

Dreams of the Dying: Where Reality and Identity Become Fluid

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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 have 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 have also been exploring dreams for over 30 years, and I feel the same way about dreaming.

As death approaches, we invariably come face to face with threshold experiences that can be both difficult and healing. Near death, there is always a point where the familiar has fallen away, and whatever is coming has not yet formed. Contradictory truths coexist at this point. There is devastation, and also great potential. Regardless of our beliefs about the afterlife, the experience of approaching death means approaching the unknown, and has elements that are beyond words, beyond certainties, beyond belief.

My work with dreams and my work around death and dying fit together naturally, because dreams (like dying and other major transitions) are all about encounters with threshold experiences. Dreams constantly plunge us into paradox, and the unknown or unknowable. If we are aware of our dreams, especially at times of life transition, we begin to have a sense of the fluidity of reality and identity that we will face when we ourselves are approaching death.

Every dying process, like every life, is unique. "Death dreams" can be any kind of dream. Nevertheless, there are some common patterns and themes in the dreams of the dying that I would like to consider, without suggesting that they are in any way absolutes. Overall, death dreams tend to represent a shifting perspective on identity and reality. My most direct experience of this shift has been personal, so I'll use this as my first example.

Around 1990, when I was thirty, my health began to deteriorate. Over the course of five years, increasingly severe autoimmune problems began to break down my sense of myself as an independent, capable, creative person who could make choices and take action in my own life. I seemed to have a bad case of respiratory flu that never went away. My lungs and joints ached; I had fevers and night sweats; I was exhausted, losing weight, unable to think clearly. I had to leave my job as a bookstore clerk, and soon could not even keep up with household chores or errands. Hard lumps eventually developed

along my collarbones and under my arms. I'd seen doctors but there was still no diagnosis, and things were only getting worse. One feverish night, I had this dream:

I am walking naked in a blizzard at night, surrounded by the steam of my own breath and the snow coming from all directions in the dark. I know I am walking, but cannot really feel myself moving. There's just a pleasant sensation of wind-filled darkness, and icy snowflakes stinging softly all over me. I walk until the ground comes to an end at a cliff, and I step out into nothingness. I don't feel myself falling, just merging into the swirling emptiness.

I woke up with a sense of blissful release, yet as soon as I became more fully aware, I was sure that this had been a dream about my death—so sure, in fact, that I woke my partner and told her I needed to try again to get medical help.

There could have been many other ways to look at this dream if it had come under different circumstances, but for me it was a perfect metaphor for the dying I was experiencing. In the dream (as in my waking life at that time), each element of my conscious identity was dissolving: my clothing or public presence; my body, the context for my life; even the ground that held me up . . . until finally there would be no distinction

between myself and everything—or nothing.

This experience of everything being stripped away is typical of the experience of dying, and also common in the dreams of dying people, as well as in the dreams of those who are going through major life changes such as illness, crisis, or loss.

Although the dream felt peaceful, it also served to alert me that my body was, in fact, dying. As a result of this dream and the subsequent development of my symptoms (the tumors got bigger and more numerous), I had a biopsy and was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Disease, a cancer of the immune system. I went through chemotherapy and radiation treatments, and then began to recover very slowly.

The story goes on from there. Twenty years later, I'm still alive, but through this dream and other experiences, I've glimpsed enough of the threshold to know that I *don't* know exactly what I am—or what will become of "me" when I die.

Over-explaining is a common response to the anxiety we feel at the edge of the unknown, so I'll try not to over-explain! Such dreams don't require an intellectual response. We all have our own dreams-beyond-words, our encounters with threshold experiences—our indescribable glimpses of the place of darkness, swirling snow, and unknown possibilities.

At an in-patient hospice where I've volunteered for many years, I got to know a man in his seventies named Jasper who was dying of lung cancer. Over several weeks, he told me stories about growing up on a midwestern farm. He shared his memories of the endless acres of alfalfa fields shimmering in the wind—memories that were associated with a sense of spaciousness, but also with hard labor and long hours as he tried to follow his father's example and expectations.

When Jasper could no longer get out of bed, and was sleeping more and more of the time, he began to share dreams. In a hoarse whisper, he told me:

I'm walking across an open field. Just walking and walking. Trying to get to my dad. He's at the far side of the field, standing by a fence. He's expecting me. I walk and walk but can't get any closer. Don't want to disappoint him, but I'm too slow, can't keep up. The tall grass is dragging on my legs, slowing me down. But I have to keep walking. The sun is setting.

Jasper was anxious and exhausted, but committed to completing the task of his life. He'd always worked hard, and he wasn't going to give up now. So he struggled and labored through the process of dying. Towards the end, he was in a coma—unresponsive to those around him, but with his eyes partly open, and his lips moving as if talking to himself, urging himself on. As I sat beside his bed, hour after hour, I noticed that his feet were moving under the thin sheet: first one foot flexed and then the other. Actually, his legs were working, too—alternately tensing and relaxing. He was *walking*. I imagined him walking across that field, to meet his father. It was a long way, and it took a long time. He worked hard at walking, and worked hard for each breath,

the whole way.

I wasn't there when he died, but his son told me that he walked right up until he stopped breathing—then let go with a big sigh, as if he'd finally gotten where he was going.

As death approaches, the distinctions between waking, dreaming, and deep sleep can break down completely. It becomes impossible (from the outside, and probably from the inside, too) to tell what's a vision, what's a dream, what's "real."

Jasper seemed to experience the same "dream"—a dream of walking across fields—as a waking memory, a vision, a sleeping dream, and a phenomenon in deep sleep. While recounting memories, he was often half asleep. While recounting dreams, he wasn't always sure whether they were dreams or not. And when he was in a coma, he may have been dreaming, or he may have been beyond dreams, but his body was moving in a way that communicated to others in the waking world that something was happening.

When we are dying, or when we are going through times of intense life transitions, our sense of identity and reality, like the distinction between waking and sleeping, begins to fall apart as we lose many of the things that had defined us. Although it is often a struggle, our identity can become more flexible, even fluid, as if in a dream. And when the identity is fluid, the reality experienced by that identity is also fluid. Possibilities open up. Who knows what might happen next?

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