
DREAMWORK AND SPIRITUALITY

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Abstract

Our dreams reveal many aspects of a spiritual process at work inside us, from simple metaphoric reflections of life-situations or inner roles, to dramatic confrontations with choices on our life-journeys; and from direct warnings of future events to vivid affirmations of a numinous reality beyond the material world we live in. Active dreamwork with the roles presented in our dreams can give the dreamer a deep sense of hearing spiritual truth from within.

I summarise my rationale, methods, and classifications, quoting (with permission) a few dream examples.

Introduction

To start with, I will give a little background about myself. I did my Master's degree long ago in English Language and Literature, which gave me a thorough grounding in the use of imagery and intuitive meaning. I consolidated this in my career as a high school teacher of English, and as a Playcentre Supervisor working with children's imaginations. In the 1980s and '90s, I have retrained in the field of Counselling and Psychotherapy, especially in TA and Psychodrama.

Since 1985, I have been a member of a dream group in Auckland, meeting fortnightly or monthly to work with one another's dreams. This group has been the primary matrix of my learning about dreamwork, along with extensive reading of Jungian books and the academic quarterly journal, *Dreaming*, of the American Association for the Study of Dreams. In the last nine years, I have led well over 100 dream workshops, as well as working constantly with my clients' dreams. I have also developed a growing interest in the ancient art of spiritual direction based on the voice of the spirit in dreams. My own spirituality has been shaped in dialogue with the Christian faith, science and mythology.

Since 1991, under the wing of the Human Development and Training Institute, I have developed a three stage Dreamwork Programme, combining basic Jungian theory with action methods and TA Redecision work, in the context of spiritual awareness. I aim to teach people enough skills and understanding to be responsive to their own dreams and to work in small ongoing groups through to more specific coaching for counsellors and spiritual directors.

I have come to perceive our dreams as windows into the universal realms of the Spirit that underlie and interweave the world of matter which we find ourselves inhabiting. Indigenous cultures have always known this. It is our Western culture

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that has dismissed this view as 'superstitious', 'irrational' or 'unscientific'. To quote an old song: "'Tis we, with our estranged face, that miss the many-splendoured thing".

What is a dream

I like the definition given by Savary, Berne and Williams in their excellent book, *Dreams and Spiritual Growth*:¹

A night dream is a spontaneous symbolic experience lived out in the inner world during sleep. Such dreams are composed of a series of images, actions, thoughts, words and feelings over which we seem to have little or no conscious control.

You will note that a dream is not necessarily pictorial; it may have strong auditory or kinaesthetic elements, or even smell. The key factor is that it occurs spontaneously during sleep; to be more precise, during one of the cyclical periods of Rapid-Eye Movement that occur every one-and-a-half hours while we sleep. If such a vivid symbolic experience occurs while we are awake, it is called a vision. If, however, we believe the vision to be physically real, it is either a hallucination caused by mental illness, that is, an outward projection of disturbed subjective imagery; or a form of paranormal experience, that is, an objective extrasensory perception caught by means of a heightened psychic awareness. The distinction between these two may not be obvious, as our culture tends to dismiss visionaries as mad anyway. I have come to believe that some dream-events do belong to the objective category of paranormal, and happen to ordinary people far more frequently than our intellectual culture likes to believe. What is also clear, is that dreams are universal in human beings, from babyhood to old age, and that we all dream about five times every night, even if we never remember them.

Why do we dream

This does not have such a simple answer. Not only human beings dream. Rapid-Eye Movement is visible in the sleep of all the vertebrate animals. Dreaming may serve an important physiological function. Many theories have been put forward, ranging from dreams as direct messages from the gods, to dreaming as the random firing of neurons in the idling brain. Freud believed that dreams use symbolic language in order to disguise our unacceptable urges from us, whereas Jung saw the symbolic language of dreams and myths as simply the natural method of communication of the unconscious Self, which underlies and precedes the development of our conscious ego. Montagu Ullman, a major sleep-researcher, believes that all dreams are attempts at problem-solving², while recent trauma studies by Ernest Hartmann show that dreams have a function of

1. Savary, Berne & Williams (1984) *Dreams and Spiritual Growth*. Paulist Press.

2. Montagu Ullman & Nan Zimmerman (1979) *Working With Dreams*. Dell.

expressing traumatic memories until we come to terms with them³.

Current consensus among dream psychologists seems to be that dreaming serves several psychological functions, such as seeking to solve problems, and integrating new emotional experiences into our being. Who has not gone to sleep with a difficult problem in mind, and wakened with a solution in the morning? Jung also proposed a theory of emotional compensation, in which the Psychic Centre, the Inner Self, seeks to regulate our emotional balance by expressing through our dreams the natural energies we have suppressed in conscious life, such as anger or grief, fear or desire. (I will use Jung's definition of the unconscious as the field of everything we do not know in our inner world.⁴

From my own experience now of working with over 2000 dreams, I believe that dreaming serves a variety of functions, which could be summarised under the general heading of continuous psychological feedback, not only about our daily life issues, but also about our whole spiritual journey through life. Some dreams have such a strong sense of spiritual guidance in them that there is no doubt in the dreamer's mind that they come from a spiritual source, by whatever name we choose to call it, such as God, angel, spirit guide, higher self, or the One Mind. I often have people come to me specifically to work with such a dream.

Marie-Louise von Franz, who has analysed some 65,000 dreams in her long life as a Jungian analyst, speaks in the Jungian film series, *The Way of the Dream*⁵:

If you analyse dreams of artists or creative scientists, for example, very often you find that new ideas are revealed to them in their dreams. They don't figure them out in their computer. Rather they come from the unconscious as so-called *sudden ideas* ... So we must conclude that there is a psychic matrix which produces creative new insights ... this matrix seems to steer the ego consciousness into an adapted, wise attitude toward life. That matrix which makes the dreams in us has been called an inner spiritual guide, an inner centre of the psyche ... a divine inner centre.

What is spirituality

Spirituality is an ancient concept, familiar to mystical writers but scorned by rationalist theologians and scientists, and now being rediscovered in Western culture – ironically, partly in response to the new quantum theory of physics. Many in our culture seem to assume that if they have left the institution of the Church, they have no spirituality any more. Our word *religion* comes from the Latin root *religio*, to bind, carrying the sense of commitment or bonding to a system of beliefs. The word *spirituality*, however, comes from the Latin *spiritus*,

3. Ernest Hartmann (1995) *The Dreams of Resolving Trauma*. *Association for the Study of Dreams Newsletter* v 12 no 2, 1995.

4. Carl Jung (1963, 1983) *Glossary*. In *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. Fontana.

5. Fraser Boa (1988) *The Way of the Dream*. Windrose Films, Toronto.

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meaning breath, wind, something innate and much less definable. It is certainly not confinable to any religion. Thus our spirituality is our personal response to the sacred or ultimate dimensions of life, shaped as it will be of course by particular religious values, but nevertheless our own response.

Not only do religious leaders have difficulty with this concept; so do many scientists, including academic psychologists, who prefer to observe and measure tangible things. Yet the word *psychology* comes from the Greek root *psyche*, meaning the soul. Psychology means the study of the soul, not just the science of behaviour. We have been sold short by our universities, in the effort to fit the current scientific paradigm. Nevertheless, quantum physics has changed the old certainties of Newtonian science, in such a way that modern scientists now think of matter as interchangeable with energy. We are all part of a vast multiple energy field, that clusters itself into an infinity of different forms, with some form of consciousness possibly inherent even in the primordial stuff we are made of. Dana Zohar says in *The Quantum Self*:⁶

Existence and relationship are inextricable in the quantum realm, as they are in everyday life ... and they are essentially what we mean by the wave/particle duality ... The wave/particle duality of quantum 'stuff' becomes the most primary mind/body relationship in the world, and the core of all that, at higher levels, we recognise as the mental and physical aspects of life ... We are able to trace the origin of our mental life right back to its roots in particle physics, just as has always been possible when seeking the origin of our physical being.

Using such language, we are very close to theologians like Tillich, who speak of God as "the ground of our being", or Teilhard de Chardin's concept of "withinness", or the mediaeval mystics who felt intuitively that God is all in all and everywhere.

The Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, in his small though difficult book, *I and Thou*⁷, first written in 1923, describes spiritual experience as found essentially in a certain quality of relationship: an open genuine mutual encounter between two beings – not only human – I being one and Thou the other, into which at any time the Eternal Thou may enter with a sense of transcendence. I–Thou encounters of the spirit have a totally different quality from the more mundane, objective I–It relationships we normally experience.

Buber initially summarised three 'spheres of dialogue' for spiritual encounter, which he later divided into four. We may encounter the spiritual Thou in the sphere of Nature "stretching from stones to stars", or in animals, which he calls "the threshold of mutuality"; or in another human being who "fills the heavens"

6. Dana Zohar (1990) *The Quantum Self*. Harper Collins.

7. Martin Buber (1958) *I and Thou, with Postscript*. 2nd edition. Scribner's Sons, NY

for a brief time; or in the sphere of spiritual beings, whom we meet in two major ways: through “the word and works” of great writers and artists, no longer living; or through the inner spiritual encounter that comes to us as ‘inspiration’, meaning an inner vision, seeking to be known and expressed.

Our archetypal dreams in particular may reflect I–Thou encounters in all of these spheres.

Berne and Savary have co-authored an excellent practical book, *Dream Symbol Work*⁸, drawing on their backgrounds in Clinical Psychology, Sacred Theology and Jungian understandings. Their basic premise could be summarised thus: Dreams are spiritual gifts in symbolic language, given for our healing and wholeness, to bring us to consciousness, and to channel energy from our deepest self into our daily life.

I consider that if we could restore to our culture the art of understanding our dreams, there would be a dramatic rise in spiritual consciousness amongst us.

Meaning

The major key to dreamwork is quite simple: Metaphor. Apart from the small fraction of paranormal dreams, and another fraction of special archetypal dreams, the vast majority of our dreams speak to us through the age-old wisdom of using familiar objects as parallels to convey new insights. This is the same principle as in the parables that Jesus told, such as the story of the sower scattering the seed on different kinds of ground: “He who has ears to hear, let him hear”, said Jesus, meaning that we have to do our own work to uncover the truth within the metaphor. Sometimes it is easy, sometimes a more complex process.

Let me quote a simple example of a recurring childhood dream from a man who grew up in a strict family where no emotions were allowed:

Secret Dolls

We were sitting in our dining-room on velvet chairs, Mum, Dad, myself and my two younger brothers. I was small and quiet, being very well behaved. We three children were each hiding our favourite doll behind us on our chairs. Mine was a black golliwog.

The scene is partly from literal memory, but adding a vivid metaphor, in a child’s language, for the secret feeling selves the children had learned to hide from their parents. The dream uses a familiar image to convey a more abstract idea. The warm feeling conveyed by the words *favourite doll* contrasts with the formal setting, and reveals how the children are being affected by their parents’ attitudes.

8. Patricia Berne & Louis Savary (1991) *Dream Symbol Work*. Paulist Press, NY.

Working with Dream

When I run a dream workshop I guide people to use an 8-step process, in two or three phases. In the first phase, the dreamer tells the dream, sketches it on the board, identifies the feelings, actions and associations, and describes the context from which it emerged, since every dream relates to a particular set of circumstances. Group members may ask 'naive' questions which help to bring out more connections. We play with words and phrases to discover double meanings. In the second phase, the dreamer moves one by one into the significant roles in the dream and responds spontaneously to simple questions, which often elicit new and surprising material. This may well be enough to reveal the underlying metaphors, and the dreamer is suddenly struck with new insight into a life-situation or relationship. If the dream is unfinished, we may have a third phase, in which we help the dreamer to find the resources they need to end it in a realistic place of safety or success. The dreamer is encouraged to act this out in solo psychodrama, taking all the roles, so that they actually *feel* the symbolic redecision, along with the support of the group to carry it out. Usually the dreamer needs little further help to see what step now needs to be taken in real life to honour the dream.

You will see from this summary that the process is intended to enable the dreamer to interpret their own dream by making the relevant connections. The dream was uniquely designed for the dreamer, who will usually know when an interpretation 'fits', in much the same way as we feel it when a piece of jigsaw puzzle clicks into place. Actually, it is more like catching the meanings of a poem, which may have multiple connections with our experience. Once we have some facility in working with metaphor, we can make sense of the majority of our dreams, leaving only a small proportion which need more expert assistance.

Types of dreams

For some time now I have been collecting examples of striking dreams, from clients, friends and workshop participants, which seem to have a strong spiritual significance for the dreamer, that is, conveying a potent depth of inspiration or challenge to respond to.

The Canadian psychologist Don Kuiken classifies dreams⁹ into four categories, based on feelings: Mundane dreams (which he dismisses as unimportant); Anxiety dreams (mainly nightmares); Transcendent dreams (arousing awe or ecstasy); and Existential dreams (which he limits to pain and sadness). I think that these categories seem far too limited to cover the range of spiritual dreams and visions that people actually report.

I have identified three major types according to their dominant style and content.

9. Don Kuiken (1995) Dreams and Feeling Realization. In *Dreaming: Journal of the Association for the Study of Dreams* v 3 no 5, Human Sciences Press, NY.

A. Paranormal Dreams

These do not seem to arise out of the normal internally-generated process of dreaming, but are 'caught' from elsewhere, as if by some kind of 'angle-mirror', through some heightened receptivity to the future, to a pre-birth existence, or to unconscious contact with another's mind. The dream imagery is typically quite objective and literal, realistic and continuous, instead of symbolic and impressionistic (though it is sometimes a combination of both) – like the difference between a photograph and a painting. The dreamer feels a certainty that "It was real – not just a dream!" and may be quite shocked or amazed at the content. I include in this category precognitive dreams of the future, past-life dreams, clairvoyant and telepathic dreams, death-transition dreams, spirit visits from someone who has died, and out-of-body dreams. Ryback and Sweitzer's *Dreams That Come True*,¹⁰ is a sober and useful analysis of many examples they have collected.

Here is one example of a paranormal dream, told to me by a psychologist, who had never had such an experience before:

Lost Child

I wakened at 4 am from a nightmare in which I was desperately searching a city street for my granddaughter 'Mary' aged 3. At the same time, my wife awoke beside me from a nightmare in which she was trying to pull Mary out of a bramble-bush.

They realised they had both dreamed vividly that their granddaughter was in danger, and considered over breakfast whether they should phone their daughter, who lived in another city. They decided not to worry her, as she always put reins on the child. But in the afternoon, he decided to ring her anyway, and asked how things were going. "Oh!" she replied, "I had a terrible time this morning! I went shopping downtown with 'Mary' without putting the reins on, and I lost her, and spent half an hour hunting before I found her again!"

Now this is not an ordinary dream. First, it is clearly precognitive, as it happened seven hours before the actual event. Second, two people dreamed of the event, one in literal form, the other symbolic, with similar feelings of great anxiety, caught as if by telepathy. One of them received the message in much more accurate detail than the other, showing how even a telepathic message has to come through our own reception system. Third, they dreamed not of their own future experience, but of their daughter's, as if through her eyes – a form of clairvoyance. Was this a warning? If so, from whom? There seems to be another level of intelligence or communication at work in such experiences, beyond the range of our normal sensory apparatus.

10. David Ryback and Letitia Sweitzer (1989) *Dreams That Come True*. Aquarian Press, UK.

B. Archetypal Dreams

These are just as vivid as the paranormal ones, but the imagery is mainly symbolic, and often numinous, with figures similar to those in mythology and religion. They seem to occur at times of spiritual crisis for the dreamer, providing inspiration, confrontation or encouragement, and are drawn from a deeper, more ancient layer of the psyche. The word *archetype* comes from Greek roots, meaning a *primordial imprint*. Carl Jung originated the concept of archetypes, based on his observation of the repeating similarity of certain dream figures to those in the myths and folk tales of world mythology. He considered that the archetypes are transcendent, belonging to the realm of soul, which underlies our physical existence.

This is an area of specialist training for Jungian analysts and mythologists, but it also includes many overtly religious dreams of I–The encounters, with a numinous quality of awe, often a sense of being in a parallel dimension of reality. The dreamer knows intuitively that these are spiritual figures or landscapes, different in quality from those in ordinary life, but equally real. Yet a dreamer with support can usually enter into an archetypal role, and let it speak for itself, knowing what is in its mind, which is not the case for paranormal dreams.

In this category I include dreams of numinous people, creatures, places and things, as well as certain vivid dreams about light, sound and movement. I also include visions of heaven in this category, on the assumption that the imagery is metaphorical rather than literal.

Here is a brief example from a time when the dreamer was beginning to work in the corporate sector:–

The Marvellous White Bull

I was in a wild bush setting, standing in a swift little stream, below a steep waterfall. I was in the curve of the stream beside a grassy meadow. I looked up and saw a huge, beautiful, white bull come rushing down the steep bank, straight for me. I couldn't run away anywhere – I was helpless and terrified. It was a magnificent bull, powerful, with horns – awesome. It stopped inches away from me, snorting. I could feel its breath on my face. I woke up crying and shaking.

When the dreamer did dreamwork, giving the bull a voice to express itself, she felt its primitive energy, and recognised it as a symbol of her own masculinity coming into consciousness. She said that after this she felt “fuller and stronger” in herself as she embarked on the tasks ahead of her. It became then an empowering dream to strengthen her spirit.

C. Life – Metaphor Dreams

My third major category of vivid dreams is actually by far the largest. Whereas paranormal dreams are mainly literal, dreams of this third type are based on metaphor. Whereas archetypal dreams draw on mythological or transcendent symbols, the dreams in this third category draw on symbols and metaphors from ordinary human experience – though they are sometimes collated into rather bizarre scenes and stories.

Here an example of my own, from a time when my life was overcommitted:

Feeding Six Babies

I am with a young mother of sextuplets – 6 babies – on a sort of commune-farm. She is a good mother, and quite overwhelmed with the task of nurturing 6 babies at once. She is breastfeeding them all, one after another all day, and getting worn out. I am helping by breastfeeding one myself – no problem re-inducing lactation as I've had children myself. (Maybe I'm her mother). The babies are all growing vigorously like little piglets or kittens, very active – in fact I have to go and catch them for feeding! They all snuggle around playfully together. I tell the young mother she must choose one of the babies to breastfeed, and let the rest go onto bottles now. But she wants them all to have the best, not choose one, it isn't fair on the others. I tell her she can't be fair to all of them, her health won't take it. She should choose the one that's different – there's one girl and five boys – she should choose one, and let her have the specialness.

Obviously, there's a warning about burnout here, but it's also interesting in that I was the eldest of 6 children, who were born in only 9 years; and it happened when I was getting interested in women's spirituality. So it touched many levels in me. It also expresses a continuing theme in my dreams about caring for a baby – or suddenly remembering to care for one – when I have neglected my own self-care. Such dreams do not come from my conscious ego, but from a deeper source of wisdom within me.

I have subdivided Life-Metaphor Dreams into traumatic memories, warning dreams, problem-solving, affirming, calling, wholeness and healing, learning, and life-journey dreams. There may well be more.

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