

CHILDHOOD DREAMS

By

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A LITTLE girl, still quite young, often makes the following experiment: going upstairs, she stops suddenly on one of the steps, shuts her eyes, and stands quite still. She thinks: "The world in which we live is only a dream. There is another 'real' world, a world quite different from my present surroundings. This other world cannot be described; it is quite different, but it is the real one. Presently I shall open my eyes and find myself in that real world." The child has absolute faith in this; confidently she opens her eyes-and is full of bitter disappointment when she sees the well-known staircase, the hall down below; above the staircase the landing with the stairs leading to the rooms in which she is accustomed to play and to work. Though she is bitterly disappointed, nevertheless she continually repeats the same experiment, for she never ceases to long for this world which is so much more real to her than all her earthly experiences, though she could by no means describe the peculiarities of it. There are moments in this child's life when she seems to seize something of this "real world"; these are the moments before she falls asleep. Sounds come to her not from outside; music is in her ear, in the listening soul. A succession of beautiful melodies makes her very happy whilst she falls peacefully to sleep.

The following is another experience: a child, not very strong in health, had to go to sleep for a while after lunch. But it was a difficult task, for in the room next to hers another child had to practice the piano. Hollow tunes wandered through the wall to the child who was half asleep. As if by magic these sounds produced in her mind wonderful images. She did not "make" these pictures herself; they arose of their own accord. Generally she "saw" flowers, not single ones, but whole garlands, bowers covered with light red roses, continually changing before her inner eye.

These are typical experiences in a child. The world is seen in a dreamy way, and very often we, as grown-ups, remembering our childhood, do not know whether we dreamt or really experienced the events which we call back to our minds. We believe that the world has changed a great deal since the time when we were young, 'but it has not altered as much as our own consciousness. Painters sometimes look at a landscape when lying down on a slope, so that the head is lying lower than the feet. In this way their eyes, more filled with blood than when standing up, see a much more richly colored landscape. The exact outlines disappear, but each colour seems to be full of life and intensity. This is the way children see the world, because their senses are still full of life, reaching out towards what they perceive with the strongest sympathy or antipathy. A child's world is plentiful in colours and figures, each colour and each figure with its own magic atmosphere. There are dreams which we experience with such intensity that our feeling in daytime is quite pale and ineffectual compared with our feeling in dreams. Such is the world of the child; a dream lived through with the freshest intensity of feeling and willing.

It is difficult to say when children begin to have dreams during sleep. They must have learned to speak before they- can tell us of their dreams; and healthy children forget their night dreams and are not very much inclined to speak about them. Surely it is not a wholesome method to ask them every morning: "Now tell me what you dreamt last night." It is a bad habit to destroy the child's original naiveté by drawing its more unconscious

experiences into the light of consciousness. By such means children would obviously be induced to indulge in fancies or even simply to tell lies, if they perceived how very much the adults were interested in their dreams. It is, of course, much better to be patient and-to wait till the time when the child itself confides to you what it has dreamt.

It is different with the dreams which frighten a child. We know of them because generally the child begins to cry, and when awakened is sometimes able to tell us the reason of his anguish. He has seen wild dogs or other horrid animals, or even awful shapes of giants, dwarfs, or other demons. These dreams may pass into a sort of vision of hallucination, so that the child, wide awake, goes on screaming and trembling, shaken with terror. Children who suffer from such vivid, frightening dreams are generally not fully awake in the daytime. Their consciousness is never fully awake, but they live through their day, playing and working in a more or less dull and dreamy attitude of mind. Sleeping and waking are not really separated from each other, sleep at night is not deep and sound; being awake does not mean that the child's mind is clear and conscious. Such children have a strong dream-life and their sleep is restless. Between going to sleep in the evening and awakening in the morning they may be subject to visions (though the word is perhaps too strong for such a state of mind in children). In the daytime they weave together their sense perceptions into dreamy images. These children must never be frightened, and no educational experiments should be tried on them as, for instance, sending them into a dark room to make them "brave." It is not against the principles of a good education to have a comforting night-light in the night nursery if a child is afraid of the dark. To frighten a child very often has the effect of bringing abnormal imaginative forces to work in its mind. Children are generally not accustomed to speak of their experiences. They have not yet the faculty for expressing themselves in words; but, being little artists, they have other modes of expression at their disposal; many drawings and paintings of little children are dream visions. For instance, a little girl of five years old always asked for her coloured crayons immediately after waking and while still in bed began to draw. These drawings were most delicate, of an intimate beauty, a weaving of light yellow angelic forms on a clear blue background, delicate figures of stars and flowers. A little boy of six or seven painted big strange richly coloured birds on blossoming trees, their plumage adorned with jewels. They touch the soul as only fairy-birds can. On the back of the drawing he wrote in big clumsy letters; "What I dreamt."

Another boy, three years old, drew himself lying in bed asleep. Coming from his head he drew curves, which linked themselves high above his bed into a sort of wonderful flower-shape with twelve starry leaves.

Another little boy also sketched himself in his bed; a coloured line indicated the way which he had taken in his dream, from his bed into the jaws of a dragon-form proceeding through all sorts of strange plant-like figures.

From these drawings we may even learn more of the child's true dream-life than from what he is able to tell us in words.

Rudolf Steiner has often drawn our attention to the fact that dreams are less interesting and informative in their imaginative contents than in their dramatic progress. Looking at the problems and solutions of our dream experiences we may learn much about our inner development, efforts, and moral progress. It is obvious that many dreams are only reflections of bodily processes and functions, especially if these are disturbed. But there are also dreams which act like a mirror, in which we may recognize our own inner self in clear and overpowering truth.

Very instructive are those childish dreams which do not arise merely out of bodily disturbances, perhaps at the beginning of illnesses, fevers, and so on, but are revealing mental evolutions quite unknown to the child's conscious day-life. One boy, who was very much

attached to his father, a strong and violent man who made the boy utterly dependent on him, so loved his father that he could not bear to be separated from him. He felt that he and his father were one being. At the important age of three or four: years, when a child generally develops a strong sense of his own personality, and obstinately tries to hold his own ground against his elders, this boy had a dream. This dream was also the first conscious event of his early childhood and he remembered it throughout his whole life, so deep was its impression on his mind. As a schoolboy he once tried to write down what he had experienced in this important dream, and in awkward words tried to express himself: "Once when I was a little boy of three or four years old, I dreamt that my father had died. I awoke and felt dreadfully frightened, and when I was fully awake I realized that I was a separate being, that I existed in a life of my own." He had always thought of his father as his second self and felt him as such, and now, after this dream, began to realize for the first time that he had to grow into an independent being. In an unconscious way he began to separate his life from that of his father.

The following dream gives us an insight into another important period of a growing man's evolution; it comes from a delicate boy of about twelve years old. This is the age when the bones become more solid than before, with the result that the child becomes, in a dim sort of way, aware of his skeleton. It is the time when boys especially lose their graceful movements and become awkward and clumsy. This fact of evolution and its claim on education have been discussed by Rudolf Steiner in his educational lectures. In a child, this step in his evolution, the experience of what is "dead" in man, may be reflected in his dreams. He may dream of death, of the dead, of the skeleton. For instance, one boy, who dreamt the following dreams, very often dreamt of events connected with death. He felt very much oppressed by his dreams, and so he decided to tell his mother about them. She had been wise enough never to ask him to tell her, so he unburdened his mind very early one morning when he came to her bed, crying bitterly. His mother afterwards wrote down as precisely as she could, word for word, what he had told her. He never knew that she had done this, but went to school comforted by the mere fact that he had relieved his mind. This is one of his "death dreams": "I was lying in my bed when all of a sudden the ceiling of my room opened, and I looked straight into heaven. Then I saw a star, standing in the center. It grew redder and redder and all at once it burst. Suddenly the heavens opened up and I saw God the Father sitting on His Throne with His feet resting on the head of Death. Then the Lord God said to Death: 'Death, Death, Go down and bring misery!' Death came down and' went quickly past me, looking like a white figure. Then I died and left earthly life, but I lived on. Then Death took me on his back and carried me to a very beautiful big lake, into which he threw me, and only my head rose above the water. The lake was hotter than fire, and Death said to' me: 'Hermann, wade over to the other side.' It seemed to me as if it would take me a thousand years to do this. When I was at last on the other side, I saw a big garden. Flowers were growing there like grass; everywhere I saw nothing but flowers; there were no roads. Far in the background I saw a palace; it had a tower without a dome on it. Then an angel came and helped me out of the lake. I heard a soft melody, and several angels came and led me to the palace. I looked round once more, and very far away I saw another man in the lake and Death just leaving him. The angel who had helped me led me into the tower and placed me on a beautiful chair. Then I looked up and again I saw the star. Again it grew redder and redder, and again at last it burst. The heavens opened and I saw God the Father on His Throne, and He said to me: 'Hermann, Hermann, you had to suffer because of your own guilt.' Then He raised His hand, and I entered Heaven."

The strange visions of this dream, pathetic in their simplicity, remind us of those which William Blake saw as a child. They reveal the hidden beauty of a child's soul.