
METAPHORIC PRESENCE IN SPIRITUAL DREAMS

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THE "HARDY QUESTION"

In the 1970s, Sir Alister Hardy (1966), seeking to reconcile evolutionary theory and human spirituality, argued for the development of a "scientific natural theology" by collecting data to build a more comprehensive knowledge of people's spiritual experiences. To collect such data, he advertised what became known as "the Hardy Question": "Have you ever experienced a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self?" Hardy invited people to contribute personal accounts of spiritual or religious experiences to the Religious Experience Research Unit (RERC) in Manchester College, Oxford, receiving over 6,000 submissions. One woman contributed this life-saving dream:

During a period of awful mental and physical suffering a few years ago, I called in despair to God to help me. I then dreamt that I was travelling through space—the earth rotating on its axis before me—the stars all around me. I experienced within the dream a feeling of most wonderful peace and when I awakened I was both mentally and physically refreshed and my problems were given a different perspective. I had contemplated suicide. I have had many dreams which have restored my mental and spiritual balance. (RERC Account 000786)

Analyses of the Hardy Archive Dreams

In his book *The Spiritual Nature of Man*, Hardy (1979) outlined a classification system for the first 3,000 accounts in the archive, noting that spiritual or religious experiences in dreams appeared on average 88 times per 1,000. Hardy listed "Dreams" as one of 12 main categories of experience appearing in the archival material, but he did not analyze the dream accounts. Nonetheless, he observed, "Of the importance of dreams to many individuals concerned as a channel for religious experience, there seems to be no doubt" (1979). In conjunction with what is now the Religious Experience Research Center (RERC) at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Lampeter, United Kingdom, this author has reviewed the first 1,000 archival accounts and found that 51 provide dream narratives sufficiently detailed to warrant further analysis.

Interpretive Frameworks

Dreams in the RERC selection could be described within the taxonomies of other dream studies. For example, a survey of "extraordinary dreams" (Krippner, Bogzaran, & de Carvalho, 2002; also see Chapter 11) focuses on dreams that "appear to create new experiences." The 51 RERC dreams include 10 of the 12

listed categories: creative, lucid, out-of-body, healing, telepathic, clairvoyant, precognitive, initiation, visitation, and spiritual dreams.

The selected RERC dreams also share characteristics apparent in the International Association for the Study of Dreams (IASD) collection *Dreams That Change Our Lives* (Hoss & Gongloff, 2016), namely, “a sense of spiritual or divine presence, lucid intervention; genetic or ancestral influences, forces that appear to transcend space and time or simply the natural creative, healing and adaptive learning process of the dreaming brain.” (Hoss, 2016). Of the RERC respondents in this review, 94 percent recount positive cognitive or affective change occurring in relation to a dream (e.g., from struggle to peace, confusion to a sense of knowing, feeling lost to feeling guided, moving from a problem to a solution, fear of death to acceptance).

In an analysis of 73 dreams set in contemporary miracle stories, Anne-Marie Korte (2015) identifies 10 categories, of which 8 appear in the 51 RERC dreams: miraculous rescue, special sign of guidance, contact with a deceased person, forecast or premonition, miraculous healing, miraculous fulfilment of urgent wish, apparition, and contact with “other reality.”

Korte observes that many of the 73 dreams in her study have a “non-religious frame of reference.” She proposes that “the personally meaningful dream functions as a parallel to the experience of miraculous intervention that many miracle stories relate. . . . The dream itself becomes experienced as a wondrous intervention—although, not explicitly identified as such.” Of the 51 RERC dreams, although 86 percent of the respondents identified themselves as “Christian,” only 16 percent of the dreams feature symbols associated with classic Christian iconography. Spiritual or religious experiences in dreams appear not to be dependent on religious frameworks for their structure or understanding. How, then, is the spiritual or religious nature of the dream manifested and *experienced*?

REEVALUATING TERMS: “RELIGIOUS” AND “SPIRITUALITY”

Despite the lack of religious iconography found in this study, the dreams nevertheless connote the original meaning of the word *religious*, which stems from the Latin root *re-ligare*, meaning “to bond, join, bridge, put back together again,” capacities the Jungian analyst Robert Johnson (1991) calls “sacred faculties.” “There is,” Johnson explains, “no such thing as a religious act or list of characteristics. There can only be a religious insight that bridges or heals.”

Spirituality broadly refers to “the *meaning, purpose and values* in people’s lives” (Aponte, 1998). Transpersonal psychology recognizes “experiences in which the sense of identity or self extends beyond (trans) the individual or personal to encompass wider aspects of humankind, life, psyche or cosmos” (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993), a sense that “we belong to more than ourselves” (Powell, 2017).

DREAM AS METAPHOR

Viewing dream metaphors as primarily explanatory and revealing of memory patterns connected to emotional states, Ernst Hartmann observed, “When a dream

is fully structured—a true dream—its structure can be understood not only as pictures in motion, but usually as metaphor in motion” (see Chapters 12 and 14).

Metaphors also provide bridges between analogical categories, between abstract thinking and subjective feelings, and between the symbolic portrayal of phenomenal forms and spiritual values—giving the dreamer an experiential encounter with their inner life (Hamilton, 2014). Writing on the nature of metaphor as it relates to children’s cognition as the foundation of spirituality, Shellie Levine (1999) argues that a child’s use of “metaphoric truth” has the same validity as the traditional “cognition of truth,” in which truth is understood as a correspondence between thought, thing, and behavior.

Stephen Pepper (1948) used the term “root metaphors” to identify organizing metaphors shaping differing worldviews or scientific paradigms. Kelly Bulkeley, who understands dreams “as a primary source of root metaphor” (Bulkeley, 1994), identifies root metaphors found in individual dreams and concepts of dreaming. In Kelley’s view, root metaphors provide what “has always been lacking in the study of the religious or spiritual dimension of dreams: a clear, sound well-developed notion of religious meaning.”

The findings described here not only explore the metaphoric content of individual dreams reported as spiritual or religious by the dreamer, but they also reveal how one overarching metaphor—that of *presence*—operates across a collection of such dreams.

The Dream as Metaphor in Spiritual Experience

Huston Smith suggests that the Christian cross expresses analogical processes involved in creating religious meaning. He describes the vertical axis of the cross as the *axis mundi*, the axial point of the world, which intersects all planes of existence, and the horizontal axis as the space-time continuum. Where the two planes intersect, there arises an experience of (1) the union of complements and (2) the resolution of opposites. “Existentially, then,” Smith notes, “the cross’s center represents the point where complements unite and opposites are resolved. Ontologically it is the ‘here and now’ from which time and space protrude” (Smith, 1992). The following dream account illustrates this analogical process:

I was being swept along in a broad, swirling river towards the open sea. It was a wild stormy day, with dark rain clouds racing along overhead, and the trees on the banks of the river were being tossed hither and thither in the wind which blew over the face of the waters. I must perish in such turbulence. As I was being swept along I heard a quiet voice saying, “Take hold of the rope,” and beside me in the water I saw lying the end of a strong rope. “Hold it firmly, but easily,” said the voice. I took hold of it in the way I had been told, and imperceptibly the raging waters became calm—or I quiet in their midst. I looked again at the rope and saw that it was no longer an end that I held; it stretched before me and behind me and I knew that I only needed to hold it in this way to be taken to the sea. I knew too that it had been there all the time. I was no longer afraid, and the waters that had before seemed so hostile, sweeping me to the sea against my will, now seemed friendly. (RERC Account 000128)

The respondent adds: "I awoke from this dream to feel that I had discovered the key to all life—the whole secret of being."

This dream as metaphor allows the dreamer to know *experientially* qualities of spirituality. The dreaming mind itself acts as the center point, a fulcrum where the concrete metaphor (the rope) and its metaphoric nature (the source of comfort and connection to "being") unite to create a sense of presence.

Metaphoric Presence

"The Hardy question" specifically asks people to share experiences of a presence or power—whether called God or not—that differs from their everyday self. Hardy's own analysis of the archival material identifies on average only 202 accounts per 1,000 as demonstrating a sense of presence, which he includes under the general category of "cognitive and affective elements" (such as "feeling of love, affection," "sense of purpose behind events," etc.). However, the researcher in this study has chosen to view the cognitive and affective elements described by Hardy as contributing to the quality of presence. On this basis, 96 percent of the 51 dreams involve a sense of presence.

Metaphors of Presence

The following five subsets and percentage breakdowns can be distinguished in the 51 RERC dream accounts under analysis:

1. Auditory phenomena: 8%
2. Concrete phenomena having extraordinary properties: 12%
3. Ideal personifications of human spiritual potential: 12%
4. Abstract phenomena: 30%
5. Human personifications of transcendent reality: 33%
6. Other: 5%

In the first subset, auditory phenomena, dreamers report hearing an unforgettable voice with little or no reference to a dream setting or context. For instance, one respondent wrote, "Whilst asleep one night, I heard a solemn, drone-like voice which said, 'Come with me'" (RERC Account 000678).

The second subset involves concrete phenomena having extraordinary properties. This includes metaphors of presence symbolized by objects, such as a rope, book, or flowers in an unusual context and with unusual properties. The term "hierophany," coined by Mircea Eliade (1957), designates "the *act of manifestation* of the sacred" in which ordinary objects of the "profane world," such as trees and stones become, "something of a wholly different order" (p. 11). In this subset, "profane" forms carry a strong cognitive or affective quality: guidance, knowledge, a sense of help, encouragement, love, and so on. The dream in which the respondent took hold of a rope exemplifies this category (RERC Account 000128). Another respondent describes a dream in which she read a book "about the nature of reality" (RERC Account 000928).

The third subset involves personifications of human spiritual potential through an ideal being. This may take the form of a famous person or a divine being—religious or non-religious—or an unknown being with powerful cognitive or affective qualities. Henry Corbin (1969) uses the word “theophany” for the imaginative apprehension of a spiritual being in physical form. The following dream describes such an experience:

I saw in my dream a famous poet—Ghalib. He is an Indian poet of great fame and his poetry in Urdu has great depth and beauty. . . . He came and recited a poem of his. . . . I am writing them down with their general translation in English. Translated [from Urdu] literally it means: The string or reed that has not played the music for a very long time. . . . Let us bring it to life and by its music, let the whole world be brightened and as if, brought to life. (RERC Account 000008)

This dreamer, a scientist, reports that after the dream, he became a recognized poet.

The fourth subset features abstract representations, such as light, space, a vortex, or a void, that communicate powerful cognitive or affective qualities. The opening dream of this chapter wherein a woman views the earth from space exemplifies this category (RERC Account 000786).

Here is a further example:

I was one with eternally pulsing light. . . . Nor was I by any means alone: I was communicating with infinite wisdom, not as an individual but as an entity; this wisdom was in me and flowed through me and yet was also outside me. I had no need for companionship because I was, in a sense, companionship. I seemed to be part of some mighty essence, some ultimate, unknowable reality. (RERC Account 000266)

Another respondent simply said of the light in her dreams, “It smiles” (RERC Account 000166).

The fifth and largest subset, “human personification of transcendent reality,” involves a close friend or relative who is deceased or who, shortly after the dream, becomes injured or dies. In such dreams, the metaphoric presence develops from the dreamer’s recognition—either in the dream or after waking—of a dislocation in ordinary space-time, attributed to a nontemporal, transcendent dimension.

For example, one respondent reports that his dream presaged his cousin’s tragic suicide (RERC Account 000782). The following dream account illustrates a personification of “the next world”:

I remember feeling strongly that there was religious significance in a dream. . . . It was that those of my relatives who had passed on before me, including one who was and is actually alive, seemed to be in a room in a house in which I had just entered and in which I was feeling rather strange. The relative who is still alive seemed to sense my feelings. She seemed, as she came out to me, so happy, and she said to me, “They’re all sitting at table in there.” . . . I have more than once had a dream in which relatives who had passed on seemed to be preparing a place for me. (RERC Account 000151)

Another respondent, who dreamed of her deceased husband, wrote, "It is always with the same wonderful feeling of love and security that he generated in life. I always awaken with an awareness that I have actually been with him" (RERC Account 000687).

In each subset, the organizing metaphor of presence serves a religious function, enabling the dreamer to *experience* deeply human qualities, values, purposes, and meanings, the subjective qualities of spirituality.

RECEPTIVITY AND REFLECTIVE AWARENESS IN DREAMS

In the dreams under review, the dreamers align themselves with the metaphoric element of presence, demonstrating varying degrees of reflective awareness and cognition by making a choice within the dream (Kahan & LaBerge, 1996). For example, in RERC Account 000128, when a quiet voice asks the dreamer to take hold of the rope, she chooses to do "as she is told" and feels calmed.

Similarly, in dreams resulting in positive cognitive/affective outcomes, the dreamer harmonizes with the manifestation of presence through a demonstration of receptivity in a number of ways, for example, following dream guidance, allowing themselves to be carried or transported, listening to a message, accepting an invitation, overcoming fear, or, as shown in the following lucid dream, maintaining the capacity to remain open to the transcendent presence:

I was sitting at the foot of a long dinner table after a meal. On my left, at the end of the left side, was . . . a man, aged about 40. I knew I was dreaming. . . . I asked my companion whether he was a figment of my imagination, the creation of my own mind. . . . My companion made no answer, but I felt a firm and friendly hand in my right hand, and looking to the side, saw the hand extend to a robed arm, which disappeared into cloud. . . . I quickly fell on my knees and bent over the hand in awe and reverence. (RERC Account 000465)

The dreamer's capacity for reflective awareness deepens the relational and existential reality of the metaphoric experience of presence. In contrast, in the few cases wherein the dreamer resists the element of presence or cannot overcome their fear, the dream narrative lacks a positive resolution, an experience that apparently has negative effects on the dreamer's well-being. Yet, because of their powerful affect, such dreams, whether for good or ill, are experienced by the respondents as spiritual.

CONCLUSION

This preliminary investigation suggests that an analysis of the root metaphor of presence across a collection of dreams experienced as spiritual or religious provides an understanding of what makes such dreams meaningful for the dreamer. Whether the sense of presence appears in an ordinary or extraordinary way, in a religious or nonreligious context, such dreams provide a deeply felt spiritual value and generally prove to be a positive, life-changing experience.