

# **From Biblical Dreams to Children's Dreams: A Challenge For Religious Educators in Catholic Schools**

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## **Abstract**

In the Judaeo-Christian scriptures, dreams were viewed as one medium through which God communicated with humankind. Contemporary research shows that some children in Catholic schools report dreams which bear similarities to those recorded in scripture. Often these children perceive their dreams as having religious connections. This paper argues that when children find meaning in these dreams, they may be drawing on spiritual intelligence to do so. Given that all children dream, the topic of dreams has immediate relevance for students. The religious component of some dreams gives this topic a pertinent and challenging place in religious education, and is therefore worthy of further exploration.

## **Introduction**

Since ancient times, the experience of dreaming has intrigued and captured the human imagination. It is a phenomenon that has been researched in several disciplines, including psychology and religious studies. The belief that some dreams emanate from a divine source finds corroboration in the sacred texts of many world religions, including the Judaeo-Christian scriptures. This paper draws on contemporary empirical research focused on reported dreams from children in Catholic schools, whose dreams bear similarities to those recorded in scripture. It argues that when children find meaning in these types of dreams, they may be drawing on their spiritual intelligence to do so, thereby addressing issues of meaning and value in their own lives. To begin, this paper briefly presents an overview of dreams recorded in the Judaeo-Christian scriptures. It then discusses the notion of spiritual intelligence as a means by which people may address issues of meaning and value in life. In drawing from one of the author's empirical research, the paper proceeds to present two particular instances in which the children's reported dream (1) was believed by the dreamer to be sent from God (i.e. the article focuses on the children's interpretation. The authors make no assumptions as to whether or not God sends dreams), and (2) were responded to by the dreamer as a means by which to address an issue of meaning or value in their own life - that is, the dreamer responded to dream using spiritual intelligence. Finally, the paper examines some current Australian religious education diocesan guidelines and text materials to ascertain the place and potential role that dreams may play in religious education lessons. As well, some of the challenges and perceived difficulties for

religious education teachers are discussed.

### **Dreams in scripture**

Sacred scripture in the Judaeo-Christian tradition is composed of a variety of literary genres, many of which contain references to dreams experienced by the biblical characters. The dreams take different forms, some of which are described below, but are all linked by one common theme: they have an explicit link to God. In some dreams God appears in order to give a verbal message, an example of which is offered by Solomon's dream in which God engaged him in conversation. Whilst at Gibeon,

the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night. And God said, "Ask what I shall give you ... I give you a wise and discerning mind. I give you also... riches" (1 Kings 3ff).

Gnuse (1996, p. 16) terms Biblical dreams which contain a verbal, unambiguous message such as Solomon's as "auditory message dreams". This type of dream was prevalent in the dream reports of the ancient Near East and usually occurred in a religious context (Oppenheim 1966, Gnuse 1996, Husser 1999). Central to them was often an epiphany – the appearance of a god with the purpose of conveying a message (McLain Carr 1991, Patton 2002).

In contrast to these auditory dreams lies "visual symbolic message dreams" (Gnuse, 1996, p. 16). Here, the dream conveys its meaning by substituting characters, objects and events with others that represent them. Often, an interpreter was needed to decode the symbolism as in the case of Joseph who interpreted Pharaoh's dreams of seven lean cows eating seven fat cows, and seven withered ears of corn swallowing seven healthy ears of corn. This imagery, suggested Joseph, indicated that seven years of famine would follow seven years of plenty (Genesis 41:1-36).

### **Scriptural dreams of the future**

The Biblical dream narratives contain recurring themes. One of these, as Pharaoh's dreams illustrate, is a prediction of the future. Similarly, Daniel interpreted King Nebuchadnezzar's dreams as predictions of events to come. In the King's first dream, was a frightening image created from gold, silver, iron, bronze and clay. A stone struck it and shattered the figure into pieces which the wind swept away whilst the stone transformed into a mountain so large that it filled the earth (Daniel 2:31-35). According to Daniel's interpretation, the metals symbolized kingdoms that would rise and fall. However, unlike Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar failed to take his advice and was stripped of his kingdom as the dream had foretold (Adams, 2004).

Dreams relating to the future are also present in the New Testament. In Matthew's Gospel, Joseph is central to the dream narratives. Joseph's first dream contained information about the future, delivered by an angel who informed him that a virgin would conceive and give birth to a son, which would be a fulfilment of prophecy (Matthew 1:20-21).

### **Spiritual intelligence and dreams**

Although it is a contested topic, contemporary research suggests that it is possible to conceive of spirituality - a person's sense of connectedness with self, others, the world and, in some people's

views, with a Transcendent dimension – as a type of intelligence (Emmons, 1999, 2000; Zohar & Marshall, 2000; Kwilecki, 2000; Hyde, 2003, 2004; Adams, Hyde & Woolley, in press). Among the better known proponents of spiritual intelligence are Zohar and Marshall (2000) who have drawn on neuro-scientific and psychological research to argue for the existence of this form of intelligence which, in their view, complements the rational (IQ) and emotional (EQ) categories of intelligence. They argue that a key feature of spiritual intelligence is its unifying function which integrates both IQ and EQ, thereby making possible a dialogue between reason and emotion. Zohar and Marshall describe spiritual intelligence as the mental aptitude used by human beings to address and find solutions to problems of meaning and value, and to place their lives and actions into a wider, richer, meaning-giving context. This supports the findings of other scholars from the neuro-scientific field who have argued that the human brain has evolved with structures that may enable people to attend to the goal of addressing issues of meaning and value within their life contexts (see for example, Newberg, d'Aquili & Rause, 2001; Ramachandran & Blakeslee, 1998). Zohar and Marshall point to a number of characteristics which typify spiritual intelligence. Among those that appear to be pertinent to the children described in the next section of this paper are the quality of being inspired by vision and values, a tendency to see connections between diverse things (being holistic), and a reluctance to cause unnecessary harm (pp. 15- 16).

Also arguing in favour of spiritual intelligence is Emmons (2000) who draws on theories related to motivation and personality, as well as the influence of Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. Emmons purports that the ability to draw on spiritual information is a component of intelligence, and that spiritual intelligence consists of a set of five abilities, or competencies, which lead to problem solving behaviour: a) the capacity to transcend the physical and material, b) the ability to experience heightened states of consciousness, c) the ability to sanctify everyday experiences, d) the ability to use spiritual resources to solve problems in living, and e) the capacity to be virtuous.

According to Emmons (2000), people can display differing levels of proficiency or sophistication in relation to these spiritual abilities and competencies. He further argues that such capabilities may enable an individual to adapt and to function effectively in a wide range of life endeavours. Those competencies which appear to have relevance to the children described in the next section of this paper are the latter three appearing in Emmons' list - the ability to sanctify everyday experiences, the ability to use spiritual resources to solve problems in living, and the capacity to be virtuous.

Dreams which people describe as significant or spiritual have often been related to solving problems (e.g. van de Castle, 1994), and in some instances, the solving of problems through dreams has been directly related to issues of meaning and value (Adams, 2004; Adams & Hyde, in press). Through finding meaning in such dreams, the dreamer is able to attain the practical goal of solving problems - a hallmark of spiritual intelligence (Emmons, 2000, Zohar & Marshall, 2000). This supports the thesis presented in this paper that when an individual addresses a problem of meaning or value in their dream, they may be drawing on their spiritual intelligence to do so.

## **Dreams of children**

The following accounts of children's dreams are offered as examples of the dreams of children in

Catholic schools in the UK to which the children attributed a religious link. The data is drawn from a larger, multi-faith study, of 107 dreams collected initially through questionnaires and then through follow up interviews (n=94). A key purpose of the research was to gain a greater insight into how children understand their own dreams – a purpose which is reflected in this analysis. The authors make no judgement about the children's assertions of links between their dreams and God or other aspects of religion, but report them so as to inform readers about the ways in which some children in Catholic schools experience and explain their dreams. The children's names have been fictionalised.

### *A new baby*

Ellen, a ten year old girl living in a Scottish city, reported a short dream which she described as follows: “It was just a room and like I woke up and then my mum had said to me that I had a little sister.”

Whilst this dream may at first seem insignificant, partly because of its brevity, discussion with Ellen revealed more depth, particularly in relation to her insights into her own dream. The dream had taken place at the end of her mother's second pregnancy. The following day, her mother gave birth to a girl and Ellen described the dream as being a prediction of the future; whilst she had obviously known of her mother's pregnancy, she had not known the sex of the baby. There was another element to Ellen's understanding of her dream: the source. Whilst Ellen believed that most dreams are created in the mind, she thought that God had sent this one to her. When asked why she thought this, she explained “Because not very many of my dreams come true the next day and then I was sure that God had sent it because it did happen in real life.” The reason for God sending this dream, she suggested, was to show her what it should feel like to be a big sister. This was reflected in her feeling of happiness both in the dream and upon awakening from it.

Clearly, there was an equal chance of the baby being a boy or a girl, so the dream of a sister may have been coincidence. However, of fundamental importance is the meaning which Ellen found in the dream. In interpreting her own dream, Ellen appeared particularly to display two of the characteristics of spiritual intelligence: the ability to see connections between diverse things (a dream and an event in her family's life) and the ability to sanctify an everyday experience. Firstly, in interpreting her dream Ellen saw immediately the connection between the actual birth of her little sister and the dream in which her mother told her that she had a little sister. In other words, she was able to see these two events holistically. Secondly, in maintaining that this particular dream had come from God for a specific purpose (so that she would know what it would feel like to be a big sister) Ellen had effectually sanctified this experience. Emmons (1999) maintained that to sanctify means to set apart for a special purpose. Ellen appeared to have done exactly this. The meaning she found in her dream, which she believed to have been sent by God, had been set aside for the purpose of enabling her to know, perhaps intuitively, how it might feel to have a baby sister. Both of these characteristics enabled Ellen to address an issue of meaning and value in her own life – becoming an older sister, and how that might feel. In other words, she used her spiritual intelligence to address, and to perhaps be at peace with an issue of meaning and value particular to her own life.

In terms of scriptural dreams, Ellen's report has parallels. As in Joseph's dreams detailed in Matthew's Gospel, God did not appear but a link between the dream and God is made. Joseph's

first dream, cited above, in which the angel informed him of the conception of Jesus (Matthew 1: 20-21) contains two corresponding themes: birth and future prediction. The latter theme, also prevalent in Old Testament dream narratives, is also one identified by psychologists. Van de Castle (1994) and Fukuda (2002) detail accounts of people who claim to have had dreams which predicted the future, some of which occurred during childhood. Whilst there are obvious methodological difficulties in verifying such claims, the importance lies in their perception of the experience as being predictive, giving it personal significance through that interpretation.

### *Kindness to others*

Thomas, an eleven year old boy, attended a Catholic school in a wealthy suburb of a Scottish city. His dream had occurred when he was four years old and had made sufficient impact upon him to be remembered for seven years. Thomas explained that when he started going to school he had been bullied by some of the other children in his class. The dream was set in heaven and Thomas was a teenager, surrounded by lots of small children. He was being unpleasant towards them and the children were running around complaining to Thomas "he hit me, he hit me." Initially Thomas ignored the children's complaints but then remembered what it had felt like when he had been bullied and "decided to start being nice to the wee ones."

Thomas described two emotions in the dream: anger and happiness. The anger stemmed from his initial dismissal of the children's cries for help. He explained that he was angry with himself for having behaved in that way. The happiness arose from his being surrounded by other children. Despite the age difference, Thomas explained that "I was just happy that I could like be around loads of people and have loads of friends."

Thomas' dream, like the scriptural dreams, contained what he perceived to be a message. Like the visual symbolic dreams of the Old Testament, Thomas uncovered a meaning in the story line. Whilst identifying an explicit connection to his experiences of being bullied in school, he also understood the dream to represent how he should be behaving in school - to help children who are being bullied. In interpreting his own dream, Thomas appears to have displayed four of the characteristics of spiritual intelligence: the quality of being inspired by vision and values, a tendency to see connections between diverse things, a reluctance to cause unnecessary harm, and the ability to be virtuous. Firstly, Thomas was inspired by a value he believed to be represented in his dream - of being compassionate to those younger than himself. From the discussion with Thomas, it seemed that this was a value he would be aspiring to live out in his own life. Secondly, Thomas was able to see the connection between his own dream in which he displayed empathy with the younger children, and the message contained in the dream, that is, how he should behave at school in terms of helping those children who are being bullied. This also links to the third characteristic. Through this empathy, Thomas displays a reluctance to cause unnecessary harm to his younger schoolmates. And finally, in heeding the message he perceived to come from his dream, Thomas indicated that he would display the capacity to engage in virtuous behaviour in his own life - specifically that of being compassionate towards those who were younger.

Moral issues relating to the dreamer's behaviour may not be as explicit in scripture, but do occult. For example, Nebuchadnezzar's second dream showed the destruction of a great tree that reached to heaven.

Previously, many creatures had dwelled there but after it was destroyed the creatures abandoned it (Daniel 4: 10-17). Daniel told the King how the magnificent tree indicated how strong Nebuchadnezzar had become but that, like the tree, his power would be destroyed and he would be forced to live with the animals. Daniel advised him to act in a more honourable manner and show kindness to the oppressed in order to lengthen his present stability. However, as Nebuchadnezzar did not heed the message, his power was lost.

### **The place of dreams in religious education**

The two examples provided above suggest that the children were able to find a meaning in their particular dream, and were able to respond to their dream using their spiritual intelligence. Given that, for these children, the dreams possessed a religious component, and that they were responded to by the dreamer as a means by which to address an issue of meaning or value in their own life, an exploration of children's dreams has a pertinent place within the religious education program. While writers such as Faraday (1972), Jones (1987), Grimmitt et al. (1991) and Adams (2001, in press) have proposed that dreams can be discussed in religious education, the topic seems to have received little attention in Australian Catholic religious education. This section briefly investigates where dreams which may have a religious connection could be explored in the religious education curriculum by examining three Australian diocesan sets of guidelines/textual materials for religious education.

#### *Guidelines for religious educations - Archdiocese of Brisbane*

With its focus at the classroom level on understanding and learning from religion, several of the suggested support modules in the Guidelines for Religious Education - Archdiocese of Brisbane (1997) lend themselves to a possible exploration of children's dreams in the religious education classroom. For example, the strand of "Scripture" includes at Level 4 a module titled "Images, Symbols and language". A pertinent issue here is that children's attitudes towards the Bible is often seen as far from positive (see Copley & Walshe, 2000), and so a challenge for the religious education teacher is to make learning about scripture relevant and interesting for children. Since psychology has shown that dreams are a universal human experience, scriptural dreams have immediate relevance to children's lives. Not only can children relate to the dreaming state, but as this paper has shown, some have dreams to which they assign meaning and a religious connection.

The unit "Images, Symbols and Language" could then include a study of some scriptural dream narratives, exploring the types of symbols and images that occur in those dreams, and an examination of what the dreamer, or dream interpreter, understood those symbols and images to mean. This could lead to a discussion or to activities in which the students themselves reflect on dreams they may have had which bear similarities to those in scripture. For students who have experienced such dreams, classroom work on this subject may be quite poignant, providing them with opportunities to explore their personal responses to their dreams in the context of the classroom. This may entail them drawing upon their spiritual intelligence to find meaning in their dreams so as to address, or to be at peace with, issues of meaning and value in their own lives. Importantly also, the teachers may potentially be accessing a valued part of the inner lives of those children, and may be in a position to nurture that through the planned learning and teaching experiences. However, reflection on perceived meanings in dreams is not to be

mistaken for dream interpretation; the teacher is not a psychoanalyst and should not attempt to adopt such a role in the classroom. Rather the concept of dream interpretation – of dreams having meaning, as explicated in scripture – can be explored in the classroom rather than dreams be interpreted publicly.

Similarly, under the strand of “Celebration and Prayer” the modules titled “Spirituality and Personal Identity” at Level 2, and “Spirituality and the Human Quest for Meaning” at Levels 5 and 6 directly link to issues of meaning and value in students’ lives. This topic could include a focus on dreams that the children may have had from which, in their belief, they had derived meaning – be it a moral imperative, or the premonition of an event. Since the type of dreams reported by the children above linked directly to a search for meaning, discussion and activities focusing these types of dreams that may have been experienced by members of the class would be valuable.

*To know, worship and love text series - Archdioceses of Sydney and Melbourne*

While the focus of the *To know, worship and love* (2001) series in the primary years has a catechetical focus, there are units of work which lend themselves to a possible exploration of children's dreams in the religious education classroom. For example, at Level 3a, unit 14, titled “Living in the Life of the Holy Spirit” emanates from the education goal of “Grace and the Moral life”. This unit states, as one of its doctrinal foci, “We need God's grace to help us to do what is right”. One component of an exploration into how children know to do what is right could include an exploration of messages people receive from dreams. At a cognitive level, this might focus on, for example, the character of Scrooge and his dreams in Charles Dickens' “A Christmas Carol”. At a more personal level, children could be invited to reflect upon and share instances in which they may have experienced dreams – like the one reported by Thomas in this paper – which they believed to contain a moral message indicating how they should act or behave. For children who attribute a religious connection to their dream, their dream could be perceived as an act of God's grace helping them to choose and to do what is right.

*Good news for living: A curriculum framework for religious education in the Archdiocese of Hobart*

Utilising a Shared Christian Praxis approach, there are several possibilities which could lend themselves to an exploration of children's dreams within the materials which have been developed in the Archdiocese of Hobart (2005). For example, under the doctrinal concept of Christian Life at Level 2, two of the doctrinal concepts stated – “My choices and actions affect others” and “In times of happiness and in times of sadness and loss, people can experience God's love in their care for each other” - could include a focus on dreams. The dream reported by Thomas in this paper is an example of the type of dream which may be consistent within an exploration of the first of the doctrinal concepts outlined above. Thomas interpreted his dream as representing how he should be behaving in school – to help children who are being bullied. The type of dream described by Ellen in this paper would be consistent within an exploration of the second of these two doctrinal concepts. Ellen's dream, believed by her to have been sent by God, occurred during a time of change (in terms of family structure), and perhaps initial uncertainty, but which reassured her, and hence, it could be argued, was an experience of God's love for her in a time of happiness for her family.

The examples presented above are certainly not exhaustive. They serve as illustrative of the fact that there are pertinent topics within the existing religious education syllabi of various dioceses which can lend themselves to include an exploration of children's dreams which may have a religious connection.

### **Challenges and perceived difficulties for religious education teachers**

Some readers will have reached this point and have reservations about discussing dreams in the classroom. It is thus important to briefly consider why this might be – potential concerns that teachers may have are explored in more detail elsewhere (Adams, 2001 ; Adams in press). One of the main causes for teachers to be reluctant to initiate discussions about dreams may derive from the negative legacy left by Freud in the West. Whilst Freud contributed significantly to dreams in the early 20 century, raising awareness of them amongst the wider public, attached to it was a widespread association with neurosis. Yet more contemporary psychological and neuroscientific findings are not known by non-specialists, but these demonstrate that dreams are a universal experience common to all mammals, and that children dream in greater quantities than adults (see Bulkeley, 1997; Flanagan, 2000). Importantly, qualitative studies with children show that many take their dreams seriously, reflecting on them, finding meaning in them and influencing their thoughts or actions in waking life (see Siegel & Bulkeley, 1998; Adams, 2001; Mallon, 2002). Through RE, teachers can capture this arena of important inner life for many children.

It is possible that teachers are anxious about children initiating discussions about nightmares, thereby causing unnecessary distress. Psychologists have shown that nightmares are a normal part of childhood (Mallon, 2002) and it may be that children will feel more at ease if they realise that other children are also experiencing them (see Adams in press for a more detailed discussion).

Finally, teachers may need to engage with a more searching issue: are they uncomfortable with the idea that some children believe that some dreams come from God? Does God really send dreams? To reiterate a point made earlier, the authors of this paper take a non-confessional stance on this issue, instead focusing on the parallels between how children and scripture understand some dreams to have divine connections. For teachers in Catholic schools who are uneasy with this concept, a challenging issue faces them: to reflect upon why current thinking, and theirs in particular, on dreams may have moved so far away from biblical teachings. Scientific hypotheses on the causes and functions of dreams are still debated but whilst a small number of authors from different faiths write on their belief in dreams as a vehicle of communication from God (see Sanford, 1989; Philips 1996), this religious aspect is rarely discussed in wider society. Certainly, the distancing of many religious believers from scriptural teachings on dreams would make for an interesting and thought provoking discussion in the classroom with older children.

### **Conclusion**

While the area of dreams in religious education may present challenges for religious educators in Australian Catholic schools, it is an area worthy of further consideration. This is so particularly given that a number of the guidelines documents for religious education and text-based syllabi



used in various Australian Catholic dioceses contain topics and modules which lend themselves to a possible exploration of children's dreams in religious education. In presenting two examples, drawn from larger empirical research, this paper has shown how some dreams with religious connections experienced by children in Catholic schools may have enabled the dreamer to address an issue of meaning or value in her or his own life. In other words it is possible that the dreamer responded to the dream using spiritual intelligence. This highlights, at the very least, the importance of a consideration of the place of children's dreams in the religious education classroom.

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