

GRACE NOTES XXI

DR SALMA SIDDIQUE considers the dreams and nightmares of the refugee

WHY DREAM? Theories from the evolutionary sciences and cultural stories of creation have embraced dreams and their less welcome bedfellow, nightmares. Dreams illuminate our inner lives, the unintegrated fragments; they might serve as premonitions; or may be mere reflections of memory processes. The philosopher Whitehead (1968), offered a partial response to the question of 'why dream?' when he challenged the notion that there is such a thing as a 'static entity', believing instead that we reveal our sense of self through unfolding and enfolding layers of complexity.

I am struck by the notion of fluidity between the lived 'fact' and the 'fictional' experiences of the characters in Gaiman's (2010) novel *American Gods*. (In this book mythical gods are dying away and being replaced by the gods of social media in the chaotic warring worlds for the 'soul of America'.) Here, the main character, 'Shadow' decides to embark on a road trip. In the unfolding narrative, the narrator tells a story about their loss of place in the world. I wonder how much of this is a dream?

The film 'Lion' (Brierley and Buttrose, 2015) based on events in 1986, when five-year-old Saroo finds himself trapped in a decommissioned passenger train in India which carries him, alone, 1500 miles to Calcutta. He manages somehow to survive in an alien cityscape where threat and exploitation infests every street corner. Identified by the authorities the 'street child' ends up in a local orphanage. Both the central characters for *Lion* are built on an understanding based on the Sartrean (2015) premise 'if hell is other people', then what 'if there is an Other, whatever, wherever, whatever its relationship with me ... then I have an outside, a nature, my original sin is the existence of the other' (Sartre, 2012, p321). It becomes easy to distance ourselves, even as therapists.

For Saroo the orphanage becomes a bridge to liminal place(s) of transformation and transition. After a visit from a social worker Saroo finds himself on a plane to Tasmania where he is adopted by the Brierley family, and grows up in a loving household. In adulthood, Saroo is

visited by dreams, and feelings of longing for a family lost and inaccessible. In a moment of epiphany he realises that the motifs in his dreams can be mapped on to the territory of Google maps. He realises that this must be the place where both his worlds of refugee and refuge meet.

After reading about President Trump's suspension of the US refugee programme, I am reminded of the words of Hannah Arendt (1943) that 'we are all refugees', so there is no need to single out one or other. Arendt (1943) wrote often about the unfolding nightmare of post WWII Europe's refugees seeking refuge in camps across Palestine, Syria and Palestine, and the erosion of the sanctity of rights through indifference to memory and remembrance. Can we see similarities with the present refugee situation? The number of registered Syrian refugees around the world is 4,289,792 (UNHCR, 2017) and since October 2001 there are only 2,370 (UNHCR, 2017) Syrian refugee arrivals in the US.

When presented with the theme of this month's issue on dreaming. I struggled to see if there was anything left to dream about. It was then I remembered the television news item on President Obama's meeting with undocumented immigrants (DREAMers) who arrived in the USA as unaccompanied children. The stories shared at The White House event offered the narrative to keep believing that 'to dream is to hope'. I think of the nightmare in which the refugees' act of fleeing one reality offers potential (physical, emotional and/or psychological) isolation in another reality. But maybe dreaming is an evolutionary survival mechanism: to flee a sense of isolation we are in constant search of relationship. When thinking about the journey these children embark on I am drawn back to reflect on Gaiman's story (2001): 'they came to Lookout Mountain from all across the United States. They were not tourists. They came by car and they came by plane and by bus and by railroads and on foot. Some of them flew- they flew low. Several of them travelled their own ways beneath the earth. Many of them hitchhiked cadging rides from nervous motorists or from truck drivers' (p434). I wonder how long before other narratives start to fray the cultural fabric of the American Dream? In the end such knowledge only remains in the hands of the old gods, or can the new gods of social media help us to find our way home or will we all be led astray? While the marking on

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