

The Dreams of Children

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Dreams. Good dreams, bad dreams, wet dreams, dreams that scare you awake, dreams that you don't even remember. Dreams -- the key to the subconscious. Dreams -- the pathway of the prophets, the avenue of angels.

Our biblical ancestors knew the power of dreams. In the Old Testament, Joseph saved his people by interpreting dreams for the Pharaoh.

Job was forced to listen to one rather frightening view of God's use of dreams: "In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on mortals, while they slumber on their beds, then He opens their ears, and terrifies them with warnings."

Throughout the Bible, God's angels appear most often through dreams. I don't think this is an accident. Having an angel appear in a dream lent a sense of the supernatural to the experience. It also made it much more believable. Think about it -- say Joseph and Mary were just hanging around one day and saw an angel. People would have thought they were crazy, or hallucinating, or smoking some of the crop. But if, as Matthew reports, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him of the impending virgin birth -- well, that's a different story -- a much more powerful and awe-inspiring story. Wow! You saw that in a dream and then it came true? Awesome!

Now I would have made a lousy biblical hero. I almost never remember my dreams. I can see it. The Lord sent an angel to Scott to tell him that he would be great, powerful, and the leader of his people. And I'd wake up, vaguely remembering something -- Wings, I'd say. Something with wings and power. Must have been a bird ... a powerful bird ... an eagle. Eagle ... golf -- I'm going to be a golfer! The Book of Scott just would not have made it into the Top Ten.

Fortunately for us, Martin Luther King had dreams -- and he shared them with us during his much-too-short life. Thirty years ago, in perhaps his most famous speech, Dr. King told us about them. Here's a little of what he said:

I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a 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 are created equal.

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a desert state sweltering in the heat of injustice and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day the state of Alabama ... will be transformed into a situation where little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plains, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

Five years later, on the night of Dr. King's tragic death, Bobby Kennedy quoted the ancient poet Aeschylus to eulogize Dr. King. Aeschylus's words of comfort to mourners again remind us of the power of dreams: "In our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."

But these dreams -- dreams of fear and hope. Dreams of freedom and justice and equality. Dreams of despair and wisdom. These are the abstract, rhetorical dreams of adults. These dreams make for good speeches, but sometimes I want something more. I want real dreams -- the dreams of children.

This morning, we've heard our youth share the experiences of the children of the civil rights movement. Their dreams were concrete -- it wasn't about some abstraction; it was being able to go the school down the street. It was being able to go to a fast food restaurant. It was sitting in the nicer waiting room at the doctor's office.

To dream like children. To put our hopes and fears and desires and dreads in real, concrete terms. To stop thinking about concepts and start doing something about stuff, real things. Freedom, equality, justice, peace, righteousness ... the homeless problem, the AIDS crisis, urban poverty, teenage pregnancy, the crime problem, famine. They are concepts, they are passive, they are out there somewhere. We may fear them -- abstractly. We may desire them -- in the back of our minds. We may donate some money or a few hours of our time -- almost absent-mindedly. Did I give to the homeless this year? I'm not sure -- here's a few dollars. We have our lists of causes, of concepts, of ideals. But they're not real.

Children, though, would approach these problems differently. Not as global abstractions, but as real, discrete, smack-you-in-your-face problems.

Not "homelessness" but "Jimmy doesn't have a place to live."

Not "the AIDS crisis", but "Jane's brother is dying."

Not "poverty", but "Mary can't buy new shoes."

And not "peace", but "Let's make Bill and Tom stop fighting."

I have a dream today. To dream the dreams of children. To turn abstract, societal concerns into real, discrete, manageable problems that I can help solve. I can't reach millions of people with a powerful message like Dr. King did. I can't persuade Congress to alter the priorities of our entire nation. I can't bring peace to the world. But I also know I can't just sit by and watch it all happen.

I know I can't do anything about "homelessness." But maybe I can do something about Jimmy not having a place to live.

I know I can't do anything about "the AIDS crisis." But maybe I can do something to prevent one person from getting AIDS.

I know I can't do anything about "poverty." But maybe I can do something to help one person get back on her feet again.

I have a dream today. To dream the dreams of children, to remember those dreams, and to do something to make those dreams real.

Let us learn from our children and help make our world better -- one dream at a time.