A Field Guide to Dreaming

By: Laura Huff

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A waterlily

seems to float freely on the pond's surface, but actually, it's tethered to a strong, spreading root by an underwater stem. The root generates the forces that send forth the flower. Between the flower and the root runs the stem, which connects the two and keeps them mutually thriving.

Similarly, a dream may seem to be a random fantasy floating on the surface of consciousness, but its source is rooted deep in the unconscious. Just as the lily's root makes what the lily needs to thrive, so the deep-rooted soul center, or God-within, makes a dream that is exactly what the dreamer needs at that time to live creatively and wisely.

Dreamwork

is like the lily's stem. Just as there's a natural connection between flower and root, there's a natural connection between dream and source: dreamwork happens whenever we sleep! And when we work, play, and pray with dreams, we are feeding our souls and moving powerful soul energies for wisdom and transformation up into our waking consciousness.

One afternoon about twenty years ago, I was at a conference where the leader announced, "And now we're going to do some dreamwork." What?" I thought. "Dreams are legitimate? I'd been listening to my dreams for years, writing them down sometimes, knowing that there was real truth in them. They helped me make decisions. They helped me get into my life instead of run away from it. I had no way to talk about them and I certainly didn't know that dreams were something you could study and share in the context of personal and spiritual growth.

Soon after that, I had a dream that I like to share with people who are beginning to listen to their dreams. It's a dream about listening:

I'm at a college piano recital, listening to accomplished students perform difficult pieces. Suddenly I see my name on the program. I'm next. I had no idea. But it's time, and I'm expected to perform, so I walk from the audience to the piano. It's a beautiful concert grand, black, gleaming, with its lid open, strings visible.

I sit on the bench without a clue: I know absolutely nothing, I've forgotten even the simplest piece. So I put my hands on the keys, and wait.

Soon, I begin to hear from within the piano a faint tune. It's as though a wind is passing over the strings. I'm amazed, fascinated this is the most beautiful melody I've ever heard. So I begin to play it, following it as best I can on the keyboard. To the audience, it sounds awful. I don't care. Nothing matters but following this music.

Eventually the music subsides, and I stop. I stand up. The audience boos loudly. I'm totally unfazed. I walk up the steps toward the exit, where a cheerful schoolteacher says, "Thank you for showing everyone what it's like to teach."

This was a powerful dream.

I soon came to realize that its wisdom for me was this: it's more life-giving to play in concert than to play a concert. There was music within me that came from beyond me, and I needed to let it sound however I could. It was something to share. So began my work as a dream teacher.

Dreams "mean"

the same way a poem or a painting means: they work through

metaphor and symbol.

They help you understand the

unknown

by linking it to a picture or feeling of

something you know.

Working hard to decode dream language isn't necessary: feeling-drenched metaphor is your mother tongue. (Look - you're probably wearing a meaningful metaphor right now. Special jewelry? Totem color? Signature fragrance? Birthmark or scar? You know what it means - and there may be something more about it that you can't quite articulate.)

All images and emotions and themes in a dream are such bridges. Dreams trust that you have the inborn sense of metaphor needed to intuit what you need from a dream.

Miraculously, your Self generates a dream loaded with the bridges that are specifically significant to you at the specific time that you need it. In addition, the Self charges the most important information with a sense of strangeness and/or heightened emotion.

Dreamwork is...

…the practice of remembering dreams,

appreciating their energies,

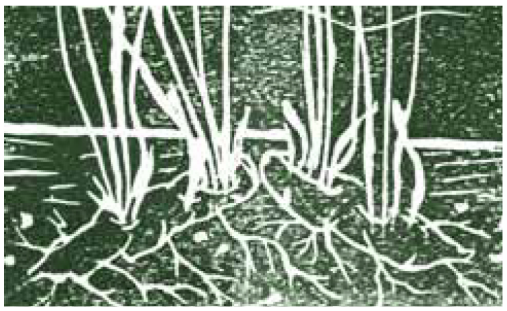
opening up their possible meanings,

and integrating their wisdom

into waking life.

The next section briefly introduces four steps of dreamwork with essential concepts and practices for each. Let them be a beginner's field guide for your nightly dream wilderness.

Remember



Dreams arise through the unconscious,
from our deep wholeness, our imago dei.

Dreams picture both the energies
of the personal unconscious
and the deeper workings of the
collective unconscious.

Dreams have their place and purpose
in our waking life: spiritually,
emotionally, physically, practically.

Dreams are pictures of God's longing for
relationship, showing us we are loved,
known, challenged, and changed.

Divine desire is the source of our life's
meaning and our individuation process: the
best thing we can do for others and for the
world is to live with our whole selves in play.

All dreams, even nightmares
and tiny fragments, come to
help us become whole, healed,
and heartily ourselves.

If you can remember it, you can handle it.

Practices: Dream Catching

Before sleep, set your intention to remember your dreams. Speak, pray, write, or ritualize this intention.

Place a notebook and pen or recorder under your pillow or very close at hand.

Take your time waking.

If at all possible, eliminate the alarm clock. **Do not rush** to put language on dreams: watch them graze at the edge of consciousness like deer on a misty morning.

Gently begin to translate the feelings and images into language.

Just a few words or pictures will hold the dream in your memory.

Later **go back and write** out the dream in detail.

One useful structure is this:

At the top, put the date and a title for the dream (you can add the title last)

On the left, record the dream in detail.

On the right, write your associations, questions, and make drawings.

Add a table of contents for dates and titles in the front of your dream book.

Hold dreams lightly.

Refract

Dreamwork is a relationship: it is a dialogue with the dreamgiver, and a form of prayer.

It's more important to appreciate the dream than to understand it.

Everything in the dream is an aspect of the dreamer.

Symbols carry both personal and collective significance.

Dreams can balance us out by compensating for something we don't do or see or think or feel in ordinary waking life. Sometimes they are scary or distasteful: these are often repressed shadow energies, and we can learn from them.

Dreams point out "You are here" on the map of your life journey.

The dream gives us up-to-the-minute news about ourselves, our individuation, our relationships, our conflicts, our habitual attitudes, and our limited perceptions.

Look for these issues in yourself, in your culture, and in the collective human experience.

A recurrent dream or a dream series asks the dreamer to focus on a particular area of growth necessary at that time.

Death in dreams is usually symbolic: death imagery asks us to focus on something in us that needs to die so that we can grow beyond it.

Practices: Making Associations

For each element in the dream, write down your personal and cultural associations.
That is, what does each part of the dream make you think of?
Cover the following elements:

settings…people and animals… objects…feelings …actions

Link your associations to your waking life.
This includes your personal life both past and present; your culture, and the collective realm of human experience.

What sense of the dream arises?

Draw, paint, sculpt, or dance the dream as a whole or a specific image in it.
For an image that carries strong energy, write out answers to Bob Hoss's Six Magic Questions:

1. What are you?
2. What is your purpose?
3. What do you like about yourself?
4. What do you dislike about yourself?
5. What is your greatest fear?
6. What is your heart's desire?

Talk about your dream with a dream partner or dream group.

Respond

When you play, pray, and work with your dreams, you are deepening relationship with the Dreamgiver and saying yes to your divine calling.

Follow up your heady associative work with embodied creative work: respond to the dream with some sort of ritual or symbolic action.

Your response can be a drawing, a gesture, a symbolic action that only you understand, an addition to your dream altar. The point is that when you do the action, you are telling the Dreamgiver: "Here I am. I am listening. I am willing to integrate dream wisdom into my waking life, even though I don't understand it yet."

It is difficult to integrate shadow energies. Go slowly and watch for ongoing dreams and synchronicities.

Practices:

Enact a symbolic gesture in response to a dream. This can be a movement you saw in the dream, or it can be a mime of the whole dream. Embodiment is strong dreamwork.

Make or find an image that connects you to the dream imagery, and place it where you will see it often to keep aware of the dream's energy. Tape it to your mirror, the refrigerator, the dashboard. Tuck it in your pocket. Start keeping a special shelf or personal altar for these things.

Link your dreamwork to your established spiritual practices: for example, meditate with the dream or write a prayer or psalm based on your dream. These do not have to be pleasant or upbeat. A traditional practice is a strong, impersonal container to hold your emotions. Tallulah Lyons offers a helpful prayer pattern: Thank you for this dream. You show me (name actions in dream) and feeling (emotions in dream). The dream spotlights (issue). Please help me engage this part of my life with (courage…creativity… new perspective…compassion, etc.). Thank you for (this new awareness) and help me to (state your intention).

Practice symbolic sight in waking life: notice the meaningful coincidences that draw your attention (synchronicities). Why do these events seem significant?

Revisit

Over time, bewildering dreams begin to make sense, and once-clear dreams open into new meaning.

Reviewing our dreams once or twice a year in the context of our waking life events (past and present) help us perceive our life's deeper story.

Sustained dreamwork leads to deeper faith, compassion, capaciousness, wisdom, courage, and humor.

Practices:

Keep a dream journal over several years. As you journal, include life events; significant books, quotes, art, movies, and music; original art and photos; bodily changes and symptoms.

At least once a year, review your dreams and dreamwork, looking for repeated images and dream series. Note changes, especially in characters and key images. How have these dream elements chained over time? What is the story you can tell yourself about those transformations?

How do your dreams, over time, reflect and shape your waking life relationships, attitudes, and choices?

Start a dream group and initiate dream education in your community.

Give thanks for

the dreams you

remember, and

if you remember

nothing, record

your thanks for the

ones that got away.

They are doing

their work whether

we remember them

or not.

THANKS TO

Sam Fulks
of Poverty and the Arts
for his
beautiful carvings
of waterlilies

Laura Huff

Laura Huff is a certified Dream Mentor and Spiritual Director who has worked with dreamers and taught dreamwork since 1999. She trained at the Haden Institute, completing programs in both Dreamwork and Spiritual Direction. She holds Masters' degrees in English and Psychology. Currently she is a full-time Dream Mentor in Nashville, and serves as a Mentor at the Haden Institute Dreamwork Program.

Laura learns as she leads, and she's grateful for a variety of dreamwork leadership opportunities places like The Haden Summer Dream & Spirituality Conference, The Scarritt Bennett Center, Columbia Theological Seminary, IASD International Conference, St. Mary's in Sewanee, SoulFeast, Stillpoint, and many churches and retreats in the Nashville area. Second Presbyterian in Nashville is her home church.

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...each pond with its blazing lilies

is a prayer heard and answered

lavishly

every morning....

Mary Oliver, "Morning Poem"