

From "Big" Dream to "Great" Dream:
How one person's private struggle can give rise to dream solutions
for collective healing

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Presentation given at the annual conference of the International Association for the Study
of Dreams, Kerkegrade, Netherlands, 2011

In the time frame allotted, one must be necessarily focused, and yet the topic by definition is vast. With this dilemma before me, let me proceed by first stating a hypothesis that can be researched by taking into account a variety of dreams that have transformed individuals and the communities in which they lived. And then I will tell about my own dream, which I believe illustrates the thesis.

The hypothesis is this: The individual dreamer may come into alignment with, or be seized by, a problem of such import that it presses for a solution. The individual begins to struggle with, and chooses to live according to its mandate--either failing, or contributing a uniquely lived out solution to the problem needing resolution. Along with the tethering of the individual to the pressing and timely agenda, the process may result in the suspension of personal fulfillment, even personal welfare, as the life of the dreamer takes on the elements of an archetypal drama. I have also observed that the great dream inaugurates a process that eventually culminates in a later dream, thus establishing a "frame" within which the story proceeds from beginning to end, even though in another sense every stage of the process coinheres with each present moment. If an initial big dream announces the problem, the subsequent dream reveals, at least in metaphorical terms, a solution that may benefit all who

become aware of the story. Through the dreamer's actions and through his or her willingness to share it, the dream drama can become a great dream.

Carl Jung devoted a great deal of attention to the myth of the Fisher King, Parcifal and the quest for the Holy Grail. However, his wife Emma made the study of this particular myth her life work. *The Grail Legend*, which was completed upon Emma's death by her collaborator Marie- Louise von Franz, is perhaps the most important work on the topic, at least from the standpoint of analytical psychology. Carl Jung believed that the life of Christ was the most important example of individuation in Western history. But he also believed that the story of Jesus left significant problems unresolved, in particular the place of power and the role of the feminine. He went on to say that the Grail myth, which arose in Europe in the late 12th century, was the most significant attempt to date to resolve the problems left unanswered by the life of Christ.

If this is true, and I think it is, then coming into alignment with this myth and living out one's own version of the Grail quest, is a particularly ambitious (if conscious at all) and hazardous journey that is on the leading edge of our collective healing and evolution. For as Jung was so quick to point out, when we draw close to archetypal reality, we are exposed to great psychological potential and hazard.

It was a few days before my 21st birthday that I first became aware that my life was already paralleling some aspects of the Grail quest. I dreamed I was in my childhood home in Texas with my parents. It was just before dawn, and I invite them to follow me outside onto the

driveway so I can reveal to them my life purpose. I lift my arms in the air, and begin to chant a single note. As I do, powerful energy erupts in my body, and at the same time, I see lightning arcing across the sky. Finally, I lower my arms, and the lightning strikes only a short distance away. I repeat this process, all the while standing outside of myself puzzled by this demonstration, and not knowing what it means. Suddenly, I become aware that my parents, in their fear, have hurled a lance into my back. I fall to the ground, knowing that I am dying. I am not afraid, but I'm disappointed that they didn't understand and accept me. They come up and stand over me, looking frightened and worried. I say, "I was really your son. But I am the son of the unborn son, who is still to come." I know that they must eventually deal with him, even though I am dying.

Those of you are familiar with the myth of the Fisher King, Parcival, and the Holy Grail, will recognize some parallels to that myth. Like Amfortas who was the fisher king—a word that means, by the way, without power—I am wounded in such way that I can not heal myself, and became aware that a successor -- a Parcival -- is necessary for the completion of my purpose. There are differences between my dream and the various versions of the Fisher King wounding. Depending on the version of the story, Amfortas was either wounded -- perhaps castrated -- by a pagan knight whom he attacked and killed, or he was burned when eating a fish cooking on a spit that was too hot for him to handle. In contrast, I was killed by my parents as a consequence of my actions. Arguably, it's the same drama from the other side. Amfortas attempted to defeat the primitive knight, whereas I was harnessing the life force without regard for the authorities who would have me abide by a less presumptuous and less empowered agenda. A significant

difference, perhaps borne of the s in cultural ideals and unconscious patterns since the 12th century.

Those who have studied this myth seem to agree that the problem with Amfortas, regardless of how his wound is inflicted, is his unthinking zeal and aggression, which blinds him to the legitimate interests of the pagan knight, who in a sense embodies the very power that Amfortas seeks but merely projects it onto a presumed enemy. In killing the source of his own power, Amfortas is rendered impotent. When Amfortas' nephew Parcival enters the scene, he is afflicted with the same problem. He is also unthinking and unfeeling in his zeal to attain power. He leaves his mother heartbroken--unconvinced of her warnings--without any remorse on his part. He shortly thereafter encounters a woman in a tent in the woods who is awaiting a guest with a sumptuous feast. Parcival assumes he's the guest. He kisses her, and then eats the meal and takes a ring meant for her lover. All hell breaks loose for her when her lover whose name means "Pride" arrives on the scene, but Parcival has no clue because he's already gone. Later he leaves his lover Blanche Fleur heartbroken while he goes off in search of the Grail. He goes on to exhibit the same unexamined responses to life until he fails in his first encounter with Grail, during which he remains characteristically self absorbed in its presence rather than inquiring of whom it serves.

The recipient of a big dream such as mine can elect to take a step in the direction of the myth's unfoldment, or can surely resist it. I think in most cases, it is difficult to resist, because a chapter is already in place, and the trajectory can be felt. So, at a particular moment in my life, I

left my second home in Virginia where I'd practiced psychotherapy for 17 years and returned to the waters of my childhood, and built a fly fishing lodge on the Laguna Madre, or the Mother Lagoon.

Amfortas, as you may know, becomes known as the Fisher King because the only way to relieve the pain of his wound is by fishing. Thus he becomes known as the fisher king. When my wife and I were trying to decide what to call our waterfront B&B, out of which I have guided fly fishers for the last 12 years, a green kingfisher flew by the dock. And so we adopted the name Kingfisher Inn, unaware that we were taking the step toward enacting a drama that mirrored the story of Amfortas and his redeemer, Parcival.

I approached my career as a guide much as Amfortas approached his initial task, and Parcival approached his quest for knighthood--with zeal, unfounded confidence, and a highly competitive edge. In my attempt to establish myself as a great angler and guide, I entered the oldest and largest fishing tournament in Texas, hoping to gain notoriety by winning. On the opening day just after sunrise, I hooked a big trout that I knew could very well clinch my victory. But landing the fish was a remote possibility, for the species is known for its thrashing style. The big ones usually get away. So, as I fought the fish, I thought of what deals I could make. I stood there and foolishly prayed to God and the forces of nature and whoever else would listen, saying that if I landed the fish, I would finally consent to having a child with my wife, as if that would please the audience. What a promise for a single fish, right? We both had children by our first marriages, but I had resisted the idea of having a child of our own for various excellent reasons, such as age and finances. I landed the fish, won the tournament, but eventually reneged on my promise, causing my wife great heartache, and looking back probably planting the seeds for our

eventual breakup nine years later. Like Amfortas, I had offended everything precious to me, especially the realm of nature and of the body. And like the youthful Parcival, I had kissed the woman, taken the ring, eaten her feast, and left her to deal with the aftermath. Of course, as we know, there's no escaping the psychic consequences of taking without giving back.

Unlike the myth where the retaliation of the pagan knight is immediate for Amfortas, there was no immediate wounding on the heels of my ambitiousness, and broken promise. But two years later, a couple of days before the same tournament commenced, I dreamt of seeing a sting ray that became a man of stone who attacked me. I defeated him only by chipping away at him until there was nothing left of him. Then, on the opening day of the tournament during which I hoped to consolidate my already impressive reputation, I stepped on a sting ray before sunrise, whose barb went through my foot.

It was terribly painful, but I decided to continue fishing, because a friend was with me, and I didn't want to ruin his chances. I waded in the warm water for 10 hours, inadvertently allowing the wound to become infected with the one of the most lethal pathogens available in the environment today--a first cousin of cholera, called *vibrio vulnificus*. Anglers and doctors alike shudder at the name of this dread disease.

While I was, in one sense, repeating the Fisher King error and incurring his wound, unlike Amfortas, I experienced the *of heart* that his nephew Parcival experiences after his string of failures. After his first vision of the Grail when he fails to ask the essential question, Parcival immediately encounters a psychic woman in the woods, who is grieving her beheaded lover

(representing, of course, Parcival's own dissociation from the body and his feelings). Once she realizes who Parcival is, she tells him his sword is weak and will fail him in battle unless it is reforged, again an allusion to the powerlessness of Amfortas and Parcival in their unthinking zeal. She goes on to deride him for his failure to ask the essential question of the Grail, and says that his failure could be traced to a single problem—a pervasive lack of remorse for what he's done to others. In specific, she tells him that he lacked remorse for the emotional pain he'd caused his mother and his lover Blanche Fleur by leaving them. She also tells him that he is responsible for the abuse that befell the woman whose ring he took early in the story at the hands of her jealous lover. This lack of feeling is the central problem of the myth, and now that Parcival is aware of it, he is crushed by deep remorse. Indeed, after hearing the woman's ruthless assessment, he stands stricken with a stark realization of the pain he's caused three different women. He remains in a swoon until after dark when his men finally rouse him from his grief.

In my slow and painful recovery from the disease, I, too, had my experience of deep remorse for promises I'd made and broken, the pain that I'd cause my wife, as well as the unwitting offenses against nature I had committed as an overly zealous angler, hoping to establish my reputation as a master of the shallow lagoon where I guided, which was aptly named the Laguna Madre, or the Mother Lagoon.

Following this life threatening ordeal (which I have also described in my book, *Healing the Fisher King*), a dream foreshadowed the beginning of the end of this lifelong division between myself and my feelings. This second dream establishes the second half of the "frame" I mentioned earlier, between which almost 30 years of "coming of age" had ensued, and which

culminated with a more complete embrace of the earth, the body, and the feminine--in general, the realm of feeling.

I become aware in the dream that a group of hunters have killed and beheaded an Indian who had been living in the woods. Like the Grail story, we see the divorce from the natural man dramatized by a beheading. I am aghast, and feel compelled to report the crime. I convince my father, who was one of the hunters that we must report it. He seems confused, but finally agrees. On the heels of reporting the crime, I am suddenly "told" that a great cat is returning to its home in south Texas, where it will thrive in its natural habitat. I am at peace, and become lucid. As I walk under dew-covered hibiscus blossoms, I affirm that when I look up, I will see the holy Light. I raise my eyes, and the whole sky is filled with a bright delicate latticework that surrounds an orb of white light many times the size of the sun. I know that it's Christ's light. Then an elderly woman walks up to me, who I know is Mary, the mother of Jesus. I bend down and kiss her on the forehead, and then turn back and see that there's a second light to the left and below the white orb. The second light looks like the blossom of a passionflower vine--indigo and white, with delicate hair-like petals. I ask Mary, "Is that your light?" She smiles and nods. I turn back again, and see that there's a third light shining from the window of a tower, which is below and to the right of the white orb. It has a circular stairway leading to its summit. I ask Mary, "Whose light is that?" She says, "It's Mary Magdalene's light." I then ask her, "Do you want to go there?" She nods, so I take her hand and we begin climbing the stairs of the tower.

This second dream doesn't directly refer to the coming of age dream, but alludes to the same unthinking masculinity that forms the central problem in the Grail Myth--an aggressive zeal that fails to appreciate the legitimacy of other authorities. Its resolution is seen in the

awareness of abhorrence by the dreamer, and the convincing of his father--the very one who had killed him in his coming of age dream--of the crime against the natural man.

In the final vision of the three lights, we see a solution that can be felt as perhaps complete. The presence of the lights beside the Christ light connotes the recognition of the rightful place of the feminine, not only in the form of the mother, but in that of the lover. Also we see that the Magdalene's light, unlike the other two, is completely grounded in the world by the tower and the stairway. She is a ladder to heaven, and a stairway to earth, the restoration of the union between head and body, heaven and earth. Even the Holy Mother yearns for that light.

In addition to the rough parallel between the myth and my own dreams and life experiences, I made decisions along the way that fit into the requirements of the larger mandate. One decision I made, which fits into my thesis about great dreams, was to make the story of my wounding and subsequent healing, however partial, public. That is, I offered the story to the community in the form of a book, in whose collective psyche this story is still unfolding down a myriad of individual paths of enactment.

Like Jung, I understand that a dream becomes a big dream by arresting the momentum of the individual's ego-defined trajectory, and by depicting a deeper, sacred course more aligned with the Self. However, I believe that the big dream becomes a great dream as the individual chooses a course of action that aligns himself with the myth's unfolding agenda, and takes the dream into the world, thus providing a lived-out solution that can be witnessed and shared. In the community's recognition of its value, do we have a dream that extends beyond the individual's personal history and narrow interests, and becomes a chapter in the collective story of our becoming.