

# Dreamwork: A Spiritual Journey

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## Abstract

My passion for dreamwork arose from discovering the power of dreams as a multi-level spiritual process within me and others in 1985 when I joined a group of therapists meeting regularly to explore our dreams. For several years we laughed and cried together as we discovered new insights, challenges, affirmations, and healing. I was inspired by a “big dream” of my own about embarking on a journey of the soul. I studied to learn more about dreams and began leading workshops, seeing with awe how dreams opened windows into everyone’s inner experience, from post-trauma nightmares to perceptive feedback on personal issues to unforgettable mystical visions. I learned to ask simple questions of dreamers and I take continuing delight in seeing the “Aha” in the eyes of clients, students, and colleagues as they make connections and discover new perspectives. From the beginning of psychotherapy, dreamwork in one form or another has been of its essence.

## Waitara

I pupū ake taku ngākaunui ki te whakarehu i te kitenga i te awe o te moemoeā pēnei ki tētahi paparanga hātepe wairua i roto i a au me ētahi atu, i te tau 1985, i tōku piringa ki tētahi rōpū kaihaumanu tūtakitaki ai ki te hōpara i ā mātou moemoeā. He maha ngā tau kata tahi, tangi tahi ai mātou ia wā kitea he tirohanga hou, he takinga, he whakakoihanga, he tumahuhanga. Whakahiringa ngākauhia ahau i tētahi pekerangi nui āku. Ka whakawhānuihia ake e au aku akoranga mō tēnei mea te moemoeā ka tīmata ki te taki awheawhe me te kite kaiora i te mahi a te moemoeā ki te whakatuwhera huarahi wheako whakaroto o te katoa, mai i ngā kuku i muri pāmamae ki ngā whakautu hōhonu whakapā ki ngā take whearo ki ngā kitenga māminga. I mōhio au kia noho mahuki ngā pātai, ā, e haere tonu ana te harikoa ki te kite i te taka o te maramatanga ki ngā kanohi o ngā kiritaki, ākongā me ngā hoamahi ia wā puta mai ngā hononga me ngā kitenga hou. Mai i te tīmatanga o te whakaoranga hinengaro, ko te whakarehu me ōna āhua tōna iho.

**Keywords:** dreams; dreamwork; visions; imagery; spirituality; nightmares; post-trauma dreams

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## Discovering Dreamwork

I have always loved stories for their power to show us other people's experience of life, thus expanding our own horizons and our capacity to understand how others think. I have also loved poetry for its play with metaphor and meaning, and its capacity to touch into mysterious depths. When I was 13, my father gave me his copy of Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* (1861) and a large leather-bound book in which to print out my favourite poems. I was soon writing my own poems and spent many hours alone in my attic bedroom engaged in worlds of the imagination. It was not surprising that I went on to study English language and literature for my Master degree and later, as a teacher, was most successful when teaching literature to young people.

All of this must have fed my dream life but I am amazed that I did not discover the significance of dreaming for another 30 years when I was re-training as a counsellor. In 1985, Anne Faraday (see 1972) ran a dream workshop in Auckland and a group of my counsellor friends invited me to join them in a follow-up dream group. We met fortnightly to explore our dreams together, practising a variety of skills on one another. I was immediately inspired; here was a doorway to the inner world, tailor-made for each person and accessible to counsellors without requiring lengthy psychoanalytic training. I reasoned that if everybody dreams every night from early childhood on, in language, emotions, and stories based primarily on their own experience, ordinary dreaming must have meaning for the dreamer or for his or her social group, without the necessity for complicated theory. I have found this to be true with only a few exceptions.

Our dream group of seven met for four years, with great sharing and learning for all of us; then four of us continued to meet monthly, and after 25 years, two of us still do so. Within two weeks of joining this group I had an amazing dream of my own, which both reflected my excitement and promised a journey of discovery ahead. I will recount the dream and explore the questions it raised for me.

We are standing on a harbour beach at dawn. Everything is dark and still, only faint light on the water. A large woman in oilskins comes down the beach to a rowboat, pushes it out and climbs in, rowing. Suddenly the sun comes out from behind the headland, and everything is illuminated with vivid blue and gold colours, very beautiful. I am amazed and delighted. The woman rows out, and I know she's going out for a day's fishing. No one will keep her back.

The setting was familiar from my teenage years, when I used to spend holidays with a friend at Orua Bay on the Manukau Peninsula; a place of fun and discovery. Dawn on a harbour was familiar from my university days when I was one of the first women rowers in an Auckland rowing club. The dawn was always beautiful.

The big woman reminded me of New Zealand's novelist Keri Hulme who had just won the Booker Prize for *The Bone People* (1984); she lived on the West Coast, went fishing and wrote in a poetic style. I had never met her so what was she doing in my dream? I realised she must symbolise an aspect of myself — maybe becoming a famous writer? I too had published poetry and had also tried to write a novel.

But why fishing? Jungians suggest the ocean is often a symbol for the unconscious.

What is fishing — dropping a line into the sea, hoping to catch fish, fresh food, a metaphor for dreams as spiritual food? And why sunrise? In mythology it means the coming of Divinity bringing a blessing to the Earth. The whole dream scene is archetypal and full of meaning.

And why did I feel so delighted in this dream? The sudden illumination of the scene was surely a gift, a metaphor in itself — enrichment, enlightenment, insight, meaning. And of course, this was how I was feeling about discovering dreamwork — pulling dreams up out of the unconscious! It felt like an opening into a spiritual world. It was not until years later that I realised the dream was also prophetic, the beginning of my life-journey as a dream educator.

## Psychotherapy

Meanwhile I was deepening my training in humanistic psychotherapy. I read all the books I could find on dreamwork, most of which, in the 80s, were written from a Jungian perspective. I found Jung's biography (1961/1983) inspirational and his essays on dreaming (1985) full of insight. This gave me a spiritual framework to add to the action methods I was learning in Psychodrama along with the use of empathic enquiry in Transactional Analysis. I started to offer dream courses as a night class, using simple action methods in which the dreamer enacts the main dream characters, letting them speak for themselves. I also asked the dreamer to sketch each dream on a flip-sheet or whiteboard in order to keep the dream in front of the group while we explored it.

In 1989 my youngest son Stephen, aged only 19, was killed in a road accident; a devastating loss for our family. Our dreams reflected our grief. But then, over time, they showed him getting on with a life of higher learning in a spiritual world. We understood this as at least a metaphor giving hope about another reality and were comforted. I also discovered considerable literature about the whole range of visionary experiences around the time of death (see Morse & Perry, 1995; Zaleski, 1987).

In 1991 I joined the International Association for the Study of Dreams and began to read new research and writing from North America about the origins of nightmares and trauma dreams, especially articles by Ernest Hartmann (see his 2001 book), Deirdre Barrett (1996) and scholarly books by Kelly Bulkeley (see, for example, 1995) exploring the relationship between dreams, myth and religion. I learned the relevance of sleep studies (Hobson, 1989) and brain imaging, adding a systematic scientific basis to my theory. I read Freud's essay *On Dreams* (1989) and found little in it of use to me although I honour his role as a pioneer.

In 1992 I was accepted into the New Zealand Association of Psychotherapists (NZAP), presenting a case study based on dreams. Since then I have run workshops for counsellors and therapists all over New Zealand, some in Australia, and several at international conferences. Everywhere, people are delighted to be given practical tools and accessible theory for understanding their dreams, healing their nightmares, and normalising common psychic experiences.

## Spirituality

Inevitably, my exposure to the range of dreaming expanded my religious faith. My understanding of theology and morality had already been stretched by listening to hundreds of clients' stories. Dreamwork stretches it further, with powerful psychic experiences, spiritual encounters, and inner-world journeys that cannot be denied, such as Margaret Needham's *Call to the Inland* (2012). I read John Sanford's (1984) and Morton Kelsey's (1968) scholarly books on dreams in the Judaeo-Christian tradition and realised that the Bible is full of dreams and visions. I am still an active Anglican Christian but I now find far more metaphor than history in the Bible, which actually opens it up to discovering the presence of the Divine everywhere, in everyone, both immanent and transcendent.

Sleep science tells us that everyone dreams in REM sleep every night, from pre-birth to death. In fact human beings spend approximately one-twelfth of our life in dream-sleep. During REM sleep, brain-mapping shows that half our brain is switched off, disconnecting the external environment (Hoss, 2005) but the other half is actively conscious in an altered state, engaged with internal material relevant to one's sense of self. We each become actors on our own inner stage among symbolic characters who may be understood as aspects of the self or as our perceptions of other figures in our environment.

Who am I in this inner world? Not just my ego on its own. We recall very few of our dreams, mainly the ones involving strong emotion, puzzling behaviour or dramatic encounters, but they can influence us, even unconsciously. They also reflect our particular patterns of behaviour with uncomfortable accuracy, becoming a valuable source of personal feedback. We do not construct these inner stories with our conscious mind, the waking ego, but from a deeper source within us, a spiritual core of self (Jung, 1961/1983), like the nucleus of an organism, hidden in the unconscious. Jung called it the archetype of the Divine and most religions understand it as a source of potential guidance. It seems we are all touching into this same deep source of wisdom, albeit through our own particular lens.

## Clients

As I work with clients and supervisees, I ask for dreams and listen for their sense of inner guidance. Some dreams, including nightmares, are reflections of immediate dilemmas and challenge the dreamer to choose a new attitude or course of action. A supervisee may report a dream showing transference dynamics, vicarious trauma, or over-stress. Clients bring dreams about the issues below the surface as in the case of my client Joy (not her real name) who dreamed that her hair was falling out when she combed it. She then remembered that her hair had fallen out once before when she was seriously ill. She took this as a warning to quit her very stressful job before she fell ill again.

Recurring nightmares identify unresolved issues needing urgent attention. Chronic nightmares are a danger to health, by undermining the quality of sleep and reducing our resilience (Krakow, 2004). Simply teaching clients how to create new endings to their

dream stories can bring about rapid improvement in sleep, which soon enables better decisions in their daily life. One client described a devastating recurring nightmare he had had all his life in which he expected to be killed. After we tracked its origin, he consciously created a new way out of the dilemma and applied it the next time he had the nightmare. This worked immediately and he has not had the nightmare since. Released from the sub-conscious fear of sudden death, he now sleeps easy and feels much healthier.

Some dreams offer hope or encouragement, as in the case of Jeremy (not his real name) who was recovering from deep depression; he dreamed of climbing on a barren mountain and finding new life in a nest of eagle chicks. Another client dreamed she was walking through a dark forest, but there was a light behind her all the way, showing her the path. Their wisdom came from within them.

Some of those who are bereaved have a vivid vision that releases their distress when the loved one appears, looking healthy, indicating they are in a new life now. I understand such dreams as showing that love can reach across the barrier of death. I have heard examples like this so often that I believe death is simply a transition into another state of consciousness, and not to be feared, although the process of dying may not be easy. We leave our physical existence, but consciousness goes on. One of my clients told me about a marvelous near death experience some months before his final illness, in which he stood in wonder gazing at a magnificent aurora of golden light that filled the sky. All his fear disappeared.

## Conclusion

I have also kept a Dream Log of my own for 28 years, recording over 2000 dreams. While most of them give me feedback on current issues in my life, some of them have a mystical depth that touches my soul with wonder; and a surprising number have had precognitive elements that I did not recognise until after the event. And so I resonate with others when they reveal similar experiences. A common theme in my dream groups is the relief of being able to discuss “weird” dreams, visions, and psychic experiences that had caused the dreamers to wonder if they were “going mad”.

I have been collecting vivid dreams and visions for over 20 years now (with written permission) from friends, clients, trainees, and participants in hundreds of workshops around New Zealand. I am constantly impressed, often awed, by the spiritual impact of the dreams and the power they have to enlighten, challenge, heal, or guide each one of us on the journey of life.

They remind me of an old French medical slogan about the role of the doctor with patients: *Je le pensay, et Dieu le guarit*, (I treated it, but God healed it). Eric Berne commented thus: “There is no need for false humility, but only for facing the facts: we treat them, but it is God who cures them” (1966/1994, p. 63).

When clients bring their dreams into therapy, workshops, or dream-sharing groups, they become open to their own inner resources for wisdom and healing. And therapists listening to our own dreams may find therapy for our own souls.

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