

The Transformative Power of Dreams

by Gary Seeman, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist
<http://drgaryseeman.com>

It frequently happens at the very beginning of the treatment that a dream will reveal ... in broad perspective, the whole programme of the unconscious. C. G. Jung¹

Given the power of dreams to reveal ourselves to ourselves, why do relatively few take advantage of this opportunity? Early societies had symbolic and mystical explanations for every life experience, including dreams. In a post-modern, global culture, many of us have not been taught a way to understand dreams. I've written this to help you understand the language of dreams in a practical way. The main topics covered here are:

- Understanding the language of dreams
- Tips for remembering your dreams
- Types of dreams
- Working with dreams in therapy

(A note of caution: If you're having difficulty sleeping, you may have a health issue that should be evaluated by your medical doctor.)

Understanding the Language of Dreams

The interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind. Sigmund Freud.²

If a picture is worth 1000 words, consider the value of a moving image. If you include touch, hearing, physical sensation, emotions, smell and taste, how much do you add? The language of dreams includes all of these senses because it speaks in terms of lived experience—with an important difference. Dreams portray mental states, unfettered by the limits of physical reality. The combination of lived experience and the freedom to shift shape and time gives dreams tremendous power to convey mental contents. Freud's endorsement of dreams' significance speaks of their ability to reveal thoughts, feelings, intuitions and self-knowledge. These psychic contents arise as whispers that are difficult to hear below the noise of waking experience.

So, let's assume that your dreams are delivering a rich soup of information every day. What if you can't remember them? Perhaps you wonder if you dream at all. Or, you may

¹ Jung, C. G. (1954). The practical use of dream analysis. In R. F. C. Hull (Trans.), *The practice of psychotherapy: Essays on the psychology of the transference and other subjects* (2nd ed., paragraph 343). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

² Freud, S. (1950). The interpretation of dreams. A. A. Brill, trans. New York: Random House. (Original work published 1900)

find your dreams fading soon after opening your eyes to a new day. How can you remember your dreams?

How to Remember Your Dreams

- Ask yourself to dream about something you want help with before going to sleep.
- Record dreams before they fade using a note pad or tape recorder.
- Take what you get, even a dream fragment.
- Don't overdo alcohol or other sedatives before bedtime—they can disrupt sleep and make it harder to remember dreams.
- Get enough sleep to better recall your dreams.³
- Be patient. You may not remember your dreams right away.
- Don't lose a lot of sleep trying to remember every dream.

Types of Dreams

The mystery of dreams extends beyond their experiential language. There are very different types of dreams. Mostly, we experience dreams as a composite of familiar experiences. Those experiences may flow into each other more suddenly or abruptly than in waking life, like the scene changes in a film or play. These are ordinary dreams, which usually do contain significant meaning worth exploring. There are other kinds of dreams that stand out from the ordinary. Some may shake you up or even challenge your model of reality. The most commonly recognized categories of dreams are as follows. A single dream may fit more than one of these categories:⁴

- Ordinary dreams (described immediately above)
- Guiding dreams
- Repetitive dreams
- Archetypal dreams
- Nightmares
- Lucid dreams and OBEs
- Paranormal dreams⁵
- "Big" dreams

Guiding dreams. As seen in the Jung quote at the top of this article, dreams before entering therapy can outline the core issue a person is struggling with and thus provide extensive guidance on how to proceed with treatment. Initial dreams are one example of

³ This helpful tip comes from the website of the Lucidity Institute, which is a treasure trove of information about dreams and lucid dreams. See <http://www.lucidity.com/NL11.DreamRecall.html>.

⁴ Knowledgeable readers may have seen other dream categories or definitions of types of dreams. My purpose in this article is to give a brief and readable overview. I invite you to e-mail me via drgary@drgaryseeman.com with any comments or suggestions of additional material for this introduction to dreamwork.

⁵ You don't have to believe in paranormal or psi abilities to benefit from dreamwork. I include this category because people are often startled by dream contents where they seem to sense things at a distance or in the future without apparent prior knowledge.

what I call a "guiding dream." Someone may have a guiding dream before connecting to any person or experience that will help them transform. Other guiding dreams may offer meaningful perspectives from an inner healer or teacher. In a larger sense, people who learn to interpret the meanings of their dream experiences obtain self-understanding, or guidance from their dreams.

Repetitive dreams. These dreams suggest that unconscious material that is pressing for consciousness or that the dreamer may need a change in attitude, behavior or circumstances. The unrealized dream material has not been understood, or the dreamer can't or won't responded to it. I consider repetitive dreams to be a type of guiding dream.

Archetypal dreams. Some dreams contain archetypal contents. Plato defined archetypes as universal forms.⁶ How do such "universal forms" appear in dreams? An image of a golden sphere can represent wholeness and completion attained through long internal work. Similar universal images include those of a wedding, of a kind and wise mother or father, and such alchemical images as becoming immersed in water.

Nightmares are sufficiently frightening that they awaken the dreamer. In his seminar on dream analysis, Jung said that nightmares can compensate "a flippant and perfunctory attitude of the conscious" mind.⁷ In other words, they awaken the dreamer to some situation not being addressed in conscious life. Upon awakening, the dreamer recalls dream contents. This is different from Sleep Terrors where someone may awaken in a terrified state but be unable to record the dream contents. The difference may be physiological, since Sleep Terrors are produced during a deeper state of sleep.⁸

In a **lucid dream**, the dreamer is aware of dreaming and is able to make conscious choices within the dream.⁹ Lucid dreams may correspond with a heightened ability to maintain consciousness in relaxed states, something found in people who advance in meditation practice or consciously pursue dreamwork. Are there benefits to lucid dreaming? Dr. Stephen LaBerge researches, teaches and writes about lucid dreaming. He sees many benefits that would be seen in any situation where one is conscious rather than unconscious, including enhanced volition, learning and healing, as when one consciously faces and overcomes perceived dangers.¹⁰ In addition to being awake within a lucid

⁶ Jung conceived of archetypes as organs of the objective psyche that express themselves as primordial images whose presence is reflected cross-culturally in the myths of humanity. Those myths describe instinctive stories of human society and forms of human behavior. According to Samuels, Shorter and Plaut, the archetype is also "a psychosomatic concept, linking body and psyche, instinct and image." Samuels et al. also write that archetypes "carry a strong, potentially overpowering charge of energy which is difficult to resist." Samuels, A., Shorter, B., & Plaut, F. (1986). *A Critical Dictionary of Jungian Analysis*. New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Inc. Pp. 26-28.

⁷ Jung, C. G. *Dream analysis: Notes of the seminar given in 1928 - 1930* by C. G. Jung. (W. McGuire, ed., p. 205). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

⁸ This differentiation is cited at <http://www.emedicinehealth.com/articles/42677-1.asp> (accessed 2/13/05) Sleep terrors occur during NREM (non rapid eye movement) sleep. Nightmares occur during REM sleep.

⁹ From *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, Vol. 26, 1913. Cited at <http://lucidity.com/vanEeden.html>, accessed on the World Wide Web on 1/29/05.

¹⁰ For benefits of lucid dreaming, see The Lucidity Institute's FAQ page, <http://lucidity.com/LucidDreamingFAQ2.html>.

dream, some people report an experience of leaving their bodies during the dream state. Dr. LaBerge favors the view that this such out-of-body experiences (OBEs) are a product of the imagination. He has conducted research that supports his belief. Dr. Charles Tart is another respected researcher whose experiments support his belief that people can partially separate from their physical bodies and even report objective perceptions obtained during OBEs.¹¹

Paranormal dreams are those said to contain information one might not otherwise know through the physical senses. (You don't need to believe in psychic abilities to psychologically benefit from the imagery produced by the sleeping mind.) It's not unusual, for instance, for people to dream that someone has died and find out that later that this was true, even though it was unexpected and they hadn't been told. I call such a dream "paranormal" because it reflects paranormal or "psychic" abilities.¹² Such dreams may be more common with emotional events that are highly charged. The Collected Works of C. G. Jung and notes from his seminar on dream analysis present his lucid observations about related phenomena of consciousness, including telepathy, synchronicities (meaningful events that don't seem to have a causal connection)¹³, and the "psychoid" nature of the unconscious.¹⁴

"Big" dreams contain visions or information beyond one's daily, personal concerns. These are relatively rare and may be more common to people of intellectual, visionary or spiritual stature. An example of such a dream is that of C. G. Jung before one of the great world wars of the 20th century, in which he saw Europe floating in an ocean of blood.¹⁵

¹¹ Dr. LaBerge's online writing about OBEs as an imaginal perception can be seen at <http://www.lucidity.com/LucidDreamingFAQ2.html#OBE>. (Cut and paste the url to the left to get to that site. Adobe Acrobat doesn't translate the # character!) Dr. Tart's online articles about his view and experiments regarding OBEs can be found at http://www.paradigm-sys.com/display/ctt_articles1.cfm.

¹² Many in Western technological culture reject the possibility of paranormal or psychic perception because accepting such a possibility seems to contradict scientific models of cause and effect. However, scientific theories, such as that of quantum physics, do allow for interactions of objects at a distance and independent of time. The idea of paranormal perception is also controversial because it can be used to excuse charlatanism and/or manipulation of others for profit. Also, few people can reliably demonstrate consistently accurate paranormal perceptions. There is an extensive body of research, however, that demonstrates with substantial statistical significance that paranormal abilities are real. An excellent summary of 100 years of that research and a discussion of rigid skepticism about that research is found in Radin, D. S. (1997). *The conscious universe: The scientific truth of psychic phenomena*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

¹³ *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung* are published by Princeton University Press. I also cite Jung, C. G. (1984). *Dream analysis: Notes of the seminar given in 1928-1930 by C. G. Jung*. William McGuire, ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

¹⁴ The psychoid concept is summarized by Dr. J. Marvin Spiegelman as follows: "Jung concluded that beyond the world of the psyche and its causal manifestations and relations in time and space, there exists a trans-psychic reality (the collective unconscious), where both time and space are relativized. At that level, there is acausality and space-time relativization parallel to the findings in physics. The archetypes are then conceived of as "psychoid", i.e., not exclusively psychic." He adds that "The psychoid archetype lies behind both psyche and matter and expresses itself typically in synchronistic events." Spiegelman, J. M. (1976). Psychology and the occult. In *Spring: An annual of archetypal psychology and Jungian thought*. 1976, 104-122.

¹⁵ Op Cit., Jung dream seminar 1928-1930 (see footnote 13) pp. 4-5 "Primitives believe in two different kinds of dreams: ota, the great vision, big, meaningful, and of collective importance, and vudota the

Working with Dreams in Therapy

"It was nothing, really. Just people and things I see every day." A frequent client statement.

In this section, I discuss my approach to doing dreamwork in therapy and suggest a mindset for learning from your dreams. At the start of therapy, I encourage clients to bring any dream material they remember. They're often surprised at the depth of feelings that even mundane dreams can bring to our work. There's usually something we can find in the dream that offers guidance and centers us on important issues. This is why I ask clients to approach dreamwork with an open mind. In general, discussion of dream contents stimulates the imaginations of therapist and client and evokes creative thinking about healing.

People often report unpleasant dreams early in therapy, which can discourage them from wanting to do dreamwork. They may have had similar or repetitive unpleasant dreams for years. Why does this happen? Jung discovered that as people go progressively deeper in exploring unconscious contents, the layer they encounter on the surface is shadow material—those aspects of themselves they reject or ignore.¹⁶ For instance, a dreamer may be chased by a gang of threatening people in a dark street. When faced, the gang members may represent insights or attitudes that have been pressing for consciousness but resisted by the dreamer. Pushing such contents below awareness tends to add to their power and threatening nature.

Sometimes clients ask me about "the meaning" of a specific dream content. You've probably seen books about dream interpretation or symbolism. These can be helpful, but if followed rigidly can entirely miss the point. For example, saying that a body of water in a dream represents the unconscious will be off point if you miss the dreamer's personal memories of a lake she spent her teenage summers. Associations to that lake are more likely to be meaningful than the "cookbook" interpretation alone.

This is why I listen to every detail of the dream, not just the general narrative. The details lead to associations that may bring emotions to the surface or stimulate important memories. If you see a familiar person in your dream, I may ask you about him. Is he someone you once knew? A current friend? What do you think of him? Are there things about him you find admirable, peculiar or irritating? One reason I ask such questions is that you may dream about people you know because they portray an attitude you're bringing to your current life situation. In this sense, that person in your dream is a part of you being presented in dream language.

ordinary small dreams. They usually deny having the ordinary dream, or if, after long efforts on your part, they admit such an occurrence, they say: "That's nothing, every one has that!" Great and important dreams are very rare, and only a really big man has big dreams - chiefs, medicine men, people with mana."

¹⁶ Hall, James A. (1983). *Jungian dream interpretation: A handbook of theory and practice*. Toronto, Canada: Inner City Books.

For time efficiency in your therapy session, I recommend that you bring your dream in written form, if you are able. (If not, bring dream material anyway!) Bring a copy for yourself and your therapist. This way, your therapist won't have to take extra time to write down your dream in order to consider it thoroughly, and you'll have more time for discussion. The guiding power of dreamwork can make your therapy more efficient in general by helping you progress more quickly.

Often, I ask clients to read or speak their dream, even if they've brought it in writing, because this will bring it alive. Then we proceed through the dream, gathering associations between dream material and waking life. I may then amplify the dream by exploring symbolic meanings. I advise clients to pay attention to associations or symbolic meanings that strike a chord. If this line of interpretation isn't emotionally evocative, it may not be what's most significant for you. In situations where it may help our therapeutic work, I may ask the client to imagine in session that the dream continues beyond where it left off. (The terminology for this type of work is "active imagination.") In this case, the client's own imagination is already attuned to their larger consciousness through the dream and provides additional material for therapeutic work.

The skilled interpretation of dreams can help assist that therapeutic work by delving into the multiple layers of meaning found in a dream. Although some of that meaning may be inaccessible to conscious realization at this time, the meanings on the surface may be apparent enough to promote growth. Unlike Freud, who believed that dreams spoke in symbolism intended to hide repressed meaning, I concur with Jung's belief that dreams communicate more directly than this. A combination of knowledge of the client's life circumstances, her history, her cultural beliefs, and other dreams she has had, plus understanding of dream symbolism helps unlock multiple layers. Some of those many possible layers of meaning and their interconnections are discussed below.

Dream Interpretation

The purpose of interpreting dreams is to promote insight for self-realization. This section goes into some detail describing the layers of meaning in dreams to offer readers a sense of the richness of dream experience for self-realization. These layers begin on the surface with material that is closest to consciousness. They descend to the personal unconscious and connect eventually to a larger consciousness that Jung called the "objective psyche."

Closest to consciousness are subconscious realizations about attitudes, behaviors, stresses, and so on. Emotions or thoughts that haven't been given enough attention may be at this near-surface level. Even at this level, dreams often have a compensatory function, offering to influence the dreamer to change a one-sided attitude.¹⁷ At this layer one may already see transference material. Transference is the dreamer's attachment to the therapist and reflects both healthy and distorted attachments to other important figures who influenced formation of the dreamer's psychological self. When a therapist interprets

¹⁷ IBID.

transference material with tact and sensitivity, this can help the dreamer realize attachment conflicts in the here-and-now of the therapy experience and promote healing.

A phenomenon that is close to the surface and connected with a layer below it is what Freud described as wish fulfillment. Here, a person may dream of loving interaction with an estranged spouse, for instance. Psychiatrist James Hall writes that the notion of wish fulfillment can foreclose healing. He suggests that understanding how one unconsciously participates in that relationship offers an opportunity for growth. Hall relates this type of dreaming to continued attachment of the ego (how one copes with reality) to the old attitude.¹⁸ Here we see a way the dream is linked to a deeper aspect of consciousness, the interrelation to each other of psychological contents.

So, at the next deeper layer, we see the type of dream discussed just above revealing aspects of the dreamer's personal unconscious. There are many technical terms to describe functioning at this layer. For simplicity's sake, consider interactions between your urges and your conscience (Freud labeled this conflict as one between ego and id). Or, consider the difficulty of making an important decision about a relationship, where you're torn between two alternatives (Jungians may see this as a "conflict of duty" or being caught in the tension of the opposite positions in a feeling-toned complex). When such feeling-toned complexes are touched upon, forgotten memories may rise to consciousness and offer opportunities for healing. A brief discussion of the nature of complexes should help you understand their significance.

Jung describes complexes as splinter psyches (or subpersonalities) that act autonomously and out of character with one's usual stance in the world. They contain "the image of a ... situation" and are "strongly accentuated emotionally." Thus, feeling-toned complexes prescribe behavior that differs from one's usual attitude.¹⁹ Think of complexes, then, as containing the script of an unresolved inner conflict. Consider a boy, for instance, who had a harsh, authoritarian father. The boy vowed never to be like his father, deciding instead to be the model of calm fairness when differing with others. In situations that closely resemble the drama with his father, the father complex is unconsciously triggered into action. Thus, confrontation with a submissive and ineffectual employee or a harsh, authoritarian boss can induce the boy, now man, to replay conflicts of dominance or submission. This is how one's usual attitude can be hijacked by a complex. Energetically, it is as if the complex has a positive and negative pole, with each pole representing one side of the conflict. Each pole represents an extreme, and one identifies with either pole when the complex is activated. When possessed by the complex, one regresses to the childhood attitudes of its emotional activation. A child's limited development can promote an emotional stance of limitless extremes, such as "I always have felt this way and will always feel this way, so there's no use trying to change me." The power of complexes to take over one's response to situations can seem uncanny. This is because when activation is intense, they are linked, at the core of the conflict, to age-old behavioral scripts (instincts). In Jungian terms, complexes are linked to archetypes. In the

¹⁸ Op. Cit., Hall, (1983), p. 30.

¹⁹ Jung, C. G. (1960). A review of the complex theory. In R. F. C. Hull (Trans.), *The structure and dynamics of the psyche* (pp. 92-104). New York: Pantheon Books. (Original work published 1948)

case discussed here, the authoritarian father image can carry an intensity similar to that of confronting a harsh and judgmental god. Such religious myths as that of Zeus carry an energy that remains accessible to the human psyche. Encounters with such figures can appear in dreams and be interpreted in terms of such myths. The point here is not to promote the worship of Zeus! In terms of human development, the assignment of great power to an authoritarian figure can be traced to early childhood terror of depending on inattentive but all-powerful parents. Thus, interpretation of the myth can awaken the adult dreamer to the emotional power of the behavioral script and promote healing.

The connection between complexes and archetypes is one way that the personal unconscious links to the objective psyche. The objective psyche where archetypes reside is more than a mere repository of ancient stories, or myths. Many believe that it is a larger, living intelligence. I see evidence of that intelligence in the guiding nature of dreams and their compensatory function. Others find such evidence in transpersonal experiences, such as paranormal perceptions or visions during dreams, and in synchronicities, paranormal perceptions, and visions while awake. That evidence isn't convincing unless you've had such experiences personally. In closing, I offer an example from Jung's writings of a dream experience that was supported by a synchronicity. He writes of a woman client who dreamed she was given a golden scarab. As she was telling him this dream, a beetle closely resembling a golden scarab knocked at the window. Jung opened the window, caught the beetle and presented it to the client. This meaningful coincidence shook up her rigid reality construct and helped start her healing process. He writes that the dream also had archetypal roots directly related to the synchronicity in that:

Any essential change of attitude signifies a psychic renewal which is usually accompanied by symbols of rebirth in the patient's dreams and fantasies. The ancient Egyptian Book of What Is in the Netherworld describes how the dead sun-god changes himself at the tenth station into Khepri, the scarab, and then, at the twelfth station, mounts the barge which carries the rejuvenated sun-god into the morning sky. C. G. Jung²⁰

²⁰ Jung, C. G. (1960). Synchronicity: An acausal connecting principle. In R. F. C. Hull (Trans.), *The structure and dynamics of the psyche* (pp. 417-531). New York: Pantheon Books. (Original work published 1952). Paragraphs 843 and 845.