



Introduction

Dolores had just dreamed that someone was banging on the front door of her house in the middle of the night. In the dream, she walked down the hallway and saw a man in an overcoat through the front door, silhouetted by the full moon outside. He had a hat pulled down low over his face. Alarmed, she called out, "What do you want?" He answered brusquely, "I want to sleep here tonight."

Dolores walked back to her bedroom and called the emergency operator. When she explained her concern about the man at the front door, the operator replied, "Oh yes, we know who he is. His name is Nisrock." Perplexed, Dolores asked for the spelling of the odd name. Meanwhile, she could hear the man trying the other doors of her house. They were all well locked. A split second later, she noticed that her telephone was sitting on a large Spanish dresser she had left behind in a move sixteen years earlier. At that moment, she realized that this was a dream and awakened.

Several days later, still reflecting on the dream, Dolores stopped at the local library and found an interesting book about the unconscious. She opened it at random, and, to her amazement, saw a drawing from an old manuscript. The caption read, "Nisrock, the winged Babylonian god who takes the souls of dreamers to the place of the dream."

The remarkable synchronicity first led Dolores to conclude that the dream was precognitive. It seemed to foretell an event, namely the soon-to-be-discovered book with the origin of the name Nisrock. However, as she began to reflect on her life in relation to the dream, she realized that the Nisrock figure

was more accurately a representation of the unknown to which she needed to “open” herself. She had recently moved from the United States to another country and was worried about her ability to survive on her own. Her concerns had her “locked in” and she needed the courage to open herself to new experiences. As Dolores worked to more fully understand her dream, she realized that it was helping her psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually to embrace her new life.

The Dream Process

To understand the dream process, we must first describe the basic sleep cycle. Most people dream at least four or five times each night. About ninety minutes after falling asleep, we typically enter that stage of sleep marked by rapid eye movement (or REM) activity. Although dreams can appear during other sleep stages, it is during REM that our dreams generally occur. Laboratory sleep research shows that most sleepers, when awakened from REM sleep, will usually recall a dream.

At the beginning of the night, our first REM period may last only five minutes; toward the end of the night, a REM period may last as long as thirty minutes. This stage of sleep is marked not only by rapid eye movements but also by a loss of muscle tone, sexual excitation, and brain waves resembling those that characterize wakefulness.

The reason for REM sleep is unclear, but it may facilitate memory storage, maintain brain equilibrium during bodily repose and, among infants, may accelerate the development of the brain and the coordination of the eyes. All of these potential goals of REM sleep indicate that its psychological activities are superimposed on more primary biological functions. While dreams may assist the dreamer to become aware of life issues, identify personal myths, and solve problems, these psychological activities are secondary to the biological purposes served by REM sleep.

According to one widely-held theory, during a REM period, a cascade of potent chemicals (including serotonin) is released. This stimulates the visual and motor centers of the brain, evoking the dreamer’s memories. No matter how they are elicited, it is these memories that the dreaming brain uses as building blocks for the dream—recombining them in original, vivid, and often baffling ways to create a story. The dreaming mind may create the story by providing a script that has been waiting patiently for the material that would allow it to surface, or by producing an on-the-spot narrative that matches, as best it

can, the images that have been kindled.¹ In either event, the dreaming brain appears to have remarkable self-organizing properties that create several more or less coherent stories each night.

Some dream stories reflect basic problems in daily life with which we have wrestled for years, stories that hold deep meaning for the dreamer. Other stories may be more trivial in nature, reflecting events of the past few days or hours that surface as “day residue.” Still others may be little more than a jumble of disparate pictures and events, lacking any coherent theme. Regardless of the type of dream story presented, the story-making process can be likened to what transpires when we use language while awake. In fact, dreams are often called the language of the night.

We can define dreams as a series of images—reported in narrative form—that occur during sleep. Our mental and emotional processes during dream time are, in many ways, quite similar to those we experience during wakefulness. In one study people were asked to make up a dream while awake. Surprisingly, the judges could not discriminate these imaginary accounts from the written reports of nighttime dreams. Both contained similar imagery reported in a narrative form.²

Dreams and Myths

Some dreams bear an uncanny resemblance to those stories we refer to as myths. To scholars of literature, myths are not falsehoods, but rather symbolic and metaphorical narratives that address important human issues. Dolores’s dream exposed her to her “personal myth,” a story she told herself over and over again. The dream informed her that her old myth of keeping herself from facing her unknown “shadow” was no longer appropriate, and that she needed to open herself to a new myth that would stimulate her further development. Although few modern cultures have unified mythologies that everyone accepts, each of us has personal myths, family myths, and institutional myths that can exert enormous power over our actions.

These myths largely operate outside of our awareness. In Western culture, where the interpretation of dreams is considered superstitious, dreamers are rarely aware of their personal myth except when it emerges in dreams. Even then, the myth usually takes the form of metaphors and symbols. Metaphors are activities that stand for highly complex human issues; symbols are images and pictures that do the same. When metaphors and symbols are used in dreams, their meanings differ from dreamer to dreamer. For this reason, there is no single meaning for an image from a dream. In Dolores’s dream, for exam-

ple, she felt the man knocking at the door represented an opportunity for her to look more deeply inside herself. However, for another woman, the figure might have symbolized the “animus,” the masculine aspect of a woman’s psyche, or perhaps a fear of intruders. To a woman who had been abused, the shadowy figure might have been a traumatic residue from the past. There is no one “correct” interpretation for each image.

Dreams That Create Experience

Dreams can illuminate our personal myths in several ways. Some “problem-finding” dreams help us to identify our personal myths. Other “problem-solving” dreams put our personal myths to use in resolving a personal or professional life issue. However, some dreams appear to have little to do with our life issues and problems. Because biological functions of dreams are primary and psychological activities are secondary, many dreams are merely replays of daily activities, retrospective accounts of past activities, rehearsals of future activities, or combinations of the past, present, and future that make little sense. The brain’s propensity to stimulate itself during REM sleep sometimes introduces new imagery into an ongoing dream narrative. As these new images are worked into the dream story, many dreams take on a bizarre, surrealist quality that reflects the brain’s unpredictable activity. This activity may be described as chaotic, but the dreaming brain creates order out of chaos, and the result is a scenario that can be profound, provocative, or even silly.

Most dreams reflect our experience, usually events that have taken place during the past few days. However, some dreams appear to create new experiences. They seem to help us prepare for the future, generate a new idea, or provide helpful insights to our waking life. They may provide the breakthrough that is needed in articulating a new personal myth, rather than reflecting myths that already exist. We have referred to these dreams as “extraordinary” because they are strange and unusual, yet precious and beautiful.

Some extraordinary dreams fall into the category of what Rhea White calls “potentially exceptional human experiences.” These dreams call attention to themselves because of their unusual or anomalous quality, but they also seem meaningful in some way. If one or more of these dreams is accepted as “genuine,” and if it impacts the dreamer’s life, White would call it an “exceptional human experience.”³

The following is an example of an extraordinary dream that helped the dreamer to gain athletic skills. This lucid dream had a significant impact on the dreamer's life.

Eva's Dream

Eva, one of our colleagues, loved ice-skating but had not skated for twenty years. At age forty she decided to take up this sport again. The first night on the ice, Eva was afraid of falling, so she moved very slowly with great hesitation. After being on the ice for a week she had the following dream:

In the dream I find myself watching an ice-skating performance. I want to go out on the ice but I am afraid. Suddenly I realize that I am dreaming. With no hesitation I enter the ice rink. One of the ice-skating champions holds my hand and encourages me to be free with my movements. I am skating beautifully with no fear. While holding her hands, I make a few spins, which I have never done before. Suddenly she lets go of my hand so I skate on my own. I slide and spin, then I feel elevated from the ice into the air. The excitement is so great it wakes me up.

The next day when Eva went ice-skating, her fear was greatly subsided. She began skating with renewed self-confidence and, because she was not fearful, she was able to recall the skating skills she had had as a teenager. The improvement was so dramatic that the ice-skating coach was surprised and approached her with many compliments as well as questions. This experience helped Eva not only with her ice-skating skills, but also gave her courage to take risks in other areas.

This type of extraordinary dream has not been widely discussed in books about dreaming. However, extraordinary dreams may provide us with valuable and meaningful dream content and offer a unique opportunity to apply and learn important new skills.

Content Overview

This book features a variety of extraordinary dreams that are worth studying. These powerful dreams are filled with potential meaning and direction that can be as valuable as waking-life experience. Each chapter focuses on one type of extraordinary dream. It provides a definition, a historical perspective, dream examples, and a way in which dream practitioners can appreciate, understand,

and/or work with the material in the dream. Among the variety of dreams discussed in this book are:

- Creative dreams, which assist us in our attempts to solve problems and bring new endeavors or aspects of ourselves into being.
- Lucid dreams, in which we are actually aware of dreaming while the dream is occurring, enabling us, to witness, or to choose a new direction inside the dream for exploratory, spiritual, or therapeutic value.
- Out-of-body dreams, in which we have the sensation of leaving our body during, or even after, the dream experience.
- Pregnancy dreams, which may alert us to a variety of unconscious attitudes and feelings that may accompany the impending arrival of a new child.
- Healing dreams, which can signal oncoming health problems or point out needed preventive or remedial action.
- Dreams within dreams, in which we dream about having a dream or dream-like experience or a “false awakening” in which we think we are awake but we are actually dreaming.
- Collective dreams, in which two people report similar dreams on the very same night or dream of each other in a common space and time, independently remembering similar events about the dream.
- Telepathic dreams, in which we appear to identify the thoughts of another person physically distant from us at the time of the dream.
- Clairvoyant dreams, in which we seem to perceive distant events about which we have no ordinary way of knowing.
- Precognitive dreams, in which the dream seems to provide information about an event that has not yet occurred.
- Past life dreams, which appear to detail past events we could have known little about unless we had been there at the time.
- Initiation dreams, which introduce us to a new reality or vocational path.
- Spiritual dreams, in which we may experience some form of entry into a spiritual realm or be visited by ancestors, spirits, or deities.

Included at the end of each chapter are exercises to aid in working with dreams. These exercises are not a substitute for counseling or psychological therapy. Individuals in need of counseling or psychotherapy require the help of a trained therapist. Most readers, however, will find that working with their dreams can help them clarify and often resolve inner conflicts. As psychotherapist Anny Speier maintains, the interpretation of dreams, whether attempted

by a mental health professional, a layperson, or the dreamer, must reflect the individual's unique personality characteristics as well as his or her present life situation.⁴

Extraordinary dreams are not uncommon. By recalling our dreams, we open a magic theater with an endless array of dream experiences. However, to open the doors to these new realms, we need to take the time to record our dreams as completely and accurately as possible. Dream reports are the only tools available for dream interpretation. When we work with dreams, we are always dealing with the memory of a dream, not with the actual dream itself as experienced during sleep. While we assume that the dream report is fairly accurate, we cannot be certain unless scientists someday develop ways to film, televise, or record a dream while it is happening. Until that distant time arrives, here are some techniques to help you more fully remember and record your dreams.

Remembering and Recording Dreams

Synesius of Cyrene, writing in the fourth century C.E., observed, "It is an excellent idea to write down one's dreams . . . to keep, so to speak, a dream diary."⁵

When we write down our dreams, or record them on tape, we are expressing an event that typically connects a series of action-oriented images, usually visual in nature. However, because dreams occur in an altered state of consciousness, one in which the biological and chemical brain ecology differs from that during wakefulness, many people have difficulty recalling these images or recording them coherently when they awaken.

It helps to have a pad of paper and a pencil at your bedside to jot down a dream if you awaken in the middle of the night. Some people use a tape recorder. Others use a penlight to see what they are writing. Whatever technique you decide on, preparing to make notes about your dreams will give your psyche a message that you will honor your nighttime creativity. This message may suffice for ensuring dream recall. Later, you can transfer your dream reports to a notebook or to a computer diskette, adding details. As an alternative, you may choose to record your dream by making a drawing of the images or dreamscape. Or, if the dream is especially lyrical, you may be inspired to write a poem.

Remembering one dream per week is sufficient to start working with your dreams. If you cannot meet this modest quota, you might try self-suggestion. Before going to sleep, simply tell yourself (silently or aloud), "I will remember a

dream when I wake up. I will remember a dream when I wake up.” Adapt the words to your own purposes, then repeat the message twenty or thirty times. After a few nights, this technique should begin to yield results.

Once you have recorded a few dreams in your notebook, you can start to work with them. One direct approach is to deal with them as stories. Give each dream a title, just as you would a poem or short story. Then identify the different parts of the dream. We have found that everything in a dream falls into one or more of eight categories, a list originally conceptualized by Calvin Hall and Robert Van de Castle.⁶

1. Activities: Any type of action or behavior.
2. Setting: The place where the activities in the dream occurred; sometimes the dream will also include the time when the activities took place.
3. Objects: Any object made by humans; objects not occurring in nature.
4. Nature: Any natural object; objects not made by humans.
5. Characters: Any entity with a distinct personality.
6. Emotions: Any subjective mood or feeling experienced by a character.
7. Sensations: Any non-verbal stimulation of the senses experienced by a character.
8. Modifiers: Any adjective used to describe something in the dream.

All of these eight elements can be found in Dolores’s dream. The activities were walking, talking, knocking, and telephoning. The setting of the dream was her home in the middle of the night. Articles included Nisrock’s clothing, doors to Dolores’s home, her telephone, and her Spanish dresser. The full moon was a natural object. Dolores, Nisrock, and the telephone operator were the three characters in the dream. The emotions in the dream were fear and confusion. The “banging” sound was a sensation. “Shadowy” was a modifier that described the figure.

Identifying these elements helps when dreamers begin to record their dreams because they call attention to aspects of the dream that would otherwise be ignored. Once dreamers become adept at dream recall and are able to use more sophisticated dreamwork methods, they often discontinue these techniques. However, it is helpful to retain the practice of giving their dream reports titles as this helps identify the dream’s central theme. This theme often serves as what chaos theorists refer to as an “attractor,” something that organizes other material. In this way, your dreaming brain is a self-organizing system that provides you with a constant flow of stories, many of them ordinary