

The Give-and-Take of Dream Notes

When I began exploring dreams, I followed two premises that were stated or implied in various dream books available in the 1970s. First, every dream image—person, animal, or object—conveys an emotion and can be regarded as referring to oneself. Second, every word describing a person, animal, object, situation, or relationship is a carrier of emotion. Gradually I became aware of mercurial aspects of dreams; for example, an abstraction may turn into an animal, and a motif may turn into a theme.

From the start I uncovered a great deal of punning, also *double entendre*, that provided clues to understanding a dream; also I recognized that homonyms (such as right/write and pane/pain) are often clues. Nouns may revert to verbs, and persons may carry through the actions from which their names were derived. All forms of my name, even my initials, indicated personal involvement. In addition, names of persons I have known in the past suggested other times and places; for example, the name Robach told me to row back to an earlier event. Spielmaker reminded me to avoid exaggerated speech. Hartman and Newman had positive connotations, whereas Falter, Lynch, and Schaaf had negative ones. McPhilamy could be positive or negative, depending on what filled me at the time. Elderkin I have yet to embrace.

Sometimes a dream image is a recognizable portrait or a mirror image; other times a caricature of a trait that I would like to enhance or to erase; a snapshot of a prevailing mood; an etching of the impression I make on others; or a sketch of an activity that is questionable.

Each person in my rogues gallery of dream adversaries, as well as in my portrait gallery of family and friends, illustrates a quality, or even a philosophy, that I need to explore. For example, when I first encountered violence in dreams, I was reluctant to claim it as my own. Yet I had to admit that, even when violence seemed

to emanate from Other, I had internalized it to some degree in Self. Similarly, even when a person in a dream was recognizable as Other, I still needed to deal with my part in the relationship. Dreams alerted me to what I was projecting onto others and what others were projecting onto me, and that required a great deal of sorting!

Images in the Context of a Dream

Occasionally there was only a single image that I recalled, due to highly-charged emotions. An instance of that was when I wakened myself shouting, “Not an ice chest, Jay!” Later, in a dialogue with the image of a Styrofoam ice chest, I better understood my concern. Its response was, “I keep the hot and cold in,” which was a problem in our relationship at the time.

Even a single feature of an image can call attention to a greater whole. In literature this feature is called synecdoche; in cinematography it involves zooming in on a facial expression, a hand holding a revolver, a medallion, a stamp, or anything emblematic of the plot. Here is an excerpt from a dream, “Yippie Yi Yay” (Jul 15, 1977) wherein clothing and a voice convey the scene:

In town, dungarees sit erect, mad for the rodeo,
and bright neckerchiefs salute one another
before the competitions begin.

A silver-spangled announcer challenges,
his voice compelling as an auctioneer’s:
Come if you dare! I’m here when you dare!

A very brief dream that carried a powerful message for me was composed of only two images and one word: construction sand; fine, white play sand; and *combine* (Feb 21, 1996). From them I understood a need for balance when working on a book—a need to include playfulness along with the serious business of construction. That became my practice in the succeeding 20 years.

Dreams without Images

For me a verbal dream, one without images, is rare. An example is a two-word dream, "Oh, Govern!" that led to the realization that "the governing of one's Self comes from within" (Mar 4, 1978).

A verbal dream carries intense feelings, often reassurance, and sometimes a realization about a problem or situation. One such realization came to me fully formed: "Lumps of anxiety and knots in muscles can be available as energy. Energy in suspension can be called on when I need it. There doesn't have to be heat-conversion each time from energy to action" (Jun 30, 1979).

In the following verbal dream, which still astonishes me, I speak on many subjects and hear a response from a feminist critic:

Sep 14, 1986

Performing Extemporaneously

I'm performing extemporaneously a poem that goes on at considerable length. Every phrase has energy and pushes toward a climax. I realize how eloquent this is and wish a tape-recorder were capturing it. I wonder if I can possibly reconstruct the piece in writing.

Some of the closing lines incorporate or else paraphrase a penitential psalm that begins, "Out of the depths I cry." My whole performance poem is about depths, hollows, cylinders, spools of film, darkness, blankness, the registering of images, the clarity of images, fullness, ripeness.

The poem conveys something about the positive forms of technology that enhance natural forms and flows of energy. So many abstractions followed by a twist, "How sweet it is!" [a la Jackie Gleason].

There's a woman in the audience or class or seminar who picks up on an oral cue, "I cry to you aloud." She notes, "The male aspect of divinity is not stressed. Also there's a pun, aloud/allowed. Crying is allowed, protesting is allowed; these are actions as well as sounds and may take us out of the depths."

When I have a verbal dream, it often leads me to more verbalizing, either by journaling or by drafting a poem.

Doubling or Repetition of Images

Images when doubled or repeated, and themes when repeated in close succession, demand my full attention. Some are like instant replays of a televised sporting event, showing a close-up view or a detail that might not have been noticeable the first time around. Repetitive dreams ask, sometimes command, me to stand at attention, salute, and carry through with appropriate action. Repetitive dreams come in several ways: in a *cluster* on one night, in a *constellation* covering several consecutive nights, or in a *series* occurring over a long period— sometimes years between them, yet picturing such strong emotions that they are memorable.

My Steps in Recording Dreams

My practice has been to write dream notes during the night, without turning on a light, and while resuming the same bodily position as when I wakened from the dream. (A Fisher Space Pen® allows me to write in any position.) As I scribble the notes, I often leave a bracketed space [], which keeps me in the dream and allows me to fill in a fact or a relevant association in the morning when I write my Reflections. When I pose a question within the dream itself, I also utilize brackets so I will not be distracted from the immediate dream experience.

With the Reflections in the morning, I focus on the exact words and images written during the night. I have found it does not profit me to veer into free-association or to spiral into analytical interpretation, yet I sometimes note an immediate prompt for the dream such as a book, movie, or conversation.

For presenting my dreams in dream groups, I use a font that resembles handwriting for the notes made during the night and a book-face font for the Reflections made in the morning. The following is a dream that speaks to the efficacy of handwritten notes:

Jul 24, 2010

Composing while Writing Longhand

This may be in a test situation. At any rate, there is a deadline involved. I'm writing fluently and serenely, breathing deeply. I never write this well when under duress! I stop momentarily to admire the penmanship. My grade-school teachers would be proud of this penmanship—legible and lovely, even though not as prescribed in class.

I'm delighted that my composition is moving so well. But now I'm distracted by someone who asks me a question. When I look up to answer, I realize that no professor or publisher will accept handwritten pages. Manuscript has lost its original meaning.

I leave off in the middle of a sentence and move to my computer, filled with doubts of how to proceed. The joy has dissolved. I'm afraid the inspiration has, too.

FEELINGS:

I can't recall another dream that has so many feeling words within the story! In the morning I add these: unacceptable, afraid, confused.

REFLECTIONS:

1. Happily, there is no deadline for my poetry book, *Suspending Disbelief*. The "legible and lovely" refer to these poems. This dream's questions and distractions resonate with my book about dreams, *Dream Encounters*, which is underway but not a source of stress.
2. Relative to "manuscript," my misgivings are most likely about the dream notes themselves because many are still in scribbles, never typed.
3. The distractions, questioning, and doubts resonate with my Inner Critic, who still insists on prescribing and classifying.

CHALLENGE:

How can I achieve greater cooperation between my Critic and my Creative Child?

My Steps in Processing Dreams

For the processing of my dreams, I allow up to one hour each morning to list feelings and reflections, assign each dream a title, and enter any new motif or theme in my concordance. I stay with the dream and its puns as my primary source. Some of the themes I have explored through decades are universally known, such as flying dreams and sexual dreams. Others themes are highly personal, such as catharsis dreams and my versions of death and dying.

My next step is taking a dream that still puzzles me to a dream group. I was a member of Dreamtalk in Columbus, Ohio from its inception in 1981, until I moved to Colorado in 1997. We met weekly and followed the guidelines in *Appreciating Dreams: A Group Approach* by Montague Ullman, M.D., who is often referred to as “the grand-daddy of dream group work.”

Sometimes another step is necessary for me to achieve closure on a dream. If so, I add that to the original notes under a side-heading, either Challenge or Action.

When I am completely stumped about meaning, I honor the dream not by analysis but by action. Sometimes the action has been allegorical. For example, I honored a dream about a little girl who, like her counterpart in a Mother Goose rhyme, “when she was good she was very, very good, but when she was bad, she was horrid.” For her I pasted a gold star on my forehead each morning for a week. Most often the action has been practical, such as following a dream suggestion about the state of my health, the safety of my car, or the fragility of a friendship. Other actions range from wearing a gemstone of the dream’s main color, to applying an essential oil that resonates with the dream; from vocalizing while holding a single dream image in mind, to transposing the entire dream into a poem; from sketching a mandala based on a dream’s images, to incorporating them in a large collage.

Determined never to impose meaning on a dream, I look for meaning to emerge from the seeming chaos. If it does not emerge in timely fashion, I recite the mantra, “Be at peace with your soul. The universe is unfolding as it should.”

Distinguishing Motifs and Themes

Regarding people, places, and things in dreams, I do not call them symbols; I refer to them simply as images. A *symbol* is a representation that is recognized universally and through generations or eras. Examples are flags of countries, the Red Cross, some international logos, the Christian crucifix, mathematical symbols, computer icons, and most punctuation marks. Carl Jung's predecessors gave a convincing argument that archetypes are symbols, having been recognized over centuries and around the world. Jung went a step further, asserting that archetypes are not only recognizable signs but have a life of their own. (More about this appears in the section "Me and My Shadow.")

An *image* is more discrete than a symbol; even when it develops into a personal symbol, I would never claim that a dream image of mine has the same meaning for another person, far less for a group of people. Therefore, when I write poems derived from dreams, I strive to give readers enough clues for them to recognize meanings that are personal to me, whether or not they might be construed as archetypal.

In the dream concordance that I developed, and in this present book, I also make a distinction between motif and theme. A *motif* is a figure whose characteristics can change in various contexts while still maintaining its essence. A motif is not always consistent; the context of each dream allows for emphasis on different features. For example, in my dreams a canary is aesthetically pleasing as a songbird; it also can be a warning about my shallow breathing, a carrier of a bright idea, or a messenger on the spiritual level. Another example of a motif is from a single lengthy dream (Aug 25, 1975), in which a spotlight occurs in six scenes:

- on a Coca-Cola truck, more a warning than publicity,
- on the invisible wall of an elevator,
- overhead, probing, as in old police interrogation movies,
- ahead of me and a patient, like a flashlight,
- over a doctor and his patient, their auras,
- on a dancer.

When a motif appears repeatedly, it may lead to the discovery of a theme. For example, my notes on the *motifs* “staircases and ladders” led me to recognize the *theme* of Ascending. Another example, my notes on the motifs “crossroads and intersections” led me to recognize the *theme* of Making Decisions.

A *theme* is developed at greater length than a motif, is usually an action (or several actions), and maintains its characteristics in a variety of contexts. In the variants of a theme traced over several years, the situations, images, and motifs may differ considerably.

Characteristics of Dream Cycles

I was slow to realize that different dream periods have different characteristics. I learned this gradually from my own dreams and from similar observations by other members of Dreamtalk:

- The falling-asleep dream is short and its images reflect the activities or concerns of recent days.
- The middle-of-night dreams are longer and they process feelings on a deep level.
- The dawn dream, which anticipates the new day, is vivid when the dreamer is wakened by an alarm clock; therefore, it is easiest to recall. The dawn dream, literally cut off by the alarm, rarely has a conclusion, thus leaving the dreamer puzzled and exclaiming, “That was weird!”

If a dawn dream of mine is not interrupted, it may reveal strange bedfellows: characters from books, film stars, political figures, my kindergarten teacher or my dentist, any person of my extended family, and any animal from a pet to Adam’s off ox. There follows a poem derived from a constellation of dreams that occurred over consecutive nights, at the times noted. It exemplifies dream cycles; the variety of verse forms conveys the variety of presentations within those cycles.

Royal Flush

12 a.m. King

A king dubs me Venerable.
 Next, offers a sliver of his pie chart,
 expecting reciprocity:
You owe me.

1:30 a.m. Queen

My home is a castle inviting the tourist.
 In the great hall, on a table of ebony,
 is draped a medieval tapestry
 whose theme is hunt-to-feast.
 Its warp and woof are weighted down
 by bowls and tankards, pewter and silver.
 I would yank it out from under
 all that unaccommodating treasure,
 wrap one end around my shoulders,
 covering myself with embroidered flowers
 stitched by radiant handmaidens
 who now dance in a heyday circle,
 allowing the hounds and the hunters
 to bark their way at the end of my train.
 Queen of all I survey, I reign.

3 a.m. Knave

Someone has left wet towels
 and large black circles
 on my golden oak floor.
 I, who am left to restore
 the wood, tell everyone in sight,
 "Move the furniture away.
 I need to sand and varnish, too."
 They do.

But no sooner than I say, "Okay,"
 Two Men and a Truck take over,
 move every piece back,
 and frustrate my putting things right.

4:30 a.m. Tenterhooks

You, the gentlest of men, make magic—
 pull poems from behind my ears,
 produce gems as large as metaphors,
 intertwine scarves with such brilliance
 I can never forget.
 You place your hands above my shoulders
 and gift me with a deep flush
 of loving benediction.
 Your final gift: a rabbit
 to keep our memories warm.
 I cherish it as long as life allows—
 snug in my caring until
 someone with a wet blanket
 comes and smothers it.

6 a.m. Joker

I, garbed in a royal-blue blanket
 that slips provocatively over my breasts,
 the men in the seminar bare-chested or nude,
 none of us a prude, one of us joking:
*Are we sufficiently mature
 to be explicating
 the barwdy lyrics of Chaucer?*

In the dream that I transposed into the poem "Royal Flush," there are several *motifs*: home as castle; tapestry, scarves, and towels; animals predator and prey; men of varying dispositions. The one constant is the Queen facing challenges. What is the *theme*? Gambling for high stakes, to cancel the IOU held by the King.

Respecting the Complexity of Dreams

Starry-eyed at the beginning of this endeavor, I supposed that I could trace progress year by year. Ha! Whatever progress I have made as an adult has gone through several patterns. For the first pattern, a line drawing can suffice: a steep learning curve. For the second, the pattern is two-dimensional: a labyrinth. The third pattern is three-dimensional: a spiral, its every upward arc followed by a downward arc, rising slightly higher with each turn.

Only after five years of writing dream notes did I begin studying books on the subject, because I had vowed “not to be led into temptation” (*i.e.*, analytical interpretation) by eminent authors. After that I read widely for information, guidance, and sustenance, and within 10 years, I acquired over 75 books devoted to dream studies in all their complexity.

Unfailingly helpful to me over the years has been Jill Mellick’s *The Natural Artistry of Dreams: Creative Ways to Bring the Wisdom of Dreams to Waking Life*. I love her motto, “Delighting in Diversity,” and have been guided by her philosophy, as set forth here:

Dreams, creative expression, and soul are inseparable. They operate in an endless cycle. Each plays a crucial role in your inner life. Each needs, nourishes, and leads into the other. Treat each with the quiet, curious, and loving respect it deserves.

In the 20 years since the publication of Mellick’s book, the book of dream studies that I value most is *Integral Dreaming* by Fariba Bogzaran and Daniel Deslauriers. Here is a capsule report on their scientific and cultural studies of dreaming:

From an integral perspective, *dream awareness* is the practice of being present to one’s inner life in its full integrity. The simple but powerful act of being present to one’s dreams helps dreamers perceive aspects of their selves that are perhaps the growing tip of their own

being. Often this perception reinforces the dreamer's wish to know him- or herself better, thus helping to overcome self limitations. Dreams become a potent vehicle for creative insight, connecting seemingly divided or unfamiliar parts, or even discarded ones, into a more complex, interconnected whole.

My focus has always been on the appreciation of dreams' complexity and power, not on the dissecting or dismantling of them. I have found Jung's discussion of *meandering* very helpful. In *Man and His Symbols*, he states that meandering goes on continuously in our Unconscious and manifests in our dreams, often with highly personal images. Some figures, landscapes, or situations recur until we realize a series and can readily see changes that have gone unnoticed. Further:

If one watches the meandering pattern, in which individual strands or tendencies become visible, then vanish, then return again, over a long period of time, one can observe a sort of hidden regulating or directing tendency at work, creating a slow, imperceptible process of psychic growth—the process of individuation.

In processing my dreams for more than four decades, I have become increasingly aware of Jung's qualifiers: "a long period of time" and "a slow, imperceptible process of psychic growth."