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It's *Your* Dream

“One night, a man dreamed that he was being chased by a monster. Finally, the monster grabbed him from behind, threw him down on the ground, and jumped on top of him. [Shaking uncontrollably,] the terrified man ... looked pleadingly at the monster, and asked, “What is ... to become of me?” The monster replied, “I don't know. It's *your* dream.”¹

That's the whole sermon. It's *your* dream!

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I don't know the man in that story, but my friend and colleague, Rev. Jim Robinson, has one like it. Jim had a recurring dream – a nightmare – in which he was being chased by *something*. *Something* would gain on him, getting closer and closer, as Jim's lungs began to burn and the strength in his legs gave out. For years, he would awaken, screaming, sweating, terrified.

Jim Robinson determined to change the dream. One night, as he lay sleeping, the chase began again. “Turn around!” Jim told himself. “You have to face this!” Against the will of every fiber in his body, Jim stopped. Whatever it was was very, very near. His mind white with terror, Jim turned to face his pursuer – finally turned, to look it in the eye.

There was nothing there but a mirror.

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Nothing but a mirror, long before Michael Jackson's
 I'm starting with the man in the mirror
 I'm asking him to change his ways
 And no message could have been any clearer
 If you [want to] make the world a better place

¹ Anna Prajna Douglas, “The Highest Form of Magic,” in Gil Fronsdal with Nancy Van House, eds, *Voices from Spirit Rock*, p. 69

Then look at yourself and ... make a change.²

It's *your* dream.

There is a Tibetan saying: “It's a tall order to ask for tea without leaves, or meat without bones.” This means, to put it more crudely, no compost, no flowers. Nothing for nothing.

Meditation teacher Anna Prajna Douglas writes, “When we pay close attention, we can see the mind's tendency to connect each moment ... with a memory of the past or an expectation of the future as a story ... we tell ourselves over and over again.... Each telling convinces us further of its reality. Fear has a story. Lust has a story. Anger has a story. Laziness has a story. Indeed, these intense states of mind ... convince us of our their reality. They lull us into a trance state.

“Being mindful is coming out of the trance and seeing the nature of the trance for what it is: an intense feeling, with a ... story attached to it, [a story] ... we believe and with which we become identified.”

We experience the story, we tell the story, and we believe the story ... until we see it for what it is: only a story, a nightmare, a dream – *our* dream – until we free ourselves from its grip. The Buddha said, “By looking, it is seen. By seeing, it is free.”³

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In his book *Reaching Out*, my teacher of blessed memory, Father Henri Nouwen, asks three questions:

First, what if the events of our history are molding us as a sculptor molds ... clay, and ... it is only in a careful obedience to these molding hands that we can discover our real vocation and become mature people?

Second, what if all the unexpected interruptions are in fact invitations to give up old-fashioned and outmoded styles of living, and are opening up new, unexplored areas of experience?

And third: What if our history does not prove to be a blind, impersonal

² Michael Jackson, *Man in the Mirror* (lyrics fragment)

³ Anna Prajna Douglas, *op cit*, pp. 70-71

sequence of events over which we have no control, but, rather, reveals to us a guiding hand, pointing to a personal encounter in which all our hopes and aspirations will reach their fulfillment?

Then, our life would indeed be different, [Father Nouwen concludes,] because then fate becomes opportunity, wounds a warning, and paralysis an invitation to search for deeper sources of vitality.

I love that a Catholic priest asked this rather than proclaimed it: *What if there is a guiding hand?*

If we choose to believe it – not because it's true, but because our lives are richer if we choose to act as if it might be true – If we *choose* to believe that fate is opportunity, and setbacks are an invitation to seek out signs of life; if we choose life, no matter what – If we choose to live that way, it's our dream.

It's our dream, and it's ours to claim or shrug off the possible meanings of that dream – our life.

So how do we get through the days when the monster, the nightmare, is gaining on us, and we can't see a clear reflection of ourselves? This is a question that gets to the heart of faith. Walk with me a little further.

Years ago, Rev. LeRoy Ricksey, who served the Church of the Resurrection in East Harlem, asked his congregation to say the Twenty-Third Psalm with him, and as they recited it – *The Lord is my shepherd* – he said, *Think about what single word in the Psalm seems the most significant.*

We can do this together in a moment, if you like. I just want to highlight something that, as we say in Buddhism, *gave me the view* of this psalm.

Thanks to my Unitarian Universalist Baptist colleague, Rev. Dr. Anita Farber-Robertson, you'll note, as the Twenty-third Psalm begins, the psalmist is talking about G*d, talking about The Lord, in the the third person: The Lord is my shepherd. And then, without missing a beat, the psalmist switches to the first person, talking *to* G*d: I will fear no evil, for thou art with me. *You* are with me.

For my purposes, to translate the psalm into Unitarian Universalist, I substituted all the “The Lords” for “You” – changing third person to first person. You are my

shepherd.... You make me to lie down in green pastures.... You restore my soul. Suddenly, it was personal ... and so beautiful.

You might want to try that sometime.

For now, let's speak it – or, if you don't know it, I'll speak it, and you can listen – in the traditional way, as you might hear it at a memorial service. And see if there's a word that grabs you. Actually, first, let's recite the King James version, which is gorgeous poetry, and then I'll read it in the translation to English-as-we-speak-it, more or less, to make it a little more accessible. And listen, if you will for the single word in the Psalm that seems the most significant to you. Ready?

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
 he leadeth me beside the still waters.
 He restoreth my soul:
 he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
 I will fear no evil: for thou art with me;
 thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
 thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
 and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

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The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
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 he leads me beside the still waters.
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 your rod and your staff they comfort me.
 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies:
 you anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over.
 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
 and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Amen.

Anyone want to call out their word?

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I like “restoreth,” as in, “You restore my soul.”

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At the Church of the Resurrection in East Harlem, a woman raised her hand right away. Her word was ... *through*. *Through*. Let's see ... where's *through*?!

Yea, thou I walk through the valley of the shadow of death....

And why through? “Through,” she said, “means you don't die; you get through it. Getting through our challenges and pain is the key; getting through gets us out.”⁴

There's the faith. *I will walk through*. And when we say, *You are my shepherd*, we could be talking to the divine, transcendent or imminent: to the object of your heart's desire, or your heart, your spirit; to a loved one, or loved ones, collectively; to this beloved community of memory and hope. *You are my shepherd, I shall not want. You restore my soul.*

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Beloved spiritual companions, let's stop and turn around. Let's snap out of the nightmare and release the story; “by looking, it is seen; by seeing, it is free.” May we give ourselves to the possibilities that “fate becomes opportunity, wounds a warning, and paralysis an invitation to search for deeper sources of vitality.” Together, may we walk through. It's *our* dream!

⁴ Gilbert W. Bowen, *Comfortable Creatures*, preached on 30 January, 2000 at the Kenilworth Union Church (non-denominational) in Kenilworth, Illinois