

# Interpreting Dreams, Finding Spiritual Significance

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## Abstract

The Bible takes dreams very seriously. They were considered a way that God spoke to a pharaoh, pagan kings, prophets and apostles. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century psychoanalytic thinking saw dreams coming from the unconscious with important implications for daily living. In this study series of six 75 minute workshops you will have an opportunity to reflect on and interpret your dreams. You will be given practical guidelines on how to decode the symbols inherent in dreams and suggestions on how to apply the messages. A particular focus will be on how God speaks through our dreams, so the spiritual implications. The workshops will begin ??? led by the Rev Dr Bruce Stevens clinical and forensic psychologist and supply minister at GUC from March 2022.

## Week 1 The Bible and Getting Ready

Every night we have **strange visitors**. We sleep, we dream, but often we are puzzled and even confused. Do we think about our dreams or forget them? I will argue that they can be like angels, who sometimes bring messages from God.

People in **Biblical times** took dreams very seriously. This is obvious in the Genesis passage of **Jacob's dream**, "There was a ladder set up on earth, the top of it reaching to heaven and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it." (28:12) My first thought, hearing this, was to think of Bath Abbey and the portrayal of this dream in stone on the west face. But Jacob was given a more spiritual interpretation with the land as a promise to him and his descendants. God said, "I will not leave you until I done what I have promised to you" (28: 15). However, I am sure I am not the only person to remain puzzled at the link between this dream and that promise. Jacob at least understood "this is the gate of heaven".

Perhaps like Jacob we have mysterious dreams, find it hard to make any sense of the experience, and somehow find any relation to 'everyday reality'.

*Reflect and Discuss:* When I was a young man, before my conversion to Christianity I once broke off an engagement as a result of the dream. Has a dream ever influenced your actions?

Abraham **Herschel** had a dream in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century of the Jews returning to the promised land. This led to establishing the Zionist movement and the eventual Jewish state.

## Bible and Dreams

Dreams are mentioned over **50 times** in the Bible. There are many insights, for example, we dream when stressed, "for dreams come with many cares." (Ecclesiastes 5:3) Dreams are a way that God talks to humanity, God appeared to Solomon in the dream "Ask what I should give you." (1 Kings 3:5). Dreams were important to kings, for example Pharaoh was troubled by a series of dreams which only Joseph could interpret (Gen 41). The same happened with Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel who credited the Almighty, "There is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries." (Dan 2: 27). Five dreams were associated with the birth of Jesus. In the NT Paul was guided "a man of Macedonia pleading with him, 'come over to Macedonia and help us' in a dream (Acts 16: 9-10).

Dreams were associated with the 'end times'. The prophet **Joel** foretold, "I will pour out my spirit on all flesh, your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams and your young men shall see visions." (2: 28) Well, at 71 which qualifies me as old and I certainly dream – have we arrived?

## Relevance?

Now you may respond, “So what?” You might forget your dreams as soon as you wake up. Maybe dreams are ‘out of fashion’ by about 2000 years! And almost everyone would agree with you, except for a handful of Freudian and Jungian analysts (and there’s not too many of those left!). However, I have found that dreams provide meaningful guidance at significant transitions in life. Two examples of when I found either reassurance or a disturbing realization:

- (a) In **1982** I had been accepted as a graduate student at Boston University. I was worried about the financial implications of taking a wife and four children to live in Boston. I knew the city was expensive, clergy jobs almost impossible to get and a leading minister told me “Don’t go!” In this time of transition, I had a strange dream in which the diocesan **Bishop Cecil Warren** was playing a child’s game jumping over the backs of other people. I worked on the dream and came to the realization that I had an overly masculine view of the church and its hierarchy. I was challenged to believe in a more feminine and nurturing side – one that would care for me and my young family. I felt reassured and it worked out well with both a university scholarship, to cover some of the fees, and successive clergy jobs that supported my family.
- (b) In **1994** I had returned to further parish ministry but after five years in a busy parish, Holy Covenant in Jamieson, I was completely **burnt out**. I was planning to teach part-time at St Marks and to work as a psychologist. But I was conflicted about leaving parish ministry. In a dream I was drinking wine from a crystal chalice and it broke in my mouth. I was wounded in my vocation as a priest and concluded with a healthy measure of self-care that I needed a break from parish ministry (which has lasted 25+ years!).

I am not saying that all dreams have such significance. Some dreams seem to ‘**clear the clutter**’ of daily life. But some are important. I am aware of my dreams and I can sense when one has an important message for me – maybe once or twice a year. So how do we begin to understand our dreams?

*Discuss:* Have you ever had **repetitive dreams**? Or dreams seem so vivid that you can’t forget them. What sense did you make of it?

## TO DO THIS WEEK

1. *Be Ready:* Place a **notebook and pen** beside your bed. Be ready to record even a fragment of the dream. Even a brief, seemingly insignificant dream will try to tell us something we need to know. Dreams never waste our time. (Johnson, 1986, 44)
2. *Invitation:* Say to God, yourself or your unconscious, before going to sleep “**I am willing to listen** to you. Send me an important message through a dream.”
3. *Respond:* Bring either a dream or a fragment of a dream that feels significant to you to our dream study next week.

## Week 2 Beginning the Work of Dream Interpretation

### Introduction

When we think about dreams, there images that strike us as strange, unreal and even frightening. Dreams come from a different place and speak a different language. We can recognise that dreams speak the language of the unconscious.

Robert Johnson makes the point that we can experience our unconscious either in a voluntary or involuntary way. We can have explosive negative reactions to people or even overly positive responses - this was a way that our unconscious can influence us without our choice. Or we can choose to listen to our dreams or other manifestations of our unconscious life (such as Freudian slips of the tongue, daydreams or active imagination).

Johnson makes an interesting point, “All the forms of interaction with the unconscious that nourished our ancestors-dream, vision, ritual, and religious experience - are largely lost to us, dismissed by the modern mind as primitive or superstitious. Thus, in our pride and hubris our faith in unassailable reason, we cut ourselves off from our origins in the unconscious and from the deepest parts of ourselves.” (Page 9-10). The Jungian take on all this is that if we don’t open ourselves to the unconscious it will return as neurosis.

*Discuss:* do you have a sense of your unconscious and its importance or otherwise? In what ways do you notice this dimension.

### Interpretation

There is a long **history of dream interpretation**. Over the centuries people have developed dream manuals to aid the dreamer in understanding dreams. Freud’s famous *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) was the analytic equivalent and today there are countless new age manuals and internet sites.

How does the Bible approach dream interpretation? Some dreams are quite obvious. **Joseph** in Genesis 37 dreamt of his own greatness “a sheaf of the field” with others bowing to him. His brothers were resentful that he was their father’s favourite child, and they had no difficulty interpreting this dream. The brothers asked “Are you indeed to reign over us.” (37:8) They sold Joseph into slavery. Later after Joseph arrived in Egypt, Pharaoh dreamed 7 fat cows, followed by 7 lean cows, which swallowed the 7 fat cows (Gen 41). He had a similar dream of 7 ears of grain. Joseph interpreted the dream as foretelling 7 bountiful years followed by 7 years of famine. The pharaoh responded to the message of the dream and used the good years to build a reserve of grain which fed the nation. We notice that the language of dreams is the language of symbols.

In other interpretations of dreams the symbols needed to be decoded. The Israelite Daniel was described in the book of **Daniel** as having “understanding in all visions and dreams” (1:17). The **King Nebuchadnezzar** had a dream which troubled him. He went to his court appointed interpreters (2:2) but they could not tell him what he had dreamt. This was no problem for Daniel “You saw, O king, and behold great image. The image, mighty and of exceeding brightness stood before you, it’s appearance was frightening. The head of the image was of fine gold, its breast and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay. As you looked stone was cut by no human hand and smote the image on its feet of iron and clay and broke them in pieces then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and gold altogether were broken to pieces and became like chaff on the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. The stone that struck the image became a

great mountain and filled the whole earth. (Daniel chapter 2:31-35). Daniel (Dan 2) interpreted this as the rise and fall of kingdoms, “You are the head of gold. After you shall arise another kingdom inferior to you, and yet a third kingdom of bronze which shall rule over all the earth. There shall be a fourth kingdom strong as iron. Because iron breaks to pieces and shatters all things ... it shall break and crush all these. And as you saw the feet and toes partly of potter’s clay and partly of iron, it shall be a divided kingdom; but some of the firmness of the iron shall be in it, just as you saw iron mixed with the miry clay. And as the toes of the feet were partly either partly clay so the kingdom shall be partly strong and partly brittle. As you saw the iron mixed with miry clay so they shall mix with one another in marriage but they shall not hold together, just as iron does not mix with clay. And in those days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed, nor shall its sovereignty be left to another people. It shall break to pieces all those kingdoms and bring them to an end shall stand for ever.” Note that Daniel explained the meaning of the dream to the King “in order that the interpretation may be known to the king and that *you may understand the thoughts of your mind.*” (Daniel 2:30) This not only honoured the dimension of dreaming, it was a trust in the unconscious.

When dreams are interpreted in the Bible there is a standard approach in which the **symbols are identified and this ‘un-locks’ the meaning of the dream.** In Daniel 2 the various metals descending in value were identified as the present rule of Nebuchadnezzar and then following kingdoms until the divided kingdom which is destroyed by God. This is a foretelling dream but essentially the interpretation follows a standard process of identifying dream symbols and then making meaning out of the dream as a whole. I will recommend something similar.

*Discuss:* Are there certain symbols that are meaningful to you? The cross? The Australian flag?

Broadly, there have been various approaches to interpreting dreams which I’ll introduce now and explore in more detail in a later study. For the moment I will identify three approaches:

- (a) Using a **dream dictionary** and look up the suggested meanings. I did a research study about 10 years ago and I was surprised to find that this is reasonably effective. See [www.dreamdictionary.org/](http://www.dreamdictionary.org/)
- (b) **Freudian** approach which means you take your dreams to a classical analyst who is an expert in dream interpretation. This is costly, if you can still find an analyst, and I am not convinced that the expert approach works well.
- (c) **Jungian approach** puts the responsibility to interpret the dream back on the dreamer. In my experience this works well. The assumption is that it is your unconscious and you are the expert in understanding it with the right tools.

I will advise some practical steps which follow the self-interpretation of dreams along Jungian lines. The approach is well explained in Robert Johnson’s *Inner Work* book (now about 20 years old).

*Discuss:* have you ever tried to interpret one of your dreams? Was this successful or did you become frustrated?

### Practical Steps

You might be thinking I can’t remember my dreams, so I remind you to put a **pad and pen beside your bed.** This action will signal that you are receptive to your dreams. It is important to get down as much of the dream as possible including all the small details. All this is essential for the following steps which will help you to interpret the dream:

1. The **most important dreams** are vivid, surprising and possibly repetitive. When you wake up and remember something of a dream, record it on the note pad or journal. Begin with fragments and add details as you recall them. Make sure every detail that you can recall is recorded on the pad. Then I would advise you to go back to sleep, you can think further about the dream in the morning! But note that writing the dream down takes it seriously and indicates your intention to work on understanding the dream.
2. **Set a time, maybe 30 minutes to work on the dream.** Underline the key symbols. This includes people, actions and places. These will be central to ‘de-coding’ the dream. It is like when you learned a language at school. I did three years of Latin, you look at a passage, gradually you can get some sense of meaning, but a few words puzzle you until you get the dictionary to look the unknown word up. Then hopefully all becomes clear. It is the same process with dreams.
3. Then put the **symbol-words on a page and associate meaning until one ‘clicks’**. For example “rocking chair” then you might associate: grandmother, retirement, mortality and when one ‘clicks’ for you giving the meaning for that word, but not yet for the dream as a whole.
4. **Do this with all the symbols**, insert the meanings into the flow of the dream and then you will start to have a sense of the meaning. **Make it about you personally.** The dream will not be about mortality in an abstract sense but your vulnerability to death.
5. When you have a sense of the dream as a whole, **try to hear a message to yourself.** Try to express the meaning of the dream in a single sentence addressed to you, “My dream is telling me...”
6. Johnson also recommended doing **an action to honour the dream.** I have rarely done this but it does have the effect of making it part of daily life.

I am not saying that these steps will work every time. Also, I had long periods in which are hardly paid any attention to my dreams. But I have also had a number of significant dreams which have influenced the course of my life. I have come to think of the dreamer and the interpreter in me as **part of my ‘wise self’**. Not based on rationality but somehow caring and knowing what is best for me. I have found the messages very reassuring, especially in times of transition or making a major decision. It adds to my confidence in making a life decision to have this ‘wise self’ and my rational brain ‘in sync’.

**To Do:** begin with what you have. Do you have a dream fragment, the recollection of a repetitive dream from your childhood or adolescence, or a dream you recorded this week? Make a start.

## Conclusion

Have you ever played the game of throwing a flat pebble and watching it skip across the surface of a lake? I suppose we all have. A harmless activity but it is a metaphor for how we live much of our lives. Just skimming the surface of life. Of course, there will be life crises when we are plunged beneath the surface: a health crisis, losing employment, a separation or the death of a loved one. But we can choose to go deeper in the water. I see the spiritual life as an invitation to depth. Of course, this is helped by our common worship, the beauty of music and art, meaningful friendships and intimacy with family.

Attending to our dreams is another pathway to psychological and spiritual depth. Dreams remind us of another realm: mysterious, potentially deep in meaning, and at times insistent. A little like God.



### Week 3 Various Perspectives on Dream Interpretation

*Discuss:* did you have a dream this week that you felt was significant? Did you work on it? Did you make progress or get stuck? Share your experiences.

There is **nothing more personal** than a dream. The dream is my creation, your creation, on rare occasions our creation. Is there any value in the self-analysis of dreams?

#### Johnson's Four Steps in Dream Interpretation

When you read *Inner Work*, there are a raft of Jungian concepts such as archetypes, individuation and myths. You may find these helpful, or not; I find them interesting but generally not persuasive. Hence, my approach is to use the practical outline of Jung's approach, and to not get distracted by theory generally whether Jung or Freud.

- (a) **Associations.** Every symbol in the dream is the unconscious providing an opportunity for association that explain the symbols meaning. So, we begin by recording the dream, underlining the key symbols and then writing out every association you have with the dream image. A dream may contain persons, objects, situations, colours, sounds or speech each of these is a distinct image which needs to be looked at in its own right. **Look at each and make your associations.** An association is any word, idea, mental picture, feeling or memory that pops into your head as you examine the image in the dream. It is literally anything that you spontaneously connect with the image. Usually, an image will have a number of associations. Once you've written down all the associations, then go to the next image and begin the same process. Often the first connection, one that seems obvious, is not the one that will work best for you later in the process. Be patient and be prepared to do the work. Remember that **it is your association**, since the dream comes from your unconscious.

It may help to think about the image as the **hub of the wheel** with spokes going out to various associations. Now which association is the most significant? You have the idea that an association will "click" as this will have the most energy for you. There is a feeling that it fits. Johnson also talks about archetypal amplification but this is not a technique that I have used.

- (b) **Dynamics.** In this step we connect each dream image to a specific dynamic in our inner lives. We identify parts of our inner self that appear as images in the dream. This involves going to **each image, one at a time and for each image to ask what part of me is that?** Where have I seen it functioning in my life lately? Where do I see the same trait in my personality? The scope of this is large because it can include an emotional vent such as a surge of anger, and in a conflict or an inner personality which appears to be acting through you, feeling, an attitude or a mood. Essentially, we are asking ourselves: **what is going on inside me that this dream speaks of?**
- (c) **Interpretation** In this step we ask questions such as, "What is the central most important message in this dream is trying to communicate to me? What is it advising me to do? What is the meaning of the dream for my life?" Johnson gives some principles for choosing an interpretation: (i) Choose an interpretation that shows you something you didn't know. (ii) Avoid an interpretation that inflates your ego or congratulates you. Dreams are aimed at the unfinished business and your life, showing what you need to

face next, what you need to learn. (iii) Avoid interpretations that shift responsibility away from yourself. Your dreams are not concerned with pointing out faults of others. (iv) **Learn to live with the dreams over time**, fit them into the flow of your life. On occasion everyone has a big dream which gives a panoramic view of your life. It is a good thing to learn to live with dreams like this and to return to them regularly. As time goes by our understanding increases. Johnson said, “**Such dreams come from the frontiers of your consciousness**. They are joined in some way to the future, the seeds which are contained already and you now. Give yourself time and experience, keep interacting with the symbols, return to the dream from time to time and all will become clear.” (Page 96)

- (d) **Rituals** A ritual is a physical act which enables the **dream cross from the psyche to the physical**. This is a way of honouring the dream and its message to you. Small things work best, for example picking a flower, hugging your dog or sending a card. Think about something that seems appropriate. Johnson gave an example of a man who had a dream about junk-food so he bought a cheeseburger and buried it in his backyard. The best rituals are physical, solitary and silent. If you can't think of anything to do, Johnson recommends lighting a candle.

**To Do:** Take a dream fragment and apply these steps to it. Then discuss in small groups.

### A Research Study 40 Dreams

Over a period of about twenty years I recorded some of my dreams. In the middle of the night, I would write what I could remember on scraps of paper, later to record them in a journal but mostly to forget about them. I went into Jungian analysis for a couple of years, but generally I am not particularly self-reflective. Then, after returning to academia from many years in clinical practice, I thought there might be a potential research project in the accumulated dreams. I asked: Do different therapeutic approaches to understanding one's dreams differ?

The great pioneers of the psyche Freud and Jung both took the self-analysis of dreams very seriously. The last century began with the publication of **Freud's** *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900/2001) which is now considered a classic of Western literature. It was highly influential in spreading his ideas about the unconscious. The text was informed by the self-analysis of his dreams (p. 105). One example was the Irma dream with its extended analysis (pp. 106-118). In 1900 Freud was in the middle of his long life. However, **Jung** wrote *Memories, Dreams and Reflections* (1963) in his 80's. Both works are highly personal and illustrate, in different ways, a psychological encounter with the unconscious through dreams. Both tried to provide a theoretical map to understand the unconscious realm. In terms of qualitative research, both Freud and Jung attempted a kind of 'grounded theory' arising from their understanding and clinical practice. Their work resulted in theoretical and therapeutic innovations that have had far reaching influence in the 20<sup>th</sup> C and show no sign of this abating in the 21<sup>st</sup>.

I had my data: **40 recorded dreams**. Five psychotherapies were chosen to interpret the content of dreams: Self Psychology within psychoanalysis, Jungian analysis, Existential, Schema, and Dream Dictionary. This was somewhat arbitrary since there are potentially many equally valid approaches. While there was some diversity, the choice was mine and simply reflected areas of interest and to a lesser extent clinical experience. This was a comparison of five different approaches to the *self*-analysis of dreams. A number of approaches to dream interpretation,



especially psychoanalysis or ‘depth’ psychology, are more embedded in a therapeutic relationship. This leads to a reasonable question about whether any meaningful analysis of dreams can be separated from that interpersonal milieu.

The pitfalls of this kind of research are obvious. It is easy to become self-indulgent and lost in subjectivity – without demonstrating any capacity for critical self-reflection. The test is in the quality of the analytical reflexive critique. I built in some safeguards by consulting experts in each therapy and a close friend reviewed my work. Both provided counter-points in the reflective process. Auto-ethnographic methodology (Grbich, 2011) proved to be a useful means of comparing various therapeutic approaches to the analysis of dreams, to encourage theory development and ultimately to attempt to further therapeutic goals.

The **research plan** included the following:

1. **Record the dreams** in a digital format from my hand-written dream journal. Also keep a process journal while carrying out the research.
2. Give a **title to each dream** (also suggested Gonclaves & Barbosa in Rosner, et al., 2004, p. 133).
3. Record the **first impression** of the dream (5 minutes).
4. Follow with a **second reflection, from clinical experience**, but not from a specific theoretical approach (about 30 minutes per dream).
5. Select **five approaches** to dream interpretation and then randomly assign the 40 dreams. These included Self Psychology, Jungian Psychoanalysis, Existential Therapy, Schema Therapy and Dream Dictionary.
6. Complete a literature review in the different therapeutic styles, work out a method of interpretation (following the recommendations of influential authors in each), and reflect on each sample of dreams from the various perspectives.
7. Approach an **analyst or psychotherapist** (experienced in the different interpretative frameworks) to review the interpretation and provide written feedback to stimulate further reflection.<sup>1</sup>
8. Ask a **close friend** to review the dream interpretations as a check for being self-deceptive in the interpretive process.<sup>2</sup>
9. Develop an interpretative template, as a general approach, to be used on a more recent dream – the 41<sup>st</sup> dream.

### The Five Approaches

**Self Psychology** The most useful aspect of Self Psychology was the attention to narcissism and the idea that self-structure is revealed in dreams. Most of the eight dreams were self-state (Kohut, 1977) with a number having themes of self-expansiveness. The imaginative technique of reverie from Ogden (1990, originally Bion, 1962) proved useful. I took a fragment of the dream and then allowed my imagination to wander. The theme of narcissism figured in my dreams but surprisingly my friend Dr Yapp asked me, “Are you perhaps a little over-preoccupied with (your)

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<sup>1</sup> The following experts were consulted: Dr Ron Lee and Ms Lynda Parry (Self Psychology), Dr Patricia Moroney, (Jung), Dr Alison Strasser (Existential), Dr Bob Tsapilis (Schema) and Ms Jane Teresa Anderson (Dream Dictionary).

<sup>2</sup> Dr Graham Yapp is a retired academic and scientist. He has known me over twenty years.

narcissistic tendencies?” As I think about it now, if you are narcissistic it is impossible not to be somewhat preoccupied!

**Jungian Psychotherapy** The Jungian approach seemed comfortable. This has been the approach used with my patients in therapy. I tried to identify important symbols in the dream and associated until sought meaning until ‘it clicks’. The process included archetypal expansion, reflecting on aspects of my inner self that the images might represent, using active imagination, listening for a dream message and performing a ritual to honour the dream message. This seemed the most practical and possibly most useful approach though I am not particularly drawn to Jungian personality theory.

**Existential Psychotherapy** I have read many of the existentialist writers, novelists and philosophers, but it has never seemed the best way for me to work clinically. But this approach is present tense and grounded. The process placed the dream in a historical and interpersonal context, restated in the present tense, and explored relationships in the dream from a real life perspective (see Boss, 1957). I added a personal challenge to **think about whether the dream was calling me to make a responsible choice**. The Existentialist approach highlighted such life dynamics, but felt stripped of the numinous.

**Schema Therapy** I used the general principles of Schema Therapy (Young, 2003) to work out a process which included identifying schemas in a dream, both adaptive and maladaptive, and rescripting of any related childhood memory. As far as I know, this therapy has not been used with dreams. I thought that the rescripting had potential and it has been used for working with nightmares associated with PTSD (Krakow, 2004). Schema Therapy is now my preferred approach with difficult clients, so it was interesting to apply it in this context.

**Dream Dictionary** Needless to say I approached the use of Dream Dictionaries with considerable scepticism and low expectations. I went to [www.Amazon.com](http://www.Amazon.com) and simply ordered three of the most popular dream dictionaries: Bethards (2010), Crisp (2002), and Holloway (2006). As chance would have it, the three are very different but seem broadly representative. This approach seemed a-theoretical. A theoretical understanding might have provided more overall coherence. The approach was to identify key words or phrases, look it up in all three dictionaries, and see if anything ‘clicked’ for me. The Dream Dictionaries would sometimes provide helpful hints. Surprisingly this led to novel possibilities in understanding a dream.

It seems likely that **dream content is so rich that it can be approached from many perspectives, like a city can be seen from many vantage points**. Each theoretical approach specified different ways of interacting with dream content. Ways, as it were, of placing myself in relationship to the city: in the top floor of a building, at street level in various locations, on a hill, in a large park or above in a plane. It was inevitable that various perspectives will govern what is noticed. Each approach contributed something to understanding the 40 dreams. There was no ‘standout performer’, but I was reasonably satisfied that I had gained a reasonable understanding through each approach. Occasionally an approach did not really work with the dream but this was unusual and seemed a ‘bad fit’ with only two or three dreams. What seemed most valuable was the process of reflection. The value was in ‘dream work’ or working on understanding the dreams. While there were clear limitations in my research, using only five approaches with a single dreamer, it would appear that potentially any therapeutic approach has a reasonable chance of working for our clients if done with some diligence.

*Discuss:* and continue work on your dreams.

## Week 4 In the ‘Salt Mine’

*Discuss:* Did you have a significant dream this week? What was your experience with the dream and trying to understand it?

### What I learned from the Dream Research Project

The goal in qualitative research is a ‘rich description’ of what is studied (Baker, Pistrang and Elliot, 2002). It encourages a process of discovery. I found my **research process deepened some aspects of my understanding**. This included what felt like insights ‘along the way’ and some potentially could have benefit for how we guide others in interacting with their dreams.

My creative interaction with dream material was patchy. Sometimes it seemed to flow, but equally progress could be arduous or not existent. It seemed **valuable to be in an intuitive, almost ‘receptive’ mood**, for dream interpretation. In order to enhance my understanding, I needed to enter into a *like process* to the *creative process* which created the dream. This might parallel the processes of **reverie** (Ogden, 1990) or Active Imagination (Jung, 1964). Maybe ‘like understands like’.<sup>3</sup> The challenge seemed to be to find a similar mental state in waking life to approach the dream. In contrast, coming with a reductionist attitude seemed to miss what the dream had to say.

I wondered **how to play with my dreams?** (Ogden, 1990, 241) This was suggested by the Jungian analyst. Philip Bromberg advised, “Health is the ability to stand in the spaces between realities without losing any of them.” (Bromberg, 1993, 401). Another parallel might be cognitive flexibility in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Hayes, 2006).

Each theoretical approach had benefits. All generated a kind of check list. This countered some natural laziness and brought a more disciplined and comprehensive approach to understanding a dream. It was beneficial to incorporate other perspectives, “Oh, I will look at it from that angle too.”

At times **insights were surprising**. Something was seen that felt powerful and genuine. When an insight or relevant connection was made, what might it suggest about understanding a dream? It can feel like it comes from a transcendent or numinous source. Or just making some mental connections, which is something brains seem good at doing. Perhaps there is an equal risk in expecting too much or too little as one approaches a dream.

Gradually the realization came to me that **I experienced dream interpretation as a kind of self-therapy**. Like keeping a journal, it takes *my relationship to me* seriously and strangely it had a similar feel to being in therapy.<sup>4</sup> This seemed crucial. It was not just a matter of hearing a message from my unconscious. And it made insights from the Existential and possibly Schema approaches more intelligible.

The sense of **doing ‘dream work’** was something I took from this study. While there was something of a spectrum from Jung-Freud-Dictionary-Schema-Existential about anything being ‘revealed’ in a dream – the value was undeniable. I was able to reflect, consider, try to recognise and work through common psychological themes in my dream work. As I did this, it seemed less relevant how much came from a ‘Wise Self’ or higher consciousness. I could, just as easily,

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<sup>3</sup> Shakespeare noted “Like doth quit like, and measure still for measure”, Measure for Measure, Act 5, Scene 1.

<sup>4</sup> This insight led me to understanding the self-analysis of dreams as serving a selfobject function.

have been talking to a therapist about an incident with my boss at work. **Perhaps ‘dream stuff’ is no different and easily becomes ‘therapy stuff’.**

## Week 5 My 'Impossible Dream'

*Discuss:* Did you have a significant dream this week? Did you work on it? Arrive at any insights? Do you have a sense that some themes are more common than others? What might this indicate for you?

After working on the 40 dreams, I thought it might be valuable to apply what I had learnt on a more recent dream. When I began looking for a dream 'to try out the method' I had what I thought was a **very significant 41<sup>st</sup> dream**. I repeated many of the steps but took a more inclusive approach drawing on the various approaches to interpretation

### 15 March 2011 The Ochre Man

I am driving around Canberra and I come to a quaint village, there are small but elaborate mud houses. Some have a number of stories with stairs up the side. The road becomes rougher so I avoid some streets and eventually find a place to park. There are some faded colours but mostly dusty brown. Then I meet Ken who is made of mud and says to me, "Hello Dr Bruce, thanks for sending people to me." He offers to show me around. He is in charge of the place, "my shift" maybe for years. He said that the village has been there since Lazarus and I think of Biblical times. He wants to know my last name but I will not tell him because I fear that it may give him the power to keep me there. It turns to dusk and then night but with more colour in the street-scape. There is social life with people and dining places. I understand that if I stay, I will become part of the place, maybe for ever, so I intend to leave. I make the observation to Ken that he is trying to trick me and he laughingly agrees.

(a) *Give the dream a name:* "The Ochre Man."

(b) *Have an initial impression* (about 5 minutes): I was puzzled by what this dream might mean but it felt very important. The title became the "Ochre Man" (after Ken). Maybe Ken was half alive but coming to life. The risk was to be imprisoned in the village. What did this mean? Should I join or must I escape?

(c) *An extended reflection* (about 30 minutes). I thought about the cost of belonging. Every community has a cost. The people were made of mud like in the Biblical account of Adam, the first human, created from the dust (Genesis 2:7). I was told that the village dated back to Lazarus, whom Jesus brought back to life. This seemed significant. What does it mean to be alive? Are the people inanimate or animate? Sterile? There was some ambiguity. Another puzzle was in relation to what Ken said to me, "Hello Dr Bruce, thanks for sending people to me." How could I do this having only just discovered the place? A more alarming thought was that my work, as a psychologist, sends people to the mud village and somehow made them less alive – possibly trapped there forever? But this society became more alive and engaging at night. I was apprehensive that I could be captured by the place and unable to leave. There was a primitive fear in having my name known which evoked superstition with magical overtones. Did I have to leave before midnight when 'I could become a pumpkin'? Ken reminded me of the male Barbie doll. Might this have been my destiny if I made the wrong choices, perhaps staying too long in the mud village? Was I already of becoming a resident of the mud village?

(d) *Identify key symbols in the dream and associate until 'it clicks':*



There were a number of symbols in the dream. But a couple to illustrate: Ken is *in charge* (highest on the pecking order of the place, but still not fully alive, Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost* "It is better to reign in hell than to serve in Heaven" Line 263, Book 1). *Lazarus* (in the Christian tradition a symbol change from death to life, a miracle).

- (e) *Choices* I actually make a lot of choices in this dream: followed my interest to an interesting discovery, drove around, got out of the car, engaged with Ken, took up his offer to show me around, but refused to tell him my last name and remain until night when the village became more alive. On what basis did I make the choices in this dream? Maybe it is best to be decisive, even when lost and confused? It seemed to carry me forward. However, I did not have a sense that my choices were that productive in the dream. This could be typical of me. Usually, I have a sense of direction and I am able to make confident choices even when confused. What is less clear is whether this trait is even remotely of any use, especially to my overall sense of life direction.
- (f) *Identify key themes or schemas in the dream.* This dream was internally consistent. There was no sense of it being fragmented. However, something remained out of awareness. Everything was *homogenous*, made of mud, both people and buildings. Even with mud there was human creativity to make something "quaint". While humanity in the Biblical tradition was made of the dust of the earth, could it be that the people were not so much 'half-dead' but 'half-created'? The process of creation had been halted?

There was a passage of time: light, twilight and darkness which mark greater social interaction and possibly the appearance of life. The day passed and this might have been a metaphor for the seasons of a life? My life? But it is not in the light but in the dark that this world thrives.

It is **ironic** that I was generally satisfied with my self-analysis of the 40 dreams no matter what approach was used. However, when I approached the final big dream I got stuck. There was no satisfying resolution. I presented the research and this 41<sup>st</sup> dream in a number of forums. This led to some interesting comments. Dr Kate Stewart asked, after the Empathink conference (Canberra, 3 March 2012), "Funny that both you and Ken knew each other by first name only." This final comment struck me and I wondered about the extent to which I tolerate trivial relationships? I also gained insights from the review process with one of the reviewers asking whether my shadow included valuing Ken and the mud. This made sense of people coming to life in the dark.

- (g) *Attempt an overall meaning for the dream and possible 'take home message'.*

It is curious that this dream has not readily yielded up its secrets. The 41<sup>st</sup> dream seemed the most important dream that I have ever had and yet it proved to be the hardest to understand. I struggled to find an organizing theme. The following were tried out: mortality, what of value is to be discovered among the familiar, life choices to be made, the denial of my creativity, the unknown consequences of my actions, my relationship to spiritual values, as a multi-faceted portrayal of my inner self and

what blocks my growth. It was of course amusing that I should spend a year on a research project and then try to apply it but only to grind to a halt!

*Comment 2021:* It is now nearly **10 years after I dreamt The Ochre Man**. There been some huge changes in my life such as retiring from academia and counselling work, return to part-time Christian ministry, and facing the diagnosis of a chronic illness. I suspect that some dreams have an embryonic period and have to be birthed with later understanding. Sometimes you grow into an understanding. Sometimes there is a change in perspective, for example I recently stopped seeing people for counselling and I have expressed an intention to do more ministry work in the next couple of years. This opened the way for a different understanding.

It is 5 January 2021, I woke up this morning and had the thought that this dream could be about the limits of my work as a clinical psychologist without a more spiritual or ministry perspective. This seems to click, to feel right, so I'll explore it more.

(h) *Do a behavioural ritual to honour the dream.* The initial ritual was to write the academic paper.

### Interpretation 8 January 2021

**I am driving around Canberra and I come to a quaint village** (this is a quaint village, and it interests me: it is my location, and undiscovered part of Canberra where I have worked almost my whole adult life), **there are small but elaborate mud houses. Some have a number of stories with stairs up the side** (I associate stairs with that which is usually internal, similar to what is hidden is revealed in therapy). **The road becomes rougher so I avoid some streets and eventually find a place to park.** (This is like the process of therapy, the road gets rougher and we both go down alleys and avoid others. Sometimes we stop. Not everything is addressed.) **There are some faded colours but mostly dusty brown.** (Life can be bland, often this is a motivation to enter therapy) **Then I meet Ken** (artificial, somewhat superficial like the Barbie doll Ken. Everything is homogenous in this village) **who is made of mud** (the Genesis story has people made from dirt but this indicates an incomplete process with people who are half-created) **and says to me, "Hello Dr Bruce** (there is something superficial about us knowing each other only by our first names), **thanks for sending people to me."** (Could this be a judgement on my work as a therapist? Do I leave people and situations 'half-created'?) **He offers to show me around.** (Look at the results of your work) **He is in charge of the place, "my shift"** (it is for a time, a season, relations and power are temporary) **maybe for years. He said that the village has been there since Lazarus** (this is a powerful image since Lazarus was resuscitated and not resurrected, he was given additional life but not eternal or spiritual life) **and I think of Biblical times.** (The time when God revealed himself through the prophets and Jesus). **He wants to know my last name but I will not tell him because I fear that it may give him the power to keep me there.** (There is something in me that is frightened to remain in my assigned role, I want something more!) **It turns to dusk and then night but with more colour in the street-scape. There is social life with people and dining places.** (People I see do recover and are able to have a social life and relationships, but at best they remain in the night and stay mud people. Again, I'm confronted with the limits of what I'm able to achieve.). **I understand that**

**if I stay, I will become part of the place, maybe for ever, so I intend to leave. I make the observation to Ken that he is trying to trick me and he laughingly agrees.** (This is one of the great conflicts of my life. How to invest my gifts and training? I have skills in both psychology and theology in pastoral ministry. I think this is a powerful reminder of God's call to a spiritual vocation. When I had this dream, I was early in my academic career in training clinical psychologists which I loved, so my direction was set but I think the dreamer in me protested but I was not ready to hear.) In **February 2022** I feel more certain that the dream foretold my need to return to pastoral ministry and to honour my vocation. Additional years were needed for me to be ready for that message.

## Conclusion

Dreams are ephemeral things. We give them shape by recalling them, doing dream work and applying the insights in our daily lives. This study supported the value in doing 'dream work' using a variety of therapeutic approaches and learning something from each. There was some support for the benefit of the self-analysis of dreams, regardless of therapeutic approach. However, there was also a sense of the limit of self-analysis. In the research I developed a protocol which essentially failed with the final dream. I found more benefit from the comments of experienced therapists who noted what I failed to observe.

I will leave the **last word to Hamlet** "To sleep, perchance to dream, ay, there's the rub" (1602).

## Week 6 Final Thoughts

*Discuss:* Any dreams this week? Did you have a sense of any possible meaning?

We began this series of studies with some biblical observations, this led to considering a research project I did a number of years ago, but most of the focus is been on understanding your own dreams.

I hope you have been able to come to a place of **greater respect for your unconscious**. I like Robert Johnson's acknowledgement, "It is in the world of dreaming that the unconscious is working out its powerful dynamics. It is there that the great forces do battle or combine to produce attitudes, ideals, beliefs, and compulsions that motivate most of our behaviour." (Page 19) Have you gained a greater sense of this in the last six weeks?

If you would like to continue with another creative activity with implications for self-growth, you might consider Johnson's understanding of *active imagination*. This is featured strongly in his book.

## Symbols of Transcendence

Perhaps you found there are some symbols, in your dreams which represent your total self, the spiritual side of your personality, or God.

*Discuss:* Have you found some symbols of transcendence in your dreams?

I could only find one paper on religious imagery in dreams on Google Scholar:

## Religious images in dreams

[James A. Hall M.D.](#) in the

[Journal of Religion and Health](#) **volume 18**, pages327–335 (1979)

## Abstract

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In the tradition of Jung's analytical psychology, specimen dreams are given to illustrate: 1) traditional religious images modified by the personal context; 2) dreams in which material appears that has traditional religious meaning, but not in the conscious religious tradition of the dreamer ("archetypal images" in dreams); and 3) dreams that seem to carry a numinous religious meaning, but have not been shown to use traditional religious images. An understanding of the possible religious meaning of dreams should be a specialized but necessary aspect of counselling in depth, whether done by secular professionals or by pastoral counsellors identified with traditional collective religious organizations.

I think given the nature of symbolism there should be some caution in directly associating religious imagery with God. For example sex in dreams is not usually about sex as such but may be about intimate connection, etc. Jung had a significant but somewhat blasphemous dream cited in his *Memories, Dreams and Reflections* (1963). While a religious image might not be literal in meaning it should be taken seriously in a process of dream interpretation especially if it carries a sense of the numinous or mystery.

### An additional dream 28 March 2021

I am lying on the edge of a small cliff maybe 10 or 15 feet down. I can't pull myself back to safety. Someone is behind me whom I can't see. I asked for help saying, "I have Parkinson's Disease". This person is slow to respond and has two handfuls of sand which he or she releases over the over the edge. I'm not sure if they help me at that point. I thought this dream was significant since it was the first time I can recall having a reference to PD, though I have had some since.

In February 2022 I had a **dream about coming to GUC**. I felt I understood the advice to me. It encouraged me to a style of ministry, which I will be happy to share with anyone who asks me at the end of my term of supply ministry. Maybe the advice was useful in my pastoral approach?

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