

Taking Your Dreamwork To The Next Level

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We are hard-wired to live in connection with others. As humans, we are by definition part of a tribe, a clan, a family. We have friends, colleagues, spouses; we have bosses, children, pets, and some of us maintain connections on the other side with our departed friends and relatives. Sometimes these relationships are smooth, easy, and enhance our lives. Sometime they are messy, painful, and cause us no end of grief. That is all part of “the full catastrophe” of life, as the character Zorba the Greek teaches us. There are many avenues to address healing or understanding relationships that are difficult, but one that is often overlooked is waiting on our pillow each night.

We all dream every night, whether or not we recall it. Neuroscience and brain scans tell us that we have five to seven REM (rapid eye movement) dreaming cycles per night. Our dreams give us a window into our deepest and wisest selves, and allow us to tap into wisdom that we cannot access while awake. The phrase “let me sleep on it” when confronted with a problem or dilemma is not just hyperbole; we actually can problem solve and gain insights into our waking world issues before, during, and after we wake from our dreams. In addition, if we also attend to signs and symbols in our waking life as a form of waking dream, and approach these synchronicities (what Carl Jung called “meaningful coincidences”) in the same way that we approach our dreams, these waking dream states can also provide guidance our lives. You can harvest the wisdom from your dreams that can allow you to find your way back home to your truest self.

Before You Sleep

Ask For What You Want With Dream Incubation. Dream incubation, in a nutshell, is endeavoring to dream on purpose. In ancient times rituals that accompanied this goal often included embarking on a journey to a sacred site, bringing sacrifices to the gods, and praying for a healing or revealing dream. In modern times, we might be more apt to light a candle, meditate, or journal and write down the question we are hoping to get an answer to. We then go to sleep hoping to have a dream that clearly answers this question.

At its core dream incubation is about intentionality. We intentionally turn to a source of wisdom that is larger than ourselves, and open to the response we get from the universe through the portal of our dreams. When we point our thoughts and attention in a particular direction, we are more apt to find advice and answers than if we cast too wide a net.

Dream incubation is most often used to ask for a specific dream to address an issue or problem that is important in your life or relationships, such as: “I really like Jeremy, but should I actually marry him?” or, “I have been having so much conflict with my boss lately. What can I do to smooth things out at work?” or, “My dad died last year and I still have so much unfinished business with him that it feels like he is haunting me. Can I do anything now?” I used this technique 21 years ago to answer the question, “*Is this our baby?*” when we received our referral for adoption from China. (The dream answer I received in symbolic form was “Yes!” Our “baby” is 22 now, and a delightful young woman).

Incubating a dream is a way of lining up our queries, our dilemmas and our intentions with the highest source to get answers, or at least guidance, to questions that we are not able to fully answer on our own. Through the practice of intentional dreaming, morning can bring new light to the dilemmas we were stuck with when we went to sleep the night before, and shine light on both past and current relationships.

The core of the practice is to spend a few minutes before going to bed writing down your question, being sure that it is in the form of a question. You can journal for a while first — spend five minutes or half an hour — but try to end with a succinct question about your relational conundrum. The clearer your question is, the greater the chance that your answer will also be as clear. In the morning, or in the middle of the night, record your dream on the same page as the question you wrote, and then examine it. Remembering that dreams usually come coded in symbol and met

some time to see how your dream may be related to your question if it is not clear at first. Get others' opinions as well; two or more heads are better than one in decoding symbols since we can't see around the back of our own heads without someone helping to hold another mirror.

During The Dream

Practice Becoming Aware During Your Dream. There is a type of dreaming called lucid dreaming that is, in essence, being aware while we are asleep that we are dreaming. It is a kind of meta-awareness, a way of having our consciousness alert during the unconscious process of a dream. There are a number of techniques and books available to help you develop the practice of lucid dreaming. For our purposes, after incubating your dream with your intention to receive answers about your relationships, pay attention to whether you can access this state of awareness while asleep. Sometimes there will be a succinct thought in a dream, "I am dreaming!" or sometimes there is a cue that lets you know this. One method suggested is to assign your hands, for instance, as the cue in waking time, and then later in your dream, if you notice your hands, that is your cue that you are having a dream.

In particular, if you dream of the person you have a relationship issue with, and notice this person while you are dreaming, then you have successfully accessed lucidity. If you are able to achieve this state of awareness while dreaming, you can begin to dialogue with that person about the issues right then and there, or you can reset your dream and move it towards a different and more positive outcome. This is a fairly advanced level of lucid dreaming however, so don't worry if you can't do it while asleep. You can easily do this exercise after you wake up. A wonderful sci-fantasy book I read recently had the lucid dreamer grab hold of her dream by the corners while she was in it, shake it out like beach blanket, and then have it resettle into a nicer landscape and circumstances. That's some strong dreaming!

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After The Dream

Unpack Your Dream Upon Waking. There are many ways to work with the dream material, and many layers of each dream that may be simultaneously true. If you dreamed of a particular person in your life as a dream character, here is a list of possible meanings for you:

1. They come to the dream as themselves. Mom is really mom in the dream; no symbolism here. Look at what she is doing and what is happening in the dream.

Samantha's mom died four months ago. She misses her a lot, but has moved past the initial hardest months. Sometimes she dreams that she and her mom are together doing things they used to do, like walking the dog or baking cookies. They feel like bittersweet memories to her — sweet memories, but no longer possible to do. Recently she began having a different kind of dream of her mom. These dreams feel incredibly vivid — more present, "in living color." In this type of dream her mom is simply smiling at her fondly, nothing else is happening. When this happens, Samantha feels as if her mom is there in the room with her. Her sense is that these dreams are more like a visitation, that her mom is right with her saying, "Hi sweetie, I am still watching out for you." Her spiritual belief system holds with the eternity of spirit, so she is very comforted by these visits.

2. They come as a symbolic stand-in for someone else. That man with the dark hair who is not my dad in real life is actually my dad in the dream. Stand-in characters sometimes have a symbolic tie-in with the people they represent.

Josh dreamt that he entered a dark forest following behind a man. When the man turns towards him Josh sees that he has a mask on. As he takes it off, Josh realizes that this man is not who he thought he was. The now unmasked man has a sinister smile on his face, and Josh feels that he was lured in by him.

Upon waking, Josh notes that he felt anxious about entering the forest, but felt compelled to do so since it seemed somewhat familiar, but he couldn't quite place where it was. He felt the man was creepy, and that he was stupid for having trusted him. Why was he masked; what was he hiding from me? Among other things, Josh notices the man feels like a vampire, so he thinks about people who might be "energy vampires" in his life. This generates an "aha" for Josh — the truest barometer of the meaning of a dream. Josh's aha is, "He is just like my father! And for that matter, just like any number of my previous boyfriends!"

3. They represent a part of yourself. Dream characters may represent an aspect of yourself that you need to befriend, heal, reclaim, come to terms with, or simply get to know better.

Going back to Josh's dream, Josh recognized that this masked man was also a part of himself — the part of him that ran away from true intimacy or pushed others away. He realized he had masked this part of himself in his dream because he wasn't proud of it. He felt embarrassed even to name it, but knew it was true that he had been sabotaging himself each time he found a good man, instead pursuing men who were needy and "sucked him dry," rather than offering a true partnership. When Josh could learn to trust and protect this masked part of himself, he was then more available for mutually caring relationships with others.

4. They appear as an archetype. This Jungian term implies the embodiment of a primordial image or character, such as the Witch, the Trickster, or the Lover.

Spend a few minutes before going to bed writing down your question, making sure it is in the form of a question. The clearer your question is, the greater chance that your answer will also be as clear in the morning.

While I was at a recent international dream conference, I had a dream of my friend Jennifer wearing a witch's hat. She looked at me and said, "You know that you are one too." Both Jennifer and I have been exploring uncanny ways of knowing such as dreams, intuition, and synchronicities for many years, and this fun archetypal dream message seemed to confirm that we are still doing so.

A colleague of mine painted a picture from her dream of a king with his crown slightly askew sitting on a type of throne in the background, while the court jester or fool was saying "Shhh" in the foreground with his finger up to his lips. On closer inspection, the throne was actually a large toilet. Our dream circle had a field day with this one, immediately thinking about a public figure who sets himself up as a false king, whose name happens to rhyme with "dump." The "don't tell" jester invoked associations to the story of "The Emperor's New Clothes." This dream did not have any personal associations for the dreamer, but came through on a transpersonal level as a collective message for all.

5. They are a guide or a higher being. They come to give us precognitive information or spiritual direction. He or she may be a commonly known figure like the archangel Michael or Buddha or Persephone (goddess of the underworld.) They may have some numinous sacred quality, but sometimes our guides come disguised as tricksters or unsavory characters or people we have known.

Terry had a dream in which she was sitting in the lap of St. Teresa of Avila, her patron saint. St. Teresa was one of the great mystics, and Terry was currently exploring more of that direction in her life as well. She knew that St. Teresa had a message for her; for the moment however, she just wanted to bask in the peaceful energy she felt in her lap.

When you awake, write out your dream images and dialogue, and then ask questions of the person you need answers from. Write out both sides of the conversation — yours and their responses. Don't worry if it feels contrived; just let it flow from your intuitive self. This exercise can be done both with living relationships, as well as with those who have departed Earth. It is possible to repair a difficult relationship in this way with someone who has passed, as well as receive advice and connection.

Giving your dream a title often helps get to the core meaning of your dream more quickly. For example, when Maria had a series of dreams about traveling with her Hartmann luggage set, which got lost, stolen, and spilled out in public places, she named them Losing My Heartman, spontaneously changing the spelling to Heart. Recognizing the pun let her know these dreams were about her desire for a life partner and her history of losing her heart too quickly and ending up with several divorces.

In addition, you can perform a symbolic act that honors your feelings and desires about the relationship brought about by the dream: plant a flower, say a blessing, rip something up, rearrange your room. The power of dream-based actions is strong, and doing something in the physical world helps manifest the essence of the dream.

Think back to the person or relationship you asked for help or information about and see if any of the above categories seems to fit. Notice what they are doing in the dream, what your relationship with them is there, and whether it is better, worse, or the same as in waking life. Consider which aspects from the dream character you would like to add or subtract from your waking relationship. Ask them questions, listen in your heart for the answers, and write those down, too. You can say things in your dream-based journaling that you couldn't or haven't yet said to the person in real time, or in their lifetime.

If you can make changes in your dream, or in your dream dialogue, or your understanding about the person you have struggled with, you can then apply your insights to shift the energies with that person in waking life. Be patient and compassionate with yourself, and know that you can practice whenever you desire clear answers. Every night can be a new opportunity for sweet, healing and productive dreams.

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See also:

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Beautiful Words

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