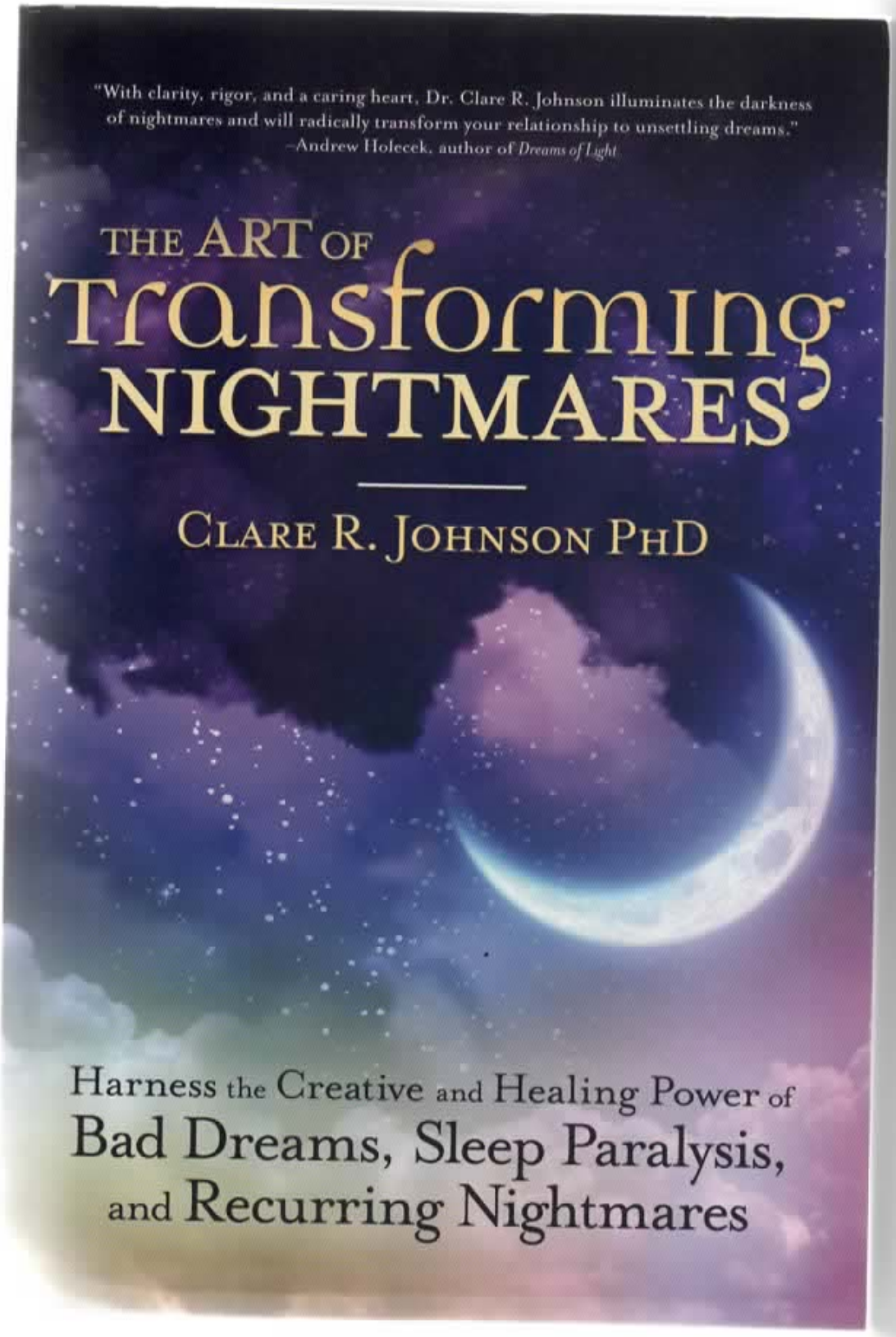
"With clarity, rigor, and a caring heart, Dr. Clare R. Johnson illuminates the darkness of nightmares and will radically transform your relationship to unsettling dreams."
–Andrew Holecek, author of *Dreams of Light*
THE ART OF
Transforming
NIGHTMARES
CLARE R. JOHNSON PHD
Harness the Creative and Healing Power of
Bad Dreams, Sleep Paralysis,
and Recurring Nightmares

CHAPTER 2

Understanding the Symbolic Language of Nightmares

How do nightmares speak to us? They communicate in an intoxicating mixture of imagery, metaphors, symbols, and visceral emotions. They paint a cinematic, high-stakes picture of our lives, our relationships, and how we really feel deep down. We are stars in the super-vivid movies of our nightmares! Nightmares reveal to us the state of our soul. They are supremely honest mirrors that reflect the darkest shadow sides of ourselves and illuminate our deepest fears, yet they can be surprisingly hard to understand. In this chapter, we'll look at how to decipher the symbolic language of nightmares, and I'll share some key practices for unwrapping their meaning.

The beauty of nightmare work is that nightmare images zing and sparkle with life: they have a powerful living energy that we can tap into. This energy is incredibly concentrated because of its emotional and personal nature, so it is extremely transformative. Its transformative power can be used for healing, creativity, and change in all areas of our lives. It's a curious thing, because when we unwrap a nightmare using the techniques in this chapter, we are fully awake, but since we are engaging imaginatively with dream images, we are simultaneously working on a deeper unconscious level.

Unwrapping nightmare images, symbols, and storylines can be instrumental in illuminating unhelpful beliefs we hold about ourselves, unhealthy relationship patterns we cling to, and old attitudes that have been holding us back. We know when we've hit gold because the results can be felt viscerally

within our body as tension falls away, and there is often a jolt of understanding, an aha moment. We simply know when we have found the wisdom or insight we need to receive from our nightmare. We'll look at the symbolic language of nightmares in this chapter, and explore common nightmare themes, but first I'll say a few words about the ethical side of helping someone else understand their nightmare.

The Dream Belongs to the Dreamer

The way that personal dream images arise and how they fit with the dream story reflects each dreamer's unique life experience, memories, desires, and associations, which is why we should never tell someone else what their dream means. I'm honoured to be past president and current board director of the International Association for the Study of Dreams (IASD), and our code of ethics emphasises that *the dream belongs to the dreamer*; that is to say, the dreamer is the ultimate authority on their own dream.

Interpreting someone else's dream for them can be an aggressive act, leaving the dreamer feeling powerless and exposed. "Oh, if you dreamed about a sexy naked woman in your marital bed, it means your husband is having an affair!" How is this going to make the dreamer feel? If the dreamer were left to explore that dream in their own way, they might realise the sexy naked woman is symbolic of themselves at a younger age and the dream is in fact inviting them to get back in touch with their passionate side. Or whatever. Who knows which associations would come up for them? The point is, this dream belongs to the dreamer, so ultimately only they can truly know what it's about.

It's lovely to help others unwrap their dreams and nightmares if they'd like us to, but we should do so with the greatest kindness, because the dream is a piece of their soul, a fragment of their psyche.

Any remarks we make about someone else's dream are at least partially based on the inner visions, emotions, and associations that their dream invokes within us as we hear it. Whenever we listen to someone tell us their dream, we engage with *our own inner vision of that dream*. A cave or tree will appear very differently in your imagination than it will in mine. If someone shares a dream in which they are with their brother, the word *brother*

will inevitably create different gut feelings in a listener whose brother died recently, or a listener who has never liked their brother, or a listener whose brother is their favourite person in the world. Because of this, in a sense every dream we listen to becomes *our* dream.

We offer the dreamer respect and compassion when we acknowledge the subjectivity of our listening experience by prefacing any comments about their dream with the words "If this were *my* dream ..."[4] This reminds both ourselves and the dreamer that our comments are merely projections that reveal as much about our own psychology as they do about the dreamer's. In the case of the thoughtless remark about the dreamer's husband having an affair, this tells us more about the person who made that comment (their lack of trust in relationships or a loss of belief in fidelity, perhaps?) than it does about the dreamer. The following practice gives tips on how to help someone unwrap the message of their nightmare.

practice 7

THE NIGHTMARE REFLECTION TECHNIQUE

- When someone shares any dream or nightmare with you, listen all the way through without interrupting. Extend warmth and compassion to the dreamer; they are entrusting a piece of their soul to you. When they have finished, it can be good to empathise with how real and upsetting the nightmare was, using the words they used: "When the cave collapsed, I imagine that must have felt very frightening." This allows the dreamer to feel heard and to clarify their emotions: "Well, now that I think about it, I wasn't really frightened for myself; I was just dead worried about not being able to reach my son."
- Ask the dreamer clarifying questions about their nightmare: "How high was the demon's wall? What exactly did the weird bumps on your tongue look like?"
- Ask them, "Do you have any thoughts so far on what this nightmare might mean?"

4 American psychiatrist Montague Ullman created the "If this were my dream" approach within his group dreamwork method.

- Check with the dreamer: "Would it be okay with you if I shared my own associations with your dream?" When we offer our associations or gut reactions in a nonjudgmental way, we might trigger an aha moment in the dreamer, which is why group work on a dream can be so powerful when it's done respectfully and with love.
- It's good to use this respectful phrase to preface your comments, as it makes you as vulnerable as the dreamer: "If this were my dream/nightmare..." or "In my dream/nightmare..." For example, "I'm really scared of snakes, so if this were my nightmare, the snake would symbolise my fear." Or, "In my dream, I feel very helpless and insignificant when the king sentences me to death." Be careful not to label a dream as "a nightmare" unless the dreamer uses that term. As discussed in chapter 1, sometimes dreams that have a storyline or imagery that disturbs the listener are *not* in fact experienced as nightmares by the dreamer.
- If there is clearly fear or other difficult emotions around the nightmare, and if it feels right for the dreamer, you could ask them, "What would you need to feel safe in this dream?" (A strong friend, a magical power such as flying or invisibility, a healing potion, a rescue helicopter...) Or, "If you could go back into your nightmare and change the storyline, what would you change?"
- Nightmares may take several goes to unpack; don't expect an instant solution or push the dreamer to wrap things up with a neat conclusion. I've found that nightmares can be very dense, and sometimes days, months, or even years later, we can find further meaning in them that is highly relevant for our lives. In creating this book, many of the generous people who shared nightmares with me said that in writing down their nightmare and life context for me, they discovered new insights and incredible resonances that made them appreciate the gifts of their nightmare all over again.
- If it feels right, you could ask the dreamer, "What do you think this dream wants you to know?" and "Is there any action you could take in your life to honour its message?" Thank the dreamer for sharing their dream with you.

Now let's get to grips with the symbolic language that dreams and nightmares use to communicate with us.

The Symbolic Language of Nightmares

The true gift of a nightmare often lies hidden underneath some pretty nasty wrapping paper. Imagery of people getting shot, abandoned babies, or plane crashes can make us feel we'd rather not get involved with this dream at all! It's worth it, though, I promise. In order to unwrap this gift, we need to become familiar with the symbolic nature of not only the dream images themselves but also the actions that occur. For example, a dream of driving a car depends not only on the nature of the car (battered? brand-new?) but also on the way the car is being driven (wildly? with confidence?) and by whom (you? your dead mother?) and with what degree of success (is this a smooth and easy ride, or have the brakes failed?). In the case of you, the dreamer, driving a car fast and the brakes failing, this may indicate that you are being reckless in an area of your life, driving yourself too hard, or racing so fast that although you need to slow down, you cannot stop. The dream could be saying, "Danger! Slow down!" A dream car may also represent the body, so failing brakes could indicate failing health. The only way to know for sure is to unwrap the dream further.

Context is also very important for understanding dreams, since a person's current or past-life issues are often key to shedding light on the imagery. This is why dream dictionaries that offer one meaning for one image are sadly inadequate. How can a dream cow mean the same thing for a butcher as it does for a Hindu, for whom cows are sacred animals? A dream moth will have a very different meaning for an insect enthusiast than for someone who is moth-phobic. I do think that the deeper, more soulful dream dictionaries can be useful in helping people gain insight into the way that dream symbolism might work. It's often illuminating to explore how archetypes (universal images, symbols, themes, and archaic mythical characters) crop up in dreams and nightmares. It can also be fun to look up an obscure dream image, such as an ostrich feather or a balaclava, to see if anything resonates with you. The main thing is to trust your own gut feelings and associations around your

nightmare imagery, and give due attention to its context and possible meaning in your own life.

Let's look at some different examples of nightmares and their meaning so you can see for yourself how nightmares speak to us symbolically through violent or upsetting imagery to get their message across, and how examining context can reveal insight into why a particular nightmare occurred.

> My very beloved cat has been beheaded. Someone has taken his severed head and hung it in my home as a chandelier—over the dining table!!!!!

This was the nightmare of a woman whose husband had been diagnosed with a mental illness and refused to take medication. She recognised that the severed head symbolised the shocking split between his former beloved self and the way he was after he "lost his mind."

> I walk into the bathroom and find my boyfriend swinging dead from a rope.

This was a nightmare I had after ending a relationship with my boyfriend in my early twenties. Upon waking, I panicked briefly that this highly realistic dream meant he might kill himself over our breakup. But death in dreams is usually not a prediction of a person's actual death. Death is a transition from one state to another, and in dreams it often symbolises transformation: the dying of an old way of life. I also worried that the dream meant my ex would soon be "dead to me." But even today, he and I are the best of friends. My nightmare was symbolic of the huge and difficult change we were undergoing.

The following two examples are from Stase Michaels's book *Nightmares: The Dark Side of Dreams and Dreaming*.[5]

> A large spider whose sac is swollen and about to burst is going to spawn many more scary creatures and create a horrible mess. I know I have to kill it.

5. Michaels, *Nightmares: The Dark Side of Dreams and Dreaming*, 88 and 57.

The dreamer's boyfriend was a bully who often had temper tantrums. She realised that this nightmare, which portrayed him as a spider and his tantrums as scary creatures, was a warning to leave him, to avoid a future filled with many more ugly outbursts.

> I watch as my friend sits motionless. Then he picks up a hammer and sharp tools and gouges himself, creating extreme pain.

This teenage dreamer was experiencing enormous pain as his parents went through an acrimonious divorce, but he hid his pain under a calm, polite exterior. This dream helped him realise that he needed to express his pain before it led to depression. (Depression is portrayed in the dream by the friend's passive, motionless position.)

Were you able to follow the dream logic of the symbols these nightmares chose to express themselves with? If so, you're well on the way to grasping the art of understanding the symbolic language of nightmares! Isn't our dreaming mind clever to come up with such fascinating stories to show us how we really feel and what we need to change? Each of these nightmares reflects pivotal emotions in the lives of the dreamers, showing in highly visual, shocking metaphors how the dreamers really feel about situations. Dreams show us what is happening in our heart, mind, body, and soul. Dreams act as emotional, physical, and spiritual barometers, and when they become nightmares, it's time to sit up and listen and to create positive change in our lives. This might take the form of taking steps towards self-care by acknowledging our wounds and ensuring we get the support we need, or it might mean we need to mend (or leave) a relationship or talk to a counsellor.

There are taboos around nightmares that I hope this book will help to break. Nightmares with extreme imagery and murderous or psychopathic actions are generally not shared outside of a therapist's office because people fear they'll be dismissed as crazy. In this book, I hope to illustrate the symbolic and emotional power of nightmares, to help readers understand that just because they have a shocking nightmare does not mean they are losing their mind. Nightmares can be incredible drama queens! If we aren't aware of how we truly feel about something, they escalate our emotions and set them on a lit stage, with the intention of shocking us into changing our ways.

One dreamer shared a nightmare in which a manipulative man forced him to use a pair of scissors to cut the head off a woman.

> I love this woman profoundly. My hands quiver and tears stream as I pick up the scissors. Doing as I am told, I cut the woman's head with these tiny shears from back to front, beginning with a cut through the cheek. I feel every visceral cut as the blades work through flesh and bone. The scissors crunch through the vertebra and I feel everything. Each cut devastates me emotionally, yet I do not hear screaming from the woman... I feel immense resistance. I am horrified at what I've done to this living, beautiful girl whom I love. The guilt is overwhelming. And yet, she seems to understand that I have no choice, and in fact, tells me to keep going.

This nightmare had a dark energy that haunted him, and he worried that his actions in the dream made him look like a psychopath, even though when he worked with it, he realised it was symbolic of the overly emotional and anima-possessed part of himself. It is valuable to work with the symbolism of nightmares and also explore the dominant emotions. In this nightmare, resistance and guilt seem particularly strong.

Let's have a look at common themes that emerge in nightmares—common nightmare stories and what they might mean—while remembering that every dreamer is a unique individual and has different memories, associations, and emotional reactions.

A Quick Guide to Nightmare Themes

There are so many possible nightmare stories. Here I'll cover only a few, just to give you an idea of some of the most common themes and what they might (or might not!) signify. Please forgive the generalisations in this section. As I have explained, every dreamer is unique in terms of their life experience and emotional responses, so this can only be a rough guide, its main purpose being to help you to understand the language of nightmares and how they might depict violent emotions, psychological shifts, physical illness or pain, spiritual impasses, and reactions to major life changes.

It's also good to bear in mind that dreams and nightmares may not be personal but rather collective and social—in other words, a nightmare about mass death and destruction may be a reflection of the state of the world or be linked to a current war or pandemic rather than being purely an amplification of the dreamer's emotions. An excellent example of socially influenced nightmares are those that emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic. These dreams around the common theme of a deadly virus emerged in the form of nightmares about ferocious bugs and invisible monsters, having difficulty breathing in a dream, or sensing that one has been infected by the virus. Other pandemic dreams focused on social distancing stress or were saturated with death imagery: corpses sit with the dreamer on a bus; deceased relatives show up to take the dreamer away with them, or the dreamer orders a taxi and a hearse arrives instead. A global crisis impacts dreams and reflects our unconscious response to threat. Researchers found that dream recall rose by 35 percent as the pandemic started to spread in earnest, as detailed by Harvard psychologist Dr. Deirdre Barrett, who collected over nine thousand COVID-19–themed dreams and described her findings in her book *Pandemic Dreams*.

The quick guide that follows focuses only on personal nightmares.

Feel free to absorb what resonates for you and then use the practices in this book to deepen your personal understanding of your own nightmares. Remember, the worse the nightmare, the greater its transformative potential, because the need for healing is more urgent and you are ripe for change.

- **Being trapped or unable to move.** Nightmares commonly involve being trapped in a burning building or in a plane that's about to crash, or in a confined and suffocating space, or paralysed and unable to act. The dreamer might scream, but nobody hears. These scenarios are often linked to feelings of helplessness, an absence of emotional support, and a belief in the dreamer's inability to change bad things. If you have a nightmare with this theme, ask yourself, "Where in my life do I feel trapped, paralysed, or powerless, as if there's no way out?" and "Where in my life do I need to take action?" Physical paralysis in dreams can also be linked to sleep paralysis nightmares; see chapter 7 for how to navigate these experiences.

- **Attacked, shot, wounded, or killed.** Violent attacks and killing are common nightmare themes. Killing may reflect unwelcome changes that are being forced on the dreamer. Scenes of mass shootings could reflect current news events, but on a personal level they may hint at a plethora of unpleasant situations, outbursts of aggression, or enforced changes. When the dreamer does the killing, they may be trying to rid themselves of unwanted shadow aspects of themselves. While shooting people in her nightmare, one woman experienced a moment of lucidity when she realised they were aspects of herself that she hated and wanted to finish with forever. When you are wounded or shot in a nightmare, pay close attention to the site of the wound, as it may be a reference to a health issue. Attacks are displays of anger and seem connected to confrontation, aggression, or being overpowered. Ask yourself, "Is there aggression in my life?" and "What's my own temper like, and how well do I express myself when I'm upset?" Chapter 3 explores the dark shadow side of ourselves that often rears up in nightmares.
- **Disaster and apocalypse nightmares.** "A giant tsunami wreaks havoc on the land, and there is death and destruction everywhere." Dreams of hurricanes, fires, floods, or other natural disasters may reflect our global relationship to our planet, but on the personal level, such nightmares and also scenes of war zones or other human-made disasters such as shipwrecks or plane crashes can indicate feeling overwhelmed during an extremely challenging time. Such nightmares can flag up emotional upheaval and feelings of helplessness and terror in the face of unwanted changes. Drowning in dreams often seems linked to feeling overcome by emotions or a life situation. To discover how to take positive action in your life through working with a nightmare, see Practice 17: The Nightmare Transformation Technique.
- **Animals in nightmares.** Dream animals are wonderful to work with because they have wild, intuitive, instinctive energy that we often don't tap into enough in our lives, and they can be very helpful in revealing our hidden shadow sides, our conflicts, and who we aspire to be. They may have a shamanic element, connecting us to the spirit world and reminding us of our soul's journey. When dream animals want our attention, they may chase us, bite us, attack us, or even rip us to pieces.

Nevertheless, they are soul allies! They take on threatening roles to wake us up to empowering action we need to take in our lives, and to help us towards psychological wholeness and spiritual advancement. Ask yourself, "Which qualities does this dream animal embody for me?" A snake may be the wise healer within you, while a lion might represent your powerful voice. A squirrel hides away what is important to him; a dinosaur lives in the past. Ask yourself, "What is my dream animal trying to teach me?" Practice 43: Turn Mythological Beasts into Protective Allies looks at how to work with animal nightmares.

- **Sex-themed nightmares.** Rape nightmares can relate to the misuse of power. It can be helpful to ask yourself, "Where in my life do I feel violated, disrespected, or overpowered?" When we dream that our loving partner is having hot sex with somebody else, we may wake up feeling betrayed, upset, and suspicious. Mostly, such nightmares won't be pointing to a literal infidelity. People in our dreams may symbolise an aspect of ourselves. Ask yourself, "Am I being untrue to myself in some way?" or "Where in my life do I feel cheated right now?" If you feel the dream is related to your partner, ask yourself, "Do I feel unsupported by my partner? Are we happy together? Do we need to change anything about our relationship?" Reenter your dream imaginatively and interview your cheating partner. Ask them why they are behaving this way. Practice 24: The Lucid Writing Technique for Nightmares can help you explore sex-themed nightmares. If you're interested in learning more about what sex dreams can symbolise and how to work with them, a great book is *Sexual Dreams* by Dr. Gayle Delaney.
- **Heavy emotional nightmares.** "I see a funeral procession on the street. My mother is in that coffin and I know I killed her." In any nightmare where heavy emotions such as guilt, shame, grief, disgust, dread, terror, or despair dominate, this can be seen as an invitation to begin healing the deep wounds and unresolved situations that may have caused them before these feelings cause further damage to our health and wellbeing. However, if your nightmares are very strong, please remember that you don't have to face them alone. In extreme cases, it's better to get a therapist or dreamworker to help you work with them. Chapter 6 explores ways of moving through deeply emotional and traumatic nightmares.

- **Nightmares with archetypal, mythical, and spiritual elements.** "Through a veil of mist, a phoenix appears. Its feathers are luminous green and it breathes a stream of golden fire that burns me until I'm nothing but ashes in the wind." Mythological dream beasts, hybrid animals, and fairy tale dream plots such as "trapped in the cabin in the woods" or "fleeing from the evil witch" are imbued with the ancient power of timeless stories and archetypes. They are cosmic yet personal. Often, such nightmares seem to reflect major periods of psycho-spiritual growth where we depart from a previous way of life and recreate ourselves anew. It can be a painful process, but such dreams invite us to examine our spiritual life and reveal the shifts taking place deep within us. Chapter 9 shows how to work with these nightmares.
- **Horror movie nightmares.** This encompasses zombie invasions, psycho-thriller dream plots, violence and murder, and nightmares with decapitation or dismemberment themes. Why does our dreaming mind sometimes create such disturbing stories? Because it's crying out for our attention and telling us we need to work towards wholeness and balance. Getting killed in a dream may reflect an unwanted change that someone else is trying to impose on the dreamer. Killing someone else may mean that part of you seeks major change, either within yourself or in waking life. Dying may symbolise the death of an aspect of the dreamer, and death in dreams is very often not a literal warning of future events, but rather a symbol of change and transformation. Dreaming of deceased loved ones is discussed in chapter 8. Dismemberment can be symbolic of feeling torn apart, while decapitation often registers a split between our mind and our heart. The emotions in horror movie nightmares can point us to the heart of their message. Unwrap your dream to find out with Practice 12: Ten Key Questions for Unwrapping a Nightmare.
- **Vomiting, ingesting something, or choking.** When we vomit in dreams, there may be something we need to express, something we're sick of, or something impossible to digest. One woman was shocked by the suicide of her friend and unable to accept it. She had recurring nightmares about vomiting uncontrollably. When we ingest something in a dream, this might symbolise that we are trying to assimilate something. Such dreams can also be shamanic, as we absorb new energies. In one dream, I watched a man very consciously eating his dead father's ashes so that his father would live on inside him. This dream came at a time when I was assimilating the mortality of my parents and others in their age bracket. Choking may indicate unexpressed emotions. One woman had recurring nightmares of choking and eventually realised these were an indicator of grief that needed to be faced and healed. Sometimes we cry buckets in our dreams, which may show that we are overloaded with sadness and have much to release. Practice 32: Forgive and Release can help with this.

- **Running away.** Are you being chased or running away from something you saw that upsets you? Ask yourself, "Is there something I'm terrified to face?" or "What am I running from (or turning my back on) in my life?" Threatening figures in nightmares can indicate shadow sides of ourselves that we have repressed or do not want to own. Chapter 3 shows how to work with shadow energies.
- **Monsters, ghosts, devils, vampires, and other supernatural figures.** Monsters and supernatural figures are often our worst fears incarnated as powerful nightmare figures. They demand our attention, and the bottom line is that they want change, integration, and healing. Ghosts might be seen as past psychic energy that's still hanging around, past issues we haven't confronted, or someone who has transitioned (been through a major spiritual change). Ask yourself, "Which ghosts from the past am I holding onto that need to be released?" Vampires or other parasites feeding off the dreamer may reflect people who are feeding off your energy in waking life, or flag up a health issue: one man dreamed there was a parasite filled with dark energy stuck to his neck. Soon afterwards, he was diagnosed with stage-four throat cancer.

Devils may represent powerful limiting beliefs we have imposed on our psyche, or an inner struggle between good and bad. Ask, "Who does this monster/devil/ghost remind me of?" and "Where in my life do I need to transcend fear?" "What action can I take to move forward spiritually?" Supernatural nightmare figures have a strong link to the spiritual aspects of our lives. Try asking yourself, "Am I at an impasse in my spiritual life?" "Is there a spiritual conflict within me?" It may also be

useful to consider your worldview and how it creates your reality, using Practice 39: Question Your Beliefs, Assumptions, and Expectations.

- **Naked in public.** Most of us have had some variation of this dream, which is not always a nightmare by any means! It can be liberating and sensual to be naked in public in a dream. It can feel brave and affirming. In dreams, I have put my chin up and danced naked in public with a sense of, "Okay then, who cares how it looks. This is me. Let's just do this!" (This is possibly a reflection of how it feels to publish books with my most personal and transformative dreams and life stories in them!) Nightmare versions involving horror and embarrassment tend to point to vulnerability and exposure: a sense of not being able to hide our true self or true feelings, or not having the right "clothes" (attributes, social skills) to fit in, or making a social blunder. Practice 13: The Lucid Imaging Nightmare Solution (LINS) is a creative and positive way of engaging with such nightmares for transformation and empowerment.
- **Black void nightmares and falling.** Many people write to me in terror of nightmares in which they fall or are sucked into infinite dark space and experience strange sensory sensations. The luminous black void is discussed in chapter 9 and is a space of infinite creative potential. It is really not something we need to fear! In fact, it's an excellent space for liberating ourselves from fear and opening up to spiritual adventures, as shown in Practice 42: How to Navigate the Lucid Void. Nightmares about falling off cliffs or high buildings may be linked to feeling unsafe or losing our emotional balance. Ask, "When do I not feel safe?" and "Where in life am I heading for a fall?" We "fall" asleep every night, and dreams of falling may also be linked to the sensory changes we experience when we fall back to sleep after a mini-awakening in the night.
- **Teeth falling out and other losses.** A dream of losing teeth is often linked to feelings of insecurity, instability, life changes, and loss, or to a sense that we can no longer hide how we really feel—we can't smile and pretend all is well because we have no teeth to smile with! We need to speak our truth and dissimulate no longer. Ask yourself, "Am I doing what I really want to do with my life?" "Do I feel insecurity or loss anywhere in my life?" Many nightmares focus around loss—we lose our phone and spend the rest of the dream searching high and low and freaking out ("Where am I unable to communicate?" "What am I searching for in my life?"), or we miss a train (an opportunity?). These can be seriously stressful dreams that often recur. The good news is they can be calmed, resolved, and rerouted through a simple, fast dream reentry technique such as Practice 17: The Nightmare Transformation Technique.

Now let's look at the way that physical pain can appear in nightmares.

How Pain Creates Nightmares

Dreams and nightmares can be intimately linked to the body. The dreaming mind automatically translates sensations, sounds, and other sensory stimuli directly into streams of vivid imagery. Physical pain during sleep is often directly translated into imagery, and excruciating pain can be experienced during nightmares, as in the following examples. Bernie dreams:

> I am in a building and I know I need to get to the other side. As I try to do this, figures holding swords attack me as I push forward across the room. I feel every cut and the pain is like being cut with a thousand razor blades. I become aware and realise I can wake myself up. I do this to escape.

Bernie realised this nightmare reflected all the physical pain he suffers in waking life. He has suffered from migraines all his life, has had nonstop pain for about 30–40 years, and also suffers badly from depression.

Natalie had the following lucid dream:

> A demonic creature appeared that was incredible to look at but really scary. This creature came up to me and towered over me. I was frozen (like with sleep paralysis, which I have had). The creature stuck one of its pinchers straight into my side and ripped the flesh and I felt every moment of it. The pain is impossible to describe. After doing that, the alien reptilian creature had sex with me. I had multiple orgasms which totally destroyed the pain in my side. The creature said pain and pleasure are very similar and both very powerful. They should be harnessed.

Years after this experience, on a lucid dreaming ocean retreat with me, Natalie experienced an insight into her nightmare. As the group worked with the Lucid Imaging Nightmare Solution, she could clearly see that area of intense pain where the demon reptile had stabbed her, and realised it was exactly where she'd had terrible pain for 33 years. She reports:

> Only a few months ago, a new doctor sent me for a scan I should have had decades ago and diagnosed me with adenomyosis. Now I know what is wrong with me, it actually makes sense.

Keith had a nightmare about being attacked in the woods by a headless horseman:

> With a swift slice to the back of the neck, my head comes off … I am now in a small cabin with a group of fellow victims; we have all had our heads cut off. Somehow, we are all still alive with heads reassembled, but we all bear a scar.

Keith reports:

> This dream came during the worst time of my life. I've had chiropractic problems with my head and neck for years, but this felt life-critical. My atlas vertebra was hypermobile, and surges of energy flowed up the base of my head; I felt like I could die at any second. I lived this way for weeks, with a feeling of impending doom. Every time I closed my eyes to go to sleep, I would feel the energy surge in my head and neck, and it felt as if I would die unless I kept the energy at bay with all my willpower.

Since dreams use a highly metaphorical language, nightmares involving intense physical pain can also represent emotional or spiritual pain. Through unwrapping the nightmare, we can reach its heart and hear its message. Let's look at some quick and easy ways of reaching the heart of a nightmare.

Core Techniques for Reaching the Heart of a Nightmare

These core techniques can be used whenever needed to help you unpack a nightmare and gain insight into its metaphorical meaning, or reenter it to reexperience it with full awareness.

practice 8

REENTER THE NIGHTMARE

This is a technique that we'll use throughout the book, based on "active imagination," which was developed by Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung, the founder of analytical psychology. Any inner imagery, such as a memory, a fantasy, an emotion, a mood, or a dream, can be conjured up and imaginatively reentered for discovery, insight, and resolution. Here's how to reenter a nightmare so you can explore the imagery and actions while remaining in control, knowing you are in charge of the process and can stop it whenever you like. When working with very difficult nightmares, it's important to feel in control, especially when we decide to experience the emotions of the nightmare.

1. Sit or lie down and relax with closed eyes. Breathe slowly and deeply.
2. Create a golden space in your mind, a safe space.
3. When you feel ready, bring your nightmare into this space. Look at the images, knowing you are safe and can stop this process at any moment by opening your eyes. Notice the colours, the emotions, the action of your nightmare. Run the nightmare like a movie.
4. If it feels safe to do so, relive the emotions you experienced and feel them in your body. This helps the work to go deeper, but it's not essential, so if you prefer not to engage too deeply with major emotions such as disgust, guilt, and dread, that is fine; you can retain as much distance as you need from the nightmare movie.
5. Now you're ready to engage with your nightmare in any way that feels right; for example, by sending love and light to scary figures, or asking them why they came into your dream, or changing the nightmare story (as in Practice 14: Creative Nightmare Responses), or by using other techniques from this book. Be brave and trust your instincts! There is magic in this process, and working directly with nightmare images forms a strong bond with your unconscious mind so that healing and resolution happen naturally, without the need for us to push to get there.

practice 9

CONNECT YOUR NIGHTMARE TO WAKING REALITY

1. Reenter your nightmare as described in the previous practice, and keep your eyes closed.
2. Connect to the most powerful emotion in your nightmare. This might be shame, terror, grief, sadness, desperation, loss, loneliness, or any other feeling. It can also be a mixture of different emotions.
3. Feel these emotions in your body. Are they making your heart heavy or your gut tense? Are they stuck in your throat, or do they turn your legs to jelly? Bring your attention to them without getting too sucked into them, and remember you can stop this process whenever you like.
4. Breathe calmly as you remain present to these emotions. Sometimes an image will emerge from the part of the body that is holding the emotion. Notice what comes up.
5. Now ask yourself when in your life you have previously experienced this emotion or mix of emotions. Feel your way back, using your memory of the emotions and your bodily awareness of them to guide you. You might find yourself way back in the past, in your childhood, or you may find yourself feeling these emotions yesterday at work.
6. The point of connecting your nightmare emotions with your waking reality is to get clarity on the life context that this nightmare might be referring to. When we know which situation the nightmare reflects, we are much closer to understanding its message.

practice 10

EXPERIENCE YOUR NIGHTMARE AS AN ALIEN FROM OUTER SPACE

1. You can do this practice on your own in your head or with a friend who is willing to turn into an alien for a few minutes! Dr. Gayle Delaney, author of *Sexual Dreams*, created the "pretend I'm an alien" technique for dreams, and it can be illuminating. Retell your nightmare as if you're sharing it with an alien from outer space who doesn't know what a vat of acid is, how pizza tastes, or how scary a pterodactyl can be.

2. Pause at key nightmare images and explain them to the alien without thinking too much—be spontaneous in your associations. If you have to explain to the alien what bread smells like, you might say, "The smell of freshly baked bread is the magic of childhood for me, but in my nightmare that smell gets swallowed up by black flames. Flames are destructive; they destroy what used to exist." Your descriptions of key words and images will be different depending on how they appear in the nightmare.
3. Make the link to your life. When you have to explain to the alien what a cockroach is, your answer might be, "It's a bug. It's something unpleasant I don't want near me." Using those same words, ask yourself, "Is there something in my life right now that is unpleasant and that I don't want near me?" Often this will result in an instant answer: "Aha! My coworker—she's been bugging me so much lately!" Dreams love puns. They love wordplay and idioms. If you dream of a bug, ask yourself what's bugging you.
4. After gleaning some insights into the language and metaphors of your nightmare, you can move things along further with a transformative technique such as Practice 14: Creative Nightmare Responses in the next chapter.

practice 11

FREE ASSOCIATION À LA FREUD

Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud was the founder of psychoanalysis, and one technique he used was free association with dream images to explore the unconscious.

1. Choose the main figure from your nightmare, or the central image (the most emotive or disturbing one), or anything that shocked you about the nightmare, such as an out-of-control windmill or a dead bunch of flowers.
2. Relax with a pen and paper at hand, and bring your chosen nightmare element into your mind. Jot down any associations, memories, thoughts, or emotions that arise in relation to this. No judging or critical thinking

allowed! Even if you think the words you're writing make no sense, keep going. If you get stuck, return to the image or figure and begin again. Ask yourself about the image to get back on track: "What is a 'haunted house' to me?" Then jot down further associations, or choose a different element and play with that instead.

3. When working on a nightmare about trying to drink a glass of water but ending up with a mouthful of glass fragments, you might end up with something like this: water—elixir of life—thirst—nourishment—chewing glass—biting—bitten off more than I can chew!
4. Finally, look over your associations and see if anything causes you to go, "Aha!" Free association is a nice way to get more intimate with your nightmare images, but it's usually best done in combination with other techniques such as the following practice, in order to get the full experience of unwrapping a nightmare.

practice 12

TEN KEY QUESTIONS FOR UNWRAPPING A NIGHTMARE

After you've written down your nightmare and given it a title and sketched any images, if its meaning remains opaque to you, consider the following questions. A dream version of this practice first appeared in my book *Dream Therapy: Dream Your Way to Health and Happiness.*

1. Who are you in this nightmare? (An observer, an older/younger version of yourself, an animal, a different person, or you as you are today?)
2. What is the core image or scene in this nightmare? ("Core" means the central, most energised and powerful image.)
3. What are your associations with this core image? Quickly write them down without pausing to think or analyse.
4. Imagine that every part of this nightmare represents an aspect of yourself. Which part of you might the core image represent? Use your keywords and associations to connect with the image.
5. How do you feel in this nightmare? What are the strongest emotions?
6. Are these emotions present in any past, current, or upcoming life situation? Consider what was going on in your life at the time this nightmare appeared; it could be mirroring your feelings about a current situation.
7. If you ask the most frightening or disturbing part of your nightmare if it has a message for you, what might it say?
8. Is there anything positive, light, loving, or beautiful in your nightmare? Close your eyes and ask it, "What do you want me to know?"
9. What does this nightmare want? View it as a movie and consider the possible meaning of the plot, characters, and any resolution or climax. Be alert for surprising plot twists and try to sense the message behind the imagery.
10. If you could experience your nightmare again and change the ending, what would happen?

When you have a clearer idea of what your nightmare wants to tell you, ask yourself, "What action does my nightmare want me to take in my waking world?" For example, imagine you have a desolate dream about a friend you haven't seen in a while, where she's standing far away from you in a desert. The waking-life action to take might be to close the distance between the two of you and check if she's okay by giving her a call. Or if you dream that you eat loads of candyfloss and ice cream and get sick, take action in your life by cutting down on sugar. Once we become familiar with the symbolic language of nightmares, it gets easier to grasp their message and work out how we can create helpful change in our lives.

In this chapter, we have explored the symbolic language of nightmares and seen that the dream always belongs to the dreamer. We've explored how to listen when someone shares a nightmare, and how we might help them to unwrap its meaning if they wish. We've examined common themes of nightmares to understand how they communicate with us, and I've shared some core practical nightmare techniques to help you to discover the valuable messages that your nightmares bring and begin to uncover their vast healing potential. In the next chapter, we'll take a look at the power of the shadow and how it emerges in our dreams to challenge us and to light the way to health and wholeness.