Our dreams often are unsettling. Sometimes, however, they also provide a unique picture of and insight into reality, giving us a clearer and more vivid understanding of current events.

Last night I had such a dream — a nightmare — that made me realize in a visceral (as opposed to intellectual) way the danger of Donald Trump’s rhetoric. In the dream I was an ethnographer. Ethnography is the systematic study of people and cultures. Ethnographers document the insights that can be gained from ethnographic research. It is designed to explore cultural phenomena where the researcher observes society from the point of view of the subject of the study. An ethnography is a means to represent graphically and in writing the culture of a group.

In this dream, my ethnographic research project involved going underground and becoming part of the Trump movement, closely following those who attend his rallies. My experience as a rhetoric scholar, when not dreaming, has been spent analyzing Trump’s discourse from a safe distance. But in my dream, for the first time my understanding of his discourse was now intimate, personal and grounded in the lived experiences of his audience.
With each rally, I became increasingly aware of — and subsequently horrified by — the audience’s enormous electricity and Trump’s ability to tap into, exploit and arouse their emotions. What I was witnessing was the archetype of Aristotle’s concept of “pathos” — an appeal to the emotions of an audience, eliciting feelings that already reside in them. Pathos is a communication technique used most often in rhetoric (in which it is considered one of the three modes of persuasion, alongside ethos and logos), as well as in literature, film, and other narrative art.

This is something I could not fully appreciate if I was not engaged in ethnographic research.

Moreover, it made even more transparent what I knew intuitively prior to the dream: that the source of Trump’s persuasion is perhaps as much if not more about audience than speaker — more about Trump’s supporters than him.

Needless to say, when I awoke, I was frightened. More than ever I worried that President Trump will not and perhaps cannot be defeated until we come to grips with what Plato called the “soul of the audience.” Until then, we may not have the available means of persuasion to neutralize and counter the Trump effect.

Such a psychological-rhetorical revelation might allow those not part of Trump’s core audience to see the danger of what’s happening and why he must be removed (whether through impeachment or the ballot box). This revelation could have more impact than simply continuing to argue with his supporters or reminding potential voters about Trump’s lies, wrongdoing and harmful policies — efforts which thus far seem not to have changed many minds.

This made me wonder as well whether those who are among Trump’s ardent supporters are analogous to a religious cult, as some people already have claimed, and hence whether they can be deprogrammed.

In retrospect, my dream makes me believe that this is an opportune time for the media and political pundits to take an ethnographic approach to the Trump presidency and the rhetorical force of his discourse — to engage in what Clifford Geertz calls “thick description.” Some journalists have already done so, of course, but more work like this is needed.

Thick description will require less time and energy focused on analyzing and critiquing Trump’s speeches and Tweets, and spending more time attending his rallies and recording what is happening from the perspective of audience members.

Of course, my dream was not ethnographic research because I was dreaming, but if nothing else, it suggests that by getting inside the heads of his supporters, much as do ethnographers, the public at large might get a sharper image of America’s political culture. And that may change minds and encourage those who are undecided to vote in 2020.

Dreams indeed may be instructive
**Postscript:** Following submission of this op-ed, on July 17 President Trump whipped up the crowd at a North Carolina rally with a racist attack against Representative Abdullahi Omar — one of the four House of Representatives members of color he earlier said should “go back to where you come from.” The subsequent audience chant, “Send her back,” provides more compelling evidence of the need to take an ethnographic approach to Trump’s audience.

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