

“Dream Time”

It's been said jokingly that if you took all the people who sleep in church and laid them down end-to-end, they'd all be a lot more comfortable. Maybe the statement is made only half in jest. For sleeping in church has an ancient and curious history. Among Greeks and Romans, the practice had a technical name. The custom was called "incubation," and it involved entering a temple for the express purpose of slumbering inside the sacred precincts in hopes of receiving a dream or nighttime visitation or portent of the future. Pagan inscriptions abound giving thanks to the goddess or god for dispensing wisdom not available to the worshiper during ordinary waking hours.

Dreams were highly regarded by the authors of the Hebrew Bible also, the Psalms declaring that "God's gifts come to his loved ones as they sleep." In the Book of Genesis, Pharaoh dreamed of seven lean cows and seven fat cows, forecasting coming years of feast and famine, and it was by interpreting Pharaoh's nocturnal visions that Joseph, who had been sold into slavery in Egypt for an overbearing dream that pictured his siblings bowing down in adulation before him, came to be named the Egyptian chief's privy counselor.

That was where the Feast of Epiphany originated in the third century, the traditional date of January 6th indicating the festival began as a solstice celebration, the calendar in Alexandria being twelve days behind the Julian calendar of Rome. In Christian tradition, Epiphany became associated with the visit of the Magi, who brought gifts to the Christ child in Bethlehem: gold, frankincense and myrrh. "And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. Now when they had departed," Matthew goes on, "behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream," telling him to take his family and flee, while the New Testament Book of Acts envisions a coming day of gladness when "your sons and daughters will prophesy, and old men dream dreams."

Eastern religions regarded dreaming even more highly than those of the West. In India, the cosmos itself arises from the sleep of the deity Vishnu, who rests upon a great serpent Ananta, whose name means "endless." And as he slumbers upon this bed of eternity, a dream unfolds, growing like a beautiful lotus from Vishnu's navel. All you see around you, this world of light and dark with birds and trees and clouds, so various and vivid—deep down, all of it consists of stirring ripples in the subconscious of Vishnu. For the universe that we observe is simply the lucid dreaming of the Creator.

In China, meanwhile, the Taoist scholar Chuang Tzu is remembered for his mystical ruminations. Having awakened from a dream in which he imagined himself to be a butterfly, happy in the sunlit garden, he could no longer be sure if he was a Chinese sage, dreaming he was a butterfly, or a butterfly, merely dreaming to be a man. It's worth noting that sleep comes through what the Taoists would call the law of reversed effort, or *wu-wei*. The harder you try, the more difficult it becomes. As Lao Tze says of the wise man,

He doesn't think about his actions;
they flow from the core of his being.
He holds back nothing from life;
therefore he is ready for death,
as a man is ready for sleep

after a good day's work.