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Dreams and Spiritual Direction

Craig M. Mueller

A myth is a public dream, a dream is a private myth.

—Joseph Campbell

Throughout our lives we face transition, challenge, and change. Again and again we learn to let go of tight control and open ourselves to the healing, transforming love of God. Not until the final letting go of our death do we reach the total rest of peace and wholeness.

Yet each night we symbolically let go and in a sense die, by closing our eyes and resting. During this time we do not enter a place of nothingness but a rich, inner world of dreams. By seeking the wisdom of dreams, we acknowledge them as a gift of God for our health and salvation. While we may receive profound insight and strength from public rituals, sacred scriptures, and myths of our religious heritage, our own dreams provide a unique, personal application of divine wisdom.

Spiritual direction is a natural place where director and directee ponder, explore, and prayerfully consider God's grace, healing, transformation, and invitation. Our dreams can provide a deeper source of truth for our hearts to ponder when our conscious minds become weary of analyzing and strategizing. Dreams are a profound way to listen for the voice of the sacred speaking to us.

The spiritual awakening of the past several decades is rooted in human experience. Many people now seek a spirituality focused on their personal lives—their thoughts and feelings, their relationships, the events of daily life. Spiritual direction is gaining recognition today because it allows people to process and reflect upon the

spiritual stirrings within their own personal stories. Spiritual stirrings happen in dreams. Dreamwork is often taught in spiritual direction training programs both for students' own enrichment and to inform their practice of companionship with others.

Spiritual direction is not simply analyzing our lives using the "left brain" faculties, for this would make it an exercise in problem-solving. To embark on the spiritual journey and to enter a relationship of spiritual direction is to open ourselves up to mystery—to other ways of living, learning, reflecting, and being in the world. Spiritual direction teaches us to trust alternative ways of "knowing" ourselves and the sacred mystery within, about, and around us. Yet this is difficult for our rational, goal-oriented minds to grasp. When our cognitive side is caught napping, the mystery can begin to unfold.

Listening to our dreams is a very personal way of tapping into a source of rich inner wisdom. Dreams have been called "personal scriptures." The characters, events, and symbols in our dreams are uniquely ours. While some might dismiss dreams as simply rehashing the events of the day or revealing our deepest wishes and desires, many people have found in dreams a deep connection to the sacred in their lives. Dreams provide new information and insight; they reveal what our conscious mind doesn't already know. Dreams move us toward wholeness (*salvation*, to use religious language) and an awareness of deeper truths not always apparent in our conscious, waking state.

Dreams and Spirituality

Though working with dreams is seldom a part of religious curriculum in churches and synagogues, our Judeo-Christian sacred scriptures present a God who communicates through the symbolic language of dreams and visions (Jacob, Solomon, Samuel, Joseph, Nebuchadnezzar, etc.). Some would suggest that God no longer speaks to humankind in such a "direct" way, yet all of us dream. And those who have done inner work know dream content is not random or nonsensical. Rather, the dream is a gift from God, revealing or encouraging movements toward healing and wholeness.

Recently in my own dream life, two nonsensical figures appeared. They were two alluring brothers ages eight and fourteen. They were wealthy, sophisticated, and from another country. Who were these people, or what did they represent? Nothing about the dream resonated with me until later during a dreamwork session. I was reminded of my own particular vulnerability precisely between the ages of eight and fourteen. The brothers represented the wholeness and balance that I lacked at that age and that I seek on an ongoing basis.

The work of Carl Jung has been foundational for our contemporary understanding of dreams, particularly as related to our spiritual selves. In Jungian psychology the psyche refers to the personality as a whole. Our conscious mind is regulated by the ego, which is like a gatekeeper, deciding which psychic material is to reach the level of full awareness. The ego's awareness of self is limited and largely inaccurate. The unconscious mind is a vast sea of energies, even distinct personalities, living within us. According to Jung, our conscious ego is like a cork floating on the ocean of our unconscious. One

part of the unconscious, the Self, is concerned with balancing various aspects of our personality and is a source of wholeness and meaning. Jung suggested that for Western Christians, the Self is the Christ within, humanity's highest aspiration. Individuation, the lifelong process of achieving wholeness, brings the conscious and unconscious into relationship. Through dreams, myth, ritual, and imagination, wholeness is nurtured and enhanced.

It might be helpful to think of the dream as revealing soul energy. Whether or not we understand the significance of a dream, it works independently to establish balance within our unconscious. We may not be aware of all this energy and its possibilities, but by unlocking the gift of the dream, we can tap into this wisdom. Without processing, the dream's raw material seems a jumble of symbols and scenes that make no sense. With the help of a companion, spiritual director, or dream group, we can be enabled to integrate insights of the dream more fully into our conscious lives.

We acknowledge that God has given energy to our soul. In return, by doing dreamwork we consciously present to God the dream's gift of our life energy. We offer back to the Source ourselves transformed by the energy, or grace, coming to us through the dream. We are graced in receiving the dream, and our dreamwork returns the dream, now transformed, as an offering to God.¹

It is both surprising and delightful to encounter a dream that starts out meaning nothing to us but after dreamwork offers profound wisdom and truth. The symbolic content of the dream tells us that we are not in the realm of absolutes, for there is never only one meaning to a dream. If symbols have many meanings, then the material in our dreams will have multiple levels of meaning and relevance.

I once had a powerful dream in which I chopped someone up with a spade and held his beating heart in my hand. My mother then inserted this heart into my chest in order to save my life. On one level, the dream seemed to be about my own unacknowledged angry, destructive feelings. But on another level, the dream caused me to look at my own heart. The mother figure, as my feminine side, pointed to the need for emotion, passion, and love to balance my strong analytical side.

There may be no such thing as totally unlocking the mystery of a dream once and for all. Like a good myth, it may speak to us differently at different times in our lives. Just as people return to certain scripture passages again and again, it is possible to return to a dream in the future and gain new insights about our inner truth. For those of us who like a more systematic approach to faith or our personalities, fluid and open interpretation of dreams is a humble reminder that life is ambiguous and sometimes contradictory. Paradoxes abound.

Our lives are seldom one extreme or another but rather a holding together of opposites. Such a spiritual stance continues to lead us to new awareness of both ourselves and the Divine; life is not static but continues to offer us fresh, surprising discoveries. The mystery of rebirth becomes a tangible, unfolding reality as God continues to transform us and our understandings of self, God, our lives, and the world.

In one dream, I met up with a professor-mentor from college as well as another character, a friend whose personality is opposite to mine in many ways. These two performed acrobatic stunts together. My friend was broken in pieces and put, unformed, into a container. As I walked away, an observer noticed some of the unformed material sticking to me. Here I was holding together opposites: myself, whom I liked to see as the orderly, proper, and controlled professor, and my friend, whose qualities of spontaneity and wit I admired. Hard work during my own midlife crisis has brought about rebirth and transformation as I let these two opposites do their stunts and let some of my friend "rub off" on me.

Receptivity to Dreams

Many people complain that they don't dream or that they don't remember their dreams. In reality, all people do dream. Studies have shown that certain stages of our sleep are marked with rapid eye movement (REM). Laboratory subjects awakened during REM sleep almost invariably report vivid dreams.

Honoring dreams and the unconscious takes some deliberate nurture and attention. If we value dreams and desire them in our waking life, such an attitude will be a signal to our unconscious that we want to remember our dreams. Usually this is exactly what happens. If one is awakened by a compelling dream in the middle of the night, most of the time it will be remembered in the morning. Those who are serious about dreamwork keep a pen or pencil, pad of paper, and flashlight or penlight on their nightstand. Upon awakening they immediately write, regardless of how strange or insignificant the dream or dream snippet seems. It is helpful to briefly review the dream while still semiconscious and to stay physically as still as possible. By writing down our dreams, we are inviting the unconscious to help us. We acknowledge that our ego's perspective is limited and that we seek the wisdom of an inner guide, even the Holy Spirit within us.

Before bedtime some people say a prayer, do a ritual, or in some way seek the sacred wisdom that will come in the form of a dream. A person desiring dreams may say a simple prayer before bed, such as, "Giver of dreams, reveal your wisdom to me this night." Seekers might place a symbolic object, such as a Native American dream catcher, near or above their heads. Periods of introspection and solitude, such as retreats, may make us more receptive to remembering dreams. Placing a dream notebook near at hand is a sign of expectation and intent.

Dreams in the Spiritual Direction Session

If dreams are honored as a deep source of wisdom for our spiritual lives, then it is natural that they be included in a spiritual direction relationship. The director may suggest integrating dreamwork into regular sessions. If the directee is receptive, some introductory information will be needed, since many people are not familiar with recording and discussing their dreams. A spiritual director who has used dreams in his

or her personal work will be more comfortable incorporating them in a session with someone else. Some basic reading (see Recommended Reading at the end of this essay) will provide the spiritual director with concepts of dreams and the unconscious. However, a director should not attempt to work with someone else's dreams on the basis of reading alone.

Directees may occasionally bring a dream that troubles or fascinates them, or dreams may become a regular rhythm within the direction session. Directees sometimes express regret for having spent a whole session on dreamwork, but then they realize that nearly everything they had hoped to talk about in that session was brought up. In such a session, the dream is like an index of everything that is going on.

If the dream is recent, it is likely to contain emotional energy from the dreamer's current life situation. The dream may provide a new way of framing that life situation. The sacred is often revealed in ways contrary to what we might have first thought.

A directee told of a dream in which three babies were born in the nursing home where she works. A nursing home ordinarily seems to house people closer to death than to birth. The directee, usually proper and reserved, was experiencing the surfacing of a wild, rebellious side of her personality at that time. The dream, she acknowledged, pointed to that new birth. She was able to connect dream energy with God and her spiritual life, opening up a new dimension of the sacred by attending to a contrary paradoxical image.

A directee may seek specific direction or insight from dreamwork. While such guidance may come from material in the dream, it may be better to see the dream as raising questions rather than giving answers. The dream may invite us to reflect on aspects of our lives that we previously missed. We may see new possibilities for ourselves that we couldn't imagine before. The grace of the dream can propel us to a deeper faith and openness to life, ourselves, and the mystery of God.

Working with the Dream

A director may begin by asking the directee to read aloud the dream as recorded, in the first person (as if it were happening in the present). The directee may be encouraged to remember feelings associated with the events, people, or symbols in the dream. The dreamer can describe what associations each person or symbol in the dream has in his or her waking life. Most often each symbol is related to an energy within the dreamer. For example, if a directee dreams about his father's death, it is most likely suggesting not the literal death of his father but the death of a part of his father within the directee. The presence of death in dreams often suggests the death of an element in one's self in order that something new may be born. Thus, what could initially be troubling in the dream may be a hopeful and encouraging sign of change and growth.

A directee had a terrible dream about a young girl thrown from her seat on a Ferris wheel. The girl was totally destroyed when she hit the earth. At first the directee could think of nothing but her horror of the girl's death. In direction, she came to identify traumatic events in her childhood that destroyed her sense of wonder and

excitement. By comparing her childhood to the present, she was able to see growth and spiritual movement and receive new energy, hope, and the gift of God's healing presence.

Some analysts suggest a dream could be read by adding the words "in me" after each symbol. Again, dreams use the language of metaphor and symbol and represent a certain energy in the dreamer. Puns or wordplays may also be evident. For example, the color blue may be used by the unconscious to suggest that someone has the "blues." Dreams about houses are often pictures of our personality or the self we live inside of. The house we grew up in links us with the past; a house in disrepair may suggest loose ends in our lives; a newly remodeled house may alert us to new energy and self-esteem. Going up and down stairs or elevators may reflect exploration of future and past, ethereal and spiritual, or earthy and foundational.

Since many of these connections may not occur to the dreamer, the spiritual director's role is to open up possibilities for interpretation. The director can act as an agent of free association, remaining, of course, nondirective.

By knowing the context of the dreamer's life, the director can suggest balance or perspective that the dream may be revealing. Often the dream speaks in extremes to get our attention and to compensate for our lack of conscious awareness. In Jungian terms, ego is conscious and accessible; shadow is unconscious and inaccessible. When the shadow enters our consciousness, it may reveal characteristics that we despise, find unacceptable, or refuse to acknowledge. These negative, embarrassing, or immoral parts may be repressed, but they may be just the positive source of energy our conscious life needs. A director can help look for the positive imbedded in the negative.

Jung said about our collective shadow that he [the shadow] is 90 percent pure gold! Without a contact with our shadow we would become self-righteous, devoid of life, lacking in human understanding, sexually cold, unable to have living relationships with people, cut off from the earth, just plain dull, and subject to unconscious cruelties of a frightful proportion. When we look at some of the puritanic Christians who have tried to identify themselves with only righteousness, we can see this amply illustrated.²

We divide the world into dualities of good and bad, positive and negative, right and wrong. Yet this is also the source of much brokenness in our lives. Certain dreams may dramatize these opposites and encourage us to think about our lives in a more holistic way. Healing energy may be unleashed for us when we hear the voice of God speaking in ways contrary to our initial preconceptions. Peace and integrity may only come from embracing the seeming opposites in our personalities.

The spiritual director's role in dream interpretation may be as a gentle voice inviting the directee to see his or her life in fresh, creative ways. Dreams also provide our directees with a larger picture of life and show them what to focus upon. Amid fears and inner conflicts, dreams often ground directees in a position of strength. Dreams reveal emerging self-worth, which is the reality that all of us are created in the image of God and loved unconditionally.

One question a spiritual director can ask is, why did this particular dream come to you at this particular time? As a gift of wisdom from a Source beyond our and our directees' limited egos, dreamwork is approached with both gratitude and curiosity. A director may also suggest that the directee spend time in meditation with a scene or symbols from a dream if meanings are slow in coming.

A director, knowing a directee's communication skills, can suggest various forms of art, such as drawing, painting, or sculpting, to extend or draw out a dream. It is good to remind directees that the quality of art does not matter, but the process does.

A directee may be guided in active imagination, where he or she dialogues (either written or aloud) with a character or symbol in the dream. Dialogue may make the dream more "real" and help integrate it into the directee's life. Such dialogue is suggested in the example that follows.

A directee's dream had a large key as a primary symbol. The key is carried to a place significant to the dreamer. The directee (D) wrote a dialogue with the key (K), which opened up a deep place in his soul that could not be touched by rational analysis. It started like this:

- D: O key, what are you? What is locked? What is closed?
- K: You are not the self you used to be. Things are different. You can never go back.
- D: Did I say I wanted to go back? What is the key for?
- K: It isn't that simple. Only you know the key to inner peace.
- D: That's what I'm seeking, asking you.
- K: What were your feelings about the key?
- D: It was terrible, like being stabbed. The pain was unbearable.
- K: Is that what it was like to leave a place you deeply loved?
- D: Yes, it was the greatest pain I've ever known.
- K: Your loss and sacrifice are the key to all you are becoming. The key is your death, that you may be born anew. The key is your transformation. What is closed in you will bring forth something new.

All these suggestions can set in motion a flow of energy between the conscious and the unconscious. A spiritual director who works with dreams can assist directees to open up to the source of divine healing and wholeness beyond their rational minds. By following through and honoring the dream in some tangible way, such as with a ritual, directees can allow sacred wisdom to take root in their lives. Our dreams can be as rich as our own inner life and imagination and can paint a picture of the current landscape of our soul.

Thomas Merton and Dreams

Thomas Merton's spiritual journey is an excellent example of what Jung calls individuation, or the process of becoming a whole person—growing toward conscious awareness of one's true Self. For Christians, this would be a sense of Christ as the regulating center of the personality. Merton says, "The whole purpose of spiritual direction is to penetrate beneath the surface of a man's life, to get behind the facade of conventional gestures and attitudes which he presents to the world, and to bring out his inner spiritual freedom, his inmost truth, which is what we call the likeness of Christ in his soul."³

While Merton does not write directly about dreams within a spiritual direction session, he obviously values them as a part of his spiritual development and records many dreams in his journals. Several of these include female figures who represent his *anima*, which Jung defines as the unconscious, feminine side of a man's personality. The *animus* is the unconscious, masculine side of a woman's personality. In a dream recorded in February 1958, Merton was embraced by a young Jewish girl who said her name was Proverb. To honor the dream and its message, Merton dialogues with Proverb and thanks her for appearing: "How grateful I am to you for loving in me something which I thought I had entirely lost, and someone who, I thought, had long ago ceased to be. . . . Dearest Proverb, I love your name, its mystery, its simplicity and its secret, which even you yourself seem not to appreciate."⁴

Merton's further experience and reflection on the feminine element in his life led him to write the prose poem "Hagia Sophia." Later dreams include animal figures appearing as a Lady Latinist, a Chinese princess, and a black mother. Robert G. Waldron's book *Thomas Merton in Search of His Soul* includes possible interpretations of these figures in relation to Merton's life. Merton's recorded dreams invite the reader's interpretations, but we must remember that only the dreamer him- or herself can name and appropriate a dream's deep wisdom or truth.

If you were Merton's spiritual director, you might suggest possible ways of looking at his dreams to see whether they rang true for Merton himself. As director, you could commend Merton for his work with active imagination and poetry and encourage him to do more of the same. Since dreams raise questions rather than provide specific answers, you might encourage Merton to let the questions become a part of his prayer, journal writing, or other spiritual disciplines.

Conclusion

Whatever the stage of our life cycle, condition in life, or state of our soul, our dreams are filled with symbols, energy, and the movement of our spiritual life. Spiritual direction helps us become whole persons, and dreams are a unique way of touching our deepest realities. In seeing ourselves more clearly, we can also see the transcendent presence that is as close to us as our own breath. By sharing dreams and

possible meanings, both director and directee behold the mystery of redemption as it unfolds in one of God's beloved children.

Recommended Reading

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Notes

1. Louis Savory et al., *Dreams and Spiritual Growth: A Christian Approach to Dreamwork* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 7.
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3. Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1960), 16.
4. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), 3.