



Dreams of Grief

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The people we love--or hate--will eventually die, and so will we. Whichever comes first, our death or theirs, the direct contact is broken. Most of us have already lost loved ones, as I did with my father, who died suddenly at the age of sixty-two. Sooner or later, all of us will have to endure the trauma of the death of a significant person in our lives.

Is death the end of communication with the deceased? Folk traditions hold that our ancestors and lost loved ones speak to us through dreams. Some cultures and religions that assert an afterlife say the dead become guardian angels, even gods; still others think of the deceased as lost souls gradually working their way toward a higher level of existence; yet others claim there is nothing beyond--dead is dead and that's the end of it.

Regardless of your beliefs about whether there is an afterlife or not, one thing is certain: you will dream about the person who has recently died.

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Are these dream images of the dead simply memories of them, infused by our imagination, to help us cope with grief during bereavement? Are they part of an internal process we employ to adjust to loss and assist us in solving daily problems? Or are dream images of the dead actual encounters with the spirit of the deceased? Elisabeth Kübler-Ross thinks they are, calling dreams about the dead "true contacts on a spiritual plane."¹

There is no way yet known to prove either position: that dreams about the dead are "real" contacts; or that they are images conjured by the dreamer to meet psychological needs. Regardless of what may be the facts, we know that bereaved people dream about the lost person; that their dreams are exceptionally vivid, emotionally packed, and may dramatically alter the life and belief system of the dreamer.

Our relationship with the dead endures. In our dreams, the dead have messages for the living. The living also have messages for the dead that can be delivered in dreams. Conflicts left pending when the death occurred can sometimes find resolution in the meeting place of the dream world.

This book will help you understand the nature of these dream exchanges with images of the dead. You will learn what are the most typical dreams about the dead; which dreams are rare, and how all of them influence your life. You will find guidance for enriching the relationship that still exists between you and the person who has died. You will learn the meaning of the most common symbols occurring in dreams about death, and you will get practical techniques for benefiting from your dreams about the dead in such a way as to nourish your waking life.

First, however, it is essential to have some sense of the usual phases of grief.

The Seasons of Grief

If you have been recently bereaved, you don't need a grief expert to tell you that your sleep is likely to be disturbed for some period of time and that you may well suffer from nightmares. This is a normal response reported by most researchers in the area of grief.² Despite the fact that grief experts know disturbed sleep and dreaming is probable, only a very few of them describe the nature of these distressing dreams, offer guidance in coping with them, or demonstrate how dreams change throughout the course of mourning.³

Let's look briefly at the phases of grief.⁴ Although they are given different labels and various numbers of stages by assorted investigators, there is an overall agreement that bereavement consists of at least three basic parts:

- Numbness
- Disorganization
- Reorganization

Numbness

The first phase of grief, numbness, is characterized by shock or even outright denial of the death. Many survivors have almost no recall of the funeral or who was present following a death. Other survivors see everything vividly, but as though they were observing things from a distance. Some refuse to believe that the death has taken place. Survivors almost always feel dazed and exhausted. Everything around them seems unreal.

Don't be surprised if you seem to feel nothing at first. This numbness and "distancing" is a natural protective mechanism, to allow survivors time to absorb

the reality of what has happened before descending into the depths of their reactions to it.

Disorganization

In the second phase of grief, disorganization, there is emotional chaos. The survivor usually feels anxious, afraid, grieved, angry, depressed, and/or anguished. Other common feelings include guilt, relief, restlessness, or behavior that suggests searching for the deceased. In cases of sudden death, the response of shock may last for a long time. In violent deaths, survivors may experience hatred, horror, revulsion, or obsessive desire for revenge.

Feelings swing wildly during this time, periods of normality alternating with depths of agony or depression. Many survivors suffer physical pain or fear that they are going crazy. Yet all these reactions are part of the process.

Those people who repress their emotional responses at this stage, who seem to be handling things so well, are setting themselves up for "freezing" all their feelings for years to come. A delayed response to grief can be even more extreme when it hits. Meanwhile, the survivor may have lost years of living.

Painful as your feelings about a death may be, allowing yourself to experience them and express them is the route to healing. Some grief counselors advise "leaning into the pain." It's the quickest way through.

Reorganization

In the third phase of grief, reorganization, survivors develop new roles, skills, and relationships, or resume former ones. New possibilities are glimpsed; new behaviors tested. Eventually, survivors find out how to readjust, treasuring memories of the deceased, while becoming able to emotionally reinvest in life.

These three phases are not discrete. Survivors move back and forth between them for as long as they need, like waves flowing forward and ebbing backward. Gradually, a new life emerges.

Your Tasks in Grief

You can help yourself emerge from the swamp of grief by fulfilling four "tasks," according to one of the leading grief experts.⁵ William Worden believes that the person in mourning needs to encourage himself or herself to play a more active role in bereavement, rather than passively moving through phases of grief. He has evolved four tasks for the person who is grieving:

1. You need to accept the reality of your loss.
2. You need to work through the pain of your grief.
3. You need to adjust to an environment in which the deceased person is missing.
4. You need to emotionally "relocate" the deceased and move ahead with your life. (Here Worden appears to mean we should treasure memories of the deceased without trying to maintain the person who has died as a central figure in our lives.)

Obviously, a person requires time to accomplish these tasks, but you will see how it is here that our dreams about the dead are especially helpful.

Let's turn then to what dreams about the dead are like.

The Universal Dream About the Dead

By now, I have examined approximately one thousand dreams about the dead. (The sources of these dreams were described in the Foreword.) As I

synthesized material from these hundreds of dreams, I discovered that they have a pattern. I realized that, like near-death experiences, dreams about the dead have several elements in common that take a particular form. These nine basic elements are described here for the first time.

I call the image of the deceased person the "dream messenger." The composite dream I will describe depicts the common elements in the "journey of the dream messenger" that I found in hundreds of grief dreams. Not every dream about the dead contains all nine elements, but most dreams about the dead have several of them. In brief, they are: (1) the announcement, (2) the arrival, (3) the appearance, age, condition, and clothing of the dream messenger, (4) the attendants; (5) the message, (6) the gift, (7) the farewell embrace; (8) the departure, and (9) the aftermath. What follows is an ideal or complete model of a dream about the dead.

This universal dream about the dead will help you understand your own dreams about them. The dead live on in our dreams long after they die. We see them, yearn for them, talk with them, love them, fear them, hate them, or hold them. Sooner or later, you will have some of these dreams. Perhaps you have already. Here's how it may transpire.

1. The Announcement

First of all, you are likely to sense that something unusual is coming. Dreamers describe feeling an anticipation, an odd awareness just prior to the signal predicting the imminent arrival of the dream messenger. (All the examples given throughout this book are from actual dreams about the dead.)

The announcement that the dream messenger is here occurs in a number of ways. You may hear:

- the front doorbell ringing

- a knock at the door
- the telephone jangle
- the screen door bang
- a shuffle in the hall
- a familiar cough
- someone calling out, "Your father is here!"

Other dreamers report seeing something first. You might observe:

- a door swinging open
- a beam of yellow light emerging from the ground
- a light at the end of a tunnel
- dappled sunlight against a white wall

Your presentiment might arrive through the sense of smell, as it did for some dreamers:

- catching a whiff of his cigarette
- sniffing the scent of his aftershave

Perhaps, like other dreamers, you will notice a cosmic event:

- the full moon rising above the tree line
- the earth moving out of orbit
- a new planet rising

By these various signs and sensations, an announcement is made that the border between the living and the dead is about to be temporarily suspended. In a way, these dream images parallel what mythologist Joseph

Campbell has labeled "the call to adventure."⁶ You--the hero or heroine of your dream--are about to have an adventure.

2. The Arrival at the Meeting Place

The announcement having been made, the dream messenger arrives in the dream. You may see the deceased:

- stepping through an open door into your living room
- entering an unlit hallway
- walking in an illuminated passage in a mall
- climbing a staircase
- riding an elevator or escalator up
- getting out of a car
- strolling down the street

Or you may observe the deceased at home, performing normal activities:

- sitting at the kitchen table talking with relatives
- playing cards with friends
- having a celebration feast with friends
- reading in a window seat
- lying in bed

You are just as likely to meet the deceased in an outdoor dream setting:

- walking in a grassy, green meadow
- in a garden filled with flowers or vegetables
- on the beach
- in a river
- at a fair

- in a valley, on a footpath going home

The encounter with the dream messenger often takes place in settings that involve transportation. You may bump into the deceased:

- in an airport in the waiting area
- riding a train
- on a bus
- in a boat on a foggy lake
- in a spaceship in space
- inside a cart in a "haunted house" ride

These transportation settings are places of transition that underscore the journey that is being undertaken by both the deceased and yourself.

Often the place where the dreamer meets the dream messenger has some barrier between the living and the dead. It may be a simple garden gate; a barrier at the airport; a glass partition, or some other boundary marker.

For a moment--through a door or a gate, in a hallway or a tunnel, in a room, a garden, a meadow, a station, or in outer space--the dreamer meets the dream messenger. You will find this element of a meeting place present in almost all of your dreams about the dead.

3. The Dream Messenger

Who is this dream messenger? The deceased, of course, but often the dead do not look exactly like themselves in dreams. Their appearance depends upon your feelings--your hopes and your fears --about the dead person, and upon the message that follows. Don't be surprised if the deceased has a different appearance.

Appearance: Ill or Transfigured

Do the dead look like themselves, or as you last saw them? Sometimes. But more often, you are likely to find the deceased looking much worse than they did, or completely changed for the better.

You can expect the dead in your dreams, especially if they died after a long or debilitating illness, to sometimes look much worse than they did while dying. Some dreamers reported seeing:

- my grandmother suffering terribly from cancer, with tumors popping up like mushrooms all over her body,
- my mother lying in a bed, very weak, her face to the wall,
- my dead father's and dead uncle's faces melting and twisting strangely, like ghouls,
- my dead friend looking like a skeleton, grotesque,
- my husband very far off and thin like a soda cracker.

Distasteful as these images are, they do help the dreamer accept that the death occurred. If you experience such images of the dead, don't be alarmed. It's quite common. They express your feelings of distress about the death. Later on, you are likely to see the person who has died in a much improved condition.

For example, several dreamers reported the dream messenger appearing radiantly transformed:

- my lover looks so beautiful, his eyes sparkling, smiling, all the pain and sadness gone,
- my brother has the most healthy, beautiful tan, looking really good,
- my grandmother wears a light lavender gown, her hair is up, white and glowing, she's just beautiful,
- my grandfather's eyes are radiant with peace and love,

- my mother is sitting in the grave in her favorite rocking chair, knitting, rocking, and humming,
- my dad is healthy and young, vibrant like I've never seen him before, except in old sepia photos, smiling, his face alight,
- my mom is revitalized and youthful--she talks with joy and wonder and peace.

These positive dream images of the dead make the dreamer very happy. They seem to convey a spirit at peace, and give hope to the dreamer for a joyful afterlife.

You will be most likely to dream of meeting the dream messenger looking radiantly transformed when you are beginning to recover from loss. Eventually these glowing images emerge.

Age: Younger or Older

When the dream messenger appears in resplendent guise in your dreams, he or she is frequently depicted as younger and healthier than when death occurred. Those people who died in their older years shift their dream shapes into the prime of life. We have seen a few examples of this and will come across several more.

If the person who has died is immature, dreamers often meet the messenger looking older. For instance, some dreamers reported:

- my stillborn daughter looks two years old, wearing a pretty green dress with ruffled petticoat, her chubby legs showing,
- my little boy [miscarried at six months] is running happily, playing baseball in a golden field with his father.

Dreamers found these poignant images comforting. Believing that the lost child was continuing to exist on some plane gave great solace. You, too, may find it so.

Infirmities: Present or Vanished

Another element numerous dreamers find consoling is that the dead often appear without their infirmities. One dreamer, for instance, said:

- my dead father's voice on the telephone sounds clear and normal (he had had his larynx removed and spoke in guttural tones); he says, "I'm whole again, they gave me back my voice."

Many dreamers mentioned seeing the dead who were wheelchair-bound or walked with a cane now able to move about normally. The blind were able to see; the lame to walk. Whatever limitations had been present due to illness or old age had evaporated. This aspect, too, brought inspiration. Watch for it in your dreams.

Clothing: Shabby or Shining

You are almost certain to notice changes in the dream messenger's face, hair, or clothing. This aspect arose consistently. You might see, as several dreamers did:

- my mom wearing a shimmering white gown, her long black hair flowing around her face and down her shoulders,
- my dead friend wearing a graceful, white satin nightgown,
- my father in a white robe surrounded by brilliant white light expanding to purple mist,
- my murdered friend wearing a beautiful wreath of flowers, looking radiant.

"Radiant" is the adjective most frequently used by dreamers to describe the dead in dreams about them during the latter phases of mourning. Luminosity often emanates from sparkling eyes, shining hair, light-colored clothing, gleaming jewelry, and brilliant lights. This illumination seems to represent a transfigured condition in the deceased, and when present, invariably indicates positive emotions about the person as they appear in the dream, even if there were negative feelings about him or her prior to death. You can anticipate glorious light in your later dreams about the dead.

4. The Attendants of the Dream Messenger

Most of your dreams about the dead will contain the deceased and yourself. However, some dreamers see the dead accompanied by deceased family members or other deceased people known to the dreamer.

Only a very few dreamers reported images of strangers in their dreams who seemed to represent death personified:

- a tall man in a black three-piece suit follows my friend,
- a shadowy figure goes down the dark hall,
- a hideous old woman, small, skinny, dressed in a tattered black dress enters the sickroom,
- I catch a glimpse of Death, a gaunt man in a carriage, waiting.

What is one to make of these "attendants"? Are they part of the "death party," as one might be part of a wedding party? Joseph Campbell might say they are some kind of border guardians. In any case, if they appear in your dreams about the dead, they need give you no cause for alarm. They are pictures of your feelings about death and the threat it represents.

When you meet your dream messenger, with or without attendants, the threshold between the living and the dead has been crossed.

Look carefully at the dead, their facial expressions, their ages, conditions, and clothing--each aspect conveys clues to the messages they bring to you.

5. The Dream Message Delivered

Here we come to the heart of dreams about the dead. What messages do they bring the living, and in what form are they brought? The bulk of the remainder of this book will set forth these messages in detail. For now, we'll take a quick overview.

Form of the Dream Message

First of all, you need to be aware that dream messages may be delivered in a variety of forms. You might get yours:

- by telephone
- by letter
- on a bulletin board
- on an answering machine
- by fax
- on a computer screen
- in person

The majority of dream messengers deliver their message in person--or we might better say "in spirit," if that is our persuasion. If you prefer a psychological explanation, you might say that the dreamer delivers a message to himself or herself in the image of the deceased person.

Some of these messages are spoken in the dream; others are conveyed "mentally." Without words, the dreamer understands what the dream messenger

intends to communicate. Still other messages are understood by the actions within the dream, the mood expressed in it, and the "aftertaste" that lingers when you awake. Stay open to all these routes of communication.

Even if you do dream directly about the person who died, you may also dream of getting a telephone call from that person. When dream messages are not delivered by the image of the deceased, the next most common method is the receipt of a telephone call from the dead.

Dreams of telephone calls are more common in bereavement dreams than in general dreams (three percent).⁷ In my dreams in which my dead father appeared, twelve percent of them contained telephone calls. Dream researcher Deirdre Barrett reported that fifty-three percent of the category she called "State-of-death" dreams involved telephone calls from the deceased, while telephone calls in her other categories appeared in twenty-four percent of the dreams about the dead. Accounts of apparitions of the dead often involve telephone calls, too.⁸

Modern equipment--answering and facsimile machines, computers--takes its place in dream messages from the dead, as it did for the man who dreamed his deceased father left a garbled message on his answering machine. He commented, "I never did understand that man."

Receiving a telephone call from the deceased; making a call; getting a letter, or finding a message on a bulletin board or on an answering machine--these appear to be metaphors for communication with the spirit of the dead person. These dream motifs may help you accept the reality of the death, may give you confidence that communication with the dead person is intact, and may reassure you that your person is at peace.

Negative Dream Messages

Turning to the contents of the message, I'll summarize here a few of the most frequent. You will find these categories and others expanded throughout the book. All of them are ones I have observed and designated with original labels.

"I'm Suffering"

Don't be startled if you experience some extremely unpleasant dreams about the dead at first. It is very common to see the deceased once again suffering the symptoms that caused death, either as they were in actuality, somewhat exaggerated, or grossly distorted.

Especially if you were present at the death, or if the circumstances were sudden or violent, you are likely to "replay" the death scene. This type of nightmare is characteristic of the post-traumatic nightmares that follow violence or personal injury.⁹ Among the dreams I had about my deceased father who died suddenly, fifteen percent involved his suffering or dying again.

At times, the replay of the event is far worse than the original, as we saw in the dreams where the dream messenger was severely disfigured.

This frequent dream message may take other forms, including the dead person appearing and complaining of hunger, searching for his or her grave, or the dead person struggling to get into heaven. In these, the deceased becomes like the "hungry ghosts" in some cultures who are said to wander about in need of food or resting places.

If the dream messenger should deliver to you the message "I'm Suffering," you are being helped in the first task of grief, accepting the reality of the death, and in the second task, expressing the painful emotions of grief. These objectives must be accomplished in what Freud called the "work of mourning."¹⁰

When grief is not resolved, "I'm Suffering" nightmares may continue for a long time. As with other post-traumatic nightmares, replaying the event helps desensitize the survivor to it, eventually allowing him or her to bear the unbearable.

"I'm Not Really Dead"

Another very common dream message you may receive is "I'm Not Really Dead," in which you see the person who has died, but the death is explained away as a mistake. You may not realize during the dream that the person is actually dead, or you may be startled, even shocked, to see them. This dream motif is characteristic of the early stages of loss.¹¹

You may find yourself dumbfounded to see the person again, or just plain puzzled, as some dreamers were:

- Suddenly my husband walks into the kitchen looking just as he always did. I am astonished. I run to him, hug him, and am ecstatic that he is alive.
- I am very surprised to see my mother alive. I ask, "But didn't we hold a funeral for you?" She replies, "Yes, but I don't want anyone to know, so don't tell."
- I am astounded to see my dead uncle again, singing, laughing and making jokes; I say, "My God, what are you doing here? You're dead!" He smiles and replies, "Honey, when you die, you lose your body, not your sense of humor."

The amount of humor in these dreams surprised me. It seemed to arise especially when it was typical of the deceased.

You may find yourself angered by the appearance of the deceased in a dream, as some dreamers were:

- I see my wife playing cards with her cronies. I am furious with her and want to berate her for "all the trouble you put me through when you were actually out having a good time."
- I see my husband walking down the street in another part of town, moving into an apartment. He's dyed his hair to disguise his appearance. He only pretended to die. I am very angry.

The dreamer seems to be saying, in such dreams of aggravation, that it would be better to have the death be a trick than to have it be a reality. One of the unexpected but usual reactions during mourning is an anger at the deceased for "deserting me." This feeling finds expression in dreams of being deceived into thinking the person was dead when they were not. In waking up, of course, one has to face the loss all over again.

If your person died violently, you may find his or her appearance in early dreams about the person agonizing. A young widow, whose husband had recently died after having his chest crushed in an industrial accident, told me her nightmare about seeing him wearing a navy coat and moving stiffly toward her, "almost not alive." In another disturbing dream she saw him "very far off, and thin, like a soda cracker," and in yet another she saw his face "in a mirror, scribbled on and erased." These nightmares about her husband were so unsettling that she ceased dreaming about him directly and began to substitute the image of a fish caught on a hook, and other negative scenarios that were more tolerable.

Such dreams evoking terror in the survivor echo the fear of ghosts common in past times. They also reflect the sense of distortion and irreality that follow traumatic deaths.

In general, if you receive a dream message that "I'm Not Really Dead," you are probably wishing that were the case. With brutal deaths, you may fear that the dead person's spirit is still suffering. Excruciating as these dreams may be, they do help you accept the reality of the person's loss. Be assured that these dreams are common ones. Although they temporarily enhance your grief, they are nonetheless part of the recovery process.

Other negative dream messages include: "You Fool!"; "You'll Be Sorry!"; "Join Me!"; "Your Turn is Coming"; and "Avenge My Murder." We'll explore their meanings throughout this book.

Positive Dream Messages

Turning to some of the satisfying and uplifting dreams you may have about the dead, there are two that are most frequent.

"I'm O.K."

By far, the most prevalent positive dream message you are likely to receive is "I'm O.K." In these dreams, you will meet the dead looking or acting as they did when young or healthy. This message is where the clothing of the dead is often flowing or shimmering, their hair glowing, their eyes sparkly, and faces bright. If the individual who died was a fetus or infant, the dream image will be a few years older, looking outstandingly well.

This message has a number of variations in precise form, such as "Everything's all right," "I'm fine," "Don't worry about me," and so forth. You may not get the message delivered in so many words. Rather, you might sense from the jubilant content of the dream action, or the emotions evoked in you by the dream messenger, that "so-and-so came to let me know they were all right."

"Goodbye"

Another typical dream message you might get is "Goodbye." In this instance, you will see the dead person specifically take leave of you, saying in words, or by mental communication, "goodbye," "farewell." or "I have to leave now."

Again, exact words may not be specified, but you will "know" during the dream or after you awaken that "so-and-so came to say goodbye to me."

These dreams often include physical contact, and the exchange of loving comments, as well as an affectionate goodbye.

The dream message "Goodbye" is a classic. It has been reported over and over again in literature, usually when a death has taken place at a distance from the dreamer, or is sudden or vicious.

You can also expect a "Goodbye" dream message to be delivered when you have been deprived of a chance to say goodbye in person. Sometimes people claim this message arrives in a waking state, with the deceased appearing at the foot, head, or side of the survivor's bed. This dream message is often thought to involve extrasensory perception, as the dream may occur simultaneously with the death. In parapsychological writings, it is the most commonly reported telepathic experience and is referred to as a "crisis apparation." Other positive dream messages include: "Here's a Gift"; "Congratulations"; "Stop!"; "Go Ahead!"; "Please Forgive Me;" "I Forgive You;" "I'm Evolving;" "I'm Being Reborn;" and "I Give You Life." We explore several examples of these, as well as "Goodbye" and "I'm O.K." in the pages to come.

Neutral Dream Messages

"Hi! How Are You?"

As you enter the latter stages of bereavement, and perhaps sporadically throughout the remainder of your life, you may find yourself receiving a friendly visit from the dream messenger. At this point, your dreams about the dead are

no longer likely to be filled with negative images or even illuminated with brilliant ones. The meetings with the dead seem less like a direct encounter and more like a casual visit, with the dream action centered elsewhere.

One dreamer, for instance, made an introduction at a party, saying, "This is my brother who died six months ago (it was actually three years). He comes for a visit every once in a while." The dreamer felt her brother was just trying to tell her he was around, checking on how she was doing.

You can expect that your later dreams about the deceased will show him or her performing routine actions, such as shopping, fishing, riding in a car, cooking, or other activities typical of the person. Or the dead may simply be present as part of the background. There is not a strong emotional charge to these dreams, but you may feel pleased to have seen the person.

This category of dreams about the dead is typically found when you have fulfilled the tasks of grieving and you return to your more usual dream style.

6. The Gift of the Dream Messenger

"Here's a Gift"

You may receive a concrete gift from the dream messenger in one of your dreams about the dead. Here's a sample of assorted "dream gifts" received from the hands of the deceased person:

- a white embossed covered plate, a Chinese urn and dragon;
- a small bowl with a Mexican design (the next day the dreamer received an unexpected actual gift of a large amount of money from the deceased),
- a white Buddha brooch of beautiful, translucent jade,
- a cross on a necklace that belonged to the friend,

- a corsage of greenery and delicate purple flowers,
- a row of pink rosebushes.

Most of these gifts represented love to the dreamer; one specifically symbolized artistic talent handed on from the deceased; another stood for forgiveness for the murder of the deceased. Several other extremely meaningful gifts to the dreamer were received from the dead as you will see in Chapter 5. Gifts of love in words or images are especially comforting to the grieving dreamer.

If you should dream of getting a present from a dead person, and it is something desirable to you, honor it. If its meaning is not clear at the moment, study the image. Find something in your waking life that is a reasonable facsimile and ponder it until its meaning for you emerges. These gifts from the dead can be precious beyond all riches.

You may receive a unique dream message, especially designed for you.

7. The Farewell Embrace

Do the dreamer and the dead touch? This seems to depend upon your beliefs about "physical" contact with the deceased. You, like many dreamers, may find the embrace of the dream messenger is the most important part of the meeting. Those who engaged in "one last hug" remembered it with joy for years afterward.

Or perhaps, like some dreamers, you may feel touching is an essential taboo because of the deceased's fragile state:

- He asked me not to touch him, since he was in a delicate condition and could fall apart easily; he was in a period of transition.

- She says not to touch her, that it's too soon, it would feel like a burn.
- The other person with him said, "You can't hug him because it will bring him back to this side," so we just stood there and smiled at each other.

Those dreamers that did embrace the dream messenger with hugs and kisses seemed to be especially consoled by the dream meeting, so unless you have real reservations about it, you may wish to open your arms and savor contact with the departed person before saying goodbye.

8. The Departure of the Dream Messenger

After you have received your dream message, accepted the gift if one was bestowed, embraced the messenger or not, you will probably know the visit is over. The time for departure may be explicitly stated, as with:

- I have to go now!
- I can't stay long; I've only come to tell you that I'm O.K.

You may simply understand that the dead person's time is short. Or the dream action makes the end of the meeting apparent:

- He turned pale as a corpse and began to fade,
- The spaceship soared into space.

At times, the dream messenger orders the dreamer to return:

- You have to go back right now!
- You must get off the airplane at this stop!

The implication of being told to return seems to be that if the dreamer lingers longer, he or she will die too, or some other danger will ensue.

Whether the dream messenger departs or the dreamer awakens, the border between life and death is erected again. Folk beliefs, such as the idea that the ghost must return to the grave by midnight, underlie the concept that the encounter between the dreamer and the deceased occurs under specific conditions, for a limited time, and has a precise ending.

9. The Aftermath of the Visit

Your feelings after the departure of the dream messenger may vary widely, depending upon the nature of the message. Vast emotions may be unleashed. Numerous dreamers report awakening in tears. Here's a sampling:

- I felt so wonderful and happy; the pain in my heart had been kissed away, my suffering gone; I know I'll see him again; he came to say goodbye and it healed me...I've been blessed.
- The dream left me shaken for days afterward; his embrace communicated great love, acceptance, understanding and appreciation; he was happy with my values and just loved me.
- I awoke in wonder; he tried to tell me that his death was O.K.; I was able to get on with my life.
- I no longer felt resentment; I was able to see him as a human being, not a tyrant.
- The dream helped me realize that we will all die; the time is not for us to know; that even though she was murdered, she was all right and there was an opportunity for spiritual growth in this.

- I felt he knew I loved him, that he loved me still, and we'd said goodbye, and he was peaceful.

- The dream of her served as an inspiration and a guide; by the questions she asked, she pointed me in the right direction.

You may not only find yourself solaced by your dream about the dead, but also feel deeply loved. You may find inspiration and new confidence in the reality of an afterlife. Perhaps you, like so many before you, will find your life transformed by a visit from the dream messenger. Then the journey of the dream messenger is finished.

Awaiting Your Visit from the Dream Messenger

What can you do to encourage a dream meeting with your missing person? Some primitive tribes still practice using the skull of an ancestor as a pillow, intending to hear their counsel in dreams. In ancient times, people literally slept upon the gravestone of the person who died, in hopes of dreaming about them. Edgar Allan Poe, at the end of one of his memorable works, wrote,

For the moon never beams without bringing me dreams

Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;

And the stars never rise but I feel the bright eyes

Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;

And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side

Of my darling, my darling, my life and my bride,

In the sepulcher there by the sea,

In her tomb by the sounding sea.¹²

Poe actually spent many nights sleeping upon the grave of his child-bride whom he called Annabel Lee in his poetry.¹³ Other, less morbid practices include sleeping with a photograph of the dead person under the dreamer's pillow.

Deliberately evoking meetings--in dream or otherwise--with the dead is regarded by some groups as dabbling with the occult and bordering on necromancy.

Perhaps the best policy is to remain open to the dreams about the dead that come to you. Welcome even the painful ones. Remember that they are all ultimately healing. Engaging in certain rituals on special anniversaries is part of the mourning practice in almost every religion. You may find some of the ample suggestions in the last chapter of this book useful for planning a rite of remembrance that honors the person who died. Many dreams about the dead arise spontaneously on an anniversary or another special date, so you can anticipate this happening for you.

When you do receive a positive message from the dead, it can become the basis for healing visualizations. Some dream messages from the dead also become the foundation of creative works that benefit society at large, as well as the dreamer.

Having received a dream message, you will want to ask yourself, "What is my response?" It may be:

- I love you too,
- Help me!
- Don't worry, I'll take care of so and so,
- Be at peace,
- I'll never forget you.

Visualizing the dream again, including your response, may pacify and pleasure you. In answering the dream messenger, we complete the cycle. You'll find lots of direction for working with your dream messages in the last chapter.

The purpose of these activities and visualizations is to integrate the dream message into your waking life. By doing so, you preserve something from the life that was lost to give something to the lives to come. The wheel turns.

As we dreamers accompany our lost loved ones on the rite of passage through life's great mystery, dreams are our guiding star.

¹Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, 1975, *Death: The Final Stage of Growth*, New York, Simon & Schuster.

²See, for instance, Judy Tatelbaum, 1980, *The Courage to Grieve*, New York, Harper & Row; J. William Worden, 1991, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, New York, Springer.

³Some exceptions are: Verena Kast, 1982, *A Time to Mourn*, Stuttgart, Daimon Verlag; Alexandra Kennedy, 1991, *Losing a Parent*, San Francisco, Harper; Marie-Louise von Franz, 1986, *On Dreams and Death*, Boston: Shambhala.

⁴Descriptions of the phases of grief can be found in books by several authors, including: John W. James & Frank Cherry, 1988, *The Grief Recovery Handbook*, New York, Harper & Row; Kübler-Ross, 1975; Carol Staudacher, 1987, *Beyond Grief*, Oakland, CA, New Harbinger; Worden, 1991.

⁵Worden, 1991.

⁶Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

⁷Deirdre Barrett, 1992, Through a Glass Darkly: Images of the Dead in Dreams. In Robert Kastenbaum, ed., *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying*, 24, pp. 97-108.

⁸D. Scott Rogo & R. Bayless, 1979, *Phone Calls from the Dead*, New York: Berkeley Books.

⁹Patricia Garfield, 1991, *The Healing Power of Dreams*, New York, Simon & Schuster.

¹⁰Sigmund Freud, 1917, Mourning and Melancholia. In Joan Riviere, ed., 1959 *Sigmund Freud: Collected Papers*, vol. 4, New York: Basic Books.

¹¹Barrett, 1992.

¹²Edgar Allan Poe, *Annabel Lee*. In Hazel Felleman, ed., 1936 *The Best Loved Poems of the American People*, New York: Garden City Publishing Co.

¹³Kenneth Silverman, 1991, *Edgar A. Poe*, New York: HarperPerennial. Poe's young wife and cousin, Virginia Clemm, was only 13 to his 25 when they wed in 1836. She became seriously ill in 1841. After her death in 1847, Poe was devastated and his inclination toward morbidity grew worse.