Our Personal Experience with Dreams

We became interested in our own dreams many years before we became therapists. At some point, each of us realized that we could turn to our dreams for guidance and we began writing them down. We share our own experiences with dreams that marked us, altered us, or helped us change course.

Joe

I was introduced to Jung's work serendipitously during my last semester as a Theater undergrad. As a young actor I thought a class in Theories of Human Personality would be helpful in character development. A professor patiently unpacked the complicated systems of modern American personality theorists. I found memorizing the disjointed lists of ideas exhausting until we began reading Jung, whose intuitive style of building meaning, layer upon layer, captured my imagination. Jung simmered in the background for a few decades, surfacing in my love of symbolism, archetypes, and dreams.

By my troubled early thirties, I was deep in Hermetic studies, struggling to integrate a particular quality of discernment - an essential stage of spiritual development. This promised to reveal a radiant spirituality beneath outer life. I was focused on the symbolism of the 15th Tarot card The Devil and Qabalistic teachings regarding the Hebrew letter *Ayin*. I recall reading, *"The Devil is God as he appears to the wicked,"* which evoked a deep sense of shame. A traumatic childhood had left me in a pervasive atmosphere of dread and armed me with a false certainty that every situation harbored an enemy. My meditations were no match for those foundational wounds – and then I had this dream:

I'm at home late at night. As a severe storm rages outside, I hear loud pounding on the front door. I go to the top of the stairs and think, "This is how horror movies begin." I slowly descend the stairs and stand by the front door. The pounding has stopped. I open the door with dread. Standing in the rain is a roaring humanoid monster with a disfigured head and an enormous, fanged mouth. I am frozen in fear. As I remain rooted in place, I realize it is roaring in pain and weep with compassion. The monster transforms into a beautiful, peaceful, blonde man. I wonder if he is an angel.

I woke astounded, as if I had passed a trial by fire. I had stood before something terrifying without defaulting to fight or flight, my usual responses. Instead, compassion appeared and grace was bestowed. Asleep, I had lived a transformative moment. It would take years before I could invite other exiled parts of myself to the table of consciousness, but this dream provided a glimpse of future possibilities and the encouraging presence I so badly needed at the time.

> *"Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage. Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love."*
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> Rainer Maria Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet

Postscript.

Twenty-five years later I received an unexpected package from a fellow undergrad. Inside was my term paper from the Theories of Personality class; I had asked her to read it in 1985 and she'd saved it all these years. I was gripped by my 21-year-old self as I reread it. My naked disclosures set my face burning as I recounted my associative process triggered by Archetypal images. Descriptions of my negative mother complex flowed across the pages and I marveled at the artfully sensitive comments the professor penned in the margins. At the end he wrote, "You have a talent with the European Schools," pointing me toward Jung, Freud, and Adler.

Lisa

I "discovered" Jung in 1993. Perhaps I should say "rediscovered." My mother loved Jung and his books were featured on our bookshelves. When my sister and I were at school, she would sit at home and read the Collected Works. But I had never read anything either by Jung or by a Jungian analyst – until I stumbled upon Linda Leonard's book, *On the Way to the Wedding,* during a particularly dark time in my life. The book made a tremendous impact on me. By the time I finished it, I had even had the thought that perhaps I might one day become an analyst. A week or two after finishing the book, I had the following dream:

I'm swimming in the ocean and I'm a little afraid. I'm not out very deep but there is a terrific undertow. There are other people with me. One is a beautiful young woman who is a very accomplished swimmer. She is helping me not to be afraid. She teaches me how not to panic but to go steady and sure, and to always have faith that the ground is not far below. I am standing in the water watching a huge wave that towers over our heads coming toward us. I am afraid but I know that if I duck under the wave, everything will be okay. On the other hand, if I don't, that's when I might kick and splutter and get tossed about. I'm anticipating the wave waiting to duck under.

This dream was gifted to me just as I had become interested in my dreams. At a difficult time, the dream offered a comforting "reality check:" despite how bad I thought things were, the ground was not far below. It also offered a prescription for how best to face the quickly rising psychological wave. I would weather it fine if I submitted, whereas resistance would likely bring greater suffering. Perhaps more than anything, the dream offered a comforting image of an inner companion – a beautiful young woman who was a very accomplished swimmer. This positive shadow figure was at home in the depths in a way that my conscious ego was not. She was there to guide and companion me.

The dream was also sobering. Yes, a wave was coming – a wave that could and would wash away many aspects of the life I had been living. In this way, the dream prefigured what was to come over the next several years. I did go on to face a rising tide of doubts about the career to which I had committed. I did venture into the depths with the help of an inner companion and learned how to navigate the swells of emotion and image while maintaining contact with the ground beneath me.

Deb

When I read C. G. Jung's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* as a college sophomore, nothing in his memoir stated or implied anything about "belief" in dreams—or anything else. Jung simply told what had *happened* to him—a life filled with inner action and meaning. I was astounded. I had no idea so much could go on inside a human being, and wondered if I, too, might find dreams some of the aliveness that Jung had experienced. I had known, in a wordlessly felt way, that something was missing from my life, but I hadn't had so much as a glancing thought that it could be brought to life within me. Was Jung radically different from me and everyone I knew, or might I, like him, have some internal wellspring that could bubble up in me?

Dreams happen to us every night without effort or volition, whether we remember them or not. Sometimes dreams wake us up or we awaken to the realization that something has wafted up from within and has an image to convey or a story to tell. I started writing down my "occasional" dreams.

I dreamt I met an author and his friend. We were outdoors "upstate" and the writer was very sad. He wore a necklace with a fish strung head to tail around his neck. I found it special and moving. Then I entered a stone building at the top of the hill we were on. I descended a long flight of zigzag stairs that opened onto a riverbank. People were standing there, and as various boats pulled up—from a ferry to a speedboat—various people boarded. After a while, a man in a red shirt paddling a canoe pulled into shore. I got in with a feeling of anticipation about where we were going.

And then I woke up. My disappointment bordered on anguish: I had been eager, only to be denied discovery and destination. I felt attracted to the writer and the man paddling the canoe. It felt like a broken promise. I always read a story's ending before finishing it, unable to bear the suspense of "how it came out" (and curious about how the author would get there). Now I would never know how *this* story ended.

But in difficult early adult years I found I could return to the dream: my caring for the author in his sadness…descending the stone stairs, the surprise at the river, choosing the canoe and its guide. I would imagine reaching over the side of the canoe and trailing my hand in the water. This dream was a memory and a promise.

Many—many--years later I would read Jung's words: "*The spiritual goal toward which the whole nature of man strives is to rescue the light of consciousness…it is the sea to which all rivers went their way*…" We are all on the river of life.