

Transforming Dreams: Learning Spiritual Lessons from the Dreams You Never Forget

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The religions of the world have found a way to disagree on almost any subject you can think of. They've clashed over everything from the nature of the soul to the reality of God, from sexual morality to what foods we should and shouldn't eat. But on one small point most religions do agree, and that's a point about the nature of dreams. Nearly all the world's religions share the belief that some dreams are true revelations of the Divine, bringing people into direct contact with some kind of transpersonal being, force, or reality. Not *all* dreams are believed to have this power; most traditions emphasize that the majority of dreams are related to ordinary daily events and have no unusual, heaven-sent meaning. But almost every religion in the world recognizes that at least once or twice in their lives people have dreams that are *different*, that have a special energy, vividness, and intensity to them. The Mohave Indians of the American Southwest call these dreams "*sumach ahot*," or "lucky dreams," while the Jamaa church people of Western Africa call them "*mawazo*," or "holy dreams." Medieval Islamic theologians referred to them as "clear dream visions" sent directly from God, and ancient Hindu philosophers spoke of them as "dreams under the influence of a deity."

These unusual types of dream are not merely the relics of ancient religious superstition. People in our society today experience dreams that are virtually identical to the dream revelations reported in a wide variety of religious traditions. Although many individuals in the modern world use non-religious language to describe their dreams, the dream experiences themselves always have a vivid intensity that sharply distinguishes them from more ordinary types of dreaming. These are the dreams we never forget—the dreams we can't help but remember, the dreams that throughout our lives linger in our memories and haunt our imaginations.

Carl Jung referred to these momentous experiences as "big dreams," and he said that such dreams could, if people learned to appreciate their meanings, become "the richest jewels in the treasure-house of the soul." Unfortunately, many people in modern society have no idea what to think or do when they experience a big dream. They worry that having such strangely vivid and powerful dreams must mean there's something wrong with them. "Where did *that* come from?" the dreamers nervously ask themselves, "I've never experienced anything like that before, whether I was awake *or* asleep...."

For many years now I've been studying these kinds of extraordinary dream experiences, trying to understand where they come from, what functions they serve, and how we can interpret their meanings. My approach, in both my academic research and my experiential dreamwork, is guided by an integration of modern psychological theories with the traditional teachings of the world's religions. In *Transforming Dreams* I share the basic principles of my approach, and I show how it can provide a reliable means of making better sense of your own most vividly memorable dreams. The first part of the book, "Tales," describes four of the most striking forms that big dreams take: dreams of reassurance, dreams of making love, nightmares, and dreams of death. The book's second part, "Pathways," lays out the practical methods of exploration I have found most helpful in discerning the deeper meanings of big dreams. These practical methods include reflecting on a dream's strongest sensations, sharing dreams with other people, following particular images and themes across a series of dreams, and creatively expressing the energies of dreams in waking life. *Transforming Dreams* is written for people who simply want to know more about their own big dreams, and it is also intended for the various professionals (psychotherapists, social workers, educators, pastoral counselors, spiritual directors) whose work might benefit from a greater familiarity with the most extraordinary and mysterious realms of the dreaming imagination.

I am not assuming the readers of the book will share any particular religious faith or spiritual worldview. Big dreams come to *all* people—to religious believers, diehard atheists, and all those people who don't belong to any formal religion but who feel a yearning to discover greater meaning and purpose in their lives. I try to respect the healthy skepticism some readers may feel toward the subject of dreaming, and I also try to honor the sincere religious convictions of other readers who feel their dreams have truly Divine origins. My focus in *Transforming Dreams* is on the big dream experiences themselves, and I feel confident in promising readers that no matter what belief system you hold, these vivid and unforgettable dreams have the power to deepen your self-knowledge, broaden your emotional awareness, and open your imagination to new realms of vitality, freedom, and creative possibility.

One topic I discuss in the book is dreams of snakes, and this relates to the current interest of many ASD members in the questions of whether "universal dreams" truly exist and if so how they can best be understood. I present evidence in *Transforming Dreams* that extremely memorable dreams of snakes have been reported by people throughout history, right into the present day. Thus, in a very broad descriptive sense, I believe snake dreams are a truly universal phenomenon, and I also believe there's a good naturalistic explanation for this. Because venomous snakes have been a real danger to humans from the earliest period of our evolutionary history, dreaming about snakes (in vivid and highly memorable ways) serves the adaptive function of keeping us alert and vigilant against this perennial waking world threat. To put it in the simplest terms, *snake dreams are universal because snake dreams have tangible survival value.*

But speaking in a more interpretive sense, I do not believe snake dreams have any universal *meaning*. The snake dreams I describe in my book express a variety of

different meanings, none of which is easily reducible to a simple formula or definition. The most important practical point I emphasize in *Transforming Dreams* is that each dream is unique to the dreamer, with distinctive meanings that relate directly to his or her personal existence. Although it can be very helpful to hear how other people would interpret a similar dream (hence the value of dreamsharing groups), the dreamer is always in the best position to understand the unique meanings of his or her own dream experience.

Between these two positions—universal *dreams*, yes, universal *meanings*, no—lies a great deal of territory for creative exploration and discovery. Indeed, this gets to my basic belief about the essentially spiritual function of highly memorable dreams: *these dreams provoke greater consciousness*. Big dreams relate directly to our personal lives *and* they connect us to the universal cares, concerns, and desires of humankind. In this way big dreams truly expand consciousness, stretching our awareness to include an ever wider sphere of experience and meaning.

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Learning Spiritual Lessons from the Dreams You Never Forget*
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