Rev. Lynn Harrison

Imagine if there was a language created especially for you.

A language that used symbols and stories uniquely aligned with your life's path and purpose.

A language so precise and elegant, it could reveal to you insights that you couldn't receive any other way.

Imagine that this language had been familiar to human beings for thousands of years...but had been almost completely lost in your own culture.

And what if you were given regular opportunities to learn this language...

To practice it and to gradually become more fluent... even though much of it would always remain a mystery.

The dreams that come to human beings at night... they have been described as such a language.¹

§

There are people among us who are particularly fluent in the language of dreams.

One of them, Jeanne Van Bronkhorst, is with us today.

But Jeanne is by no means the only Unitarian Universalist to engage in the deep and meaningful exploration of dreams.

Reverend Jeremy Taylor, who lived from 1943 to 2018, was the co-founder of the International Association for the Study of Dreams.

In his book "The Wisdom of Your Dreams" he wrote that "every dream comes in the service of the individual dreamer's health and wholeness by speaking in a universal language of archetypal symbol and metaphor"...²

and that the "generic message of every remembered dream is: wake up! Pay attention."³

He revealed how dreams can be used to support our growth and development in every facet of life...

...including becoming awake to our unconscious biases:

Our attitudes which create the "barriers to full inclusion" that we as Unitarians are trying to remove.

Reverend Taylor went so far as to say that, in his view, all collective prejudice and oppression, including our destruction of the planet, is the result of unconscious projection onto others of repressed aspects of ourselves.⁴

He wrote: "If we are to survive, we must learn as much about our own unconscious depths and creative possibilities as we know about the structure of the atom and the makeup of the stars.

³ Ibid, 3-4.
⁴ Ibid., 97.
Our dreams are an indispensable key to that learning.

We must consciously explore this realm further. We can afford to wait no longer."\textsuperscript{5}

§

This past weekend, I attended a talk by poet Cathy Smith Bowers who said:

"The Kingdom of Heaven is within you, and it is a dialogue between the conscious and the unconscious."

In her talk, she held up the value--indeed the sacredness--of the images that arise for us in dreamwork as well as in every form of creative expression.

I share her belief that our lifelong dialogue with those symbols and images can lead us ever more deeply into the heart of life, so that we may join more freely with others in the work of love and justice.

As Unitarian Universalists, we've been blessed with the invitation to engage in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

Sometimes that search takes us outside ourselves. Other times it points within.

To tell us more about how dreaming can be part of our awakening, and to share her own personal and powerful experience with the wisdom of dreams,

It's my pleasure to introduce Jeanne Van Bronkhorst.

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid, 230.
Jeanne Van Bronkhorst

Today I am here to talk about dreams and dreaming—sleep-dreams—and the partnership I have built with them.

My dreams set my life on a path full of wonder from my earliest childhood. I had vivid dreams, some powerful enough to stay with me for decades. My parents encouraged me to ignore dreams and get on with more serious work, especially as I grew older, but the great joy and freedom I so often experienced in dreams kept me circling back.

I studied psychology in part to understand better how we imagine our lives, both awake and asleep. When I worked in hospice care, supporting the dying and their families, I listened in awe to the ways dreams and dream-sharing helped people find peace and reconciliation, courage and hope in their last months of life.

Four ideas from the dream research have helped me trust my dreams long enough to build a partnership with them: 1) dreams fundamentally are us; 2) dreams can meaningfully connect to our waking life; 3) we can build our dreaming ability like any other ability; and 4) dreams can open us to something greater than us—to Mystery.

Let me explain through a recurring nightmare I had. Throughout my childhood, I was chased in my dreams through a dark forest by Sasquatch—Big Foot. Each time I was terrified, hearing it roar behind me and knowing if it caught me, it would kill me. I always woke up before that happened. I hated these dreams.

When I was 22, I had the nightmare again, but this time I told someone who understood dreams and she asked me, ‘why is it chasing you?’ I said I had no idea and she suggested next time, I should turn around and ask it.
And my first response was, is that even legal? Everyone I knew had told me the best way to handle nightmares was to ignore them; shut them down; focus on reality and they will go away. No one ever said I was allowed to talk back to them.

The next week I had the dream again and I remembered as I was running to ask my question. I turned around and pretty much shrieked at it, why are you chasing me?!!

And Big Foot stopped. He got a confused look on his face and he said, “You asked me to chase you, didn’t you? I’m showing you how I guard your treasure.”

Astounding.

I told him, “I don’t want you to chase me anymore. And umm…what treasure?”

This idea of consciously interacting with dream figures, either in the dream or in our imagination when we are awake, is grounded in the first two ideas I mentioned: Dreams are us, and they come for our benefit. We have one brain that experiences life from both waking and dreaming perspectives, one heart, one life. This was My dream, My monster, my fear, and my need / decision to overcome that fear.

When I remember my dreams are me talking to me about my life, it is easier to see how they come for my benefit. Psychologists say dreams give us a safe space for experiencing strong emotions, working out life challenges. Even the scary ones can give us valuable insights. The Jungian goal of integration includes embracing parts of ourselves we might not recognize or accept at first, and we often encounter those aspects first in dreams.

At 22, I was not ready to embrace this monster as part of me, but now that I was talking to him instead of running away, it put me into a brand new dream.
Big Foot led me back through the forest, regaling me with stories of other people he had chased away, acting it all out, until we came to a cave. Inside, the walls were glittering with beautiful jewels: sapphires, rubies, emeralds, amber. He led me to a small recess in the wall that held dozens of gleaming, jewel-encrusted…shoehorns?

They made me laugh and I woke up. I haven’t been chased by anything since then. When I learned to turn around, my dreaming mind created a new habit that turns any chase into a confrontation or discussion.

Which leads me to the third idea: Dreaming is a skill that can be learned, like any other skill. I learned to dream more effectively, to keep some of my personal autonomy, which turns out to be common practice outside of western culture. Anthropologists say there are 4,000 living cultures in the world today and 90% of them teach their children how to take an active part in their dreams. Practicing just a few skills can help us develop a meaningful dream life:

- When we take a moment to remember our dreams, we build our mental capacity to remember more.
- When we tell our dreams as a story, we teach our brains to put future dreams into more story-like forms.
- When we explore a dream’s connection to our waking concerns, we teach our dreams to become more clearly connected to our lives. Less nonsense, more stories, more relevance.

For a long time I remembered that dream as the time I learned I could push back at monsters. I considered those jewel-encrusted shoehorns as a bit of nonsense—a nice, fluffy ending to a scary nightmare. The jewels destroyed the shoehorn’s only real function, something my science-rational parents would have found hilarious.
But the dream stayed with me: the chase, the turn-around, the cave, the treasure, the shoehorns. The images were alive in me, waiting for me.

Many years later I revisited this dream, when I realized shoehorns help get our feet into smallish shoes, and are designed primarily to protect the shoes. Big Foot had big soles, or a big SOUL, and suddenly I was thinking about how hard I had tried to fit my dreaming soul into my very rational family.

Maybe the jeweled shoehorns reflected my ambivalence, caught between wanting to be seen as rational (I am rational!), and wanting the treasure of my dreams. Maybe the jewels were telling me to stop trying so hard to fit in.

I was asking myself important questions. How will I treasure something so seemingly irrational? How do I embrace the beauty of my one precious dreaming life and still belong with those I love? And as I claimed the monster within me, How do I keep this treasure safe without chasing everybody away? These have been important spiritual questions for me.

Every night, all mammals on earth (plus fish and birds and who knows who else) seamlessly shift into the altered state of consciousness of sleep. At least for humans, we then experience an inner world where we play and fight with emotions and metaphors, chasing monsters and jewels and mysteries. How we respond—dismiss them as nonsense, admire their beauty, wonder at their incomprehensibility, explore their meanings, push back or hide or direct them into more useful channels—all of these are spiritual decisions.

I have come to believe dreams are one of the greatest under-utilized emotional resources we possess, if only we could learn to recognize and appreciate them. With only the rarest of exceptions they exist to help us. They can open us to Mysteries and treasures that lie well beyond our waking, rational understanding.
Dreaming has enriched my whole life. When I am facing a big life decision, I look for dreams to show me how I really feel, or imagine the different paths I see. When I am missing people I love, I reach out in my dreams and connect with them again. Dreams have given me warnings of danger I was ignoring, suggested creative solutions to problems and reminded me of the bigness of Creation and my place here, and how I want to live my life. They have been a true gift.

If you want to explore your dreams, send me an email. I run a monthly Meetup group on dreams, and can connect you to resources and professional dreamworkers in the GTA.