

# **Dreams and Dreamwork: A Life- Giving Spiritual Practice**

**by  
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## INTRODUCTION

In the context of the Malaysian Christian church, the benefits of paying attention to dreams have generally not gained its due recognition. This could be attributed to the negative connotation attached to dreams such as viewing them as disturbances of a good sleep or nothing more than byproducts of having many cares. One may be put off by some who have taken dream messages literally while others shun them for fear of the unpleasant elements they appear to suggest. The Bible also cautions dreams could be misused and prophets have lied using them (Deut 13.1-4; Jer 23.16; 25-27, 32). On top of that, churches generally are more comfortable with exploring faith through reasoning and the senses rather than through intuitive and experiential knowledge of faith and God. It is no wonder therefore that many are conditioned not to pay attention to dreams that often appear bizarre and emotional in their content.

Having said that, the Bible is also filled with many instances where God spoke through dreams and they contain our inmost thoughts. Taylor writes, '(A) Dream is the "magic mirror that never lies." This ability of the dream to reflect the deepest truths of our lives, despite any denials and conscious self-deceptions we may be trapped in, is both the dream's greatest gift, and its greatest challenge.'<sup>1</sup> However many are not aware of this valuable gift and its benefits for our spiritual journey. This article seeks to encourage us to pay attention to our dreams as life-giving and affirm their place in spiritual direction.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DREAMS

The Bible is filled with evidences that God speaks through dreams and visions (Num 12.6-8; Judges 7.13-15; 1 Sam 28.6; Job 7.14, 33.14-18; Joel 2.28). He spoke in dreams to His chosen people such as Abraham (Gen 15.12-16), Jacob (Gen 28.10-16, 31.10-13), Joseph (Gen 42.9, cf. 37.5-11, 45.4-9) and Solomon (1 Ki 3.5-15) as well as people who did not know Him including Abimelech (Gen 20.3-11), Laban (Gen 31.24, 29), Pharaoh (Gen 41.1-36) and King Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 2.1-45).

In the New Testament, the Nativity stories are surrounded by series of dreams. The angel appeared to Joseph to take the pregnant Mary as wife (Matt 1.20); to the Magi not to return to King Herod (Matt 2.12); to Joseph again to flee for Egypt (Matt 2.13) and later to return to Nazareth (Matt 2.19, 22). In Acts, we see the early church grew when Cornelius and Peter (10.3-22) and Paul (16.9) accepted and acted upon the messages they received from dreams

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Taylor, *Where People Fly and Water Runs Uphill: Using Dreams to Tap the Wisdom of the Unconscious*, (New York: Warner Books, 1992), p10.

and visions<sup>2</sup>. Indeed God reveals His mind through dreams and in Him the interpretation lies (Gen 41.16, 25; Dn 2.28, 45).

So what is a dream? A dream is an experience of a series of images, sounds, thoughts, actions and sensations while we are asleep and have little or no conscious control over.<sup>3</sup> Since Dr William Dement's research<sup>4</sup>, we have come to know everyone dreams and those who deny that are essentially saying they cannot remember their dreams. Researchers have found dreaming activities during REM (Rapid Eye Movement) sleep periods. On average, one has about six to seven dreams over a total period of an hour and a half in the eight hours of sleep. The duration of each dream lengthens over the night and the final dream is often seen as the most significant. And if a person is intentionally repeatedly disturbed during REM sleep, he or she will show signs of mental instability. So, whether we recall our dreams or not, dreaming is a gift crucial to our mental and physical health.

Jews are taught 'a dream which is not interpreted is like a letter which is not read'.<sup>5</sup> When we pay attention to dreams, we establish and nurture a relationship with the God who yearns to communicate with us through dreams. The act of receiving and savoring the letter by way of opening, pondering and responding to it till our conscious mind can grasp its meaning is dreamwork.

Freud discovered that dreams reveal our unconscious. However, it was Jung who greatly influenced dream interpretation. He discovered that dreams speak in symbols and metaphors and they are compensatory in nature. They are the dialogue between the conscious (everything we are aware of) and the unconscious (repressed memories, emotions as well as influences from wider societies, myths, religion etc.). More often than not, images that appear in the dream represent a part of us. They reveal aspects of reality in us which we deny or overlook. This is consistent with Daniel's interpretation of king Nebuchadnezzar's dreams. In Dn 4.17, 20-22 Daniel says, 'The *tree* you saw,... it is *you*,...' (emphasis added) and the dream reminded the haughty king once more (cf. Dn 2.36-45) that the Most High rules and gives the kingdom to whom he wills.

Dream symbols are multifaceted and multilayered in their meanings. Our task in understanding dreams is to discover the many personal meanings and messages represented by these symbols. To view it like a comic strip with a central theme and to take the symbols or images figuratively will get us closer to its meanings. It is important to note

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<sup>2</sup> The Bible uses the terms interchangeably in some of the text (Job 7.13-14, 20.8, 33.15; Nu 12.6; Is 29.7; Dan 7.1-2). Dream is often said to happen when one is asleep while vision comes when one is awake. Parker sees it as 'Dreams are in the ordinary sense the creation of the dreamer and form the basis upon which God can enter into dialogue with man. Visions, on the other hand, are an experience given by God to the recipient who has no control whatsoever over the content'. Russ Parker, *Dreams and Spirituality*, p5.

<sup>3</sup> Louis M Savory, P. H. Berne, and S. K. Williams, *Dreams and Spiritual Growth: A Judeo-Christian Way of Dreamwork*, (Manila: St Pauls, 1984), p4.

<sup>4</sup> John A Sanford, *Dreams: God's Forgotten Language*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1989), p97-98.

<sup>5</sup> Bart J. Koet, "Rabbinic Dream Work: An Introduction to the Dream Discussions in the Babylonian Talmud (Berachot 55a-57b)," in *Dreams and Spirituality: A Handbook for Ministry, Spiritual Direction and Counseling*, edited by K. Adams, B. J. Koet, and B. Koning (London: Canterbury Press, 2015), p138.

that only the dreamer can confirm the meaning through a sense of the 'aha' moment or moments. We ask what they represent for me or where in my life they are referring to. For example, if we dream of being unprepared for sitting an exam, we ask '*where in my life do I feel being confronted unprepared?*' Or if we dream of being driven in a car, we may ask '*what is currently driving my life now?*'

The meaning of a dream is to be found in the context of the dreamer's life. It often concerns recent events although it could be a repressed memory of our childhood. Thus we ask, why this dream now? Dreams are best viewed as offering questions instead of providing answers. We pray, reflect or journal over the symbols, themes and questions they offer, seeking greater understanding or insights and finally offer an appropriate response to. More on basic approaches to dreamwork is given in the Appendix.

### **DREAMS & DREAMWORK: A LIFE-GIVING SPIRITUAL PRACTICE**

Dreams are indeed a special gift from God to all. Dreams universality is amazing. They are readily available to anyone who wants to pay attention to them. Dreams speak a universal language of symbols and metaphors. And they bear the intention of healing and wholeness while revealing the truth. As dreams are channels through which the unconscious enters the consciousness, they open up the door for us to take the inward journey of exploring our inner world. Dreams uncover our deep concerns and true emotional state while showing us the way forward. They bring with them the wisdom and energy needed for our journey. Many faith traditions affirm the presence of the Divine in dreams. And as Christians, we believe God is constantly working to redeem and restore our broken and distorted self. He speaks through our unconscious, revealing areas we need to acknowledge, straighten or accept and cheers us on as we take the arduous journey of finding our true self and meaning in life.

The main benefit of working with dreams is that they put us in touch with our unconscious. According to Jung, the images that represent the unconscious include the shadow, complexes, opposite gender's qualities and archetypes.<sup>6</sup> The personal unconscious such as *shadow* consists of aspects of our own being which we once knew but have repressed while the collective unconscious such as *archetypes* 'is the universal storehouse of symbols and history that everyone shares'.<sup>7</sup> One of the ways we experience the unconscious is through a sudden surge of emotion, such as the inexplicable joy or irrational anger.<sup>8</sup> Dreams that contain anger tone show we are indeed harboring these feelings. The *shadow* which often

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<sup>6</sup> Robert L. Haden Jr., *Unopened Letter from God: A Workbook for Individuals and Groups*, (San Bernardino: Haden Institute Publishing, 2010), p189.

<sup>7</sup> *Unopened Letter from God*, p189.

<sup>8</sup> Robert A. Johnson, *Inner Work: Using Dreams and Active Imagination for Personal Growth*, (ADE eBook Edition, Harper Collins, 2009), Loc59.

appears as 'persecutor' personifies the aspect which we reject. Dreams call us to face the 'persecutor', to acknowledge and accept this aspect of ours. Once we do so, our darkness stops haunting us and often turns into creative energy and resulting in greater inner freedom. And when we come to embrace the opposites in us, be it our inner conflicts, the good and bad, or our masculine and feminine nature, we can become more whole. Our unconscious realm is said to contain the image of what we are made for and is constantly driving us toward this image and wholeness.<sup>9</sup>

Those who pay attention to dreams can testify that they contain a transformative power for our inner life as well as revealing creative inspiration. They confront the unpleasant side of us which we are blind to and inspire us to change. We may discover insights and ideas, energies and resolutions addressing our struggles. John Newton, the composer of the hymn Amazing Grace left the slave trade after a dream encounter and went on to become a minister.<sup>10</sup> Dream messages can be very practical in nature. I once dreamt my pillow came looking for me on an unmanned cart. During that time my body was ignoring the signal that I was lacking sleep. Dreams can warn us of our ill-preparedness regarding a forthcoming event or we may be called to name our fears and deal with the agitation brought by them. Very often we fail to pay attention to the after-taste of an encounter. It could be a positive or encouraging moment or something negative or disappointing. Without paying attention to those senses, we may miss the goodness brought or we may absorb their negative impact. Once, in a hypermarket, I saw a cute *potty* and paused to have a second look. This cute *potty* appeared as part of my dream symbol at night. While the dream rightly depicted an exhausted and de-motivated me that just wanted to sleep, I was drawn to an unknown source of music and was pleasantly surprised to find my air purifier was functioning like a radio and had the cute *potty* image on it! All of sudden, I felt energy returning to me. The dream incorporated the forgotten discovery of the cute *potty* which had intrigued me in the day: it encouraged me to enhanced creativity and showed me what actually can refresh and rejuvenate me.

Having followed a sound discernment process such as the Ignatian framework in making a decision, listening to our dreams often helps us gain confidence in discerning God's leading. While applying for SDFP, I dreamt about being called and led into the mountain with a task at hand. While the journey was laced with multiple challenges, the 'caller' was constantly present to 'rescue my mandate' and give it back to me whenever I lost it. This dream amazed and affirmed me of God's own presence as I stepped into the unknown by faith. Through dreams we receive assurances of being loved and cared for or promises of God's presence. Dreamwork releases energies, strengthens commitment for change and promotes inner transformation. It invites us to see our life in fresh and creative ways. A life-giving practice indeed!

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<sup>9</sup> *Dreams: God's Forgotten Language*, p125.

<sup>10</sup> Jeremy Taylor, *Dream Work: Techniques for Discovering the Creative Power in Dreams*, eBook Edition, (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), Loc151-181.

## DREAMS IN SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Both dreamwork and spiritual direction builds on the trust that God communicates with us personally and we are to attend to this personally communicating Lord. Spiritual direction supports the directee as they seek out the path to relate with God freely and to respond to Him. Dreamwork unveils our hidden selves before God and thus opens up our life to him. Mueller wrote, 'Spiritual direction is a natural place where director and directee ponder, explore, and prayerfully consider God's grace, healing, transformation, and invitation.'<sup>11</sup> Dreams are able to lift a person out of long term struggles. Whenever a directee is found stuck with an issue, it is good to listen to dreams. Wise says many breakthroughs he has seen in spiritual direction come from working with powerful dreams.<sup>12</sup>

Dream messages can be misunderstood and one does well to discern their messages together with a spiritual guide. A spiritual director can suggest questions or a perspective that the directee has not thought of. Precisely because dreams reveal the unconscious and touch on the blind spots, thus it is often helpful to have an independent pair of eyes to point them out for us. 'Dreams can invite people to notice whether anything other than God is at the center of their life.'<sup>13</sup> A spiritual director can also help to find the promises and hopes hidden in the negative-tone dreams. Religious experiences such as a sense of the Divine or God's presence or voice; the sudden gaining of an insight and even the sense of evil in dreams are good materials to unpack in a session.

To begin dream exploration in a spiritual direction session, it is often helpful for the directee to read out the full dream. Telling the dream in the present tense can possibly 'help trigger or connect up with more material within the dream'<sup>14</sup>. Following that, some helpful questions include:

- What is your sense about what the dream is saying?
- What *feelings* did the dream invoke?
- What are the *themes* raised by the dream?
- Where do you notice these emotions or themes *currently playing out in your life*?

When dream meaning is unclear, drawing out the dream may help attain clarity or the directee can also be guided through an active imagination in dialoguing with a dream image to see where that leads to.

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<sup>11</sup> Craig M. Mueller, Dreams and Spiritual Direction. *Presence: The Journal of Spiritual Directors International*. Vol 4. No.3 Sep 1998. p15.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Meier & Robert Wise, *Windows of the Soul: A Look into Dreams and Their Meanings*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), p3.

<sup>13</sup> Jennifer C. Jackson, Dreams in Prayer and Discernment. *Review for Religious*, (Vol. 66 No.1 2007), p26.

<sup>14</sup> Russ Parker, *Healing Dreams: Their Power and Purpose in Your Spiritual Life*, eBook Edition, (London: SPCK, 1998), Loc 1816.

Dreams often set the theme for someone making a directed retreat.<sup>15</sup> They often pinpoint the primary issue as we set the time aside to seek God. Grün says true spiritual guidance is only possible when we are aware of the directee's innermost feelings. Only then we can address the person, the wounds or the anxieties.<sup>16</sup> A friend of mine who pays attention to dreams had this dream in a 3-wk retreat.

*I am standing with another gentleman in an office situated within the cemetery compound. As we are chatting, I hear a loud and strong gust of wind outside. We run out as if something has just taken place. Out there I see the entire cemetery in a huge huge mess! Every tomb stone and concrete slab is overturned! There is a total stillness all around. It is as if a hurricane came and did all of that. The only thing is that there is no rain and no hurricane, just a gust of wind. I stand there in disbelief!*

She was at that time working on painful issues related to her family and her past, feeling rather defeated over how remote any sight of possible transformation seemed in the near future. While she could only associate cemeteries with death, her retreat director commented that cemeteries are also about life. That set her on a new path, having been assured God was responding to her fears and sense of defeat. She said, *'The gust of wind is His work and only He can do the impossible - unearthing things within me and bring new life!* That retreat turned out to be one of the most significant, life-changing retreats for her! What an experience by paying attention to and exploring dreams in spiritual direction!

While dream is a powerful means to encounter God, it can also be a source of distraction in spiritual direction. Due to the complexity of dreams, we need to be constantly checking if we have drifted away with the dream exploration and lost our focus on the directee's relationship with God.

## CONCLUSION

Listening to dreams is indeed life-giving as it works toward our healing and wholeness. However, we must not uphold it above the Scriptures. Dream messages need to be consistent with the teaching of the Bible and left open to questioning by life and others. Spiritual direction is an ideal place to unpack dreams as it holds us accountable to the messages we seem to be hearing. Dreams are a way God speaks among many other ways. Instead of selfish gain and a puffed up ego, dreamwork is to lead us in greater humility as we learn to see and accept ourselves just as we are and increase the internalization of the unconditional love of God. Ultimately dreams enrich our sense of living in the presence of God who is so actively working to accomplish his work in us while we are asleep, day after day. Yes, thanks be to God!


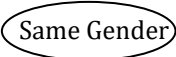

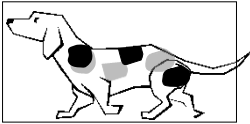

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<sup>15</sup> *Dreams on the Spiritual Journey*, p69-70.

<sup>16</sup> *Dreams on the Spiritual Journey*, p72.

**APPENDIX: A BASIC APPROACH TO DREAMWORK**

- TUNE IN with an attitude and desire of wanting to listen to God through our dreams nightly by placing a NOTEBOOK and a PEN next to our bed and, ASK God to help us with recalling.
- REVIEW the dream in bed while staying as STILL as possible physically upon awaking. Jot down IMMEDIATELY the full dream or at least the key words before returning to it soonest possible.
- Pay extra attention to RECURRING dreams and dreams that involve intense emotions, such as nightmares.
- Keep a DREAM JOURNAL with the following fields and bear in mind dreamwork’s focus is on RESPONSE instead of answers.

<b>DATE:</b>	Dream <b>TITLE:</b>	
<p><b>SETTING:</b></p> <p><b>FEELINGS:</b> Q: <i>Where in my life have I experienced this feeling?</i></p> <p><b>THEMES:</b></p> <p>4) Make a note about current life Q: <i>What preoccupies your mind of late or what has been going on in your emotional world?</i></p>	<p>1) Write down the dream with all details (people, objects, animals, colors, numbers etc.) in the present tense.</p> <p>2) Give the dream a title; note the setting/backdrop; the feeling tones in the dream as well as upon awaking; and identify the major themes.</p> <p>3) Mark the different images with a unique shape or color and work on the symbols associations.</p> <p><b>DREAM EGO</b> →</p> <p> Me in the dream</p> <p><b>PEOPLE</b></p> <p> Same Gender</p> <p> Opposite gender →</p> <p><b>ANIMAL</b> →</p> <p></p> <p><b>OBJECT</b> →</p> <p></p> <p>5) Questions from the dream <i>What issues in my life or in myself is this dream raising for me?</i> <i>What is the gift/invitation from the dream?</i></p>	<p>'I' in the dream (Dream Ego): Q: <i>How are the behavior pattern and attitudes, choices and reaction of my dream ego differs/resembles my waking ego?</i></p> <p>Q: <i>What are they like and where am I like that?</i></p> <p>Q: <i>What emotion do I associate this animal with?</i></p> <p>Q: <i>What that object is like or its function in the dream and what part of me does that thing represent?</i></p>

Sources: Adapted from the The Haden Institute Method for Working with your Dream Individually in The Unopened Letters from God by Robert Haden, p181-182 and Dreamwork for Growth and Transformation in Spirituality and the Awakening Self by David Benner, p213-221.



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