

Learning to Speak Dream

By Irene Clurman, January 2010



Gandhi got the idea for a nonviolent general strike from a dream. The Russian researcher Dimitri Mendeleev awakened from a nap with the first model of the periodic table. The melody for “Yesterday” came to Paul McCartney while he was sleeping, and Harriet Tubman used her dreams to find safe routes for slaves on the Underground Railroad.

Even if your nightly narratives don’t offer such immediate “eurekas,” your dreams nevertheless carry transformative messages for your soul’s journey. Penetrating a nightmare monster’s façade can help you identify obstacles and reclaim power from your fears. Owning the qualities of your dream heroes and heroines can encourage you to recognize overlooked strengths and talents. The guidance available is bottomless, but it’s often hidden in cryptic symbols, metaphors and puns. To decode this poetic language, you must learn to “speak dream.”

Start with a journal, a tape recorder, a computer or any other system that allows you to record your dreams. As you’re falling asleep, set an intention to remember your dreams, and practice recording even small fragments. A seemingly meaningless dream fragment can carry life-changing wisdom, and your recall will improve as your unconscious mind begins to realize you’re listening.

Resources for exploring dreams abound on the Internet and in books on dream work, archetypes, mythology and psychology inspired by the ideas of 20th century dream pioneer Carl Jung. Dream and symbol dictionaries in book form and on the Internet also can be helpful if used judiciously. Beware of sources which claim to predict the future or give only one meaning for each symbol. Dreams have endless layers of meaning and always carry new information for the dreamer. Be alert to surprising discoveries, and remember that every dream, no matter how painful or confusing, comes to show you ways to grow.

Once you’ve recorded a dream, open to possible meanings. Bring the dream into focus by giving it a title, preferably including a verb. Ask whether anything in the dream could refer to issues in your waking life. List stream-of-consciousness associations to symbols and be alert for puns. Ask how dream figures might represent a side of you, including an unacknowledged side. If the dream points to challenges or dangers, who or what in the dream might be an ally? Think of a question you have for the dream, decide who or what in the dream might know the answer and imagine a conversation with that character or symbol. If you’re so inclined, pull a card from a divination deck such as the Tarot to reflect the dream.

To get more input, attend a dream workshop, join an existing dream group or start your own. Most dream groups are discussion circles, with participants offering comments on each other’s dreams. Sources such as Jeremy Taylor’s [books and web site](#) offer guidelines for making group work both effective and supportive. Your group also could re-enact dreams in order to “talk to” animate and inanimate dream figures, as we do in Dream Portrayal [workshops](#). However, embodying dream energies can be even more emotional than simply discussing them. Both techniques should be used with respect for all members of the group, especially the dreamer.

Dr. Taylor wisely advises dream group participants to preface comments with the phrase “If it were my dream...” This allows everyone present to share in the healing aspects of the dream and to acknowledge the fact that each of us filters information through our own reality. “If it were my dream, it might be telling me about my problems with relationships” is more accurate - and free of aggression - than “*your* dream shows that *you* have a problem with relationships.”

Dreams have been known to predict the future on occasion, but in general, beware of taking dreams literally. Rather than predicting an actual physical death, for example, someone or something dying in a dream usually indicates that a key aspect of the dreamer’s life or psychological state has changed or needs to change, and the change is so dramatic that the dreamer may *feel* like something has died.

Yet another way to explore dreams is to unleash your artistic side. Let your dream themes and characters inspire a drawing or a dance, a mask or a poem, a doll, a song, a mandala or a story.

Whatever vocabulary you use, “speaking dream” will help bring your conscious and your unconscious into balance, so that you can access dormant creativity, get a clearer view of your potential and take a giant step toward wholeness.

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