

Into the Cave
Thoughts about the value of working with dreams
By Rebecca Mueller, Psy.D.

Introduction

Each night we slip through the veils of consciousness into a world of magic, mystery, and adventure. There, we are offered information, mystical and mundane, from which we can benefit. From the most profound truths to very practical guidance, this realm offers assistance for whatever holds our waking attention.

Most of the time, we wake from that realm with fleeting memories or vague emotions; sometimes a passing thought about “that weird dream” as we move into preparation for the day ahead. Before one knows it, all memory of the dream is gone. Yet, we may be left with a sense of having missed something. Perhaps, we have.

Great discoveries and decisions have resulted from attention to dreamtime messages. Thomas Edison famously worked around the clock, taking naps as needed and using the information he received during those naps to fuel his exceptional inventiveness. Dreams provided the inspiration for Elias Howe’s creation of the lock stitch sewing machine; Friedrich Handel’s composition of the final movement of *The Messiah*; Caesar’s decision to cross the Rubicon; Robert Louis Stephenson’s best stories; and Harriet Tubman’s ability to find safe routes for escaped slaves on the “Underground Railroad.”

The same wisdom that inspired Edison, Caesar and Tubman is available to each of us every night. Wisdom that can help us cross our personal “Rubicons”, the barriers small or large, real or perceived, that keep us from living into our full potential.

A personal example

As an example, let me share with you a dream I had many years ago. This is the situation in which the dream occurred. When my daughter was very young, her father and I divorced. Though recognizing that the divorce was for the best, I was bitter and angry. Not far beneath the surface, resentment simmered. A few years later, my ex-husband’s work situation changed; he requested a reduction in child support—a reasonable request. All of my unresolved anger and resentment erupted. Adrift in the self-righteous obsessions of anger, I fulfilled my daily responsibilities to work and family, just barely, before defaulting to distracted, angry rumination.

This dream was offered to me:

It was nighttime. It felt like I was in South America, some place warm and exotic. My ex-husband and I were independently struggling, in parallel, up a steep, narrow mountain path with many blind turns. There was no interaction between us as we continued up the path. All around us were threatening, ominous figures in shadowy crevices ready to attack at any moment. It was a precarious path; any misstep or miscalculation would yield dangerous results. Yet I felt no dread, fear, or anxiety; I was blindly determined to continue to the end. Arriving at the mountaintop, the landscape remained the same: dark, shadowy, menacing.

Then the dreamscape abruptly changed.

It was daylight. We were standing at the outskirts of an exotic, peaceful, sun-drenched resort town. The sky was clear and blue, the town white and pristine. We began to walk into the village. As we did, our current spouses walked up and the four of us continued amicably through the village. At this point my daughter came out of a hotel door and joined us. She complained of a headache and all four of us began searching our pockets for something to help her. Her stepmother pulled out an aspirin and the five of us continued together into the hotel.

I awoke from the dream, the vision of the five of us together at the resort emblazoned in my mind, internally commenting: “NO WAY IS THIS EVER GOING TO HAPPEN!” I resisted expressly deciphering the dream’s message, absolutely unwilling to entertain the possibility of the final dream scene. On the one hand knowing that I was being prompted to do something differently, while on the other, stubbornly and actively resisting surrender of the delicious, though destructive, attractions of self-righteous anger.

During most of the ensuing day, the dream images haunted me, intermittently intruding in my awareness. At some point, I yielded to the dream’s essential message: the vision represented by the second part of the dream was the better way, and the path I was on, the path of anger was dangerous. I understood, too, that just as climbing mountains or going to resorts are choices, so too is anger a choice, not an inevitable condition. The dream was showing me the consequences of the path I was on. Consequences I had stubbornly ignored in life, as in the dream, trudging blindly forward to the inevitable outcome of my self-righteous anger: a dead-end surrounded by more of the same.

When I finally surrendered to the dream's message, the quiet calm of certainty overtook me. For me, this was a transformative moment, but not a transcendent one. The behaviors of thought, emotion or action that brought this dream to me did not change overnight, but they did change over time. The potential revealed in the dream transpired; the lovely outcome I so abhorred, thankfully, came to be.

Over the years, my daughter's "family of parents" became collaborative in efforts on her behalf (something that cannot happen without everyone's participation and effort!). Ten years after the dream, when she played softball in college, we travelled each spring to see her play in Florida where the four of us actually shared a condominium, the sunny, resort-like environment and friendly intimacy literally predicted in the dream.

When I think about what the dream was conveying to me, I can almost imagine a good, tough-love friend holding up two pictures--one of the ominous mountain path; the other of the attractive resort scene—and saying to me, "your choice". A good friend does that, holds up a mirror for us so that we can be our best selves. How empowering to realize we have access to a wise friend whenever we want!

Right inside each of us, every night, this inner friend, teacher, guide, mentor, essential part of us, is offering insight and guidance. Our dreams are prompting our individual evolution, their information percolating up through the layers of the unconscious and subconscious minds until ultimately breaking through to our conscious minds. When we actively engage with our dreams, we can short circuit that process, making changes, implementing suggestions, improving our lives now. When we pay attention, we can receive information that helps us have more productive, happier lives. Who among us can't use that kind of help? Why not begin tonight?

Symbols in Dreams

Everything in a dream is symbolic, representative of an idea that is often more complex than the symbol itself. Just as words are symbolic of an agreed upon meaning, dream objects, characters, people, animals represent more than what they are. And their meaning is usually unique to the individual dreamer. For example, if there is a dog in your dream, it could represent friends or friendly situations (most dogs are pretty friendly characters!), unless a dog bit you when you were young. In that case, a dream dog might represent something much more threatening. Or, in my dream, my ex-husband certainly represented how I felt about him at the time, but also any object of anger. Its important to think about what something represents to you, before running off to a dream dictionary, though they can be helpful to get you started. As you work with dream symbols, you will discover many layers of meaning and thus come to appreciate that the symbols can convey so much more than mere words.

Some suggestions to get started

Understanding dream messages is not always a straightforward proposition. Unlike a tough-love friend, dreams are not always direct in their communication. The upside of their indirectness is that they are absolutely dense with meaning, the downside that they are sometimes so dense as to be indecipherable. A deep analysis can be time-consuming. Yet, using my dream as the example, even the most simplistic understanding (up the dangerous mountain=not good choice; friendly resort environs=better choice), can yield valuable information. Whether you chose to make a deep study of your dreams, or to be a more casual, but engaged observer of them, you can benefit from their promptings.

If you want to really delve into this, I have provided a list of books that I have found helpful.

Short of a deeper study, here are some hints that may help.

- Set an intention to remember your dreams.
- Demonstrate the intent by stating it (silently is fine!) immediately before going to bed, putting out paper and pen to write down your dreams.
- When you remember a dream, write it down. Yes even if its 3AM. Scribble the highlights at least.
- Think about it after you've written it or while you shower.
- Notice any associations you make to your current life, they are probably related.
- When you have time work with the dream more intentionally, identify the key objects, people, animals, time (day or night), places. List them and jot down what they represent to you. See side bar. This can be helpful with you approach it as an exhaustive or "quick and dirty" exercise.
- Separately or in tandem with the above, list the primary actions of the dream: verbs, scene changes, etc. Note the primary emotions you felt in the dream that are associated with those

actions. Also note if those emotions differ from waking emotions you have about the dream actions. For example: You dream you drive over a cliff. In the dream, you enjoy the feeling of freedom. In waking life, you are terrified of falling. Use the dichotomy of the emotions to help you understand the dream. What might such a dream be trying to tell the dreamer?

- Review the dream, or tell it to yourself, but replace the dream symbols with your associations. This may help you recognize the waking life situation the dream is addressing.
- Assume the dream is trying to help you. With that assumption, what is the dream suggesting you do? Or do differently?
- You don't need to understand all of the layers in a dream to benefit. Take my dream for example: all I needed to do was recognize the difference in the mood and tone of the two scenes to "get the picture." Each time I've examined it since, I've discovered new meaning and nuance, but I didn't need to recognize the nuance to get the message. Neither will you. How much you do or don't decipher is up to you. As with anything, mastery grows with experience and practice.
- Use all of yourself. Attend to any bodily sensations or emotions you are aware of as you work with the dream.
- Do what you can. Recognize that in waking life, time is often limited. Work intentionally with the dream according to the resources you have available. If you write the dream down, but have little time for much else, then think about it as you shower (a great place for insight!!) or on your commute to work (only when it's safe, of course). If the dream seems really important, then make some time to get back to it.
- Accept your limitations. Some part of the dream will be unknowable. If you feel completely blocked with an aspect, let it go for the moment. It may be outside your current awareness, or it may be something you are resisting knowing. If it's the latter, you can be assured your dreams will find other ways to bring it to your attention! If you sense that your resistance is creating the interference, then specifically invite, ask, or intend that your dreams show you that aspect in a way that is more accessible to you. Then trust that you will be shown, and remember to pay attention.
- Treat the process seriously, but remember to relax and have fun. Yes, the messages of the dreamtime are important, even sacred, but it's so easy in Western culture to create work, make it hard, and believe incredible effort must be exerted. Such intensity is likely to create resistance to the process and the message. If you start to struggle, let it go for awhile. Let your unconscious work with it a bit, and then go back to it. Play with the images and symbols rather than dig into them.

- Is this what it means? When you have the essence, even a kernel of the essence, you will likely have a sense of aha, oh I get it, or a bodily sense of tension release and clarity. You just know you're "getting it".

Psychologist and author Mark Thurston notes that the ultimate dream interpretation is in the living of it. If you think you understand the dream's message, consider how you can apply the message to your life. Is there a low risk change you can make that is consistent with the dream message and your own values? If so you may want to give it a try. Your dreaming self will continue to offer course enhancements or corrections as you go along.

Resources

There are many, many books available on this topic. A few are noted below. The "Dream Interpretation" section of the book store/library contains many more. Finally, there are also many dream sites on the web.

Bosnak, Robert. [A Little Course in Dreams](#). This book was written by a classical Jungian therapist, and contains several good exercises and suggestions.

Delaney, Gayle. [All About Dreams](#). A comprehensive, well-written, accessible introduction to working with dreams for the lay reader. It contains many good ideas and suggestions.

Faraday, Ann. [Dream Power](#), [The Dream Game](#), many others. I believe most, if not all, of her books are out of print. They may be available at libraries. These are written for general audiences and are pretty readable. She suggests numerous approaches to dream interpretation and ways to record and remember your dreams.

[Idiot's Guide to Interpreting Your Dreams](#). This is useful for expanding your interpretation of dream symbols in the context of the mythological traditions of Western culture. It is quite well done and comprehensive.

Mellick, Jill and Marion Woodman. [The Art of Dreaming: A Creativity Toolbox for Dreamwork](#). This is an excellent resource offering many creative, fun suggestions for working with dreams.

Summer Rain, Mary and Alex Greystone. [Mary Summer Rain on Dreams: a quick reference guide to over 14, 500 dream symbols](#). Dream symbols are highly personal and I have found most guides to be unhelpful or confusing. This one, however, has assisted me personally in

working with dreams as well as being useful to others. It has a spiritual bent and is written in slightly arcane language.

Sun Bear and Wabun Wind. Dreaming with the Wheel. This is a nature-based, earth-honoring approach to dream work that arises out of a Native American understanding of the world from the perspective of the medicine wheel.

Thurston, Mark. How to Interpret Your Dreams. This publication from A.R.E. Press is an integration of traditional psychological perspectives and the spiritual approach of Edgar Cayce. Somewhat cumbersome in style, it has many valuable ideas and suggestions. It may be out of print.

Van De Castle, Robert L. Our Dreaming Mind. This is an overview of the role of dreams in a variety of human endeavors with information about dreams and sleep research.

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