

The Religious Content of Dreams: A New Scientific Foundation

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Abstract Dream content is meaningfully related to waking life religiosity, so much so that reading a person's dream reports "blindly," without any other personal information or associations from the dreamer, can reveal with surprising accuracy his or her basic waking attitude toward religion and spirituality. Two long-term dream journals are analyzed in this manner, and the results demonstrate that dream content is an accurate reflection of a person's religious beliefs, practices, and experiences. The significance of this for pastoral psychologists lies not in specific new techniques of dream interpretation but more fundamentally in supporting the practice of paying attention to dreams in the first place. The goal of the article is to build a bridge between pastoral psychological interest in dreams and the latest findings in the scientific study of dreaming. Contrary to the assumption that religion and science inevitably conflict with each other, dreaming offers an area of potential religion–science convergence.

Keywords Dreams · Religion · Spirituality · Science · Content analysis

Introduction

The content of dreams has been quantitatively examined in relation to several factors such as gender, age, mental health, personality, occupation, cultural identity, and political ideology. In each of these cases, strong correlations have been found between patterns in dream content and the variables in question (Bulkeley 2002; Domhoff 1996, 2003; Foulkes 1999; Gregor 2001; Grey and Kalsched 1971; King 2006; Kramer 2000; Lortie-Lussier et al. 1992; Schredl 2003; Strauch and Meier 1996; Yamanaka et al. 1982). Taken together, this research supports the idea that dreams accurately reflect the most emotionally important concerns, activities, and experiences of the individual's waking life (for an earlier anthropological argument along the same lines, see Eggan 1952).

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These findings call into question the dominant 20th century theories of dream formation and function. Freud's sharp distinction between the manifest and latent content of dreaming (the former disguised and distorted, the latter wishful and infantile; Freud 1965) cannot account for the pervasive consistencies between manifest dreams and current waking realities. Jung's notion that dreams provide unconscious compensation for the imbalances of consciousness (Jung 1974) does not square easily with the finding that in most dreams people act, think, and feel very much as they do while awake. And neuroscientists who claim that dreams are cognitively deficient nonsense, i.e., epiphenomenal byproducts of automatic brain activity during sleep (Crick and Mitchison 1983; Hobson 1988), are refuted by the regular occurrence of dreams involving "higher" forms of cognitive activity (e.g., spoken language, selective attention, empathy, self-awareness, volitional control; Kahan 2001). Although the bizarre and outlandish features of dreaming attract most of our attention (or derision), the empirical fact is that most dreams accurately portray the ordinary realities of daily life—humans generally dream of being in places they know, interacting with familiar people, saying and doing fairly normal things.

In this article I will argue the same is true of people's religious lives, at least in the context of contemporary America. Dream content is meaningfully related to and continuous with the individual's religious and spiritual orientation in waking life, so much so that reading a person's dream reports "blindly," without any other personal information or associations from the dreamer, can reveal with surprising accuracy his or her basic waking attitude toward religion. The significance of this for pastoral psychologists lies not in specific new techniques of dream interpretation but more fundamentally in supporting the practice of paying attention to dreams in the first place. A growing number of Christian pastoral counselors and spiritual directors are finding dreams to be a valuable resource in their work (Haden 2008; Kelsey 1991; Koet *in press*; Nelson 2007; Sanford 1982; Savary et al. 1984; Taylor 1983, 1992), and recent years have seen an expanding scholarly literature on the importance of dreams in Christian history and theology (Davis 2005a, b; Hayashida 1999; Miller 1994; Salisbury 1997; Strickling 2007; Stroumsa 1999). My goal in this article is to build a bridge between pastoral psychological interest in dreams and the latest findings in the scientific study of dreaming. Contrary to the assumption that religion and science inevitably conflict with each other, dreaming offers an area of potential religion–science convergence. For pastoral counselors and spiritual directors who already draw upon dreams in their practices, these findings provide encouraging affirmation of their work. For those who dismiss dreams because they seem foolish or nonsensical, this research will give them a new reason to think otherwise.

The relationship between dreaming and religion has a rich history, of course. Researchers from anthropology, history, and depth psychology have provided detailed accounts of the many important roles dreaming has played in the religious lives of cultures all over the world (Boss 1958; Bulkeley 2001; Dodds 1951; Ewing 1989; Harris 1994; Hoffman 1997; Irwin 1994; Jedrej and Shaw 1992; Jung 1974; Kelsey 1991; Lincoln 1935; Lohmann 2003; Mageo 2003; Miller 1994; O'Flaherty 1984; Ong 1985; Shulman and Stroumsa 1999; Tedlock 1987; Trompf 1990; Von Grunebaum and Callois 1966; Young 2001). A content analysis approach to dreaming and religion should neither ignore this research literature nor discourage further inquiry into the cultural, historical, linguistic, and psychological dimensions of dream experience. The complexity of the oneiric imagination is so great that an open-ended, multidisciplinary approach is necessary for studying the full range of its capacities.

Method

What follows are two studies of long-term dream journals provided by G. William Domhoff, a psychologist at the University of California, Santa Cruz, on his Dreambank website (www.dreambank.org). The dream journals are publicly available for investigation, with an easily used word-search program that calculates the frequency with which different words appear in the dream reports. Both journals were recorded by the dreamer herself for personal reasons (i.e., before any contact with researchers). Word-search programs are imperfect tools, limited by the ambiguities of language and the disembodied medium of the written text. But when used with a large number of dreams these methods allow a very rapid sifting for basic, easily identified patterns in the dreams that can provide helpful guidance in deeper follow-up investigations.

The chief methodological assumption of this approach is that frequency of appearance in dream content correlates with emotional salience in waking life. Domhoff calls this the “continuity hypothesis.” If a certain man has more dreams of his mother than his father, the continuity hypothesis predicts his mother will turn out to be a more important figure in his waking life than his father. If a woman dreams a great deal about swimming and scuba diving, it can be predicted that she is likely to engage in those activities in waking. If someone dreams repeatedly about a certain house, that location very probably has particular emotional salience for the person.

Of course, not everything in dreaming is continuous with waking life. For example, a person may work in an office, yet dream frequently of being outdoors. It remains an open question whether these *discontinuous* elements represent 1) the neural chaos underlying and constraining the psychological construction of dreams (Kahn 2005; Kahn et al. 2000), 2) the unconscious creation of metaphors and symbols that accurately but indirectly relate to waking life, and/or 3) the emergence of new ideas, possibilities, and energies into the individual’s waking awareness (what I call the “provocation hypothesis”). This article will focus primarily on the continuities between dreaming and waking, but attention will also be given to the various discontinuities and their potential meanings.

The Merri series

The first series analyzed for its religious and spiritual content was the “Merri” series, from a woman who recorded 316 dreams during the years 1999 and 2000. With no knowledge about Merri’s background other than her being an artist and an avid dream journaler, the task was set of trying to discover accurate information about her religious views in waking life using only word searches of her dream reports. If the continuity hypothesis is correct, we would expect that a quick scan of Merri’s dreams would reveal her basic feelings about religion.

The first query was the word *God*, which appeared substantially (i.e. not as part of an oath) in six dreams, or 1.9% of the total series. Following the continuity hypothesis, this led to an immediate prediction: Merri is neither highly pious nor completely atheistic. Reading through the six dreams themselves revealed that four of them involved singing, and two involved hatred and aggression in relation to God. This led to two more predictions: Merri associates religion and music, and she feels ambivalence about the value of religion. To see if there was any evidence of her being Christian, the words *Jesus* and *Christ* were searched. Twenty-one of Merri’s dreams (6.6%) included a reference to *Christmas*, marking it as a significant holiday for her. *Jesus* appeared in non-oath form in seven dreams (2.2%), *Christ*

in one (0.3%), and Christian in six (1.9%). Again, these were tiny percentages, but sufficiently greater than zero to support the inference that Merri had some kind of a Christian background. The narrative content of these dreams, with many additional references to churches, the Bible, and prayer, indicated that Merri was raised in a Christian family (probably Protestant, perhaps Baptist given a specific reference to that denomination in dream 42). Many of the dreams also included singing and music, supporting the earlier prediction. Three dark, conflict-ridden dreams in particular (42, 51, 131) suggested that Merri may feel a deep-seated hostility toward the religious tradition of her upbringing, and in general has negative feelings about the coercive forces of institutional religion.

The recurrence of musical themes led to a brief diversion, searching for dreams with the words *music*, *song*, *singing*, and/or *singer*. These words appeared in a total of 62 dreams (19.6%), and an additional search for *piano* yielded 33 dreams (10.4%). These findings, along with the constant references to concerts, shows, bands, and popular musicians, prompted the prediction that music is a big part of Merri's life, both as a listener and as a musician herself; she enjoys a variety of styles and has a special fondness for singing and piano.

Returning to the theme of Christianity, several searches were conducted involving words typically associated with that faith: *priest*, *minister*, *reverend*, *soul*, *Bible*, *New Testament*, *Easter*, *holiness*, *baptism*, *angels*, *demons*, *hell*, *heaven*, as well as the names of a dozen major Christian denominations. None of these words appeared more than a handful of times, except for 15 (4.7%) references to the Bible. This added some weight to the hunch about a specifically Protestant background. Overall, the frequency data suggested that although Merri was likely raised as a Christian, the affirmative teachings of that tradition are no longer an important part of her life.

During these searches a particular dream came up twice (257, for the words *holy* and *catholic*), distinguishing it as a religiously unusual dream in the series. Its narrative combines several other references to Christianity with a *holy silence* Merri experiences in an ancient Chinese temple. This dream seemed, of all the ones considered so far, to offer the strongest and most positive emergence of religious feeling in Merri's dreams. Following the provocation hypothesis, by which infrequent but intensely vivid and highly memorable dreams are seen as spontaneous emergences of new psychological growth and spiritual insight (Bulkeley 2005), the prediction was made that Merri would independently identify her dream of the holy Chinese temple as a *big dream*, i.e. as one of her most memorable and personally significant dreams. Several researchers have examined the distinctive qualities of highly memorable dreams, and the provocation hypothesis I am using here is grounded in their work (Adams 2003; Bulkeley 1994, 2000; Gackenbach and LaBerge 1988; Hunt 1989, 2000; Jung 1974; Kahan 2001; Kahn and Hobson 1993; Kahn et al. 2000; Knudson 2001; Krippner et al. 2002; Kuiken and Sikora 1993; Nielsen 2000; Revonsuo 2000; Taylor 1983, 1992).

The word search analysis could have continued at much greater length, but a useful research method should combine accuracy with efficiency, and so the blind analysis was stopped here to see how much meaningful information could be derived from the relatively small amount of effort expended so far.

The main predictions about Merri's waking life suggested by the continuity hypothesis were:

- Merri is neither highly pious nor totally atheistic.
- She was raised in a Christian religious tradition. (Protestant? Baptist?)

- She is not now a formal member of that tradition.
- She has negative feelings about the coercive forces of that tradition.
- God, Christianity, and religion have a close association in Merri's mind with music.
- Music in general is a big part of her life.
- Merri would describe religion and/or spirituality as only somewhat important in her life.

Following the provocation hypothesis, two additional predictions were made:

- Dreams 42, 51, and 131 spotlight the development of Merri's strongly ambivalent feelings about her Christian upbringing.
- Dream 257 spotlights an unusual emergence of authentic spiritual feeling into Merri's life.

The anonymity of the analysis was removed in two stages. The first contact with Merri consisted of an email, mediated by Domhoff, with a single question: "Of all the dreams in this series, can you pick out the ones that were the most vivid, intense, and memorable for you?" Merri replied:

"[My] most memorable dream has to be 307: 'Dora's last breaths.' Lots of dreams having to do with my sister Dora, and her death seem to have had the most impact. The 'sibling lottery' dream [28] (where I could enter a lottery to replace her death with my own death) was especially strong. In the dream I was filling out the lottery papers, as my mom watched, and thought I wasn't filling it out fast enough."

Merri went on to single out six other highly memorable dreams: 215, a humorous reading of a nonsensical poem; 257, the ancient Chinese temple ("This dream stands out because the setting was so very sacred. In the dream it reverberated with sacredness."); 132, hearing Dora call her name; 3, smashing communion crackers with her fist in church; 46, being a 1-year old baby with Dora, and their mother forcing them to wear high heels; and 51, "dreamed of being drilled about 'faith in Jesus' and my mom holding a little girl's face over boiling water, till the skin peeled off, because she didn't believe enough in Jesus."

This raises an key question for scientific research on dreaming: How much meaningful information can be learned about people's religious and spiritual lives by focusing specifically on their most memorable dreams, what Jung called *big dreams* (Jung 1974) and what others have called *intensified dreams* (Hunt 1989), *impactful dreams* (Kuiken and Sikora 1993), *highly significant dreams* (Knudson and Minier 1999), and *apex dreaming* (Nielsen 2000)? Merri singles out dream 307, in which her sister Dora is killed in graphic, painful detail, as the top of her list. At this point it was unknown whether Dora's death was literal, i.e. she actually died in waking life, or metaphorical, i.e. Dora was still alive and the dream was expressing some other meaning. The tenor of the dreams suggested a literal reading. A new word search found four other dreams (1.3%) involving Dora and death, with an overall total of ten instances (3.2%) of death and 19 (6.1%) of dying. Several of these dreams involve the narrative themes of people passively witnessing other people's deaths, and Merri wanting to stop someone from dying. The final dream of the whole series (316) has Merri fighting for her last breath, afraid she may be dying—thus putting her in the same position as Dora in the highly memorable dream 307. The conjunction of air, breath, and dying resonates with the classic Western notion of *pneuma* as breath and spirit, suggesting that Merri may well have experienced Dora's death (if it did indeed occur) as profound spiritual crisis.

Merri's *big dreams* very likely point to a major loss in her life, namely the death of her sister. The dreams suggest that Merri is suffering emotionally and spiritually from this loss, and she finds no help from the Christian religious beliefs of her childhood. On the contrary, she displays a clear sense of hostility toward religion, which merges in dream 51 into hostility with her mother. The same conclusion was reached by the blind word searches. Merri has a generally negative attitude toward religion and, as indicated by dream 257, she does have some yearning for a more *spiritual* view of life.

At this point all the predictions about her waking life were presented to Merri for her comment and correction, and she offered a detailed reply. Yes, her sister Dora was killed in an auto accident 3 years previously. Dora had spent 5 days on life support at the hospital before dying, leaving Merri with an acute sensitivity to *last breaths*. Regarding her religious upbringing, Merri had this to say:

"I was brought up ultra strict Southern Baptist. We (me and my siblings) had to attend all kinds of church services/activities. I'd say an absolute minimum of 10 hrs. per week. In addition to this we had to do a non-denominational bible memory study along with bible camps in summer, vacation bible school, choir practice, and the twice yearly week full of revival services. My mom was real strict, and we were severely punished for church misbehavior, or making mistakes while reciting scripture (beaten, or whipped till the skin broke)."

This is very close to what was predicted based on her dream content. In answer to a question about the importance of religion and/or spirituality in her current life, Merri gave a classic expression of unchurched spirituality: "Religion is not at all in any way important. But, I think I'm very devout in my spirituality.... I think the best worship each person can do is to find what they love in life, and do that." This is a stronger statement of interest in spirituality than was predicted from her dreams, though in retrospect it now appears that Merri's dreams of death and dying were the best clue to the specific character of her waking life spirituality. Responding to a question about her beliefs about what happens when people die, she said "I strongly believe there is an afterlife. Maybe I MUST believe this after I lost my sister, but I continue to know her, in a different way. She influences me a great deal.... I feel that the life energy of such a powerful soul can't just be squelched."

Although Merri does not continue with her family's religious tradition, she holds to an essentially Christian belief in the survival of the soul following bodily death. As a methodological point, this suggests that dream content involving death and dying may be useful indications of a person's spiritual beliefs. Answering questions about music and religion, Merri said she was forced to study music as a child (prodded by her ever-tyrannical mother), and she spent much time singing in church choirs. At a young age she became an accomplished classical pianist, though she dropped it at age 12. Dora continued music study through college, and after her death Merri took up the piano again "to learn some of her favorite composers/songs." Thus the connection between music, religion, and spirituality predicted from the dreams turns out to be one strand in a broader family matrix involving Merri's mother and sister.

Overall, the predictions derived from Merri's dream content were mostly confirmed. Neither highly pious nor totally atheistic: yes. Raised as a Christian, probably Protestant, perhaps Baptist: yes. No longer a member of that tradition: yes. Negative feelings about the tradition's coercive forces: yes. Religion and music connected: yes, but not as much expected. Music is a big part of her life: yes, but mostly in childhood and in relation to Dora. Only moderate importance of religion and/or spirituality: no, Merri says she is very

spiritual. Dreams 42, 51, and 131 highlighting religious/family ambivalence: yes. Dream 257 expressing unusually strong and positive spiritual feeling: yes.

In a project like this, the possibility always exists of participants providing the researcher with socially desirable responses, saying what they think the researcher would like to hear rather than what is really true. That is why the questions posed to Merri were for the most part factual and biographical, involving relatively large-scale and publicly observable details of her life that could readily be corroborated by others. The information she provided in reply was undoubtedly influenced by her desire to comply with the researcher's request, but it still seems reasonable to suppose she was being truthful in saying, for example, that she was raised in a strict Baptist faith but is now not a member of that tradition. The one point where a socially desirable response could have been at work was in Merri's claim to be *very devout* in her spirituality, a self-defined interpretation that might carry a high social value, even though such devotion was not evident in her dreams. This could be a case where the dreams are giving a more accurate portrayal than the waking self-report.

These findings demonstrate that a blind analysis of a dream series can, following the continuity hypothesis, yield accurate information about the dreamer's waking life experiences, activities, and concerns, specifically in relation to religion and spirituality. And following the provocation hypothesis, the findings also illustrate how a focus on unusual elements and highly memorable dreams can further help in the identification of important religious and spiritual features of the individual's waking life.

The Barb Sanders series

The Barb Sanders series is the longest and most carefully studied collection of dreams ever gathered from a single individual. Her journal is continuous from the late 1970s to 1996, when she provided the dreams (3,116 of them) to Domhoff for study. Research to date has focused primarily on the emotional contours of Sanders' family life—her concerns about the aggressive sexuality of her ex-husband Howard, her antagonism toward her mother, her difficulties with her middle daughter Ellie, etc. (Domhoff 2003). The findings essentially confirm the continuity hypothesis. The way Sanders interacts with these people in her dreams accurately reflects both the importance of her waking relationships with them and the emotional tenor of those relationships.

Using the insights gained from a blind analysis of the Merri series, the dreams of Barb Sanders were examined for evidence of her experiences, beliefs, and attitudes toward religion and spirituality. The process began with a search for instances of the words *God, priest, minister, church, Bible, death, ceremony, and dying*. These searches yielded the findings shown below.

God: 20, 0.6%
 Priest: 11, 0.4%
 Minister: 10, 0.3%
 Church: 38, 1.2%
 Bible: 7, 0.2%
 Death: 44, 1.4%
 Ceremony: 19, 0.6%
 Dying: 24, 0.8%

These frequencies suggested the initial hypothesis that Barb Sanders is neither unusually religious nor completely indifferent to spirituality. Several of the 20 dreams involving God,

gods, and/or goddesses included a high degree of emotional intimacy between Sanders and the divine being. Her dreams were found to contain enough Christian references to justify further probing on her relationship with Christianity, and so the keywords *Jesus* and *Christ* were searched. *Jesus* yielded seven dreams (0.2%), almost all of them involving Jesus at a distance, i.e., in a story, as a doll, as an image, never as a distinct character with whom she personally interacts. *Christ* produced 32 dreams (1.0%), most of which were references to Christmas as a family holiday, with only three stray references to Christians and none to Christ as a character.

All of this suggested that Sanders does feel some kind of a positive connection with God, but not necessarily in formal Christian terms. One of the Jesus dreams (1609) mentions a “Jesus spirit,” and this prompted a search for the keyword *spirit*. Fifty-three dreams (1.7%) used this word, in a variety of significant contexts: malevolent spirits attacking Sanders, discussions of spirituality with other characters, and references to Sanders’ own spirit traveling apart from her body. These dreams would seem to indicate, following the continuity hypothesis, that Sanders is familiar with a spiritual conception of the world and will likely identify herself as a spiritual person.

Looking more closely at the narrative content of the dreams found by these searches, several significant details appeared. A number of dreams involve sexual interactions with priests and ministers, mostly negative (e.g., 683) but some positive (e.g., 2099). In one dream God appears to Sanders as a lover (2014), and in another she experiences an orgasm in church (363). Gender lines are strangely fluid, with God twice appearing as a woman (647, 1473) and Sanders herself wearing a priest’s frock (1537). If these dreams do indeed reflect elements of her waking attitude toward religion, then it is even more likely that Sanders is uncomfortable with mainstream American Christianity and is a “seeker” after alternative spiritual communities (such as Native American traditions, positively mentioned in four of her nineteen *ceremony* dreams, and contemporary goddess worship, with *goddess* also positively mentioned four times). It seems particularly unlikely that Sanders is a Catholic, judging by tepid, distant nature of the nine dreams (0.3%) using that word.

The challenge of predicting a person’s most memorable dream is especially daunting when there are more than three thousand to choose from. Using only the findings from these initial word searches, the one dream identified as a plausible candidate for “big dream” status was 2014, the blasphemous experience of taking God as a divine lover:

“God is a vague human-shaped light that lies down on me and soaks into and through me. I feel wonderful peace and happiness and for a moment feel embarrassed that this at first appeared to be like a lover. How sacrilegious!”

In purely descriptive terms, this dream is similar to the rapturous ecstasies of medieval Christian women mystics, whose celibate lifestyle and intense contemplative practice produced extraordinary psychospiritual visions that included a heretical abundance of sexual feeling (Bynum 1992; Young 1999). Sanders experiences God as an intimate union with light and love, filling her with strongly positive emotion. Following the provocation hypothesis outlined earlier, an unusual dream like this may be giving voice to the emergence of new religious or spiritual feelings in the person’s life. Hence, it was predicted that this dream provides an especially accurate portrayal of Barb Sanders’ deepest spiritual ideals.

Based on just these few word searches, several propositions could be made about the likely continuities between Barb Sanders’ dreams and her waking attitudes toward religion and spirituality. She was not raised in a distinctly religious family, and Christianity has made only a modest impact on her life. She nevertheless feels positively towards God and

other divine figures, and she is open to the existence of spiritual beings and powers. She now considers herself (like Merri) a spiritual person in an unchurched fashion, with a neutral-to-hostile attitude toward organized faith traditions.

Because Sanders is available for follow-up questions, the predictions could be tested and evaluated in light of the answers she provided in response to the following two questions. First, “Were you raised in a particular religious or spiritual tradition?” And second, “Do you now belong to a particular religious or spiritual tradition?”

This is what Sanders said:

“My grandparents were First Christian Church people and every Sunday was church day. They read the Bible and talked a lot of dogma. I asked my Grandma (on mother’s side) once what she attributed to her long marriage. She said, ‘It was God’s will dear. We didn’t have anything to do with it.’”

My Dad’s parents were probably Protestant but don’t remember church activities with them. Sunday was a day of good dinners, relatives visiting and card games. As children, my dad remembers going to church out in North Dakota sometimes.

My parents were both liberal idealists from farmer red neck backgrounds and they met at a small college. They brought us up to try out different religions and then it was up to us to decide what religion we would embrace. So as a child, I went to Sunday schools in spurts in different churches like Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian. Guess we weren’t so liberal to take on Catholic or Jewish beliefs. They had a Catholic family for friends and once we went to mass to see what it was like. (My grandparents on Mom’s side were horrified. Granddad said really stereotypical remarks like they are all alcoholic, they do wine in the service and silly things like that).

The most important belief I grew up with is that there is a God, but organized religion is dogma and man-made. This from my parents; from my mom’s parents I got the ‘party line’ of the first Christian church. Many of my cousins followed the grandparents’ church and beliefs. My mom and dad were always the different ones, the rebels.

When I married Howard [her husband] his family was Episcopalian, which upset my grandparents. Howard’s parents wanted me to join their church and it made no difference to me, so I got baptized and did the confession thing. It was so weird and unusual for me. But I did it. After marriage, we didn’t go to church. After the divorce, he went for awhile to take the children. It didn’t last long.”

To the question, “Do you now belong to a particular religious or spiritual tradition?” she answered:

“A few years ago, I began a church search and tried out a few. I liked the Unitarians the best and went for awhile but it soon paled because it is SOO universal. It’s like hearing a sociology lesson in the hymns we sang. I love the gorgeous trappings and ritual stuff of Catholicism, but can’t handle the ‘dogma.’ So I don’t have a church home. But I believe myself to be spiritual. I became very interested in Native American healing circles and so on and was very fortunate to have two Native American women friends who brought me into the community for awhile. I love reading Zen and stuff. I love a lot of the ‘New Age’ spirituality. I have an ‘altar’ of stones in a small water fountain, on important occasions I burn sage and ‘smoke’ the house clean of spirits. I pray to God when the mood seizes me. I use meditations. I

believe ‘the God Force’ is in us all, I wrote a play about everyone on earth being ‘angels’ for each other. I like the idea of reincarnation.”

Sanders’ comments correspond remarkably well to the predictions based on the content of her dreams. Much like Merri, Sanders represents a clear example of unchurched spirituality in contemporary America. She was raised in a generally Protestant Christian family, but no particular religious beliefs or practices were emphasized in her upbringing other than a basic belief in God. Later in life she gravitated toward various contemporary spiritual traditions that gave her a sense of meaning, community, and health. She remains skeptical toward the “dogma” of institutional religion, and she has a positive, welcoming attitude toward spiritual beings and realities.

The biggest surprise is her mention of a conversion to the Episcopalian church when she married Howard. Nothing in the initial keyword searches gave any indication of such an occurrence in her life. This may seem to cast doubt on usefulness of dreams in the study of religion. If the experience of a religious ritual as important as baptism is not reflected in a person’s dreams, then perhaps dream content cannot be relied upon to provide an accurate reflection of the person’s waking life. But the argument here is that dream content is an accurate reflection of the *emotional* reality of people’s religious and spiritual experiences. If a person is baptized but never dreams about it, that may simply mean the baptism made no special impact on the person—in terms of deeply-felt meaning, it never really happened. That is certainly the way Sanders characterizes her baptism, describing it as an act imposed on her by Howard’s family with no religious or spiritual meaning whatsoever.

With her comments in mind, a follow-up keyword search was conducted for the words *baptism*, *confession*, and *Episcopalian*. The results were continuous with Sanders’ description of how the baptism and conversion to the Episcopalian church *felt* to her—there were no significant references in her dreams to baptism, no significant references to confession, and only one stray reference to Episcopalian. What this means is that dream content is not a perfect index of a person’s public behavior and social appearance, but may still be an excellent source of insight into a person’s deepest emotional concerns, wishes, and desires. Such a view is consistent with Domhoff’s findings on the characters in Sanders’ dreams, whose frequency and style of appearance accurately reflect her feelings toward them, even though the dreams are not a good gauge of her actual social behavior and interactions with these people (e.g., her many sexual dreams of Derek, a male friend with whom she never had any actual romantic relationship).

In answer to several questions about her most memorable dreams, Sanders did not single out 2014 (God the divine lover) as predicted. However, the two dreams she identified as being her “most mystical” (172) and “most joyful” (1707) bear a strong resemblance to 2014:

“(172) I was asleep in my bed at home. I was in a deep sleep, the kind on the edge of waking, just after you’ve fallen asleep. I was aware that I was fast asleep and meditating. My body slid to the side of the bed; I was in danger of falling out. My arm draped over the edge and my hand hit the floor. I felt it. I became afraid and wanted to wake up so I wouldn’t fall and hurt myself. I decided to relax and flow with whatever happened. Then I was in an unidentified room sitting up but my body wasn’t there. The only things in my room were a window and a chair. I felt myself growing smaller. The room got bigger and bigger. The chair got taller and taller until I was so small, I was the size of an insect. I then realized that if there were a spider in the room, I’d be so small it could really hurt me. I started growing bigger, out of fear. I began filling the room. I raised my arms skyward and I was as big as the Earth. My hands reached out

clear into the stars. Suddenly, I saw a pair of hands holding my hands and I heard or sensed the statement, ‘I’m here.’ I feel overwhelmed with what I’d done, and retreated back to my sleeping body. I was still not able or ready to wake up yet. I flew for awhile, higher and higher. I was aware of a sense of height and that I’m afraid of heights in reality.”

“(1707) I am standing on the mud flats looking for the ocean. I’m up to my ankles in mud. A male, soft, sweet and gentle, almost a spirit, stands to my left behind me. I ask him where the ocean is. He smiles and points forward. I see a slit in the land, like the birth opening on a whale. Two ‘people,’ one male and one female, are together in a circle, the woman coming up through the slit like a flower growing (see drawing). The man smiles and says, ‘Ah, you have seen the infinity holes.’ I ask again where the ocean is. He points and I get ready to dive. I remember I won’t be able to breathe. He smiles again, walks up to me and French kisses me. It is so gentle and caring. I realize he’s given me the ‘kiss of breath.’ Now I’ll be able to breathe underwater. I dive and find myself in a narrow channel full of murky, deep water filled with a swarm of naked swimming people. It’s a school of fish. I swim among them comfortably.”

These two dreams involve Sanders in intense physical encounters with magically powerful, awe-inspiring trans-human presences. Though 2014 was not her most memorable dream, the spiritual sentiments it expresses are at least partially consistent with the feelings expressed in the dreams she did identify as her most memorable, as well as her general comments about feeling connected in waking life to “the God Force.” However, the two dreams she mentioned did not include anything like the moment of embarrassment in 2014 when she realizes she had initially perceived God as a lover; these emotional differences are significant and point to weaknesses in the current approach. More research is clearly needed to improve our understanding of the phenomenology of highly memorable, “big” dreams.

Conclusion

The Merri and Barb Sanders dream series provide clear evidence that dreams are meaningfully related to and continuous with the individual’s religious life. Pastoral psychologists now have more reason than ever to take dreams seriously as a resource in understanding people’s religious beliefs, practices, and experiences. Although these findings do not support the orthodox versions of Freudian or Jungian theory, the results are encouraging for those who follow a broader psychodynamic approach that takes a variety of emotional, cognitive, and cultural factors into account in seeking the relevance of dreams for waking life. As mentioned at the outset, a growing number of pastoral counselors and spiritual directors are already moving in this direction. The present article strengthens the empirical justification for their efforts.

These two studies have also demonstrated the limits of a content analysis approach. Without more personal interaction with the dreamers, many other dimensions of dream meaning cannot be explored. The prediction of “big dreams” proved especially difficult in the two cases, and this highlights the deep rootedness of dreaming in the experiential life-world of the dreamer (Boss 1977; Knudson 2003; Kuiken and Sikora 1993). What makes a dream meaningful depends in large part on the personal, cultural, and historical circumstances of the individual at that moment, and virtually all such information is lost when the analysis focuses only on the dream as a written text. Still, the dreams chosen by the two individuals as their “biggest” and most memorable turned out to be very helpful in

further illuminating the religious and spiritual patterns already discerned in the series as a whole, thereby supporting the general thrust of the provocation hypothesis.

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