

THE HIDDEN WORLD OF DREAMS

By Dr. Ginger E. Blume

Many people ignore the gifts that are delivered nightly to all of us, several times per night, by an inner, wise part of the human mind. These internal movies come in vivid detail, and oftentimes in living color, and they describe the beliefs, thoughts, and fears of each daytime, conscious person. I refer to our dreams as gifts from the unconscious. Such gifts are worth unwrapping, deciphering, and saving in a personal journal for future reference.

Dream Symbols

But, how do you interpret your own dreams? There are many dream interpretation books available, but they oftentimes have limited utility. While some aspects of our dreams have universal symbolism, even those symbols may change depending on a person's history and/or life experiences. For instance, water is oftentimes representative of our emotions. If you dream of drowning or of your house being flooded, this may indicate that you feel overwhelmed by a current emotional experience that you can't handle. On the other hand, if you are a highly religious individual, the same dream might represent a death and rebirth or transformation (perhaps, suggestive of a baptism). In short, I would suggest that you consider the typical interpretation of a dream symbol, but then ask yourself if the symbol has any special meaning to you. Culture plays a major part in how to accurately understand your own dream symbols.

Gestalt Therapy Approach to Dreams

One of my favorite ways of understanding dreams is to pretend that all aspects of a dream represent some part of you. This approach is used by Gestalt therapists and was popularized by psychologist, Dr. Fritz Perls. In this approach, take each dream item and imagine that it symbolizes some aspect of you. Then, speak *as if* you were that item and describe yourself as you occur in the dream. For instance, Dr. Perls described an elderly client who related a dream about a license plate that she had discovered at the bottom of a lake. She was upset that it didn't belong there and she wanted to retrieve it. Unfortunately, she woke up before she could swim to the bottom of the lake to get it. To help her understand this puzzling dream, it was suggested that she describe the license plate, speaking as if it were her. Here is a brief summary of what she said:

I was thrown like trash into this lake because I was no longer needed. I've been lying on the bottom for a long time and I've begun to rust. My numbers are getting washed off and I can hardly be read. Nobody knows that I'm down here. It's like I don't exist. I use to serve a useful purpose on someone's car, but now I'm wasting away.

As the client spoke these words, it was as if her dream came alive and spoke directly to her, revealing her true inner feelings about aging and coming to the end of her long and productive life as a employed worker. By speaking as the license plate, she didn't need her dream to be interpreted. Her dream spoke to her quite clearly. You can take this strategy and apply it to any object in your dream.

Day Residue in Dreams

It is exciting to realize that your unconscious is creating these "special delivery packages" every single night, usually every 90 minutes throughout the sleep cycle during REM (Rapid Eye Movement) sleep. These unconscious creations sometimes include "day residue" (things that we've observed or experienced throughout the day) which may

be fairly obvious. However, even these obvious features are significant because they were “included in the dream” by the unconscious as having personal meaning. In other words, not everything we experience during the day is replayed during sleep. Take notice of those things that “have stuck,” and ask yourself what significance they have for you.

Dreams with an Important Message to your Conscious Mind

Sometimes dreams are viewed as preparation for something significant that we are about to face in our waking life, but may have ignored. For example, a male client had a repetitive dream in which he feared he would lose his car keys and miss a crucial meeting at work. In the dream, he had made several extra sets of car keys and placed them around the house. When he woke up from various versions of this repetitive dream, he always felt irritated. Despite all the precautions he had taken to never be late or caught off guard, he could never locate his keys in any of the dreams and was always late to the meeting.

When we explored the dream’s message in therapy, I discovered the following: He was anticipating a major promotion at work upon successful completion of a two-year project. He felt the promotion was *the key* to his entire career path and he had taken a lot of steps to prevent any mishaps along the way. During the month that he began having this repetitive dream, he had heard a rumor at work that a merger with another company might take place. He kept dismissing this rumor since he had heard nothing to substantiate it from his own boss who was the V.P. When I asked him what would happen if a merger did occur, he said, “All my networking, preparation and care to secure the promotion would have been wasted and irrelevant.”

Next, I asked if his fear of not being able to locate his keys in time reminded him of anything in his past. This is called free association. He said, “Yes.” He reported a memory when his younger brother got to pitch on the baseball team because he had arrived too late to the game due to a flat tire on his bike. Since his brother played so well that day, his own chances for becoming the team’s primary pitcher was lost. He felt he was clearly the better pitcher, but his younger brother pitched a winning game that day. As a result, his brother was assigned to this key role that he had been training for over the past two years. My patient felt it was unfair and he felt caught off guard by circumstances beyond his control.

After reviewing this dream and my client’s childhood memory, I suggested that his dream was trying to caution him to take the rumor of a merger quite seriously. It appeared that his unconscious mind had picked up on some subtle clues that he was trying to ignore or deny because they didn’t fit into his plans for career advancement. This was a man who liked to believe that he could be in control of everything. His subsequent time in therapy was spent on learning to accept that we can’t always be in control. When he ended treatment, he made a sign to keep in his wallet: “Stuff happens. Just deal with it.”

Journal your Dreams

Hopefully, I have given you some sense that dreams don’t have to be so mysterious. They are wonderful resources for understanding yourself. Make it a point to write down your dreams and you’ll begin to discover some of your own unique dream symbols. Let your dreams “talk out loud” and listen carefully. If you keep a dream journal, you’ll eventually see patterns and develop an understanding of your own unique dream symbols. Your unconscious provides a gift each night for you to unwrap in the morning.