks to them. To me, it's interesting to note that in the verse immediately before where I started reading, the author of the Book of Samuel explains, "the word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread." [1 Sam. 3:1b] The same could be said today. If we are to hear the voice of God, we must listen to the poor and oppressed; we must listen to our abused Mother Earth, crying out to us to come to our senses.

Dmitri Karamazov is a fictional character, he didn't really live, but he can remind us of the transforming power of love, and we can realize that the poor people, and the cold, hungry babes, exist not only in dreams, but in our own world.

Martin Luther King, Jr., was taken from us when he should have had decades of life ahead. Would that he were an elder statesman today! But his message lives on. His moral power has not been diminished by death.

And, finally, whether you think Jesus was a real person, a man of myth and legend, or the personification of God, or a little of each, we're not done with him yet, and he is not done with us. Amen.