

The Dream as a Path of Initiation

G. Scott Sparrow, EdD

Twenty four years ago, my friend Benny hit a palm tree driving back from Mexico late one night. Before driving while drinking received so much attention, it was customary for teenagers and young adults who lived along the Rio Grande River in south Texas to stay up late dancing and drinking in the Mexican lounges. Then, early in the morning, we would head for home along a perilously winding road that followed the course of the river. Many of us who grew up on the border -- where alcohol for minors and adults alike was only a bridge crossing away -- can recall times when we should have been dead. I still shudder at our foolishness. We were just luckier, not wiser, than Benny and his two friends who died that night.

Shortly afterward, Benny began showing up in my dreams. He appeared deranged, even demonic -- intent it seemed on hurting or killing me. I would run from him, scared out of my mind and wondering why he would want to hurt me, his friend. In one dream, I realized it was a dream and I tried to wake up to escape him. But I couldn't escape the dream in time; and he assaulted me before I could rouse myself from sleep, terrified.

As a budding metaphysician, I realized that Benny could really have been there, attacking me as an earth-bound, or confused, discarnate soul. That idea did nothing to reassure me. But as a student of Jungian psychology at the time, I also realized that Benny could represent an aspect of myself -- my "shadow" -- that was profoundly disenfranchised and enraged by my neglect of him. Along these lines, I eventually came to realize that Benny represented my own aggressiveness and need for power that I had suppressed under a facade of outward spirituality. Quite possibly, he was angry that I had become such a wimp.

I also knew that both could be true. He could be "himself" and a part of me. From this perspective, our relationship was continuing to offer us both ways to evolve toward wholeness, even though he was physically dead. Whatever I did in the encounter that represented a breakthrough for me could release him, as well, from his own commensurate soul-level dilemmas.

Benny had always scared me a bit. On one occasion, his flirtation with power almost killed me. While I was skin diving near the Mexican town of Puerto Vallarta, Benny lofted a volcanic rock in my direction "just to see if he could reach me." The rock plunged into the water a mere foot from my head. If I hadn't drowned from the blow, it would have been a miracle; for I was seventy yards offshore in 20 feet of water. Benny made a lot of people nervous with such displays of uncontrolled aggression.

Before the series of dreams came to a powerful end, I had an opportunity to be “spiritual” in one dream with Benny. He appeared in front of me, holding a knife. He said, devilishly, “I want to show you my new knife.”

Suddenly, I realized that I was dreaming! I knew what to do then. At least, I thought I did. I said, “You are only a dream. May the light of the Christ surround you. Go away.” Nothing happened, and Benny crept closer. He was obviously amused by my ineffective tactic. Without wondering how I obtained a knife of my own, I began doing battle with him until I eventually disarmed him -- an unlikely outcome, since Benny was much larger and faster than I was in real life. I did not complain.

Then came the culmination one night while I was on vacation in England. In the dream -- the final one with Benny -- he had me pinned down, pummeling me with his fists. I knew that he would eventually kill me if I didn't free myself. I managed somehow to free one arm. Instead of hitting him back, however, I reached up and gently stroked his shoulder. Looking back, I don't know why I thought this would do any good. But he stopped hitting me immediately, and he began to cry. His tears fell into my face, and he said, “I only want to be loved.”

Years before in “real life,” I had made the mistake of making an obscene gesture at him. I was about six at the time, and he was ten; so it wasn't a very good idea. Sure enough, he pinned me down; and he spit into both of my eyes to show me how foolish I had been to defy him. It was a singularly humiliating and disgusting moment.

Now, however -- through the avenue of powerful dream encounters -- our relationship had become fulfilled. I had found the courage to fight him, and then the heart to embrace him. He, in turn, found it possible to voice what his aggression had so effectively obscured -- his need for love.

If one looks back on this series of dreams, one can see that the whole purpose of the dream series was to elicit new responses from me. The dream was not so much a message as it was an opportunity to respond in a new way. It was an initiation -- a test that was fulfilled only by acting in a new way and by expressing a new spirit. Any interpretation of the early dreams with Benny would have been largely useless and misleading, unless they included an analysis of my inadequate response to him. That is why I often say that much of what we call dream analysis misses the whole point of the dream.

Before most of us can see the dream as an initiation, we must undergo a paradigm shift in our view of the purpose of life. Indeed, most of us are deeply wedded to a view of dreams that matches a view of God that is deeply entrenched in our Western spiritual tradition. Influenced by traditional approaches to religion, we tend to believe, without thinking much about it, that dreams are oracles or messages from God or the unconscious that we need to interpret. Along these lines, we assume that if we can figure out what we are being told, we can revise our plans accordingly, and avert unnecessary pain and suffering. Further, we can obtain glimpses of unfolding opportunities, and be prepared to capitalize on them. Like Moses, we are left trying to read the small print on the tablets of our dream. All of this

“works,” as most of us know from experience. But unfortunately, this view relegates us to a rather passive, underling status, as we await the good parenting of the divine or unconscious Other.

Fortunately, the dream “source” does not fully accommodate the view that God, or the unconscious Other, is principally a source of information and guidance. Indeed, the dream source seems to function much more as a mentor, an initiator, or even a provocateur who tells us frightfully little, but who brings us the very things that we have neglected, or refused to accept about ourselves. One dream therapist, Dr. Montague Ullmann, has described the quality of the dream as intrusive and novel; that is, not providing the kind of “answers” that we expect to hear, but presenting with intensity and purpose those aspects of our being which we have neglected or disowned. Once we shift our perspective away from looking primarily for answers in dreams, we can see what has been there all along -- opportunities to confront and resolve deep issues through altering our responses to the challenges that are being presented to us.

The value of this approach is quite evident when we compare dreams that are similar in content, but which differ significantly in dreamer responsiveness. For example, a good friend of mine dreamed that UFO’s were approaching her childhood home, spewing fire from their undersides. She somehow knew that they were going to destroy the world. Not surprisingly, she ran like the dickens from this spectacle. In short order, she ran into her bedroom, and climbed under her bed (even though it wasn’t fireproof).

Now this friend came to me, knowing that I liked to analyze dreams. She asked what many of us would ask: “What is this horrible thing that I am being warned about?” I knew something was fishy about this question, but I hadn’t developed my current understanding of dreams at that point. There are many answers to the dreamer’s worried question, and many of them might prove useful. Certainly, there’s always a lot ahead to be concerned about. But the question itself leads us down a particular path, away from examining our responses to the dream and how other responses might have turned the whole experience around. In contrast to the dreamer’s question, we might ask, Why did she assume that the UFO’s were hostile? Her reaction in the dream and her question after the dream effectively obscured the simple fact that she decided to run when confronted with the spectacle of the UFO’s. Everything went downhill from that point, and we are left wondering would have happened if she had not run away.

At the time of the dream, the dreamer was struggling with the decision about whether to enter the ministry. She admitted to me that she was afraid of what God would make her do if she submitted to her calling. In particular, she feared that He would send her to Africa as a missionary. Eventually, she overcame her resistance to her calling and serves to this day as a Methodist minister. But it easy to see that her response to the UFO and its transforming power mirrored precisely her fear of responding to her own higher calling.

If the dreamer succeeds in “inducting” us into his or her biases, then we will also fail to see the opportunity that most dreams represent. If, on the other hand, we are willing to

consider the dream as primarily an initiation rather than an oracle, then the most important questions to ask in our analysis of dreams are, “What did the dreamer do?” And, “What was the best, or most appropriate, thing that he could have done in the context that he found himself?” And, as we look ahead to future dreams, we might also ask, “What is the response that the dreamer is being called to make in this circumstance?”

Another UFO dream dramatically illustrates what can happen when we suspend our automatic reactions to our dreams, and respond in a way that “opens up” the dream to become all that it can be in the moment.

In this dream, a young man was also in his childhood home. He somehow knew that UFO’s were approaching, and would soon destroy the earth with fire. Sounds familiar, does it not? His family hurriedly prepared to leave, and urged the young man to join them. But the dreamer hesitated, realizing that if the aliens intended to destroy the world, then there would be no place to hide. He wondered if the aliens would stop attacking if they knew that people meditated on earth. So, as his family fled the home, he sat down cross-legged in front of the living room window, closed his eyes and meditated. Then, he pulled back the curtains and saw that the UFO’s had stopped spewing fire. The next thing the dreamer recalled was walking with thousands of people toward the UFO’s that had landed on a beach. They were all singing as the aliens emerged from the UFO’s and greeted them warmly (but not hotly!). The seven-foot-tall aliens looked like monks: They wore saffron robes, had shaved heads, and hailed from the “Osage” star system.

The only thing that distinguishes the two UFO dreams is the dreamer's response. The content was virtually the same. If we ask, What do UFO's mean? What does fire symbolize? and What does the childhood home represent? we might arrive at the same "interpretation" for each dream. This should indicate to us that the crux of these dreams ultimately has nothing to do with an assessment of their symbols or visual content: It has to do with the dreamer's attitude and response to the initiation that the dream presents. In terms of content, these dreams were identical, but in terms of response they were as different as night and day.

That is why, I feel, that many of us find dreams so hard to interpret. We approach them as oracles, which they can be. But they are, more fundamentally, initiations that challenge and provoke us into responding to life more deeply and courageously. Until we grasp this truth about dreams, then the fruits that we will reap from dreams -- and from life -- will be meager compared to the process of becoming that a path of true initiation offers us.

If you are ready to examine your responses to your dreams and to all of life from this standpoint, then you would do well to start from the premise, articulated in a most succinct way by the teacher in the movie, *Dangerous Minds*. As she confronted a group of complaining teenagers, she startled them by asserting, "There are no victims here!" Now I realize that we can take this idea too far. Of course there are victims in the world; and it is tragic and dangerous to overlook this fact. As the Buddha and Christ demonstrated, it is even incumbent on us to feel their pain and to share their struggles. But, in most cases, we take our own passivity and victimization much too far and demonstrate the truth of what Anthony Trollope once said; that is, that a man loves nothing more than to cherish a good grievance.

I have developed a methodology based on this approach to dream work. While there are many techniques that naturally fit into my approach¹, the most important thing that you can do right now is to begin looking at your dreams as a test, even the ones that are ostensibly pleasant or “ordinary.” An initiation test usually lurks behind every dream. Then, look at the points in the dream where you reacted -- inwardly or outwardly, emotionally or mentally. Do not take these responses as necessary even if they seem justified, especially any response prompted by fear or avoidance. Begin to question every dreamer reaction and to speculate on appropriate, bold and creative alternatives. In this way, you may begin to see what might have happened in the old dream, and what still could happen in your future dreams. This exercise of critiquing the dreamer’s responses will, in itself, increase your internal readiness for future dream tests as they arise. You may surprise yourself with the creativity and fearlessness that springs forth in your dreams, and in waking life as well.

If you think about it, this approach to dreams translates into a wonderfully responsible attitude toward life as a whole. Instead of regarding ourselves as passive witnesses in life’s unfolding drama, we begin to see ourselves the way we really are -- as “co-creators” with God, capable of transforming our experiences of life through altering our responses to what is being presented.

In one unforgettable dream, I dreamed I was running from another man who wanted to kill me. I ran and tried to hide; but each place offered no security from his approaching threat. In my fear, I began to realize I would soon die -- that is, unless I was dreaming! At that point,

I realized that I was dreaming. At that point, I saw my good friend Mark Thurston, and told him that I was going to meet the man who wished to kill me. He wished me the best (but did not volunteer to accompany me).

I came to a door, and opened it. The man was sitting at a desk with his back to me. He saw me, whirled around, raised his revolver and fired -- once, and then again. I felt the "bullets" like a sharp wind passing through me. Then, I walked up to him, reached up and touched his face. He looked alarmed and mistrustful. Then, his face softened. He reached up and touched my face, too.

As we move out of a passive role in our dreams -- and in our overall approach to life -- our criteria for success changes. Instead of judging ourselves and others by the outcome of our efforts, we begin to evaluate our progress by the quality of our responses to life. By so doing, we move out of a childlike dependency on oracles: We are ushered into a fuller appreciation of what we can become as the dream of life unfolds its endlessly frustrating, forever intriguing, multifaceted initiation.