

What Dreams May Come

by Theodore Dalrymple (July 2014)

Last night I had an unpleasant dream. Normally I don't remember my dreams and if this one was anything to go by, it is just as well. Dreams may be the royal road to the unconscious, as Freud said they were, but if so it is a road that I don't want to go down. I am insufficiently curious about myself, the world containing so much subject matter of far greater interest to me and others. If the truth be known, I have never been much impressed by psychoanalytic dream interpretation, or psychoanalytic anything else, which seems to me a latter-day form of haruspicy, divination by entrails. We may be such stuff as dreams are made on, but I cannot really believe that dreams are such stuff as we are made on.

Oddly enough I woke from this dream philosophising. The dream was as follows. It was a pitch-black night and I was in the driving seat of my father's car. In my father's day it was an above average car in design and comfort, even mildly luxurious, but when nowadays (as happens very rarely) I see an example of the same, now vintage model creaking down the road, I realise that even the cheapest and smallest of modern vehicles is infinitely its superior in comfort and convenience. Moral progress in the intervening years there may or may not have been, but progress in engineering there most definitely has.

I digress from my dream, a fact which no doubt would seem significant to a psychoanalyst. I had not yet started the car's engine, and decided that I wanted some air. I wound down the window a little, and as soon as it was sufficiently open I felt a hand grab me by the collar in an obviously menacing way. I experienced a moment of panic: should I start the engine first, lock the door or wind up the window? I decided on the latter course, and caught by assailant's fingers in the wound up window. I then fumbled frantically for the keys to start the engine, with the intention of dragging the man (whoever it was) by his fingers along the road, as he so richly deserved. Luckily I woke up before I could start the car and drag him even a few yards.

No doubt there was much possible symbolism in the dream. When I woke, however, I found I was debating in my mind the ethical limits to punishment. That the man who assailed me deserved what I was about to give him I had little doubt, but was that the end of the matter? Assailants must take their chances, but their chances of what, exactly? Being dragged along the road by their fingers caught in a car window?

My scepticism about the interpretation of dreams notwithstanding, what surprised me about this

dream was the evident strength and depth of my vengefulness, as if some primitive part of my brain had been activated. I was determined not merely to get away unharmed from my attacker, whoever he was, but to exact revenge upon him. It was not enough that I should evade suffering at his hands; it was necessary that he should now suffer at mine. I was actually going to *enjoy* inflicting pain on him.

Revenge, as Lord Bacon tells is, is a kind of wild justice; and the desire for it has had a very poor press over the millennia. We are enjoined not to take it, in fact to turn the other cheek to those who strike us, to return good for evil. This is easier said than done: and the question is whether it *should* be done. Is total forgiveness, that is to say forgiveness in all circumstances, desirable?

What is certainly true is that it is easier to forgive the evil done to others than to forgive the evil done to oneself, especially if in the first place we don't really like those others to whom the evil is done. Then conspicuous forgiveness becomes a kind of sadism, an additional burden to bear for those to whom the evil was done: for as I know from clinical experience with my patients, the lack of proper punishment of the perpetrators of evil is itself a punishment of the victims of it, a punishment that is often long-lasting and even rather like a life sentence. This is because it removes from the victims all confidence that there is justice in the world or that anybody cares what happens to them. Their experiences and their feelings are of no account; they (the people who have them) are nothing, no more than insects under the feet of society.

It seems to me that mercy and forgiveness are often mistaken for one another. A judge may properly be merciful to those who come before him, indeed he *must* be so often if he is to keep his sentences within civilised bounds, such being the deserts of most wicked among us (quite apart from the fact that all of us require mercy on many occasions). But he cannot properly say 'I *forgive* you for what you did to Mrs Smith.' Only Mrs Smith can forgive what the accused did to her.

And what if Mrs Smith *does* forgive the accused, what then? At least once the law is involved, nothing much, at least where due process is concerned: because it has long been a principle that the offence by the perpetrator is not against her alone, but against society as a whole. She has no more right to demand a light punishment than a severe one. When Bacon said that the law ought to weed out revenge, he might also have added that it should weed out forgiveness. Mercy is another matter.

Where forgiveness is often (not always) better than vengefulness is in its effect on the life

of the victim. As it happens, my dream notwithstanding, I am not a very vengeful person, if only because I am too inconsistent, my attention too easily diverted by other things, to prosecute a vendetta efficiently or with determination. There have been only two or three people in my life against whom I have harboured vengeful feelings for more than a day or two, and recently I addressed a meeting at which I thought one of them might attend. I had long dreamed of humiliating him in public, as he did once me in circumstances in which I could not retort; this was twenty years ago at least, and revenge is a dish best eaten cold. But in fact I found that my desire had now completely evaporated and I was glad that it had. I can't say that this desire to be revenged on him had played a very large part in my mental life, it came into my mind perhaps once a year, and then only briefly; but nonetheless I was pleased to discover that I no longer felt it at all. He must by now have been more than eighty, and there ought to be a psychological equivalent of the statute of limitations.

What makes vengefulness so difficult to eradicate from the human heart is that it is so enjoyable to indulge it in the privacy of one's thoughts. There one can indulge in things whose attraction it would be impolitic to avow, at least if one moves in tolerably civilised society. In the fastnesses of one's thoughts, but nowhere else, one can visit upon the perpetrator precisely what he deserves. Fortunately, few people have the courage of their sadism.

Like most human traits, vengefulness and forgivingness grow stronger with habit. What starts out as an ideology can thus become a trait of character, good or bad as the ideology might be. Hatred, I have found, needs rehearsal and practice to keep it alive, otherwise it tends to attenuate, like germs passed through guinea pigs. Alas, hatred can so easily give meaning to life, especially in the absence of any other.

Oddly enough, firm punishment after due process should reduce the level of vengefulness in society rather than increase it. Man is vengeful by nature, inclined to lash out at those who do him wrong; but this tendency, inglorious as it might be, is reduced by an assurance that the wrongdoer will come to justice, even if it is justice tempered by mercy according to mitigating circumstances. Where, however, there is no such justice, private vengefulness flourishes.

As soon as I woke from my dream, while it was still half-reality in my mind, I worried that I was more likely to suffer punishment for having caught the assailant's fingers in the window than was the assailant for having grabbed me by the collar in the first place. It is said that a drowning man recapitulates his whole life in his mind in an instant; in this case, I saw in a like instant an entire future court case against me, a mixture of civil and criminal

proceedings.

The law in England, at least, requires that a person defend himself with a reasonable, which is to say the least, degree of violence appropriate to the situation. It is no defence against a charge of murder, for example, that the victim pushed ahead of you in a queue, even if he shouldn't have done so. And in my oneiric state, I already heard counsel for my assailant asking me whether I had come to any actual harm because his client had grabbed my collar, how I knew that he meant me harm, whether I had asked him first what he was doing before crushing his fingers (he was a pianist and now he would never play again). Did I indeed plan to drag him down the road by his fingers, in effect amputating them as if indulging in an updated but fundamentally mediaeval form of punishment? By what right did I do this, was I not a brute? My assailant's life was ruined, in fact he was only attempting to beg, not to attack me. I owed him a substantial amount of damages.

My reply, of course, would be that it was all very well for counsel to say that I should have made proper enquiries as to the purpose and motives of my assailant, but when one is grabbed by the collar in the dead of night by an unseen person, one naturally assumes the worst. How was I to know that the assailant was not armed, that he was not intending to kill me? Such situations are not best suited to a disinterested enquiry after truth; one has to react quickly. If the law supposes that one has the time and leisure in such circumstances to find out what is really happening, and to respond to it proportionately, then the law, to quote Mr Bumble, is a ass, a idiot.

I can't really say when I had these thoughts, whether I woke or slept, or how long it took me to think them. It gradually dawned on me, in fact, that I required to go to the lavatory, but I suppose that that explanation of my nightmare would not satisfy a psychoanalyst. And though I do not much believe in the deeper meaning of dreams, I cannot help but reflect that the thoughts that this dream aroused were of some slight significance, in that they demonstrated how deeply ingrained has become the fear of litigation in modern man (assuming that I am representative of modern man). Though I have only once been sued, by a man whose suit was thrown out as vexatious by the courts even before I came anywhere near to trial, and who subsequently went on to murder (his mother, I think it was), I clearly have absorbed a fear that the civil law might one day ruin me. I once read a book by a woman who cleverly collected dreams under the Third Reich. How common, I wonder, in an increasingly litigious society, are dreams, that is to say nightmares, of being sued?

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is