

Unlock the Secrets of your Dreams

Eight Steps to Understanding your Dreams

Sheldon Shalley, LCSW

Introduction

Within the human psyche lives an unknown land—a land with its own characters, its own laws, and its own function. In this land it is as if a story is being written and played out whose goals and purposes are independent of external factors or ego desires. Psychology calls this unknown land the unconscious. Dreams reveal what is going on in this land.

The unconscious refers to the thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in our minds of which we are unaware—forgotten events, emotions, habit patterns, as well as our intuition, creative impulses, and innate wisdom. Most of us have had the experience of suddenly becoming overwhelmed by a strong emotion, blurting out something completely unlike us, discovering we've been driving for miles on "automatic pilot" or expressing some wisdom we didn't know we had and then wondering "where did that come from?" It is like it came from some unknown place deep within us. Dreams are nature's way of attempting to bring to consciousness the unconscious material that is at the root of our emotional, psychological, mental, physical, and spiritual conflicts.

Dreams are like self-portraits, taken from the point of view of the unconscious, revealing to us the parts of ourselves that we have ignored or neglected, parts that have never been realized—potential ways of being. Dreams help us get in touch with these unknown or unacknowledged parts of ourselves. For example, in a dream I may behave like a hero, a murderer, or even an animal. I say "this is not how I see myself, but how the unconscious sees me." It is like the dream holds up a mirror to show us what is going on at the deeper unconscious level.

Principles of Dream Work

1. Dreams are products of the unconscious. They come to tell us what we don't know. Dream work assumes the existence of the unconscious—that we have thoughts, feelings, and beliefs of which we are completely unaware.
2. Within the human psyche is an autonomous and fundamental drive towards wholeness. Dreams come in service of this drive. Dream work assumes that a purpose other than the human ego is operating through reality and drawing us toward some meaningful goal. Jungian psychology asserts that we all possess an archetype of wholeness that serves as a regulating center and contains our fullest potential and unity of the personality as a whole. Dreams reflect this psychic regulation and movement toward psychic unity and wholeness.
3. Dreams refer to aspects of the dreamer. Communication is the prime purpose of the dream, and this communication is about you and your life. Even though the dream uses other people and images from your everyday life, it is attempting to help you see you. The various dream figures are almost invariably a reproduction of the dreamer's inner situation. These inner figures represent aspects or tendencies of the dreamer, fragments of his or her personality. During our development some parts of our personality are made conscious, some remain unconscious. These unconscious parts do not cease to exist but lead a life of their own in the unconscious from where they exert effects on our lives. The dream may point out blind spots about things of which we are unconscious, provide preliminary ground plans for future

activities and potential development, or provide continuing guidelines for our unique developmental paths.

4. Dreams can be understood only in the context of the dreamer's life. Dreams have their origin some time before falling asleep, in the day's or week's events. The dream starts in the present. However, the issue it addresses often derives from our past and brings this information together relevant to what we are struggling with now. To understand a dream, we need a thorough knowledge of the conscious situation out of which the dream emerged because the dream contains the unconscious point of view relative to the conscious situation. The dream may also use that information to point to some situation in the future.
5. Dreams speak a language of metaphors and symbols. Images in dreams should not be taken literally, but as symbols of parts of us and dynamics within our inner life. In dreams, it is like a language of pictures takes over and reflects our feelings. The language of the dream is often archaic, obscure, absurd, shocking, exasperating, and ambiguous. This is what makes dreams so difficult to understand at times. We have to interpret the symbolic meaning of the dream images. One of the ways to decipher the symbolic meaning of a dream image is to make associations to it. An association is any word, thought, idea, mental picture, feeling, or memory that comes to your mind when you reflect on a particular image.
6. It is our "aha" of recognition that is the only reliable evidence that we have understood a dream symbol correctly. Dreams are energy. The unconscious chooses a particular image to reflect certain energy within you. Look for where the energy is aroused. Look for the association that "clicks", where you get that "aha" experience.
7. Only the dreamer can say with any certainty what meanings his or her dream may hold. The dreamer created the dream. It is the dreamer's associations that unravel the meaning of the dream symbols. While others may make valuable

contributions to our understanding, the dreamer has the final say on what the dream means.

8. Dreams show our natural creative ability to face and solve life's problems. Sleep research suggests that dreaming is a way of processing information in search of solutions to problems. Other researchers believe dreaming is a function of the nervous system to take in, process, and integrate new information. On the other hand, dreams have always been a major vehicle for the appearance of the creative impulse. Dreams regularly serve as a source of artistic inspiration. Many religions recognize the value of dreams and assert that God often speaks through dreams. But it isn't just the scientists, the artists, or the spiritually minded that are rewarded with insight from their dreams. We all have access to the wisdom of the unconscious whenever we listen to our dreams.

The Structure of Dreams

Although the forms of dreams can range from single images to long narratives, many dreams have a story-like structure that can be divided into four stages.

Stage 1: Setting. This stage includes a statement about the setting, the main characters, the initial situation and often presents a dilemma or problem.

Stage 2: Plot Development. This stage shows how the unconscious is attempting to solve the problem or resolve the dilemma.

Stage 3: Turning Point. In this stage, something decisive happens—something good or bad—to move the dream toward some resolution.

Stage 4: Conclusion. This stage contains the solution or result. The dream resolves the dilemma one way or another or ends with an unresolved crisis and the solution is left up to the dreamer's unconscious to work it out.

In looking at the structure of a dream, it is important to notice if the solution or result actually

solves the dilemma or problem set forth in the first stage. If not, why not? What went wrong? What part or parts of the story are missing? Being aware of the component parts of a dream's story-like structure helps to understand the plot development and the dream's emphasis and allows you to quickly identify the missing part. All of this is a statement from the unconscious about the dreamer's current life situation.

8 Steps to Understanding Your Dreams

1. **Make a decision** that you want to make a serious and determined effort to listen to your dreams.
2. **Record your dreams.** Keep a note pad by your bed and write down the dream the moment you wake up, before you do anything else, even in the middle of the night. Dreams are elusive and most retreat rapidly to the unconscious. Record the dream with great care. Write down all the details, no matter how insignificant they may seem to you. Note carefully how the details are introduced in the dreams sequence. Stick as closely as possible to the dream images.
3. **Put the dream in context.** Identify what was going on in your life at the time of the dream. What were you thinking about the day or two before the dream? What were you emotionally involved in at the time of the dream? What conflicts or problems were you struggling with?
4. **Identify the dream images.** Circle or list the people, places, objects, colors, etc. in the dream.
5. **Identify the symbolic meaning** of each dream image by making associations to each dream image. An association is any word, thought, idea, mental picture, feeling or memory that comes to your mind when you reflect on the dream image. List all association until you find one that "clicks."

First, find your personal associations. These are associations that spring out of your relationship to the dream image—where the image appears or

appeared in your life, what you think or feel about the image. Say, for example, that you dream that you are in a blue room. Your association to the color blue might be "my blue sweater, sad—I've got the blues, blew, blown away, cool, detached, blue sky, clarity, true blue—honest, faithful".

A second layer of associations is the cultural level such as a red traffic light meaning "stop" or "as a "bridal color" or the president representing the "ruling center" of the US, etc. A third layer of associations is the archetypal or universal level. Archetypal associations are those which have proved meaningful enough to a large group of people over a long period of time so as to become an accepted part of some large symbolic system. These archetypal or universal associations are often depicted in fairytales, folklore, myths and religions. However, it is not necessary to interpret at the archetypal level in order to understand your dreams.

6. **Connect the dream images** to inner dynamics. Find the parts of your inner self that the dream images represent. Recall the example above where you dream you are in a blue room. The association that "clicks" for you is "blue, sad." To connect this dream image to your inner life, ask yourself, "Where have I been feeling sad?" or "What am I sad about?"
7. **Interpret the dream.** Put together all the information gleaned in steps 4, 5, and 6 and arrive at a view of the dream's meaning taken as a whole. Don't take a ready-made interpretation out of a dream book. This is like wearing someone else's clothing. The interpretation should flow naturally out of steps 4-6. The associations begin to tie together in your mind and make sense to you in light of the context. The connections to your inner life become clear. Ask yourself, "Why did I have this dream?" What is the single most important message that this dream is trying to get across to me?" An interpretation may not come on the first try. Just write down your ideas about how you think the entire dream fits together and the meaning it has for your life. Keep working at it until it makes sense. If no interpretation comes, let the dream and its associations rest in your mind. Carry them around with you. The understanding will come, and you

will say, “Aha, I see it.” When an interpretation comes, seek confirmation from trusted friends. Friends can often offer valuable insights and candid observations about our dreams and our interpretations for they sometimes see things about us that we don’t see. If you become deeply frustrated about your dreams, seek a therapist who has experience working with dreams or join a dream group.

8. **Honor the dream.** Do something to validate the dream and to imprint its meaning more clearly on your mind. For example, you might paint the dream or take some action called for by the dream.

Dream Work: An Example

The following is an example of a lady’s work on a dream following these eight steps.

1. **Decide you want to listen to our dreams and take them seriously.**
2. **Record the Dream.** A lady dreams: “I am driving my car in Broad Ripple, looking for Taylor’s Bakery. I need to buy a birthday cake for someone. I get lost on Broad Ripple Avenue and make a wrong turn. I wind up on a back street. There, wide open to the elements is a Lazarus Home Shop. There are lots of sofas and thick brilliant colored carpeting. I go in and there against a room divider is Elizabeth holding a little girl. She is attractive and very quiet, with shoulder length blond hair. She recognizes me right away and says, “Hi Joan.” It takes me a few seconds to remember her name.”
3. **Put the dream in context.** What was going on in the life of the dreamer. The dreamer is in her early 50s, recently divorced. She had left a 30-year marriage that had been very restrictive with constant fighting. It had not been a satisfying marriage for her. Her husband had not been emotionally available to her. A lot of her had had to die in the marriage in order to stay in it. After 30 years of marriage and surviving breast cancer (which brought her to the realization that she could no longer stay in the marriage if she was going to survive), she says, “I was finally able to

leave a marriage I should have left in the first year.” At the time of this dream, the dreamer was extremely anxious about facing life on her own. She was almost panicky at times, going out to bars, getting into unhealthy relationships with men because of her fear of being alone. She was having a hard time, as she put it, “quieting my mind.” There was a certain “driveness”, a compulsive hyperness about her to go, go, go, talk, talk, talk, do, do, do to avoid the fear of being alone.

4. **Identify (underline) the dream images.** I am driving my car in Broad Ripple, looking for Taylor’s Bakery. I need to buy a birthday cake for someone. I get lost on Broad Ripple Avenue and make a wrong turn. I wind up on a back street. There, wide open to the elements is Lazarus Home Shop. There are lots of sofas and thick, brilliant colored carpeting. I go in and there against a room divider is Elizabeth holding a little girl. She is attractive and very quiet, with shoulder length blond hair. She recognizes me right away and says, “Hi, Joan.” It takes me a few seconds to remember her name.
5. **Make Associations to each dream image.** The dreamer made these associations. The (*) identifies the associations that “clicked” with the dreamer.

car = movement, power, going someplace
Broad Ripple = *freedom, I love Broad Ripple, energy, you can find almost anything there, different kinds of people, free spirit
birthday cake = *celebrate, party, birth, *milestone
wrong turn = *mistake, getting off track
elements = exposed, *vulnerable
Lazarus = department store, raised from the dead
Home Shop = *heart, things for the home
sofas, brilliant colored carpeting = new furnishings, celebration, *strong feelings
Elizabeth = acquaintance from past, high school, free, earthy, gentle, feminine, *centered, bright and gay as the month of May
little girl = childhood, new life, 8potential, the future

6. **Connect the dream images** to what is going on in your life. The dreamer connected the car in the dream to her “movement through life.” The associations that “clicked” for her to the Broad Ripple image were “freedom” and “different kinds of people”. She connected these images to the new found freedom after her divorce and being able to experience all the different parts of herself—the “wild and crazy” parts, her new experiences and to no longer feeling trapped, being able to do whatever she wanted to do.

Often times the first part of a dream will identify a problem or a goal that the dream is attempting to solve. The goal of this dream was to buy a birthday cake. The “aha” association to birthday cake was “milestone.” The dreamer connected this to turning 50, mid-life, and her divorce. To actually have divorced her husband was a great accomplishment. It was indeed her survival and a “milestone.”

As the dream plot developed, the dreamer “gets lost.” She connected this image to “feeling vulnerable and uncertain” as how to maneuver her life now that she was single and feeling alone. To the image of the “wrong turn” she associated “having made some poor decisions” in her newfound life.

The result of the “wrong turn” (poor decision) landed her at Lazarus Home Shop. The association that “clicked” for her for Lazarus was “raised from the dead.” Connecting Lazarus to the Bible. To “Home Shop” she associated “heart. She connected these symbols to her feelings of love that had been dead, killed by the marriage, but were now being resurrected (Lazarus).

In this place of resurrection of life (Lazarus Home Shop) she meets “Elizabeth.” The “aha” associations to Elizabeth were “gentle, feminine, and centered.” The dreamer connected the Elizabeth symbol to the part of her that is gentle, feminine, and centered, less hyper—the part that could quiet her mind, help her become centered, something she was finding it very difficult to do. To the little girl she associated “new life” and “potential.” This dream image represented new potential life, the new self that could now develop if she could get to know this Elizabeth side.

7. **Interpret the Dream.**

The dreamer understood this dream to speak to her “wild and crazy” and potentially self-destructive behavior that had been driving her, released by her newfound freedom. She understood the dream to mean that the new life that she was compulsively seeking was not to be found going out to bars and getting into sudden and unhealthy relationships with men to avoid the fear of being alone. Rather it was in getting to know the more gentle, feminine and centered side of herself symbolized by Elizabeth.

8. **Honor the Dream**

As a result of this dream, the dreamer joined a relaxation and meditation group to help her find that gentle, feminine, and centered part of herself.

References and Recommended Reading

Hall, James. Jungian Dream Interpretation, Toronto: Inner City Books, 1983.

Johnson, Robert. Inner Work: Using Dreams and Imagination for Personal Growth, San Francisco: Harper Row, 1986.

A good beginning book that presents a 4-step approach to dream work.

Jung, Carl G. Memories, Dreams, Reflections, New York: Random House, 1961.

Kelsey, Morton, Dreams: A Way to Listen to God, New York, Paulist Press, 1978.

A small book, good for beginners

Taylor, Jeremy, Where People Fly and Water Runs Uphill, New York: Warner Books, 1992.

An easy-to-read book, covering a variety of information on dreams and a way to work in dream groups.

For Information on Dream Work
Contact Sheldon Shalley at
317-726-7417 or email at
sheldon@sheldonshalley.com

Unlock the Secrets of your Dreams Worksheet

1. Do you want to **pay attention to your dreams**? Are you willing to take them seriously? Write a statement as to your intention and determination to listen to your dreams.
2. **Write your dream** below, being careful to record every detail.
3. **Put the dream in context.** What were you thinking about or feeling around the time of this dream? What problems or conflicts were you struggling with? What was going on in your life around the time of this dream?
4. Go back to Step 2 and **circle all of the dream images** or list them below. Include people, objects, colors, actions, etc.
5. **Write out your associations** to each dream image. Remember, an association is any word, thought, mental picture, feeling, memory or idea that comes to your mind when you think about the dream image. List all associations until you find one that “clicks.”
6. **Connect the dream images** to the inner dynamics of what is going on in your life. Ask yourself such things as where have I been feeling or acting this way? What part of me does this dream image represent? Who is this in me? Work this part until you can connect each dream image to something in your life.
7. **Interpret the dream.** Put together the information gathered in the above steps and ask yourself. “Why did I have this dream? What is this dream trying to get across to me? Does the dream compensate something lacking in consciousness? Does it affirm me by showing me something in a positive light? Does it fill in a blank spot? Does it comment on some choice or decision that I am making? Is there an adversary in the dream? How do the aspects of the dream refer to me? What is this dream’s message to me?”
8. **Honor the dream.** Ask yourself, “What choices can I and will I make as a result of working on this dream? How can I honor this dream?”