

Dreams and Visions Around Death

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Abstract

This article shows how dreams and visions about death may contribute to the counselling process when clients are facing death, bereavement or other major loss in their lives. The author uses examples from her own work with different types of death dreams, including interpretation of a metaphorical dream; a series of dreams of an elderly man facing death; a shared near-death experience; a spirit visit after death, and a series of traumatic bereavement dreams, showing how the dreamers were assisted in coming to terms with their loss.

Introduction

In the process of counselling clients who are facing their own death, or the death of a significant other, dreams may be both an indicator of disturbances needing exploration and a potential source of healing. At the least, they can mark the progress of the client towards a state of acceptance as counselling proceeds.

Scientific dream research in the last decade shows an increasing consensus, articulated by Ernest Hartmann (1998), a past president of the international Association for the Study of Dreams (ASD), that we dream about our current emotional concerns, and that dreaming is not a random process but a form of unconscious cognitive activity in which we make wider connections with images in the “nets of the mind” than we do when awake. Nor is this simply a matter of consolidating memory. Emotions are given new contexts, and metaphors are created, which assist dreamers with problem-solving about the issues in their lives. This is why dreams can be highly relevant during a process of counselling; they are constantly highlighting key issues and making relevant connections.

As well as the cognitive-scientific approach, there are ancient traditions of dreamwork as a sacred or spiritual activity of the soul, in which some or all dreams are understood as messages of guidance from that part of the human mind which is in touch with the divine, however that may be conceptualised. The writings of Carl Jung (1961, 1974) and his followers have articulated this approach in western society. This includes Morton Kelsey (1974), who presents a scholarly approach to dreams in the Judaeo-

Christian tradition. More recently, Kelly Bulkeley (1994, 1995), another past president of ASD, has summarised significant cross-disciplinary research in this field.

A third stream of research focuses more closely on paranormal or psychic experience, in which it seems that the normal dreaming process is sometimes superseded by clairvoyant visions of people, places or events beyond the reach of normal sight. While western academic psychology largely ignores such phenomena, the science of parapsychology continues to investigate them (Broughton, 1992). And ordinary people continue to describe them in small groups where their experience is respected, as reported in my own book (Bowater, 1997).

My personal application of dreamwork may include any of these approaches, depending on the nature of the dream or vision being presented, and the “felt experience” of the dreamer.

Coming to terms with death

All human beings must face death sooner or later, and need to develop a philosophy that accepts death as a natural end to bodily life, including when that life has been tragically shortened. Since most people have strong feelings about loss of life, it is not surprising that we have vivid dreams when we face the threat of death ourselves, or the death of a loved one, or the traumatic death of others. What happens when we die? Are we extinguished like a flame, or do we move on in a non-material form? If this life is all there is, how do we let go with dignity? If there is another dimension beyond this, how do we prepare for it? There are many beliefs surrounding death, which influence the way we live. Counsellors work with the dying and the bereaved to help them find their own way to make meaning about it.

What do dreams themselves, coming from unconscious levels of the mind, contribute to the process? Kramer’s study of 700 dreams about death collected from university students (Kramer, 1993) found that only half the dreams showed death as an ending, while the other half showed it rather as a dramatic shift of consciousness.

I will present here a few examples from ordinary New Zealanders who have talked with me about their experience. All dreams are quoted with permission, but names have been changed where requested to protect the dreamer’s identity.

Metaphors of death

Most commonly, of course, a dream about death is a metaphor about the ending of some aspect of a life, such as a relationship, a hope, a life-role, or some project dear to the dreamer’s heart. Since some clients tend to assume that dreams about death

predict a real death, it is important for counsellors to check first whether it might fit as a metaphor, as in the following example:

Dream report: At my own funeral

I'm standing in the left aisle of St X's Church, facing the altar, looking down at a coffin. My own body is lying there, at my present age, formally dressed in a suit with a black bow tie. The head is pointing towards the central aisle. This feels like an important occasion. I'm telling everyone how to relate to the fact that I have died, and I've made a tape of music to be played, a requiem mass. I tell them there's no need to feel sad for me. I've had a very privileged life, seeing the changes happen in people while I have worked with them. I speak to my wife and each of my children, telling them I love them. Then the music of the mass is playing, and the dream fades.

I woke up knowing it was an important dream, and took it to counselling later in the week. We were working on issues of control in our marriage, and arrived at an interpretation that the dream portrayed an extreme example of my desire to keep everything under control – even how people respond to my death! I was feeling insecure in the marriage, and that would bring up a controlling policeman role in me, which I hated; but I firmly believed that if we worked with integrity we would make it through all right. I wasn't even considering separation, or the idea that my wife might want to be free.

Graham talked with me about his dream three years later, seeking a fuller understanding. In the time between, he and his wife had separated. We reconsidered the dream ego's role.

The figure of "I" in the dream is called the dream ego, and is a reflected image of the ego in real life, projected onto the inner screen of the dream. The conscious waking ego may thus observe itself from another point of view, that of the inner Self, as Jung named it, the presumed centre of balance in the total psyche. Whatever is shown happening to the dream ego is in some way a metaphor or mirror of waking life, and the feeling experience of the dream is rooted in some aspect of the dreamer's reality.

Graham identified clearly with being the speaker rather than the dead body. His dream ego was shown honouring the life he had had, and calmly telling friends and family not to be sad that he had died. He had been in good mental and physical health at the time, not suicidal, but he was in the process of letting go of the more formal and controlling side of himself, which seemed to match the dead man in his bow tie.

After considering the dream ego, I invited him to bring to mind any associations with the setting, characters and other elements of the dream. The setting is the church

where he used to worship, and the occasion is a funeral. Graham had, before the dream, organised his father's funeral – which could account for his speaking role. The Lady Chapel, where he was standing, symbolises the feminine in Catholic spirituality, which Graham associated with healing and encouragement. A Requiem Mass is held specifically to pray for the soul as it makes the transition between this life and the next. Thus a deeper interpretation of the dream emerged for Graham, that the dream was in fact preparing him to accept a much larger death in himself, that of the married man. At the same time, he was being reassured by the religious context that he could let go of one life to move into another.

Not only does this dream reflect Graham's particular set of circumstances and beliefs, it also shows the value of the new perspective contributed by the dream to his struggle when faced with a massive change in his life. It is my constant experience that our dreams both challenge and encourage us as we move through life.

Pre-death dreams

Some dreams, however, are about approaching death. Marie-Louise von Franz, a leading Jungian analyst, researched the dreams of dying patients and concluded: "All of the dreams of people who are facing death indicate that the unconscious, that is, our instinct world, prepares consciousness not for a definite end, but for a profound transformation ..." (von Franz, 1998, p. 156).

I was privileged to be invited to work with Cedric, a man in his nineties, who was having occasional nightmares, and seemed determined not to die. After a shaky start in life, he had developed strength of mind and body, but 90 years later his strength was failing. His daughter Faith, a trainee counsellor, asked me to talk with him.

Two of his nightmares showed early life scenes which revealed the buried terror he had known as a young child when his mother nearly died of asthma. That trauma was still affecting him 90 years later! Being a "brave boy", he had not shared his feelings about it. Acknowledging it now to me and to his daughter allowed him to move past the absolute terror of the inner Child who still feared abandonment.

At 92, Cedric had two vivid dreams that he nearly died.

Dream report: Doorstep of death

I was conscious but I couldn't move. I thought, I'm alive in a dead body. I felt as if I was sitting on a fence and I could go either way. It was the doorstep of death. Then my body started to respond again.

This one seems to have been a close description of his experience. The second dream was more symbolic, using the archetypal symbols characteristic of mythology.

Archetypal dreams seem to come from a deeper layer of the psyche, named by Jung as the collective unconscious (Hall, 1983), and tend to appear at times of major transition in life.

Dream report: Guards at the door

I'd finished my training run up Mt Eden and round the crater (as I used to do), and I was on my way home to Dominion Road, but all the streets seemed to be blocked. I asked a man which way to get through. And he said, "No, you can't go through there. There's only one way – through that door." It was in a building in Mt Eden Road. So I went in. It was a filthy room, with another door on the other side. A man was sitting there, in a defiant mood, with his arms folded. At his feet was an enormous black dog – I'd never seen a dog so big and vicious looking before. Their aim was to block the way. My father taught me always to confront difficulties, so I walked towards the door. Instead of attacking me, the dog started to move away. I said to the man, "The power that's within me is far greater than the power within you." The dog started to yelp, and ran behind the man, who stood up and opened the door, and I went through – into an even dirtier room. Standing in front of the door on the far side of the room was another defiant man, with a lion sitting at his feet. I walked towards them both. The lion jumped up and ran away with such haste it fell arse over kite. I said to the man, "The power in me is far greater than the power in you." He stepped aside and opened the door. I could then see all the beautiful old homes, and the green field of Eden Park in front of me, just as they were when I lived there – and I walked home.

My mother used to call me a dunce, because I wasn't much good at studies, but I was the best runner and the best boxer in the school, and I was never afraid to confront bullies in the playground. My father taught me that we all have personal power to draw on. These men at the doors were bullies, just bluffing me.

Cedric's dream ego found itself in an unsavoury place where the exits were guarded by extremely powerful animals and their masters, blocking his way back to his home. Although he had finished his run round the mountain (a metaphor for his life), he was still able to use his psychological strength to overpower them, and walk free. Obviously, he wasn't ready to die yet!

At 94, Cedric dreamed about walking anxiously along a crumbling path, and then about crossing an icefield that was starting to crack up. Both images implied warnings that his body could not keep going. His daughter talked quietly with him, assuring him that the family was ready to let him move on with love to the next life.

Then at 96 came a wonderful dream that gave him the reassurance he needed.

Dream report: Dolphin and dog

I went for a swim outside our family's bach. It was a nice sunny day. I dived into the water from the reef (about 15 metres out from the beach), and when I came up, there was a big white dolphin swimming alongside me. It swam with me until I was in shallow water, where I stood up, about waist deep. As I waded out of the water, I saw a big white dog standing on the beach. It was barking in welcome, and it came out to meet me. For a moment I thought it was Prince (an English setter we used to own), then I realised it was too white for Prince. The dog remained with me until I walked onto the shore. I turned to see the dolphin. I just saw the flip of its tail, and then it was gone.

I felt comfortable with the dream as I woke. While I was in the water, the reception and support I received from the dog made me think of Christ's promise, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." The dolphin didn't leave me until the other was right by my side. I was never alone.

Cedric recalled that he had first met his wife-to-be on that beach 74 years earlier, and subsequently built a cottage there for the family – so the place held lifelong associations of happiness for him. Prince had been the family dog at one stage, a very strong swimmer. Cedric used to take hold of Prince's tail and get towed along, while Prince never missed a stroke as he swam. So it is not surprising that the beloved dog turns up as a symbol of welcome in the dream (or is this a vision of Prince's spirit?), a reliable guide for the final journey home. And the dolphin is an archetypal symbol of a guide to the next world (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1996).

Six months later, Cedric died in peace. It seems that the dream images arising from his own psyche had been quietly responding to his fears about the unknown territory ahead.

The value of dreamwork here was, firstly, to identify the source of Cedric's nightmares so that old fears could be defused; secondly, to respect his level of readiness to let go, and thirdly, to tap into his own sources of spiritual guidance.

Clairvoyant dreams

Not only those who are dying dream of death, but also those who love them. Birth and death alike are times of awe for human beings, interrupting the ordinary concerns of life and confronting us with ultimate questions. At the approach of such times, many people seem to become open to a more sensitive level of awareness, in which psychic phenomena may occur, including various kinds of clairvoyance. Although western culture considers this "unscientific", it still happens, though not in predictable ways. I

have quoted many examples in my book (Bowater, 1997), not only about death, but including two cases of New Zealand mothers who dreamed literal images of attending the funeral of a child a month or less before the fatal accident occurred. Research by the psychologist Ryback in the United States (Ryback & Sweitzer, 1989) confirms that precognitive dreams are surprisingly widespread in western European culture, and I have found this to be true in the hundreds of dream workshops I have led over the last decade.

A memorable example is provided by Carla, a New Zealand immigrant, who had heard that her sister in the home country was ill with cancer. The doctors had given her sister about four months to live.

Dream report: The whirlpool

I am standing with a glass bowl full of water like I always use at church (which in real life was broken two weeks ago). I look into the water, and suddenly it is like a whirlpool all around me, dark in the centre and a whirlpool of colours around me. I feel frightened as I know what is happening: we are travelling through our feelings towards the tunnel into the light of heaven. My sister is first, and I follow floating behind her, still holding her hand. I say to her, "It's okay, I know where we're going, it will be okay, but I can't come with you. You must let me go." I call out to her, "Let go! Let go!" I can feel a strong wind and suction. She is pulled away from me, and again I scream, "Let go! Let go! Let go! I can't come!" I'm afraid I can't return this time. I know I have to return and let her go. There is a male voice, quite pleasant, that says, "And this will happen on Friday 28th at 11 o'clock." I understand this is a warning. I wake up relieved to be in my bed, and I have a strong feeling my sister is going to die sooner than expected.

I shared this dream with my husband and children that night, 27th November, saying that I thought it would come true. Twice before I have predicted accurately the time of a death in the family, out of an intuitive knowing, but this was the first time in a dream. I felt I knew where my sister was going, and I had to let her go. Jesus said to his disciples, "You know where I am going, but you can't come."

On Saturday morning the 29th November, I heard that my sister had died. It was eleven o'clock on the 28th in Holland, as there is a 12-hour time difference. This dream helped me tremendously in my grief, as I felt I had been with her at the very last moment helping her cross into eternity.

The bowl of water is an ancient symbol associated with cleansing and also with certain rituals of clairvoyance, "clear-seeing" into the past or future, though Carla was not aware of this at the time.

Precognitive warning dreams, according to Ryback and Sweitzer (1989), can be recognised in the main by four criteria: lifelike vividness, specific detail, a sense of urgency, and the fact of later coming “substantially true”, usually within a short time. They are not infallible, however.

I have found that they can also be confused with trauma dreams, in which a past event repeats itself in dreams, because the shock has not yet dissipated. One client came to me with a new recurring nightmare that she was about to have a fatal accident. Quiet exploration of recent events soon revealed that she had in fact just had a life-threatening accident, but did not recognise how similar the dream was. Her relief was immediate.

Near-death experiences

Carla’s dream includes an element characteristic of near-death experiences, that is, moving through a tunnel towards the light (Moody, 1988). This is a widely documented form of vision reported by people who (mostly) have been resuscitated after reaching the point of physical death. The same kind of experience is reported across different cultures (Kellehear, 1996). People who have had this experience state firmly that it was a real spiritual experience, “much more than a dream”, and it universally has the effect of removing the fear of death. One woman I worked with briefly who was dying of cancer was greatly encouraged simply by reading a book about near-death experiences, and then had a calming dream of her own.

Spirit visits

I have collected dozens of examples of visions of the deceased appearing to a close friend or family member at or after the time of death, as if to say goodbye. They differ in tone and intensity from normal bereavement dreams, which are based mainly on memories. Post-death visions tend to show the deceased unexpectedly in a younger or more vibrant form, with an impression of light or happiness (Morse & Perry, 1995). Here is a typical example, told to me by Eileen, 75, whose sister had recently died of cancer:

Dream report: Happy sister

It was in the middle of the night, and I had been sleeping. I don’t know whether I was actually awake or asleep, but my sister appeared at the bedroom door – very real. She was wearing a white frock with green and apricot splotches that I’d never seen before. She was smiling at me and looking lovely. “Oh hullo, Patricia,” I said, “have you just come from –?” but then I stopped, because I remembered she was

dead, so she couldn't have just come from any place. She just smiled, and disappeared.

I felt very glad that she'd come back to show me she was happy. She'd had such a long struggle with the cancer, five years of pain, and she never let me talk with her about anything to do with religion. I don't know if she believed in any kind of life after death. So I was so happy that she came to let me know. It wasn't just a dream – it felt quite real.

From a counsellor's point of view, I think it is important to validate such perceptions as real for the family, especially when they contribute to a calmer acceptance of death. There is also evidence that some people have much "thinner" boundaries between states of consciousness than the average (Hartmann, 1998) and may well perceive phenomena beyond the sensory reach of others. This does not mean a denial of rationality, but an extension of data to be taken into account.

Post-trauma dreams

While the above examples have a positive tone, there are also dreams following traumatic events in which the survivor's shock and horror are expressed through images of death and mutilation, some of which are memory fragments, while some are metaphors of inner emotional collapse. Those who try to avoid these by minimising sleep only compound the disturbance. Such experiences need to be talked out safely as soon as possible, to discharge the intense emotion. In the normal process of recovery the repetitions of memory gradually give way to more fantasised elements, evolving into the typical nightmare (Barrett, 1996) in which the focus is on survival, and then evolving further into quieter dreams accepting the change in life.

To illustrate this development, here is a sequence from a woman who was quite traumatised by her mother's death, and sought help later to make sense of the dreams.

Karen, a Pakeha, had nursed her beloved mother through a slow and painful death with cancer. She had always felt closely identified with her mother, and wished she could do more to alleviate the pain. A week before her mother died, Karen started to experience a strange and claustrophobic shutting down. Then, after the death, she had this dream:

Dream report: Cold coffin

I am in a very important dark oblong place, lying on my back. I want to possess this place, yet I am terrified of it. I discern that in the darkness of this place is someone or something. I call out, chanting in Maori: "I am very cold, so cold. I call out with great stillness, 'Are you the manuhiri of this place? Are you the manuhiri

*of this place? Are you the manuhiri?”
My husband’s arms woke me.*

Manuhiri is a Maori word for “honoured guests” or visitors, who in Maori custom are always welcomed formally into the tribal marae or meeting house. One such occasion is the tangi, or funeral celebration, in which the body of the deceased rests in the meeting house for three days, while mourners gather to farewell the spirit before it leaves on its journey to the ancestral homeland. Karen, who is an immigrant to New Zealand, reported that three of the first four funerals she ever attended, aged 19–20, were Maori tangi, which had an enormous impact on her. It seems that she was dreaming, as if in her mother’s body, that she was in a dark transition between one life and the next, calling out from the place of rest. This was also true metaphorically of herself, feeling desolate after losing her mother, and seeking support in her grieving.

A week or two later, while Karen was feeling not only grief but also irrational guilt at not having been able to ease her mother’s pain, she had this experience:

Dream report: Unhappy mother

I awoke, and at the foot of my bed I feel the presence of a ghost-like being. It is about my Mum’s height and it shimmers. It is very unhappy. The apparition lasts only seconds and is gone by the time I am fully awake.

This was not a nightmare, nor a dream, nor an imagining. I am very familiar with all of those states. This was something extra. Upon trying to put it in some rational place in my experience, I surmise that my intense emotional pain, and my guilt at the pain and suffering experienced in my house by my Mum, must have somehow culminated in this strong and strange manifestation.

Was this a glimpse of her mother’s spirit, still experiencing her own distress, or perhaps distressed to see her daughter’s pain, and unable to comfort her? Did her mother need some kind of release from Karen in order to be free to go on the spirit-journey? Or was this a projection of Karen’s own misery, reflected back to her through a brief but disturbing vision?

Karen had many dreams about her mother for four years after her death.

I noticed that Mum seldom spoke to me, except for one remarkable auditory dream a bit over a year after her death.

I heard a very real representation of her dear old voice saying that they treated her very well in the place where she was, but now she wished to come home to me. I was overjoyed, then with searing pain I realised that she couldn’t because she was dead. I told her so.

Gradually the dreams became less frequent, and the figure of her mother faded, as Karen sought counselling to accept the trauma of her loss. Then came a remarkable healing dream:

Dream report: Garden visit

We are visiting a garden, Mum and me. Aunty is with us, but she has gone on ahead to sort of get there first. The more I am aware, the more I realise that this garden is exquisitely lovely. Mum and I sit in this little car-like bubble which swooshes us along the garden path in a very pleasurable way. It is made of a softly glowing spring-green growing membranous substance, and all about me is glowing exquisite beauty. I am full of laughter and joy. Mum is old and frail, as she was just prior to her death, but she is full of joy too.

With this dream, Karen felt released at last from the pain of her mourning.

Conclusion

This is a bare introduction to the subject of dreams and visions around death, showing the range from simple metaphor to perceived literal experience of the spirit, a rich resource for client and counsellor alike. Such dreams have potential to ease grief, identify key issues, and generally assist the process for clients facing death or major loss in their lives.

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