

# USING DREAMS IN SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

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Everyone dreams—every night and generally several times a night. Some people spend as much as one fifth of their sleep time dreaming. Many dream in vivid color; a few have dreams within a dream. Although a universal phenomenon, in practically all cases a dream will have specific personal meaning. Anything that has affected us in depth is likely to emerge, symbolized in appropriate imagery, in our dreams. Dreams can tell us about our spiritual life, and they can be a useful tool for spiritual direction.

Since dreaming is so common and so central in a person's life, it is difficult to understand the reluctance with which dreams have been put to use in spiritual direction. It is even harder to explain why some people regard them as sources of deception, when one of the most decisive happenings in the early church—an event that paved the way for its cultural liberation from Judaism and eventually led to the acknowledgement of its universality—was Peter's and Cornelius's coordinated dreams (Acts 10).

Actually, dreams have not enjoyed a good image among spiritual writers and spiritual directors. Superstitious, occult, and irrational elements as-

sociated with dreams and their interpretation may explain the reason for this reticence and caution. Even Pedro Meseguer, whose book *The Secret of Dreams* did so much to foster an appreciation of the value of dreams, recommends their use for spiritual direction only "in exceptional cases for proportionately good reasons." Nevertheless, dreams do contain valuable information that, with proper study and interpretation, can help us to understand how we are faring in our spiritual growth.

Before analyzing dreams for spiritual purposes, we need a general frame of reference for dream study and analysis. I will present in this article two models of human growth, one from the spiritual point of view and another from the psychological, and then some dreams with analysis.

## SPIRITUAL GROWTH MODEL

From a variety of sources, I have elaborated a model of spiritual growth, keeping in mind the experiential and developmental aspects of the process. The five stages mentioned here are tentative and need greater precision. Each stage contains two phases: (1) a quickened, *revolutionary* phase, in

which an event of short duration but great impact provokes a reaction in the subject or director, upsetting and even shattering the subject's established mode of life, and (2) a second, *evolutionary* phase, in which the subject goes through a gradual process of assimilation that helps him/her to come to terms with the radical change induced in the revolutionary phase.

Growth takes place as a result of a pressing-releasing cycle, in which the subject's experience is exposed to heightened stimulation for growth, then to a period of abatement that allows assimilation of new elements in the process. The model assumes that God reaches out to the subject, confronts him/her with the existence of the divine, engulfs the subject in it, then draws him/her into his life. My conceptualization includes five stages, each with its revolutionary and evolutionary phase:

**Stage I. Phase I (revolutionary): God's insertion.** The life of the person is touched by God. Subsequent events begin to acquire and to be lived in a new dimension, the spiritual dimension circumscribed by God's presence.

*Phase II (evolutionary): Search and wonder.* The subject now acknowledges God's presence and embarks on a new process of self-observation and reflection on the implications of this presence.

**Stage II. Phase I: Explosion.** God's presence is gentle but uncompromising. God must be dealt with as God is, not as in the subject's image of God. Often this entails an eradication of old concepts of God and replacement of them with the experience of God as God wants to be seen.

*Phase II: Ordering.* The revision of one's concept of God means a major reorganization of one's value system, attitudes, and opinions. Everything is seen in a new light.

**Stage III. Phase I: Implosion.** Being anchored in God soon means being outflanked by God on all sides, similar to a state of siege. The subject finds God's presence with its natural consequences everywhere, sometimes feeling more like an unforeseen obstacle and invitation to reform than an enjoyed relationship.

*Phase II: From loneliness to solitude.* A process of total redefinition of self begins. It is often a long, dreary journey, plagued with a sense of futility and meaninglessness, leading frequently into several blind alleys. The process may be compared with a state of learned spiritual helplessness, but perseverance leads from accepted loneliness to fruitful solitude.

**Stage IV. Phase I: Re-centering.** The ability to enjoy solitude paves the way for a new mode of experiencing God's intervention as God becomes the center of the subject's life.

*Phase II: Contemplation.* A new dimension in the faith experience is introduced when the subject learns to let go in matters of spiritual life, while remaining very active and in control of ordinary life.

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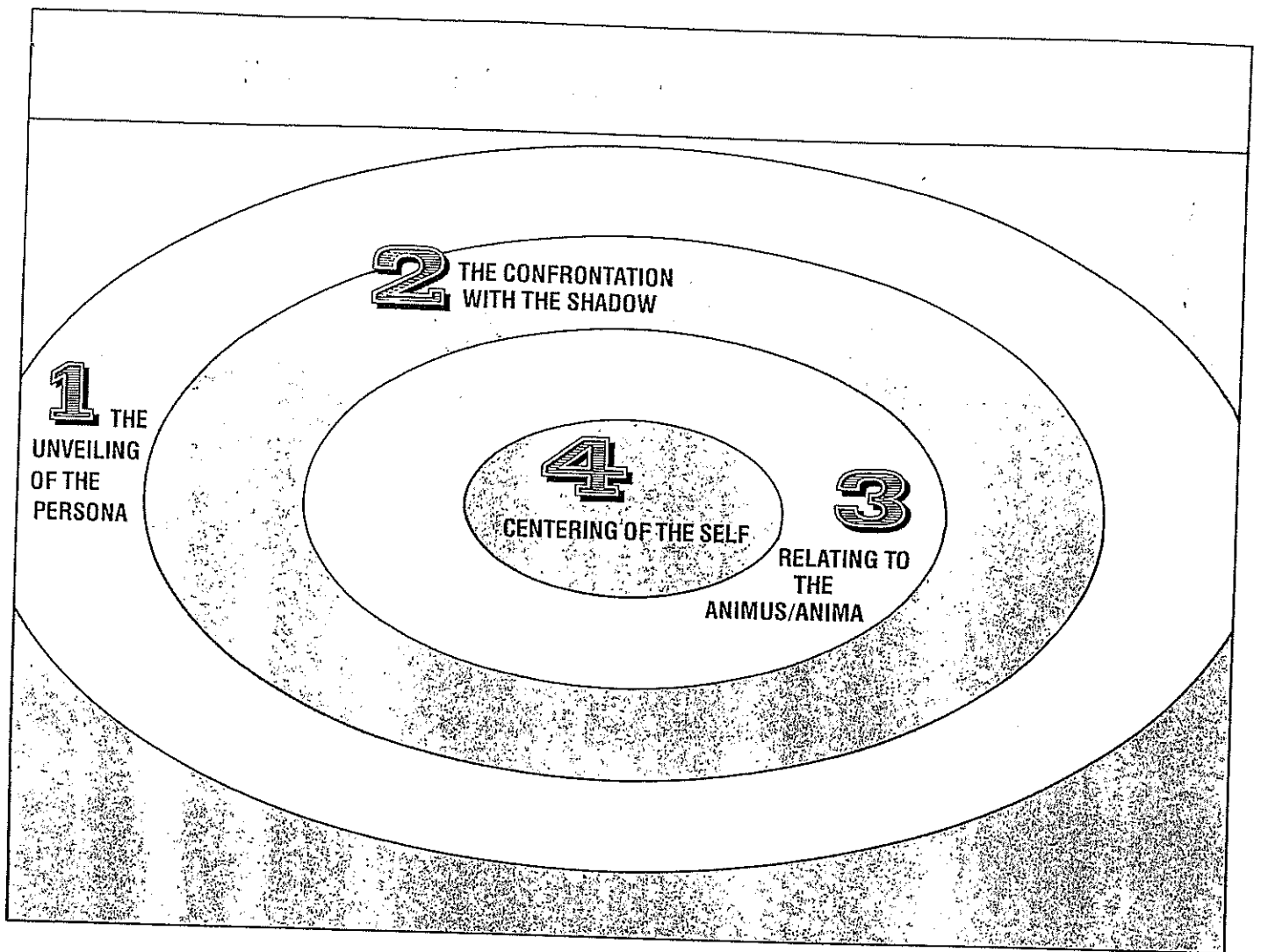
**Stage V. Phase I: Assumed in God.** The subject begins to walk on a new path, the mystical way. God acts on the subject from the center of existence, and the subject must learn to be carried spiritually by God.

*Phase II: Lived union with God.* Through recollection and quiet, the subject begins to view and experience everything in life with divine wisdom. The subject learns to live the reality of human society as a preparation for life in God's own society.

This brief outline of a model of spiritual awakening and growth will provide a frame of reference within which dreams can be interpreted. The following model of psychological growth will prove helpful for the same reason.

### PSYCHOLOGICAL GROWTH MODEL

Psychological processes take place side by side with growth in the spiritual life. From among the many models of growth in the professional literature, Piaget and Erikson provide two of the most significant and best known models, but they are not readily transferable to dream imagery. A theory that comes closer to our concern is Jung's approach to the process of *individuation*. Individuation is a gradual growth toward human maturity and freedom that charts the transition from an ego-centered mode of consciousness of oneself in the world to a self-anchored experience of oneself in the world. The ego stage in the individuation model is characterized by an outward expansion of awareness through acquisition of new elements from the environment. The ego stage of development means gaining greater control over what surrounds us,



achieving more and more, and safeguarding our position and status. Over against the ego is the self, concerned with things of an entirely different nature: inner peace, harmony, balance, integration, strength, and confidence.

According to Jung, the path that leads from ego-dominated concerns to self-initiated motives is a process containing the following stages:

**1. The Unveiling of the Persona.** The persona is that aspect of our personality approved of by society. Its activities are dictated by the desire to keep up appearances and to impress others. The unveiling of the persona means the process during which one has over-identified oneself with the expectations of society about one's social roles and comes to the realization that the persona must be unmasked, thus shedding overdependence on social roles. The unveiling of the persona involves exposing one's superficial artificiality in order to relinquish it as humanly unviable and deceptive. It is the first step toward individuation.

**2. The Confrontation with the Shadow.** Coming to terms with the reality of one's life means facing the seamy side of one's personality, or "shadow" in Jung's terms. More precisely, the shadow represents the socially nonfunctioning or nonfunctional aspects of the personality. Facing one's shadow is an unsettling experience, and Jung explains this natural fear as the consequence of our negative attitude toward this frightening part of our real self. Individuation requires that we come to terms with these negated elements of our personality, accepting them as real and eventually cherishing them as our own.

**3. Relating to the Animus/Anima.** This stage is more complex than previous stages. Up to this point, two aspects of the ego were involved with different degrees of awareness: the persona was the accepted and socially reaffirmed aspect of ourselves; the shadow represented the negated parts of our consciousness. When some measure of integration has been achieved between them, we enter into

a new type of experience by sensing what was latent within ourselves but never expressed.

This third stage in the process of growth involves familiarization with the potential of our total humanness. Jung explains that by identifying with our sex roles, some aspects of our humanness have been easily allowed to express themselves, whereas others have been forced to remain latent in the unconscious. In males, the animus represents psychic energy expressed through sex roles as men, whereas the anima harbors the unexpressed feminine part of the psyche. Conversely, for women, the animus is the unexpressed part of their psyche and the anima is expressed. In the third stage of growth, human beings come to face themselves as androgenous, or psychologically bisexual. Through this integration and unification the fourth stage of individuation can take place. For Jung, this enlargement of one's personality by the inclusion of what was latent in the psyche is not so much a confrontation as a communication with an existing source of energy. It is the unfolding of a complementary aspect of oneself, hitherto unrecognized. This growth in awareness leads to an expansion of experience and signals the beginning of true autonomy.

**4. Centering of the Self.** The final stage in the individuation process is the realization of the self as the center of harmony and integration. It includes what is both conscious and unconscious in an individual. Jung has called the self "our life's goal, for it is the completest expression of that fateful combination we call individuality." The emergence of the self brings about a re-centering of one's psychic structure, where neither the conscious nor the unconscious prevails. The self organizes the whole functioning of the psyche by integrating all the forces that impinge upon a person in a concretely individualized manner. Individuation is the achievement of completeness.

The advantage of this psychological model is that it affirms a person's gradual growth toward a responsible integration of all that is human, with an implied openness to the transcendent. In addition, Jung's model is explicitly related to a theory of fantasizing and of symbolic expression through myths, drawings, and dreams. It provides a basis for dream analysis that will strengthen our tentative insights by further probing and careful checking. Jung's approach is a good starting point, even for those who do not want to follow him very closely. It gives sufficient inspiration to get one started and places enough emphasis on personal direction to leave anyone free to go about dream interpretation based on personal insights.

#### EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH TO DREAMS

Dreams are assumed to be expressions of experience. Properly understood, they tell much of what goes on in the subject, including progress toward

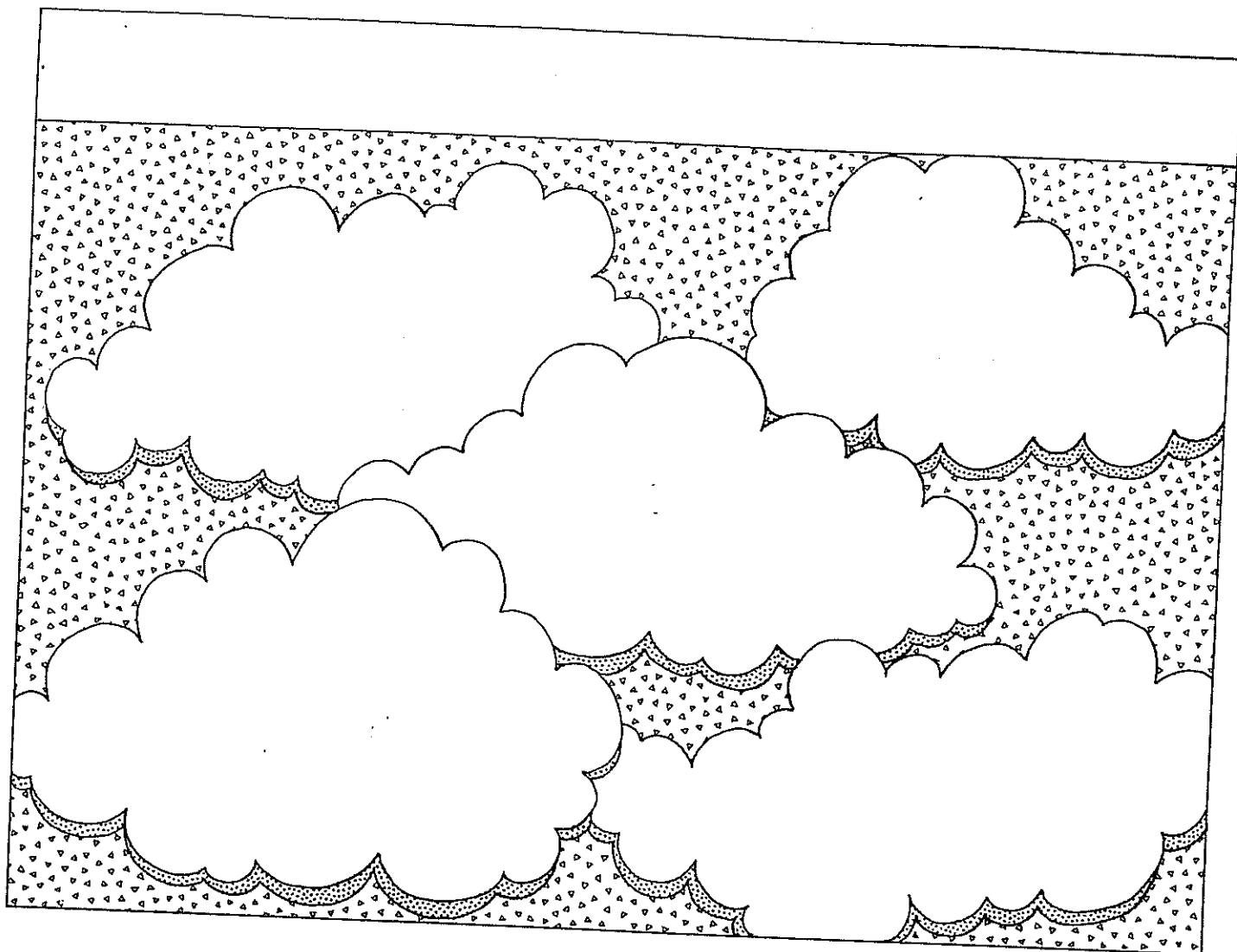
## Coming to terms with the reality of one's life means facing the seamy side of one's personality

maturity, level of functioning, and degree of internal integration. But what can they tell us about spiritual growth? And what can they reveal about the specific obstacles a person is experiencing in the course of spiritual development?

Meseguer says that dreams can be: (1) a source of temptation, (2) a problem of moral responsibility, (3) a source of information about the state of the soul, (4) a source of instruction, and (5) a source of energy. An experiential approach to dreams through their *symbolic* expression makes the first two issues (dreams as sources of temptation and as problems of moral responsibility) marginal or accidental to the real nature of dreams. The other functions (informative, instructive, and energizing) can be subsumed under the symbolic nature of dreams. Dreams, as symbolic expressions of experience, contain representations of both blocked energy and the clues to its being blocked. This is the most important principle of an experiential approach to dreams. As such, dreams instruct us and tell us much about the state of the soul and about the potential energy being blocked in the dreamer.

More specifically, dreams can shed light on the following points:

1. The degree of integration achieved by an individual in all the major factors, including spiritual factors, influencing growth toward individuation at a given period of time;
2. The hidden sources of unused energy in the subject, sources untapped or fearfully and timidly dealt with;
3. The stresses and strains, troubles, conflicts, and challenges a person is facing that subtly but forcefully indicate what blockages are at work;



4. The significance, quality, and direction of some events in the subject's progress toward psychological maturity and how far spiritual growth is integrated into this process; and

5. The effects of unusual interventions within the person and the psychological/spiritual repercussions of such interventions.

This article does not address the problem of whether God can directly communicate with us in dreams. To ascertain the validity of such an occurrence one should first eliminate the possibility that the event be explained in some natural way.

### DREAM ANALYSIS IN DIRECTION

Many approaches to dream analysis are highly sophisticated and belong in the repertoire of psychoanalysts. Properly used, they offer help in delving deep into the unconscious and unearthing much that may be of significance. We need not go as deep in spiritual guidance. Neither need we discard all

dream material as too esoteric and totally beyond our ken. The following categories are useful to consider during dream analysis in nontherapeutic situations like directed retreats, training programs, workshops, spiritual direction, or counseling.

1. *The dreamer.* Age, sex, professional work, and any specific information relevant to the type of problems, conflicts, ambitions, and plans that are significant at the present moment.

2. *Specific dream elements.* Objects, animals, events, and persons that can be easily recognized or readily identified with, as well as the significance of such elements via associations (i.e., relationships within the mind).

3. *Dream roles.* The roles played by specific dream elements.

4. *Intriguing aspect.* What is the most intriguing element or aspect of the dream?

5. *Dream message.* What seems to come through, and what is the feeling with which it comes through?

6. *The ending.* How does the dream end—natural-

ly, unfinished, truncated, smoothed over? Does the dream build on a previous one? Does the theme of the dream keep repeating itself through various images or events? Are there any additional insights coming from the interpretation of other, apparently unrelated dreams? Are there any convergent or divergent themes in the subject's dreams?

#### EXAMPLES OF ANALYSIS AND DIRECTION

I want to offer a few examples of dreams and their possible interpretation. The dreams presented here were explained either orally or in writing by the dreamers themselves. Their analysis was the result of the combined efforts of the dreamer and myself until we felt we had gone deep enough to get the light we needed at the time. They are presented without any claim of finality in the scope and depth of their interpretation; in some cases, the analysis went deeper than reported here. I offer them as examples of the experiential approach, using some dreams with clear contextual features to suggest a forthright interpretation and others that are heavily symbolic. None of the dreams were from people who had undergone therapy or were in need of it.

#### DREAM 1: A HOUSE WITH NO FOUNDATION

I am sitting in an easy chair in the upper floor of a two story bungalow. I am satisfied, I have worked hard, and I am resting on the upper floor where I can look around at green, lush, bright, clear vegetation all around me. It is a tropical country, and beyond lies the jungle. I get up from the chair and look out from the balcony. Suddenly I realize there is no ground floor. I am terrified and wonder how I will get out, how I can be standing on the upper floor if there is no first floor. I awake frightened, bathed in perspiration.

**Analysis.** The dreamer is a 38-year-old sister, a missionary with 20 years in religious life. For five years she has been principal of a school in the middle of a modern city. The school is doing very well as an educational institution. The religious community serving the school is made up of eight sisters who are hard-working, but quite independent in their work, with cooperation and communication among them at a low ebb. The dreamer has never fully mastered the language of the place and wonders whether she belongs there. The dream occurred on the fourth day of her eight-day directed retreat.

**Dream elements.** Nothing can be contextually identified except the dreamer herself. The rest is symbolic with special meanings for her. She identifies the upper floor of the house as her school where she feels quite at home and can relax. The green wall of lush vegetation and the jungle beyond is the culture, customs, and language of the country where she lives and which she does not fully understand. Her relaxed mood inside the house is indicative of

## What can dreams tell us about spiritual growth and about the obstacles a person is experiencing in spiritual development?

her having given up learning the language. Bolting from her chair is associated with the occasional awareness that ignorance of language and culture is not appropriate for a missionary.

**Dream roles and intriguing aspect.** The contributing element, an observer and active agent, is closely related to the roles of other dream elements. The intriguing aspect is her realization that she is on the upper floor with no ground floor to support her. She sees fearfully that she is disconnected from the culture around her and her sisters in the community.

**Dream message.** Can one be a missionary in isolation?

**Dream ending.** The dream ends abruptly, but her feelings and mood in the dream connect with her conscious sense of disorientation and dissatisfaction.

**Comments.** This sister's experience correlates with the search and wonder stage referred to earlier in the spiritual growth model. Before the retreat she seemed to have settled into an orderly life, but in her own world. During the first three days of the retreat, she complained of lack of interest and complete blankness in prayer. In general her health was not good, but she was dedicated, hardworking, and conscientious. During the retreat she started praying about her spiritual crisis. The dream released a store of energy related to fright at her present situation and her need to change, to relate, and to see things moving in a different direction. As a result of the retreat, she asked for a year's sabbatical so that after three months in her home country, she could come back and dedicate several months

to the study of the language of her missionary country and to the process of inculturation. Energy was blocked with regard to relationships, and a possible cause of the blockage was withdrawal through hard work.

## DREAM 2: JOURNEY TO THE BASEMENT

I am in the graveyard of my novitiate, a well-kept 13th century Cistercian monastery. A small, dark room is underground, where the remnants of exhumed bones are kept. It is twilight, and I am afraid. The stone covering the underground chamber has been pushed aside. Inside I can see a ladder, a door, and the floor, which is flooded with three feet of greenish, dirty water. In the chamber below I can see small, well-kept alabaster caskets with the names of deceased priests and brothers.

I look around the dark chamber, barely lit, standing on a rung of the ladder just above the dirty water. I hear myself mutter, "Why do you look around? It is gone." Then I am not afraid. "It is gone," I repeat to myself.

**Analysis.** The dreamer is a 52-year-old priest with 33 years in religious life. He is professionally very dedicated and competent, in great demand for lectures because of two or three successful books he has written. He is concerned about his public image, both as a religious/priest and as a professional. His religious life is sincere but lacks depth. He is faithful to his major obligations but remiss about "minutiae" like daily regular prayer and complete recitation of the breviary. He has abandoned all forms of pious practices, and he defines himself as very progressive in his thinking but conservative in his behavior.

**Dream elements.** All persons and parts of the dream are easily identified. The time being set back to the novitiate seems to suggest strong symbolic meaning in the dream elements.

**Dream roles.** The dreamer is an observer-actor, looking inside, walking down the ladder, looking around, speaking to himself. The inner underground chamber is perceived as his novitiate days and all that he was taught at that time. The dark, the twilight, and the brackish water are seen as indicative of something abandoned, such as his religious practices of the rosary or novenas.

**Intriguing aspect.** The change of mood is from fright to becoming less afraid and then to a familiar, safe feeling. He says, "It is gone." What is gone? The fear? What was learned in the novitiate?

**Dream message.** The dream possibly contains a warning against excessive liberation from religious practices.

**Dream ending.** The dream ends with a note of acceptance of present reality, though some perplexity remains.

**Comments.** This priest seemed sincere, committed, and hardworking. There are some elements of persona, in the Jungian sense of the socially acceptable

facade, that are still very much with him, including his image before others and his image as a faithful religious as measured by novitiate rules and standards. Because of his "liberation" much of his novitiate experience has become disconnected from his daily life and has been pushed into the unconscious where it has begun to stagnate and become inoperative in his life. His fear that it may be inoperative brings him to confront it in his dream as the fearful symbol of the graveyard. He faces up to his fear, looking at it steadily and unflinchingly, but at a distance. His fear melts and leads to acceptance of the reality of his present religious life in both its positive and negative aspects. He accepts the novitiate as a part of his life, but psychologically he lives by something else. He was facing the question of whether this something else was more or less meaningful (from the religious point of view) than his novitiate experience. From the Jungian perspective, his dream was pointing to a transition from the persona-shadow stage to the animus/anima stage. In our spiritual growth model, he seems to have been at that time in the stages of implosion and growth in loneliness toward solitude. Blocked energy centered on the genuineness of his commitment, and a possible cause of the blockage was ambivalence about how to give concrete expression to his religious commitment.

## DREAM 3: THE THRILL OF VICTORY

I am in a competition, a partner event like rowing a boat, but our faces are down sometimes, like in swimming. I am surprised to find myself in the competition because I know I am not good at it. So, aware of my inadequacy, I lean heavily on my partner, a man. At first he seems chagrined by the fact that I can't do it, but I encourage him, placing complete confidence in him.

We get off to a good start. It is an event that requires strength in the arms. At one point, an enormous ski jump appears off a high place into the water below. I am afraid we will not make it, since I've never done it before, but we land easily and smoothly. I am surprised, relieved, and delighted. After landing I lose a ski, and we are held up a bit as I recover it. He waits patiently. We've gone from swimming-boating to skiing. Although our winning the event was unthinkable at the beginning, we held our own and won. More important, I held my own, yet leaned on him when I needed to.

**Analysis.** The dreamer is a 48-year-old sister with 27 years in religious life, teaching at a college in India. At the time of the dream, she was attending a five-day seminar on Jungian psychology with some of her philosophy students from the college. She was particularly struck by the concepts of psychic energy and the archetypes of animus/anima. She found them similar to some Indian Tantra concepts. She is not a sportswoman, but because of her position in the college she deals with students who engage in sports. In relation to the anima/animus,

## Dreams are not irrational—they should not be left exclusively to the expert interpretation of psychoanalysts

she said she had "done a lot of looking to others in this area, wanting a man to protect me, take care of me, and meet my emotional needs, but always ending in total frustration." She described it as blocking a great deal of psychic energy.

*Dream elements.* The context is completely symbolic, since nothing in the dream resembled her real context. While recounting the dream, she stressed her surprise at being in a sporting event. Sports could be associated with her desire to prove her strength, her capacity, and her need to succeed. The presence of the partner suggests her need for a man to protect her. His surprise at her needing him relates to her being a nun yet needing a man for protection. The man's ready acceptance of his role as a trustworthy, understanding protector suggests her complete trust in his capacity to understand her need. The turbulence of the river and the danger of the ski jump are reminders of her chequered life as a religious and possible signs of her shadow.

*Dream roles.* Her male partner in the dream serves a supporting role, as well as showing her how new things are to be done. Understanding, patient, and dependable, he leads and supports but never becomes too demanding. He can be easily associated with Jesus.

*Intriguing aspect.* The racing event is surprising, especially the transition from swimming to boating and then to skiing. The event suggests a transition from a strenuous manner of moving through the water to an effortless flying through the air. She proceeds in the dream from feelings of inadequacy to trust and surrender in joy.

*Dream message.* She no longer needs to be inappropriately dependent on others to fulfill her needs. The power is within her.

*Dream ending.* It is very smooth and natural, a quiet but exhilarating achievement.

*Comments:* The dreamer is quite clear that this dream came as a clue to her habit of looking to others to fulfill her needs without realizing that power for self-affirmation was within her. She equates the inexplicable context of an athletic event with the grace of her vocation: something beyond her strength, power, and imagining. The dream presented an actualization of something she had always put into words, that the strength and power of Jesus within was available for her. Her stage is a move toward selfhood transcended by the presence of Jesus (re-centering), who challenges her to the task of living her vocation in a dynamic, powerful way.

### CONCLUSIONS

I am personally convinced that dreams help clarify some attitudes and psychological reactions, most of them unconscious but activated by the deliberate determination to take spiritual life seriously. Dreams are potential tools for psychological and spiritual understanding. They are not irrational or so esoteric that they should be left exclusively to the expert interpretation of psychoanalysts. As long as one is clear about one's own limitations and goes tentatively about one's approach to dream analysis, much can be learned from the use of dreams for spiritual direction.

### RECOMMENDED READING

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