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Invitation at the Threshold

Pre-Death Spiritual Experiences

Patricia Bulkeley

Aunt Jo lay dying in the hospital. She had lived 103 "wonderful years" as she described them, and had told us many times that she was "ready to go." My cousin Richard was sitting at her bedside watching over her as she slept. Slowly her eyes opened and with growing recognition she looked at him first with astonishment and then a gathering sadness filled her eyes. "But you can't be here, you can't," she whispered.

Richard, now feeling her concern himself, leaned closer and said, "But I am here, right here next to you. What's the matter?"

"Grandpa Will, Charlie, Aunt Kate and Aunt Francis are all here, come to get me. But it's not your time yet. Why are you here with us?"

Richard smiled at her, thinking to himself that the old dear had become even more confused in these past few days. He patted his chest with his hands and said, "Look, it's me. I'm the only one here." Then taking her hand in his he added kindly, "You're fine. Everything's just fine."

Richard told me this story a week later at Aunt Jo's funeral and I was fascinated. What had been going on? It appeared that Aunt Jo was dreaming about deceased family members who had come to do what? Accompany her to the next world? And then, upon awakening, she saw

Richard in their midst. Had she somehow mixed her dream world and her real world together?

About a year later I joined the patient care team at Hospice as spiritual care provider. As I began my work at Hospice and spent my days with dying people, I began hearing stories akin to the one Richard had told me about Aunt Jo. In some ways they were quite different, in other ways they were remarkably alike. Let me cite some examples:

- One woman saw a halo of shimmering golden light around the framed picture of her deceased husband which sat on her bedside table.
- A man dreamed that the Virgin Mary, about the size of a small statue, was standing at the foot of his bed with her hand out saying, "Come." It was a tradition in this family for the Virgin to appear at the time of death.
- A young cancer patient named Ashley dreamed of a classmate who had died recently in a car wreck. He was sitting in a red convertible and offered her a ride.
- Susan, who was dying of a brain tumor, dreamed of little Kathy, a friend of her son's, who had died the year before in an accident. Susan was able to tell the dead child's mother that she had seen Kathy, would be with her soon and would tell Kathy how very much her family missed her.
- An elderly gentleman from China saw his parents and grandparents standing in the doorway holding orchids. This vision had a profound spiritual significance for him. At his memorial service his picture was surrounded by orchids.
- A man who had been a merchant marine captain in the Far East in the 1930s dreamed that he was setting sail into uncharted waters. He said the dream brought back the old excitement he had felt as a youth when "the sea called." Because of this dream his near paralyzing fear of impending death was transformed into a sense of adventure and expectation.

Pre-death dreams and visions are often religiously significant and transformative, that is, spiritual reality for the patient is reconstructed.

The person's perception of death is altered in such a way that fear is reduced.¹

The pre-death dream or vision manifests itself in a variety of ways. Some are dreams, some visions and some a bit of both, especially for people very close to death. People report seeing family members and friends who are already dead. Others see religious figures and scenes from sacred writings. In some, the people talk together, in others they are silent. There are experiences that are only visual, or only musical or only tactile. The setting can be right there in their room or anywhere else. The people having the experience range from having a deeply developed life of faith to those who describe themselves as totally rational and "rooted in reality."

My experience has been that every pre-death dream and vision is unique to the person who experiences it and reflects their cultural situation (religion, ethnic background, family configuration, and so on). The pre-death dreams and visions incorporate the patient's own imagery, language and cultural mythology.

In view of all this variety, do pre-death spiritual experiences have anything in common? Yes. According to what has been reported to me, in nearly every case the experience has had a positive effect on the level of the patient's fear of death. The transformation of the dying person's worldview lessens anxiety. Some state unequivocally that their fear is gone. Others that it is greatly reduced. Some say that they are still afraid of the actual process of dying but no longer fear being dead.

Does the effect of the pre-death dreams and visions reach beyond just the patient experiencing it? Family members and friends say yes. Occasionally a person close to the patient will report a "companion" dream or vision where the imagery is related in substantive ways to the pre-death dreams and visions of the patient. For the most part, however, family reaction is centered on the patient's experience, and the reactions vary considerably. Some completely discount it saying, "It was only drug related." Or, "Uncle so and so always was a little crazy, this proves it."

In many cases, however, the patient's pre-death dreams and visions have a profound affect on his/her family. The story Michael told me is a good illustration.

Michael's wife Jane was dying of cancer. It was not his first acquaintance with the death of a loved one. His two sons had died before, one

at the age of two of a disease and the other at fifteen in an automobile accident. Michael and Jane, both devout Roman Catholics, had stayed after Mass on Sunday to pray quietly. Jane's eyes were closed but Michael noticed that her lips were moving. He did not disturb her but waited until they were leaving the sanctuary to ask her about it. She told him the following:

"I became aware of Sammy and Teddy standing before me. They looked so natural and happy. I felt overcome by love and a desire to be with them. They laughed and said that in just a short while we would be together again and how wonderful that would be. I have a warm comfortable feeling all over just thinking of being with them."

In the days of pain and grief that lay ahead for both Michael and Jane, they both had Jane's spiritual experience to comfort them. Jane's view of death as a harsh interloper in the middle of life was softened considerably. Michael's sense of overwhelming grief at the impending loss of yet another beloved person in his life was now accompanied by feelings of hope. Jane would soon be united with their sons in God's loving presence and when Michael died he, too, would experience this wondrous reunion.

The effect of Jane's pre-death dream and vision continues as the story is told and retold. It causes others to wonder about their own deaths and what lies beyond. It opens the possibilities of new worlds and in the process can have a positive effect on our own sense of dread at the thought of death.

Is it possible to actually measure the fear-reducing effects of a pre-death dream and vision? Possibly, but only indirectly for the following two reasons. First, the person having the experience is in the process of dying. Communication is often limited at this time by physical impairments. I suspect, in fact, that the vast majority of pre-death dreams and visions are never made known or detected by others. So often a family member will say something like, "Right at the end Papa opened his eyes and reached his arms toward heaven. A look of rapture came over his face. Then he closed his eyes and died." We will never know what he saw. After death has in fact occurred, the person, of course, cannot tell us.

Second, I feel any attempt by a pastoral care giver or anyone else to impose on a patient a set of questions designed to measure fear would be inappropriate. A person's dying time is sacred to them and their

loved ones. Interruptions, however well intended, could interfere with just the process of spiritual transformation we are seeking to understand. Death is a spiritual event and should be treated by all with reverence and respect.

I do, however, have a wealth of information that has come from careful observation and first-hand conversations. I have been told the stories of innumerable pre-death dreams and visions. They reveal with few exceptions that the patient has become less fearful and less agitated. Most often the death is described as peaceful.

The following is the story of one woman's dying time that was profoundly affected by a pre-death spiritual experience.

Margaret, a counselor at Hospice, was concerned about one of our patients, Ruth, who had only a few weeks to live and who was extremely anxious and increasingly agitated. Her Christian faith, which had been a meaningful part of her life since childhood had, in her words, "just up and disappeared." She no longer believed in Jesus Christ, the Resurrection, or in any of the rest of that "stuff." Ruth was worried sick over what to say to her pastor of many years and she was angry that now, just now, when she really needed it, her religion had vanished. Margaret asked Ruth if she would be open to a visit from me. She was and we made an appointment for the following morning.

Ruth and her husband lived in a comfortable middle-class suburban home situated on one of the bay inlets. Sitting in the living room we could see their dock off the back deck and just beyond an inviting marine vista of white boats, colorful flags, and the sparkling blue waters of the lagoon. The room itself was comfortably filled with family pictures and mementos of the travels that had taken Ruth and John to the four corners of the world. Every table held bouquets of garden flowers brought by the many friends who dropped in to say hello. A large orange tabby cat lay peacefully sunning himself near the sliding glass doors. Every now and again his ear would flick, just enough to let us know that he was listening to the cadence of our voices.

Ruth and John had been married for thirty-seven years and had two grown children who were in their thirties. I was struck by Ruth's apparent lack of pain and level of energy. She told me that she had been sick for only two years. It was the kind of cancer characterized by little ongoing pain but a rapid decline in the end. Her doctor had recently told her that she was experiencing the onset of that decline now.

At the beginning of our conversation I told her that I was the person from the Hospice patient care team who was particularly interested in spiritual matters, that I was an interfaith minister bringing no particular message and that if she wanted to talk for a while, I was there to listen.

She laughed a little self-consciously and said, "Well, I don't know. You'll probably think what I'm going to tell you is just awful and want to leave."

I shook my head a little, smiled and replied, "Don't worry, I won't leave. What's going on?"

There was a long pause, then she heaved a great sigh and began to speak.

Ruth had been brought up in a family of committed Protestants and had learned her faith in an old-fashioned Sunday school from kindly teachers. She loved God and believed the stories in the Bible. Ruth's family had been poor, hard hit by the depression. However, they had managed somehow, and had been relatively happy in the process. Her parents placed a high value on education, and through hard work and sacrifice each child in the family eventually had been given the opportunity to go to college. Ruth majored in literature and all through the years continued to read good books and show an interest in new ideas.

She had continued also in her religious practices. She attended the local Methodist church on a fairly regular basis. When her children were young she taught Sunday school. Occasionally she took part in church-related projects. She knew the current pastor quite well and was planning to have him conduct her memorial service.

But, now, all of a sudden, her religious beliefs had evaporated and she was beside herself. How could she die without God? Was there no heaven after all? She wasn't even sure that she wanted a Christian funeral and that would upset everyone. "I'm scared to death," she said, and buried her face in her hands.

After a pause I asked her if she could remember what was happening at the time that she first noticed her faith changing. She said she had been reading some books on Eastern spirituality and one in particular by a "guru type" as she described him. "All of a sudden it didn't seem possible that God could be captured in any earthly frame of reference. All we can know is a Presence, that's it, a 'Creative Presence'." At

that point she started to cry again, and then sobbed. "I've lost it all. What am I going to do? Now that I've told you I bet you don't want to talk to me anymore."

I took her hand in mine and waited a few moments. Then I said, "Ruth, I do want to talk with you. I know this has been very hard for you. Let's just take it slowly together. Maybe things aren't quite as bad as they seem. Because of the nature of faith development, a spiritual crisis often signals the beginning of significant spiritual growth."²

While listening to Ruth it occurred to me that she was probably in just such a time of faith transition and rather than losing her faith completely, as she feared, she was more likely to be undergoing a faith transformation. Because she was intelligent and open to new ideas, I asked if she would be interested in my thoughts about what was happening to her spiritually. She was eager to hear. As she listened to my explanation of faith development theories, I could see her body begin to relax.

"I guess I need to just let these new ideas about the Presence unfold within," she said. I agreed. We ended our time together then and made plans to meet again in three days.

When I arrived on Friday, Ruth opened the door as I was ringing the bell, and ushered me into the living room. Before I was fully seated, she said, "Something's happened! I've had a dream, in fact I've had the same dream three times in a row!"

"Tell me about it."

"It was the same dream every night just as I went to sleep. There were several huge deep blue boulders with eerie blue lights pulsating from them. They made a very loud wailing sound. All my attention was riveted right there. It was frightening, no, awesome, no, really frightening. Then I was awake again. The image of the boulders was gone, but all I had to do was close my eyes and it was back. And yet I didn't have a hard time going back to sleep. This happened three nights in a row."

I asked Ruth to tell me more about the noise.

"It was very loud and crashing, like whole mountains were moving. It didn't make me afraid I would be hurt. But it filled every possible space where noise could be and just engulfed me."

"Can you describe the color and how it moved?"

"The blue was very deep, almost purple and had a metallic quality. Very deep and very blue, the most blue of blue. And it pulsated, sort of danced like the Northern Lights. It was alive and compelling. Those

boulders were awesome. And that was it. It sounds so simple as I tell you but it was truly incredible to experience."

"What do you make of it? Does anything come to mind as you remember the dream?"

"It was like drums beating so loud that you think they are your heartbeat. It was the Presence, whatever that means. Not the boulders themselves or the noise itself. The Presence was all around. I was spell-bound."

"The Presence?"

"Yes, it filled my heart and soul. I felt saturated, and then the whole thing faded. And there's something else. After the second night I called my daughter on the phone and told her about the boulders. She called me back the next morning to say that she had had a dream about boulders too. In her dream the boulders were stone gray and there wasn't any accompanying noise. Isn't that amazing? Imagine us sharing this dream! I feel like we're closer together."

"Really."

"We haven't always agreed on things but since I've been sick it has been different. Julie's really so wonderful and sensitive to what I'm feeling."

For the next week or so I continued to visit Ruth every few days. She became comfortable with her transformed understanding of God as spiritual Presence and reveled in the fact of God's great freedom in the vastness of space. "I don't need to know anything more than that," she said. "God is God, that's all that matters."

She even invited her pastor over and told him of her new spiritual insights. He was immensely supportive and together they planned her funeral. "It's full of surprises for the people I love," she told me later.

On the day before Ruth died I visited, knowing it was time to say goodbye. It was not easy because even in such a short time I had come to love her dearly. She was very weak and could hardly speak. She paused every moment or two to let me lightly brush her lips and teeth with cool water on a swab.

"Tish," she said quietly smiling, "I had the boulder dream again last night." I moved closer. "They had flattened into stepping stones and had moved to make sort of a path and were singing sweetly like the gentle wind. In the distance was a soft inviting clear golden light, it was the Presence calling me." Our eyes met. "It's calling me now and I want to

go. The curtains no longer keep out the light. Nor the walls. He's here with us now. The light is right behind you." I wanted to turn and look but was afraid.

Ruth's sense of peace and rapture touched me deeply as I kissed her goodbye. Turning to leave her bedside I noticed that the nurse who had been in the room with us was crying softly. She too had been overcome by Ruth's words.

The next afternoon Ruth's husband called Hospice to tell us that she had died peacefully surrounded by her family.

I do not think that anyone can hear the story of Ruth's death without experiencing a myriad of personal feelings. For many people being part of another's death is like looking in the mirror. We see our own mortality staring back at us and are forced, at least momentarily, to consider it. We ask ourselves, what will death be like? How will it feel? What lies beyond? What is the meaning of life?

These are the big questions that have been asked throughout the ages. Unfortunately, these are also the questions that our society, for the most part, assiduously avoids. We shrink back in fear of the unknown. We cling to "the rational" as the only way of knowing and miss whole worlds of possibility. And we go to any length to perpetuate the "denial of death" our culture dictates. We lie to our children, place inordinate value on staying young, pay millions to authors to tell us that if we only have the right attitude we can cure a terminal illness. Our undertakers define their art by how natural and lifelike they can make a dead body look and we hide dying people out of sight in hospitals and so-called convalescent hospitals. Unlike other cultures where death is seen as a natural transition to another state of being, we go to any lengths to stave off death, spending billions on useless medical procedures and drugs in the last year of life.

I also do not think that anyone can hear the story of Ruth's death without being drawn into the wonder and mystery of it. We see reflected in her death the possibilities of significant spiritual insight and growing desire to venture into the unknown. Ruth's story shows us that death at home can occupy a valued place in the very midst of family life. No need to deny death here. She has the freedom to talk about her feelings as she reviews her life, almost complete in one sense, and yet in

another stretching out far into the future through her children and grandchildren.

Her family can openly begin their work of grieving the physical separation to come. They can resolve old grievances and know the joy of forgiveness. They can express their love and hear those precious words in return. After Ruth's death these will be the treasured memories that comfort their grief and soften their tears.

Of course, all of death is not good. But it is not all bad either. My question is this. How can we make a dent, even a small dent in the excessive fear of death that grips our culture?

If the pre-death dreams and visions can be transformative for dying people and reduce their fear, why couldn't the same hold true for society? If people in general were to become familiar with pre-death dreams and visions perhaps their fear would lessen too.

Fear of death appears to stem from three main sources: the existential fear that at death we simply cease to exist, fear of facing the unknown alone and for some, religious-based fear of reprisal. The pre-death religious experience undermines all three fears. The dying person's world view is transformed into a new understanding. Life is experienced that transcends the grave, some of the unknown becomes known and fear of a vengeful God is for the most part dispelled.

My hope is that those who study dreams will draw attention to the important role pre-death dreams and visions play in our understanding and experience of death. The result would be a significant impact not only on our fear of death but also on the quality of our *life*. Few would disagree about the positive aspects of the pre-death dreams and visions for dying people and their loved ones. But the advantages need not stop there.

Imagine what would happen if the pervasive fear and denial of death in our society were to significantly decrease. The effects would be felt in everything from substance abuse, to family violence, to medical delivery systems, to religious concepts of the nature of God, just to name a few. Perhaps even the ultimate goal of death with dignity for every human being could become a reality. My challenge to those who work in the field of dreams is that this very real possibility for the betterment of society will be taken up in earnest.

Notes

1. My use of transformative events as descriptive of pre-death dreams or visions is drawn from James Loder's excellent book *The Transforming Moment*. Loder explores the process which takes place resulting in a transformed perception of reality by carefully studying the "event" to determine its essential nature.

There are five steps in this process. First there is a felt sense of *conflict* which draws our attention. Next the unconscious conducts an underground search or *scanning* action which eventually results in a plausible solution or *insight* which transforms the previously held worldview. We then test the outcome to *verify* that the conflicting elements have indeed been transformed. Finally, the transformative event is *interpreted*. This process constitutes, according to Loder, "all the essential features of an event that transforms" (p. 36).

Let us now look at pre-death spiritual experience in terms of Loder's criteria for a transformative event. The conflict first appears in a situational context. Certain assumptions are taken as normative. Let us use the example of the Chinese gentleman who has the vision of his parents and grandparents. The assumption is that these people have been dead for several years. Then something happens, there is a "rupture in the inherent pattern of knowing" (p. 37). He has the vision.

Loder makes two interesting observations at this point in the process. He says that the more one cares about the conflict the more powerful will be the knowing event. And it is a knowing event of far greater personal significance if the initial conflict is not artificially generated from the outside but a conflict that the knower had had all along but not recognized. In our example, both observations have merit. This man cared deeply about his ancestors and he had for a long time been troubled by the conflict he felt between his religious value of ancestor worship and the pervasive American cultural denigration of the elderly.

Next in the process comes the interlude for scanning. The person is temporarily baffled, shifts through various possibilities, and searches for explanations. Our patient wonders how it can be that his dead parents are dead and yet right there in the doorway alive. Then comes "the constructive act of the imagination." At this point, an insight appears often with convincing force and a meaningful unity arises that resolves

the conflict. Loder states, "This is the turning point of the knowing event" (p. 38). Our patient, through the vision, realizes that he has experienced while still in this world, a part of the world of his dead parents. He had always been told of the ongoing existence of ancestors. Now he has experienced it for himself. The construction of this insight is the transformation.

Next in Loder's process, there is a release of energy as the conflict is resolved and consciousness is expanded. A sense of liberation is felt and the person becomes open to further associations carrying the implications of the resolution even further. Our patient experiences a sense of peace in the context of his dying and begins to wonder about further possibilities of life in the next world.

In the fifth and final step the transformative event is completed. The event is interpreted and the knower's world is now reconfigured in a new way. In our example, the Chinese gentleman's vision of his relatives standing in the doorway holding orchids became the impetus for the transformation of his worldview. His interior spiritual life has been reclaimed from the shadows.

James Loder defines transformation by saying, "This key term does not refer merely to change in a positive direction, as common usage would suggest. Rather, transformation occurs whenever, within a given frame of reference or experience, hidden orders of coherence and meaning emerge to replace or alter the axioms of the given frame and reorder its elements accordingly" (p. 229). The pre-death spiritual experience activates a transformation. Spiritual reality for the patient is reconstructed.

2. It was here that I became thankful, as I have been many times in the past, for the work of James Fowler and the others who study and write about faith development. According to Fowler, faith development is a constructionist rather than developmental process. This means that between one stage and the next, the currently held faith stance is not simply added to, but breaks down during the transition and a new understanding of faith comes into being. In the process, religious beliefs that may have sustained a person for years can be shaken to the core. It is a time when knowledgeable ministers and spiritual companions need to be particularly supportive of those whose spiritual lives are in a process of transformation.



Western Dreams about Eastern Dreams

Wendy Doniger

1. *What can we learn about dreams from the myths of other cultures?*

It is often argued that quantum physics confirms Zen Buddhism, that our own "modern" ideas were prefigured by "Oriental" mythologies. This may or may not be so, but I do not think it is a useful path to follow. Instead, I would argue that some of the insights of non-Western mythologies do indeed bear striking resemblances to some of the most abstract formulations of modern science, but only because the same basic human mind is searching for a limited set of metaphors with which to make sense of the same basic human experiences, be their expressions Eastern or Western, "factual" or imaginative. This is the bridge that justifies our attempts to gain insights about *our dreams* from the stories that other cultures tell about their dreams.

2. *What relevance does our understanding of lucid dreams, on the one hand, and orgasmic dreams, on the other, have for the interpretation of myths about sexual dreams?*

Stephen LaBerge has summarized the growing literature on what are called lucid dreams, which take place "when we 'awaken' within our dreams—without disturbing or ending the dream state—and learn to recognize that we are dreaming while the dream is still happening."¹ In addition to demonstrating that such dreams do occur, LaBerge goes on