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### THE GOD-PEDDLER WHO DREAMED A DREAM

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Debbie is a pastor and one of my first non-patient spiritual directees. Now, a pastor is not exactly a God-peddler, but as pastors try to influence lives and give sermons and teachings, I am sure they often *feel* like God peddlers.

Debbie, experienced communicator that she is, knows well that stories have greater impact than mere concepts. Though I am sure she could wow you with her doctor of ministry in spiritual formation knowledge, she has emptied herself, taking the form of the reader's servant, in order to reveal this part of her story. It will be our first shovelful of rich earth.

#### **Debbie's Story**

I went to bed one night and had a dream. I don't think dreaming was unusual for me, although I seldom remembered what I dreamed, and when I did, it was usually a mixture of recent activities and TV shows. But on November 19, 1996, I had a dream that initiated a journey that would change my relationship with God, change the way I interacted with others, and change me. This is what I wrote in my journal:

I was sitting on a beach chair, looking out over the water. I was deep in thought, straining my eyes as if to see the answer to a mystery somewhere out in the water.

I looked over my shoulder and saw a woman sitting at the end of a picnic table under a pavilion. I quickly got up and went to sit at her feet. I laid my head on her lap. She was looking across the table to a point on the shore. I felt safe and comfortable with her. Being near her felt like being hugged. I think it is what a mother/daughter, grandmother/granddaughter relationship is supposed to be.

She casually said, "I saw someone standing over you, with you in heaven."

I immediately lifted my head and began questioning her. "Who? Who did you see standing over me? Up where? Tell me everything!"

Then, a man walked up. He had a sheet. I didn't recognize him, but I knew he was my husband. He covered me with a fitted sheet that belonged to one of our children. I wondered how he knew I was cold, and as he was walking off he said, "The wind that blows off the River Jordan is cold."

My husband seemed to be walking towards the spot that held the woman's gaze, so I sat up straight to look over the picnic table just in time to see the man receive Communion from Jesus. He then walked into the lake.

Then, suddenly, I found *myself* standing in front of Jesus.

Jesus probed me, asking, "Who did you kill to be here?" My heart understood this to mean, "Whose blood did you shed, because you couldn't be here, standing in front of me, if you hadn't shed someone's blood?"

I answered, "Yours."

Jesus said, "Then by my blood you are here (received, accepted, welcomed)."

It was all very formal. He was my High Priest, and I came to receive communion from His hands. He dipped the host into the cup and touched my forehead. I could feel my head turning warm. I opened my mouth, and he placed the host on my tongue, but it wasn't the bread of communion. It was like tender meat but with no taste. I chewed and swallowed and felt the warmth travel through my mouth, down my throat, and come to rest in the middle of my chest.

The interaction became more familiar and relaxed. He smiled and said, "You know, you have always been my precious one." Jesus then nodded toward the water and said matter-of-factly, "You're going to go out there and bring them back to me." It was a command. It was a prophecy. It was a fact. I nodded, and then, I, like my husband, turned to walk into the water.

Just as I was about to step into the water, Jesus called out, "Hey, Debbie, don't sin anymore." I nodded and walked into the water, and woke up.

My chest was warm. I lay there feeling the heat on my forehead, in my throat, and radiating from my chest. It was 3:15 in the morning. I got up and recorded my dream in my journal.

The first tangible change I noticed following the dream concerned my personal Bible study. I could no longer sit and study scripture. In seminary, I had developed a study habit of examining scripture contextually, paying attention to author, audience, major theme, and historical/cultural factors. After I had the dream, I would lose myself in a word or a phrase, sometimes for hours.

The second change I noticed was that God began to communicate with me differently. Until the dream, the only way God ever spoke to me was through scripture. Suddenly, God began to speak to me when I was away from the pages of scriptures—in nature, sacred silence, through my senses, and in many dreams.

The third change came in the area of practicing spiritual disciplines. The only spiritual disciplines I had ever practiced were prayer and Bible study. Now, God was inviting me to fast, meditate, spend days in silence, commune with nature, and use my imagination to meet him in spiritual landscapes.

I couldn't share any of this with my Southern Baptist colleagues, my friends, or my family. I thought I was going crazy, or maybe having some kind of spiritual mid-life crisis.

A year passed, and it was all I could do to keep up with the changes I was experiencing in my spiritual life. Finally, I went to a Youth Minister's Conference in Philadelphia. I was alone, and I was feeling really old. Leaving an extremely loud concert, I entered a prayer room and drew a picture of Jesus and me sitting on a rock next to a dry creek bed. Above my head was a bubble that said, "I hate it here!" Above his: "Me, too."

The next day I signed up to take my meals with other youth ministers who were at the conference alone. A message was left on my phone to meet in a certain room at 2:00. When I entered the room, there was only one other person there, and so we introduced ourselves and began a conversation. He asked me about the landscape of my soul. I thought that was a strange

question, but I used the picture I had drawn the night before to describe my soul. He said, “Hmm.” After a moment of silence, he asked if I was alone in that dry, arid place.

I answered, “No, Jesus was sitting on the rock next to mine.”

Again, “Hmm.” (Silence.) “What do you think Jesus is feeling while sitting on the rock next to yours?”

I didn’t know what Jesus was feeling, but I knew what he was thinking in that picture. Jesus was sorry I had to be in this dry and lonely place.

Again he asked, “But what do you think He’s *feeling*?” I had no idea.

After a moment of silence, he asked, “Have you ever thought that maybe Jesus was really thankful that you were there to sit with him so he wouldn’t be there alone?”

That’s when I began to wonder if maybe I had gone to the wrong room. Actually, I had signed up on the wrong page. Instead of signing up for dinner buddies, I had signed up for a meeting with a spiritual director. I didn’t even know what a spiritual director was, but during that hour I learned that God invites people on a journey to a Holy of Holies that is hidden deep inside their souls. How does God extend such an invitation? Sometimes in a near-death experience, a powerful conversion, or something as simple as a dream!

I returned to Dallas determined to find a spiritual director. The Catholic Diocese instructed me to call Father Sam Anthony Morello at Mt. Carmel Monastery. “Hello, my name is Debbie, and I’m a Baptist youth minister looking for a spiritual director.”

Sam laughed, “Hello, Debbie. I’ve been here since 1972, and you are the first Baptist who has ever called looking for a spiritual director. Welcome, my friend!”

One week later, I made an appointment to meet Dr. Troy Caldwell. Finally, I would be able to share the journey that had begun a year earlier with someone who actually understood and was familiar with the path I had been stumbling down alone. I would soon learn that it was a path traveled by many and one that would bring to my soul grace and healing.

### **In Debbie’s Shoes**

How might you react if you dreamed an obviously important dream, as Pastor Debbie did? Do you blow it off as meaningless like the innkeeper? Do you find a psychic or soothsayer to help you interpret its mystery? Why do dreams have to be so indirect and obscure?

Happily, Debbie’s dream was not obscure to me. The unlikely circumstances that led Debbie to me were intriguing. That God would take so much trouble to send this soul to me stirred a sense of honor and responsibility. That Debbie would become one of my first non-patient spiritual directees pleased me. Perplexity about the dream was *not* one of my sensations, however.

Dreams *can* be confusing even to me at times, but the decade prior to my meeting Debbie had prepared me to recognize the patterns and principles present in Debbie’s kind of dream. The first appreciation we must know about such a dream is that it is telling a story about a person’s soul. Like most people uninitiated in dreamwork, Debbie’s first tendency was to apply the dream to the outside world immediately. She wondered if she should change her ministry somehow in response to the dream. But the dream was not about her work, as important as that may be. It was about *her*.

Big dreams come to us as important symbolic experiences during major turning points within our psycho-spiritual experience. Debbie noticed changes in her whole approach to scripture in the year between the dream and our visit. It was not something she sought, nor was it something she was taught. The changes were spontaneous, and she felt strangely unsatisfied when she used her devotional practices of the past. What was this turning point Debbie was experiencing? What

might spiritual directors do to cooperate with the message of the dream and the Holy Spirit who sent it?

Does God truly send dreams to us? Listen a moment to Job's worthy friend.

For God speaks in one way, and in two, though man does not perceive it. In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls upon men, while they slumber on their beds, then he opens the ears of men, and terrifies them with warnings, that he may turn man aside from his deed, and cut off pride from man; he keeps back his soul from the Pit, his life from perishing by the sword. (Job 33:14-18, RSV)

If you were Debbie's spiritual director, what would you do?

### **A Spiritual Direction Session**

There are no absolute *shoulds* in the realm of spiritual direction. Typically, however, the first thing we spiritual directors want to do is to attune to the reality of God in our own heart. Then, flowing with that energy through the heart, we move the consciousness to a well-centered place in our own soul. Once centered, we turn our attention to the directee's heart and mind. We pray that the love from God in our heart will flow to the directee. In that loving rapport, we attune to the words and movements of the person with whom we are sitting. On occasion, movements of the director's heart and intuition will also become data for the session.

It was easy to attune to Debbie. The joyfulness she expressed in her profession and in her love of God was palpable. It was exciting to share the interpretation of her big dream. In fact, a parallel big dream had come to me a decade earlier in my life. The dream heralded for me an exhilarating period of illumination and learning that was still occurring even as I sat with Debbie. My experience enabled my readiness to be of service to Debbie with her dream. My preparation for this service went like this.

### **From Psychiatry to Spiritual Direction**

A wonderful group of psychotherapists and I held weekly meetings in my professional offices to discuss how our faith interfaced with our psychological understandings and therapy. It was a greatly stimulating experience, but we decided to ramp up the energy a notch further by inviting some leaders from the community to offer their input. An Episcopal priest who many of us knew and loved suggested we invite a lady who understood a great deal about the spirituality of dreams. It was an intriguing topic to a bunch of therapists, so we invited her, and she began joining us once a month to offer her insights.

Talk about a mind blow! Our part of Texas is spoken of as the buckle of the Bible belt. We all participated in evangelical or charismatic churches and had learned our spirituality from these and para-church organizations. This lady, Iris Pearce, began speaking to us in words and thought forms that were a foreign language to us. Iris had therapist credentials, but her spirituality was that of Anglican and Orthodox tradition. She was well known in those circles as the founder of the Episcopal Center for Church Renewal's School of Spirituality. She was exceptionally well versed in spiritual theology and spiritual direction traditions. "Spiritual what?" we asked her. "What is spiritual direction?"

If *our* minds were blown by her unfamiliar spiritual teachings, *she* was likewise challenged by our group's knowledge of scripture. She never before taught a non-Anglican group, and we evangelicals spoke a comfortable dialect of Biblese. She was unaccustomed to repeated questioning about where her teachings were found in the Bible. Bless her heart; she tried to bring

in scriptures for us, but much of the corpus called spiritual direction arose from orthodox tradition—not from the Bible directly. Much was even derived from unwritten oral traditions believed to be passed down from the time of the apostles. Our horizons were definitely expanding.

My reading changed. *Mysticism*,<sup>2</sup> by Evelyn Underhill, *The Cloud of Unknowing*,<sup>3</sup> Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*<sup>4</sup> satisfied a hunger within me. As we explored these classic works, our group found it required us to appreciate many words and concepts that had changed their meanings over time. We also learned that Eastern Orthodoxy has its own style of thought and communication, as well. It differed from modern secular, Roman Catholic, and Protestant styles. When we read from Orthodoxy, we found our minds opening to new categories and approaches. In particular, we enjoyed Eastern Orthodoxy's less dogmatic and more mystical ways of thought. The Celtic Christians, we discovered, also shared openness to mystery and to life's oneness, as well. We Westerners like to slice and dice and define our ideas precisely. Not so in Eastern Orthodoxy. Mystery does not need to be stripped and beat into a philosophically and culturally acceptable shape. It was very refreshing.

### **My Big Dream**

Meanwhile, as we were reading and learning from Iris, my dreams shifted into overdrive. As my passionate searching and opening continued, in the fullness of time, my *big* dream arrived.

I am in a maritime museum. I stroll slowly about, looking at pictures of old multi-masted sailing vessels on the sea. There are two old mariners in the museum with me. Suddenly, I feel swept headlong between the two old mariners. I am flying. The wind that is elevating me carries me into one of the scenes from the paintings that I have been eyeing.

The picture engulfs me, so the scene is now my three-dimensional reality. It reminds me of an early scene from *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, one of the books from *The Chronicles of Narnia* series by C.S. Lewis. I zoom just above the ocean's surface, flying rapidly to I know not where. Finally, an object begins to show over the horizon. It arises incrementally from the waves as we soar nearer and nearer. I gradually recognize what it is.

It is a colossal and awe-inspiring castle. The castle is on a pedestal in the water. The pedestal is concrete and remarkable for how sturdy it stands in spite of large waves that batter it continuously. Some of the waves splash onto the walls of the castle, as well. The sea feels awesomely powerful—the castle and pedestal even more so. The base and walls of the castle are immovable at the onslaught of many waters. I am left with a feeling of strength and wonder.

I now notice that circumnavigating the castle, about a quarter mile off, is a flotilla of modern naval ships. The mightiest of the four or five ships is an aircraft carrier. I next discover that I am on the bridge of the

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/underhill/mysticism.html>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/anonymous2/cloud.html>.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.copticplace.com/files/imitation\\_of\\_Christ.pdf](http://www.copticplace.com/files/imitation_of_Christ.pdf). This is said to be the second most published book in history after the Bible.

aircraft carrier. I am its captain. Using binoculars, I am looking through the windows of the steering room to gaze at the castle. It is a wondrous sight, and I desire to look into its details. Our circumnavigation has purpose; we are in some kind of positive relatedness to the castle. We are *supposed* to be there.

In the next scene, I see that a small PT boat has been sunk, and I am inside the submerged PT boat looking upward at the surface at the sun glinting off of the waves. Though I know the boat is sunk, it seems okay—peaceful—even a little lovely, but definitely okay.

Now I am on the deck of the aircraft carrier. A native boy with dark skin and a loincloth is placing bait on a large fishing hook. He plans to dive into the water from the deck, hook a giant squid, and then bring the end of the line back to the carrier deck. He is familiar with doing this. It is dangerous but also a matter of confident routine. Once we had the giant squid hooked to our ship, we could use it to aid propulsion.

On the surface, Debbie's dream and mine have little in common. But once you learn to appreciate the actions of symbols in the soul, the commonality becomes clear. Though this book is not mainly about dreams and symbols, they will play a large part for people on their paths. Before we go into *much* detail about symbolic communications from the soul, let us develop an understandable template upon which we can hang the pieces of the dream. Until then, let us just *say* what these dreams have in common without full explanation. (If you *must* have the interpretations now, look ahead to chapter 13.)

Both are initiation dreams.

## **Initiation Symbols**

Though we think about such things little in American culture, initiation ceremonies and symbols are important for our psychological and social transitions. If we do not have societal or organizational initiation events available for us at the right times, our soul will make them up for us. The most recognized initiation rituals in our culture are graduation, baptism, marriage, bar mitzvah, bat mitzvah, baptism, confirmation, etc. In the absence of a societal ritual, big dreams can signal our consciousness that an important transition is occurring.

Initiation has important psycho-spiritual effects. Laboratory experiments in psychology have shown rewards given during initiations have important consequences. Initiates express stronger group identity. Initiations can also produce stronger group conformity among new members, and also, a stronger feeling of affiliation.

The initiation symbol is more obvious in Debbie's dream. Jesus meets her by a lakeshore. After reviewing his sacrifice for her and giving her his symbols of body and blood, he instructs her that she is to take a journey into the water. This is like baptism. It is of course, a little backward and thus not like baptism as well. We generally give communion *after* one is baptized. So, what kind of baptism is it?

Some symbols in my dream eluded me at first. Thus, a well-respected psychotherapy teacher in our area worked with me on the imagery for a few sessions. It was he who alerted me to notice the passage between the two old men. The passage between important objects or people, especially the younger person between older, already initiated people, is often used to depict a threshold-like event. It is like passing through a door. What happened next might have tipped me off if my study of symbology had been further along.

I entered another realm—another world. It was a world of flying and of awesome, large symbols. Have you ever stood next to a real castle? How about a real aircraft carrier? They are both huge and awe-inspiring. That was the sense in the dream, as well. Whenever you experience a sense of awe in a dream, it is time to pay close attention.

### **Initiation into What?**

Debbie and I were transitioning to the Illuminative Way. The Illuminative Way was a new idea for Debbie. Perhaps it is for you, as well. We were both, at the time of our dreams, moving from a time of struggle and partial dryness to a time of great learning and spiritual joy. The learning, however, was not learning from books. It was learning taught by God directly through the movements of our souls. A creative energy was about to flow. It was exciting and thrilling, but also a time of stretching. Old structures of mind were to break down. New ways of being were to manifest that we had never experienced or even heard of. It was going to be quite a trip.

I will end this chapter without fully interpreting these two dreams for you. I will return to them at the end of Part 1, when we have covered more principles of symbols. For now, just know that the Illuminative Way is the middle path of the Three Ways of spiritual life. And the Three Ways are the next adventure in our soulmaking quest.