

Extraordinary Dreams and How To Work With Them

Stanley Krippner, Fariba Bogzaran and
André Percia de Carvalho

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Spiritual and Visitation Dreams

In many cultures, dreams have been associated with the spirit world. To the ancient Hebrews, dreams provided an opportunity to receive God's commandments. In the book of Genesis for example, after Jacob was blessed by his father, "he dreamed and, behold, a ladder was set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and, behold, the angels of God ascended and descended on it."¹ Centuries later, the Hebrews began to look upon dreams as demonic portents, but the story of Jacob's ladder still retained its potency as a guarantee of God's attention to His "chosen people."²

The Egyptians also felt that deities could visit them in dreams. An inscription dating from the thirteenth century B.C.E. in the temple at Karnak relates a dream reported by a Pharaoh who feared an invasion and wanted to prepare a vigorous defense. In the Pharaoh's dream, the god Ptah appeared, extending his sword and commanding, "Take this sword and rid yourself of fear!" The Pharaoh interpreted this dream as guaranteeing divine support; he related it to his troops and they were victorious in their battle.³

Cyrus the Great, founder of the Persian Empire, reportedly had a visitation dream near the end of his life. As he slept in his palace, a majestic figure appeared to him in a dream, saying: "Make ready, Cyrus, for you shall soon depart to the gods." Upon awakening, Cyrus knew that his death was at hand. He made a thanksgiving offering to the gods, reviewed his life, arranged for his succession, gave advice to his heirs, and speculated on the immortality of the soul. He proclaimed, "There is nothing in the world more akin to death than is sleep, and the human soul at just such times is revealed in its most divine

aspects, and at such times it also looks forward into the future, for then—it seems—it is almost free from its attachment to the flesh.⁴

Vibia Perpetua was a young woman from the Roman provinces who was arrested in the year 203, and charged with being a Christian. Before her execution, she wrote a remarkable autobiographical journal, which has survived and which most scholars accept as authentic. This journal contains four dreams, all of them spiritual in nature. A portion of one dream reads:

I saw a bronze ladder of astonishing height extending all the way to the heavens, and it was so narrow that only a single person would be able to ascend it. To the sides of the ladder all kinds of iron weapons were fastened. There were swords, lances, hooks, single-edged swords, and javelins, so that if anyone ascended upwards carelessly or without paying attention, he would be lacerated and his flesh would adhere to the iron weapons. Under the ladder itself lay a dragon of great size, which waited in ambush for those who ascended, and frightened them so they would not ascend. . . . And suddenly, as though afraid of me, the dragon stuck its head out slowly from under the ladder itself. And . . . I trod on its head and ascended.

Some psychoanalysts have found sexual metaphors and symbols in Perpetua's climbing of the ladder, the shape of the various weapons, and the presence of the dragon. But to her, the dream foretold the defeat of Satan and the ascent to heaven of Perpetua and other Christian martyrs.⁵

Baha'u'llah, the prophet of the Baha'i faith, had his most important revelation in a dream. Confined in chains in the prison of Syah Chal in Persia because of his religious faith, he had a spiritual call in a dream in which he heard a heavenly voice:

Grieve Thou not for that which hath befallen Thee, neither be Thou afraid, for Thou art in safety. Ere long will God raise up the treasures of the earth—men who will aid Thee through Thyself and through Thy name, wherewith God hath revived the hearts of such as have recognized Him.⁶

The prophet was not executed but was exiled from his home country. However, he brought his revelation to people ten years after this dream.

In visitation dreams, a deceased person or an entity from a spiritual realm (or even an "alien" from a UFO) reportedly provides counsel or direction that the dreamer finds of comfort or value. Sometimes the dreamer visits a domain that transcends his or her ordinary reality, learning about matters that involve the most profound aspects of the human psyche. Visitation dreams seem to

represent a transpersonal reality only dimly perceived by human beings. They create a way in which the dreamer can be either visited by an inhabitant of this realm, or called to make a journey to this realm, encountering a deceased loved one, an angel, a spirit, or a deity. These dreams are mythic in nature; like myths, they focus on existential human concerns and have consequences for the dreamer's behavior. The message from the otherworldly visitor can change the dreamer's life.

Dreams of the Spirit

Carl Jung was a pioneering psychoanalyst who delved deeply into dreams in different times and places. His theoretical formulations came from an impressive galaxy of sources—mythology, comparative religion, alchemy, esoteric texts, his own dreams, and the dreams of clients who came from around the world. Jung used the term "archetypes" to describe what he felt were universal mythic symbols and metaphors. Among them were common dream characters such as wise old men and women, magical children, heroes, charlatans, and such dream activities as journeys, initiations, and transformations. For Jung, the universality of archetypes was due to the existence of innate neuro-psychological mechanisms that have the capacity to initiate, control, and mediate similar behavior among all humans, irrespective of ethnicity, culture, and creed.⁷

However, the common occurrence of these powerful dream images can be demystified. The psychiatrist Anthony Stevens points out that all cultures, whatever their geographical location or historical era, display a large number of similar social traits due to the fact that human beings share a common genetic code. Human cultures the world over have

laws about the ownership, inheritance and disposal of property, procedures for settling disputes, rules governing courtship, marriage, adultery, and the adornment of women, taboos relating to food and incest, ceremonies of initiation for young men, associations of men that exclude women, gambling, athletic sports, co-operative labor, trade, the manufacture of tools and weapons, rules of etiquette prescribing forms of greeting, modes of address, use of personal names, visiting, feasting, hospitality, gift-giving, and the performance of funeral rites, status differentiation on the basis of a hierarchical social structure, superstition, belief in the supernatural, religious rituals, soul concepts, myths and legends, dancing, homicide, suicide, homosexuality, mental illness, faith healing, dream interpretation, medicine, surgery, obstetrics, and meteorology.⁸

Rather than posit an unknown universal mental structure, we need merely acknowledge that certain people and activities achieve salience in the dreams of dreamers worldwide because all dreamers share a common humanity and a common physical body.

Even so, the ways in which these archetypes take specific form varies from culture to culture because of historical and social differences. Most early societies venerated an Earth Mother who gave birth to all plants and creatures, but in ancient Egypt all the world's vegetation sprouted from Geb, the Earth God, as he lay prone on his stomach. In Scandinavia, Njord, another male god, personified the earth, while the Incas of Peru worshipped *Pilcomayo*, Lord of the Earth. The marital archetype appears to be universal, but it takes different forms around the world. In the non-industrialized countries, 68 percent of people practice monogamy, 31 percent polygamy (multiple wives), and 1 percent polyandry (multiple husbands). And half of the "monogamous" societies practice occasional polygamy (plurality of wives and/or mistresses).⁹ Some dreamworkers do quite well without recourse to the term "archetype," but those who use it need to consider the wide variation in human behavior. Many life themes are the same, but the way that those themes shine in the galaxy of experience resembles a variegated rainbow rather than a narrow spotlight.

Canadian psychologist Alan Moffitt took the position that "dreams are the biological basis of spirituality and religion because they are the only place where you can meet the dead." He saw dreams as a way in which the "nervous system comes to know itself"; the brain does not have internal receptors, so it must rely on the dreaming process. The creative ability of the dream to represent the deceased, as well as other events not experienced in waking life, "is the biological basis for spirituality." From that recognition, a culture can decide that the deceased still exist in an afterlife. Or, a culture can take a different path, concluding that all experience is illusion. Moffitt's work with Tibetan Buddhists has demonstrated this latter set of concepts, which include the notion that waking life is illusory as well in that it is a set of experiences that each society constructs somewhat differently.¹⁰

Nevertheless, Jungian psychotherapists have made significant contributions to the study of visitation dreams. Marie-Louise von Franz wrote extensively about dreams of death, using a spiritual perspective. She found that death takes many forms in dreams, among them a gnarled tree about to collapse, a passage through fire or water, and encounters with death's messenger (for example, a burglar, bride, angel, or deceased relative). For von Franz, dreams give frequent hints that death is not the end of existence; her client who

dreamed of the gnarled tree reported that its roots slowly detached themselves from the earth, and the tree, once uprooted, did not fall but floated freely.

Von Franz, like her mentor, Carl Jung, took the position that the task of aging is to create a living myth. This can be done through a fusion of personal and cultural symbols, many of which appear in one's dreams. She believed that only in mythic terms can one make sense of death, an assertion supported by the Egyptian and Tibetan books of the dead, early Christian teachings on the resurrection of the body, Western and Taoist alchemy, Tantric yoga, and other spiritual traditions. For von Franz, the final goal of spiritual growth is not to transcend the material world, but to transform the elements of ordinary life into a "philosopher's stone," "diamond vehicle," or other symbolic testament that brings closure to one's personal mythology.¹¹

Visitation dreams sometimes assist in the process of mourning the death of a loved one. Margaret Gerne has observed an increase in the appearance of the deceased person in the dreams of the mourner immediately after the death event. After a period of time, appearances by the deceased wane and the appearance of living friends and family members increase. To Gerne, this shift indicates a successful mourning process. The dreamer can be aware of the emotional content of his or her dreams at this time, although there appears to be no predictable pattern. In general, death themes in the dreams increase after the death event, and decrease some time later if the mourning process proceeds in an effective manner. Other signs that the mourning is reaching closure are the appearance of dreams about work and new activities.¹²

Research with Spiritual Dreams

Bogzaran selected a group of lucid dreamers in an attempt to determine the relationship between their waking concept of "the Divine" and their experience of the Divine in lucid dreams. The study consisted of incubating lucid dreams with the intention of exploring the spiritual dimensions. Of the seventy-eight dreamers who participated in the study, thirty-five were able to have a lucid dream and carry out their intention. Two categories emerged based on people's lucid dream experiences: individuals who experienced the Divine as "personal" and those for whom the experience was "impersonal." Twelve individuals indicated that their concept of the Divine was that of a personal God while twenty-three individuals indicated that their concept of the Divine was "all-compassing Energy" or other impersonal forces. When the dreams were examined, it was discovered that 83 percent of the dreamers who believed in

the Divine as a person encountered a personal God, while 87 percent of the dreamers who believed in an impersonal form of Divinity experienced it in forms other than that of a person. In other words, people's dream images usually matched the concepts they had of the Divine in waking life.

One dreamer who had a concept of a personal God reported the following lucid dream:

I was floating and saw the back of a throne. A chair arm, solid and massive, is cut into the side of a marble block. I crept around the side and saw a person's arm on the marble chair arm. The hand was old, but firm and strong, like a carpenter's. The sleeve was white and full. The fingers were curved downward over the edge of the arm—relaxed, but full of life. I couldn't see higher than the elbow from my position slightly behind and below the throne. I knew it was God without any doubt.¹³

A dreamer who had an impersonal concept of the Divine had a very different lucid dream: "Before me appears a moving picture with numerous interwoven cycles—like the workings of a clock. It is also like patterns of pulsating light and shadow moving in cycles. No complete cycle can be seen."

Bogzaran also studied the way in which the dreamers incubated their lucid dreams. Thirteen dreamers formulated their pre-sleep suggestions in ways that actively sought the Divine, while nine dreamers requested an experience of the Divine. The remainder of the dreamers used other incubation techniques that could not be classified as active or passive. When the dreams were examined, it was discovered that 92 percent of the dreamers who decided to "seek" the Divine were actively looking in their dreams for an encounter. Eighty-eight percent of the dreamers who decided to "experience" the Divine had such an experience in their dream. Once again, the dreamers' pre-sleep preparation, expectations and intention had a strong influence upon the reported dream.¹⁴

Visitation and other spiritual dreams have played an instrumental part in motivating some people to change their religion, adopt a new faith, or lead them to a different spiritual world view. Theologian Kelly Bulkeley has collected case studies in which dreamers changed their religious affiliation because of the spiritual content of their dreams.¹⁵

Roya's Dream

The following dream is a clear example of a visitation dream in which the dreamer encounters a powerful divine being. Roya is an acupuncturist. Her mother-in-law passed away after a long and painful illness. The last eight

hours before she passed away was the most difficult period for her and for everyone around her. The second night after her passing, Roya had the following visitation dream:

I am standing outdoors. I look up and see a very large bird coming toward me. As the bird comes close to me, I see the face of my mother-in-law in the bird. She is smiling and looks very happy. I ask my winged-in-law, "But you were suffering so much and you were in so much pain. What happened?" My mother-in-law smiles and replies, "But do you remember the pain of your birth?" I tell her, "No" then the winged creature begins moving its wings with a great smile and disappears into the horizon.

Roya shared the dream in the family gathering the day after the dream occurred. Everyone in the family was in mourning, remembering in particular the last moments and suffering of the mother-in-law's death. After she shared this visitation dream everyone began talking about what to make of this visitation. One member of the family synthesized the meaning of this visitation dream to be a clear sign that the mother-in-law was no longer attached to the physical realm and that her last eight hours of passing was a "labor of death." She was no longer concerned with the physical world and was born into a new reality.

After this synthesis of the dream was expressed, there was a great sigh of relief in the room. This incredible dream allowed the family to let go of their attachments to the last moments of the suffering body of the deceased and to begin the natural mourning process. This dream was seen as a gift to the family to help them cope with the process of dying; also the dream confirmed the family's belief about the existence of the spirit world.

Sylvia Wright interviewed sixty-one adults who felt that they had experienced contact with the dead. All sixty-one individuals had responded to flyers posted in Eugene, Oregon. There were forty-six women and fifteen men in the group. The most common venue for these contacts was "vivid dreams" (thirty-five people), followed by sense of presence, symbolic events, and purported telepathic communication (thirty-four people each).¹⁶

Applications of Visitation Dreams

Psychologist Gayle Delaney perceives many dreams as having spiritual messages. Time after time, her clients bring her dream reports infused with metaphors of love and relationships, which she sees as opportunities to practice one's spirituality on a daily basis. One day, a member of her dream group

brought a dream report that turned out to be an insightful analysis of the problems she was having with her fiancé. The dreamer accepted the analysis, then sadly commented, "I had hoped this dream would be about my spiritual path, but it was only about my boyfriend." Delaney gently reminded her that it is through relationships that our spiritual path has its greatest opportunity to express itself.

Delaney explains how working with dreams also allows dreamers an opportunity to express their spiritual values and priorities. Dreams seem vitally interested in helping the dreamer be the best scientist, artist, construction worker, homemaker, or teacher that he or she is able to be. Dreams in which dreamers visit their places of work and receive some spiritual insight often direct the dreamer toward action, responsibility, productivity, and conscientiousness on the job.¹⁷

Several members of the clergy have used visitation dreams in their spiritual counseling sessions. L. T. Howe, a Methodist minister, has pointed out how dreams can disclose spiritual growth as well as revelation. From a religious viewpoint, according to Howe, the most important dreams may be those by which the dreamer gains new insight into himself or herself or about the divine source of the dreamer's present and future existence. Many of these dreams involve visitations from spiritual beings or visits to spiritual places.¹⁸

In a study involving graduate students in pastoral counseling, Fredrica Halligan and John Shea worked with twelve students who shared their dreams in the group. Archetypal images of life, death, and "internal marriage" became a recurring theme. The dreamwork clearly pointed toward the "individuation process" as explained by Carl Jung, indicating that dreams can be an instrument for psychospiritual development.¹⁹ Halligan and Shea, and many other writers as well, have observed that the dreamer's "internal marriage" can represent a unification of diverse elements of what Jung called the "Self." Moreover, this internal dream journey can actually serve as a sacred venture toward a communion with God. A Jewish perspective has been provided by Samuel Shalev, who argues that dreams can portray an individual's transformation from fearing death to assuming responsibility for personal growth, moving toward authentic self-actualization and integrity.²⁰

Jeremy Taylor, a Unitarian-Universalist minister and dream practitioner, adds that sincere seekers of spiritual experience can use their dreams to remove the blocks to their spiritual growth. Visitation dreams, and other types of dreams as well, can be invaluable in pointing out how dreamers deceive themselves, how they repress yearnings and desires that do not conform to their idealized self-image, and how they behave in ways that are false, artificial, and not

reflective of their authentic self. According to Taylor, it is only by finding the authentic person, the genuine individual who lives beneath the veneer of artifice, that one has any chance of sensing the energy and presence of the Divine. The love bestowed by God, the spirits, the Earth Mother, and the Cosmic Energy, is directed toward an authentic person, not toward a facade of surface pretense and false identity.²¹

In Krippner's cross-cultural collection of dream reports, 19 were scored as "visitations," that is, dreams in which the dreamer was greeted by ancestors, spirits, or deities, and given messages or counsel by them.²² When the same collection was examined for the broader category of "spiritual dreams," there were 101 that met the criterion of dreams in which one's focus was on, reverence and/or openness, and connectedness to "something of significance believed to be beyond one's full understanding and/or individual existence." The highest percentage of spiritual dreams came from the Brazilian sample (23 percent), the lowest from the Japanese sample (5 percent).²³

Working with Spiritual Dreams

Louis Savary, a former Jesuit priest, and his associates have provided five key questions to ask when working with spiritual dreams and other dreams containing visitation elements.

1. How can this dream be a gift to my family, friends, or spiritual community?
2. How can this dream teach me to foster the growth of my family, my friends, or my spiritual community?
3. How can this dream teach me to act responsibly, and with love and compassion, toward my family, friends, or spiritual community?
4. Is there something that my family, friends, or spiritual community is asking of me through this dream? Have I recently experienced conflicts or confrontations with them that need to be resolved?
5. Have I recently received affirmations or signs of esteem for my talents and services from my family, friends, or spiritual community? If so, how can this dream be seen as a confirmation that I have been using these abilities wisely?²⁴

Lee Lawson is an artist who collects visitation dreams and other experiences of altered states of consciousness. She emphasizes their potential for healing and observes that these experiences may occur even if the recipient has never been receptive to the notion of spirits or an afterlife. She advises that the

people who have these experiences simply accept the visit as a mystery. Instead of trying to fathom the reasons for the visitation intellectually, people might look for the meaning embedded in the visit, and how it can become a catalyst for healing and enhanced appreciation of life.²⁵

The interest in seeking meaning in religious or spiritual dreams is growing in the Western world. The question of significance and theoretical background of such growth is widely explored in the book by Kelly Bulkeley, *The Wilderness of Dreams*.²⁶ What is becoming apparent in the growing literature on dreams is that the experience of spiritual and visitation dreams can be a powerful life-changing event.²⁷ Whether these dreams are incubated or happen spontaneously, they are worth recording and studying. The meaning of these types of dreams might not be understood immediately, but by working with them, the meaning is slowly unveiled.



Dreams and Personal Mythology

Extraordinary dreams stand out from ordinary dreams, although both can be useful in illuminating the dreamer's personal myths and personal problems. Personal myths are woven from many strands, including the events of the past, the myths of the culture in which the dreamer was raised and lives, the mandates of genetic programming, and those inspirational moments that allow a person to sense the spiritual essence of the universe and peer into its nature. Personal problems may pertain to relationships, work issues, finances, family matters, spiritual imbalances, and a host of other topics. Personal myths and personal problems are closely connected. Often, personal problems are the result of dysfunctional personal myths.¹

Since personal mythology often is rooted in the ways the dreamer learned to make sense of the world during childhood, it inevitably lacks balance. We use the term "inevitably" because the mythic worldview that develops during childhood is largely determined by the hopes, fears, strengths, and weaknesses of one's parents and by other circumstances beyond one's control. Nevertheless, that mythology shapes a person's desires, attitudes, and choices just as unconscious psychodynamics shape one's dream life. While personal mythologies continually mature throughout the years and a dreamer may have some conscious access into that process, it is a realm that operates largely below the level of awareness for most people. Nonetheless, people pay a price for its imbalances, limitations, and any disharmony with their actual needs, traits, or potentials.

Personal myths appear to form in a manner that is parallel to the way dreams develop. It is likely that personal myths tie into the brain's propensity