

Dreams of the Dying: Approaching the Unknown

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In the companion article to this one, published in the Winter 2015 DreamTime, I considered how death dreams can shift our perspective on the nature of identity and reality, as the distinction between dreaming and waking states also becomes less absolute. This second article looks at some other patterns and themes of death dreams.

As a spiritual care professional and as a volunteer, I've been with several thousand people in the last days or weeks of their lives, and I've had a fairly close relationship with many of them. I've also experienced life-threatening illness and death dreams personally. Although I'm very familiar with the physical processes that occur around death, I continue to wonder what is actually going on as we die. The more experiences I've had with death and dying, the more mysterious this whole process has become. I've been exploring dreams for over 30 years, and I feel the same way about dreaming.

The dreams that come during periods of significant change in our lives often parallel the dreams that come as death approaches. When we are ill, in crisis, or grieving, we may have dreams that resemble the dreams of dying people—who are also going through powerful changes.

The individual who is going through great change is always experiencing the death or loss of the “known,” and an encounter with the potential of the “unknown.” This is generally a painful and difficult struggle, as the familiar experience of self and reality falls apart. But such falling apart also, ultimately, creates an opening, a new perspective, a new kind of meaning and healing.

*Since knowing gives us definition and control, it enables us to keep the world at arm's length. Having established our ideas and preferences about what is, we no longer have to bother to pay attention. Not knowing, on the other hand, leaves us vulnerable and free. It brings us very close to experience, unprotected and fully engaged. Not knowing, we merge with what confronts us. We let go of identity and evaluation and allow ourselves to surrender to amazement.—
Norman Fischer*

Memorable dreams during these times of change or death tend to fall into two broad categories: dreams of resistance and dreams of transcendence.

1) Dreams of resistance can include all kinds of danger, suffering, struggle, or effort. Typically, the broad theme is **resistanceto the dissolution of identity and the loss of familiar reality**. The unknown is perceived as a threat to the self.

Walter, a middle-aged man with end-stage prostate cancer, described this waking-dream experience as it was happening. He was stretched taut, hands clutching the sides of the bed, as if he were lying on his back on a sled, racing downhill at a great speed. I could almost see the wind sweeping over him, and the bumps jolting him as he rushed past. He spoke in fragments:

It's too fast. I can't get it to slow down. He says I have to go there. I have to get there, but it's too fast. He's making me go too fast. I don't know who he is. I can't stand it. I'm flying apart. It's going to go into the sun. Make it stop. He says I can't stop.

This went on and on, as I sat nearby, talking with Walter, asking him questions, and wishing I could help him

“slow down”—but, although he answered me, my wishes and my presence were not really a part of his dream. He needed to complete this headlong passage himself. He resisted the speeding force of his dying for as long as I was with him, and I don’t know what happened next. I was told he died a few days later, quietly, no longer straining or “going too fast.”

2) Dreams of transcendence often include visions of places associated with beauty, wonder, joy and peace, or visits with people or animals (often those who have died) connected with guidance, belonging, love, and compassion. In many cases, these dreams contain religious or spiritual imagery. The broad theme for this second type of dream might be, **embracing the Mystery**. The unknown is perceived as potentially liberating.

Eighty-nine year old Peg was dying of breast cancer. She shared this dream a few hours before she died:

There’s a green hill. I get closer and sort of float up to the top. It’s a meadow full of wildflowers. My mother is there, and my sister. Jesus is there. It starts to snow, even though the warm sun is shining. We are all laughing, playing in the snow.

In times of great change, or especially near death, dreams can be exceptionally intense—as real as, or realer than, waking experiences.

However, separating these dreams into two categories is misleading. It’s more true to say that most (if not all) transition dreams contain elements of both resistance and transcendence. Dreams of resistance are not entirely negative: they can include courage, determination,

anticipation, and unexpected moments of peace in the midst of struggle. On the other hand, the pure, lovely dreams of transcendence often include a hint of sadness at what’s being left behind, or a tremor of fear in the face of the unknown.

I think it’s this paradoxical mix of experiences—struggle *and* transcendence, pain *and* joy, fear *and* wonder, despair *and* peace—that makes our human lives, our dreams, and our deaths, so poignant and gives them meaning. It’s also what keeps us “up in the air,” without any absolutes—not knowing, and open.

Before my own cancer diagnosis and treatment, I became increasingly ill over the course of about five years, and I began to dream of a wonderful journey to a place I called the *Western Archipelago*.

I arrive at the ferry dock with a group of others. It’s surprisingly easy to embark on such an important journey. We are all thrilled at the prospect. We board, and the boat heads northwest, across a harbor and out through narrow straits into the open ocean. Almost immediately, we come to deep, crystalline waters, where icebergs and ice floes drift, radiant in the sunset. An infinite number of small islands can be seen in the misty distance. We will visit all of them. I can see down through the water, where whales are swimming under the boat. Our breath steams in the freezing air, but we are warm. There is a sense of playful camaraderie, anticipation, and innocent, uninhibited excitement.

As people approach death or

significant life changes, they often dream of embarking on a journey. Some dreams, like the *Western Archipelago*, are fantastic adventures. But I’ve noticed that even the “small,” apparently ordinary dreams (or dream-like experiences) of those who are dying regularly involve travel.

Repeatedly, hospice patients have told me that they need to catch the bus or train or boat, or to finish packing, or to find some missing object like a suitcase or ticket. Sometimes, they describe their travel preparations as dreams, and sometimes not—but even when they know that the journey ahead is not literally “real” in waking-life terms, they feel it to be extremely urgent. A former nurse who was dying of pancreatic cancer once told me, “I know I only dreamed it, but I’m sure I need to be on a plane tomorrow, and I keep wanting to check my purse to be sure my passport is in there.”

Early stages of these travel preparations often seem to be a struggle to gain control over circumstances and self. The planned trip, like travels in general, must be arranged and embarked upon with effort, through actions involving will and decision. At this stage, dreamers can be anxious travelers, concerned with “checking their passports” (which contain their identification, and travel history), and trying to take things with them, or leave things behind in good order.

But elements of transcendence and openness to the adventure of the unknown journey begin to come into these dreams as well. And when the journey itself is described, it can be as exciting and beautiful as the voyage through the *Western Archipelago*. I’ve never heard

anyone actually describe reaching a destination in such dreams. Sometimes, there's an exotic destination that they are anticipating, sometimes they are just going "home," and sometimes it is entirely an adventure into the unknown.

Jungian Marie-Louise Von Franz did extensive research on the dreams of dying people, and wrote:

All of the dreams of people who are facing death indicate that the unconscious . . . prepares consciousness not for a definite end but for a profound transformation and for a kind of continuation of the life process which, however, is unimaginable to everyday consciousness.—Marie-Louise Von Franz

The transformative process expressed in death dreams certainly seems to be a healing process, even when, from the perspective of the living, it ends conclusively with the death of the body. If the "profound transformation" continues, what does it look like? What are the features of the places our dreams anticipate? I dreamed of icy seascapes and islands glimpsed through fog. These are unknown waters, but I am open to the ongoing journey.

References

Fischer, N. (2003). *Taking Our Places: The Buddhist Path to Truly Growing Up*. New York, NY: Harper Collins. p. 46.

Von Franz, M.-L. (1986). *On Dreams and Death: A Jungian Interpretation*. (E. X. Kennedy & V. Brooks, Trans.). Boston, MA: Shambhala. p. 156.

Note: When I describe the dreams or experiences of others, I change some details to preserve their anonymity. Also, when I don't have written versions of these dreams from the dreamers, I paraphrase what the person told me, coming as close as possible to what I heard.

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