

Growing in the Dark

I've been having intense nightmares all my life, off and on. Many of them were one of a kind and quickly forgotten, but four have been repeated throughout my adult life. I believe I've come to understand what they mean, and in the process freed myself from a powerful subconscious motivator operating through fear.

Our amazing minds process a lot of information while we're sleeping or otherwise engaged. Whenever we become stumped by a problem we can just put it aside and come back to it later. Especially if we "sleep on it" we'll often find the solution or at least a step towards the solution comes to mind immediately. When the problem is an unconscious one to begin with, we of course aren't turning it over in our minds while awake. This is where dreams come in.

While unique dreams may serve a specific purpose, repeated ones carry a message, "Look at this! Check it out!" To keep recurring they must contain extremely significant content, material that ought to be integral to negotiating the path of one's life. I don't often remember dreams or do much work with them, but when they happen over and over, and when they cause a paralytic fear which hangs over into the waking state, they get my attention.

During dreaming the mind cleverly epitomizes symbols of events in order to either present them to the conscious mind or to use them for further subconscious analysis. Repeated dreams encapsulate broad and important bands of psychic material and represent the mind's attempts to bring them into awareness. Nightmares, by accentuating the fear element that accompanies certain events in life, signal problems that are likely to be unconscious motivators. It is well known that anxiety or fear directs much of the behavior of human beings. Only by addressing these fears and bringing them into wakeful awareness can they be disengaged to allow decision-making of a more intelligent and less reactive kind. Then we can spend our lives in positive endeavors rather than merely avoiding the negative.

The recognition of the meaning of nightmares at least for me has come at the very end of a process of dealing with them unconsciously. All along they've been working themselves out on their own and I've only been a passive witness, so passive in fact as to be immobilized with terror at times. Once they have finally worked their way to the surface, they've lost their grip. It often happens that when light is brought into darkness the unsettling objects lurking there turn out to be fairly ordinary.

Recognizing what a dream represents is not just a matter of consciously comparing it to memories of the wakeful state. You ponder and wonder, and eventually the meaning leaps out at you, accompanied by a satisfying little rush that's an affirmation from the subconscious that "Yeah, you finally got it!" Once you've had this jolt of recognition you begin to see the ways in which the dream represents the source gestalt. I suspect this "flash" is prima facie evidence it is true. While we often make mistakes in discriminating the real from the unreal, the feeling of revelation is in itself an indication of validity, emerging as it does from the part of the mind which is the originator of the dream in the first place.

My four dreams turned out to symbolize major life stages and the threat or disjunction they posed to my psyche.

Dream #1 usually began with me strolling through a vast arcade, with arched windows on either side containing complicated scenes which I wasn't really paying much attention to. I came to a long tunnel which was like a cave that passed under the mountainous ridge to my left and emerged into another arcade on the other side. Being fascinated with tunnels I entered and proceeded like an adventurer to explore. Somewhere towards the middle it would get darker and more claustrophobic, and a sense of dread would come over me. A malignant force, evil and inexorable, seemed to emanate from the very mountain around me. The terror grew until it crushed me to my knees, and it was with great difficulty I could continue. There was an overwhelming, choking fear of death, of being trapped inside the mountain and

never getting out. I could barely breathe. Eventually though, I would struggle to the other side and emerge with tremendous relief into another arcade, and the feeling that friends and family were not far off.

Over time I conquered my fear of the tunnel and would go through for fun, even though the crushing terror would come back somewhere within. And soon I remembered the fear but didn't actually feel it all that much. About then I began to lead tours through, carrying sandwiches and flashlights and basically having a lark with my friends. Even when I would try to experience the fear again, I could no longer feel it at all.

Dream #2 involved a gigantic rectangular building set in a wooded parkland. The outside was fairly pretty, with trees dappling the brickwork and some fields in the distance, but once inside you were trapped. There was a mad scientist type and a few others whose house it was. The interior was like a cluttered museum, room after room full of unidentifiable stuff on tables and in display cases. Not much specific happened, but no one was allowed to leave, and the terror was like icicles stabbing through your heart. There was a feeling that something dreadful was being planned for you, and you were helpless to resist. It took your breath away and your strength ebbed to nothing. It was certain you would lose your very self in there.

Often the dream involved walking through the woods to the house, the fear intensifying as I approached. The building itself literally oozed malice. There was a kind of satanic device over the door, like a warning, but with a perverse, helpless fascination my feet would lead me up the stairs and through the double doors every time.

Later there were friends along sometimes. The main fear was that I was helpless and at the mercy of the sinister people inside. There was no chance to stay away; I was drawn to the place like a moth to the flame. Over time the building became uninhabited, and the sense of dread ebbed away. I would visit and be unable to recreate the intense terror, though I'd try. I could remember being

afraid, but that was all. From the outside it appeared deserted. Nowadays I hardly ever go there.

Dream #3 was the least frightening of the four, the only one that didn't make me virtually disintegrate in horror. There was plenty of anxiety, but not the sheer terror of the others. It involved a huge building, long, rectangular and many stories high. Each floor had a main hallway with regular rooms on each side and stairs at either end. People lived in the rooms, including me, and we would often visit each other. But we never used the halls. All around the outside walls were secret passages that connected different parts of the building in mysterious ways. You never knew where you would come out. If someone was following you, there were secret closets to duck into. Secret stone stairs went up through odd corners. It was kind of *intestinal*, it was so convoluted inside the walls.

At the far end of the building was an ell containing a sizable auditorium. One of the main secret passages came out at the back of the stage. There was invariably a performance of some kind going on, often with me in it. I remember usually feeling I hadn't learned my lines or my part, so I'd get out and improvise a comedy routine or interact spontaneously with the other actors. The audience didn't seem to care that I wasn't following the script as long as it was amusing. Most of the focus was backstage, in anticipation of the performance. There was the worry that you were expected to do something, but you didn't know what.

As time went on the building moved to a town in Mexico with a thriving market. The dream would usually include a long journey down through the desert to the town. Sometimes I'd stay in town and just look over at the old building, which hulked there just at the edge of the action. The bustle of the market somewhat matched the busy, hivelike quality of the giant building.

Dream #4 brought back the sense of dread and doom to match the first and second nightmares. An old brick tower straight out of a horror movie loomed up at the edge of a huge farm with vast barns. I've always been afraid of heights, but I'd be drawn to

climb up the tower even though it was on the point of collapse and exuded a malignant sense of being alive and very evil. Once up in the room at the top there would often be a storm with lightning and thunder, or an earthquake. The tower would start to topple over and I'd have to rush down and get away. Sometimes it would collapse with me in it.

Again—amazingly—part of the mesmerizing quality of the nightmare was that I was so drawn to the tower. I had to go, even knowing it was evil and extremely dangerous. The tower was often different, sometimes old and made of brick, other times like a water tower with open ladders to climb, and the danger of collapse varied from immanent to hypothetical. One night I watched from a little distance away as it collapsed completely and smashed itself to bits on the ground. After that I began to explore the rest of the farm and stay away from the tower. Although the tower would be back, leaning over precariously at the far end of the farm, it became a distant and less threatening presence.

The huge barns were scary, being mysterious and full of unknown spaces, but intense dread just couldn't be generated there. I did a lot of exploration in them, which became more and more ordinary as time went on. Pumpkins and hay bales replaced bladed machinery and recondite spider-webbed corners. Once more the fear had become a distant memory. I couldn't feel it even if I tried.

As I mentioned before, these dreams occurred so frequently in my life that they eventually worked their way into my waking consciousness. I'd mull them over occasionally, but just in isolation. Then, about a month ago, I had a flash of insight and understood what they all meant, one after the other. With that, the last tongues of fear associated with them rolled back and left for good. At age 51, after thirty years of both conscious and unconscious struggle to understand, I had run them to ground. Dare I say it was a great relief?

So perhaps to you, the reader, these things look obvious when written out and put in chronological order as I've done. They look fairly obvious to me now, too. But when you're caught in a nightmare, the terror is so palpable, clutching at your vitals, choking and darkening your mind, that their meaning is anything but obvious. Intellectual understanding is only the tip of the iceberg compared to the thorough plumbing of the depths that takes place during a full-fledged nightmare.

Dream #1 is clearly a birth dream. Very familiar territory. Everyone has them. We all pass through the birth canal, excepting some C-section delivery babies, but how many of us actually get to relive the fear we all must experience in coming into the world? It is thought of as good therapy and there are a number of techniques to access it, but it looks like it can be accomplished by one's own dream therapy without any complicated assistance. Perhaps you're already doing it and haven't recognized it yet. That's why I'm writing this article, as a matter of fact, to help us all remember that this is very possibly going on in each of us. Everyone's dreams will be different, but they'll quite likely cover this same subject matter.

Of interest perhaps in this first dream is the busy arcade on either side of the birth canal. There's a lot going on both before and after gestation. The pre-birth side always seemed more like home to me than the postpartum side, even though the latter was where my family was waiting for me. I think this is because our true home is in the unmanifest rather than the manifest. Another interesting aspect was that the direction of movement on the two sides was opposite, as seen from an overhead witnessing point of view. Before the tunnel I moved to the right in my mind's eye, and afterwards headed left. I think that may be significant. To put it simply, the flow of our earthly existence is reversed from our liberated experience in the afterlife (or prelife). I suppose there would be another tunnel at a different point in the arcades where you would cycle back, representing death, but I never got there.

It's amusing that after getting over the fear I became an intrepid explorer of the birth canal tunnel. I imagine this relates to my native curiosity and enthusiasm about sex, but that's another story....

The second dream was the last I solved. That big building turned out to be my grade school, to which I had a mile walk through the woods. The double doors were, well, regular schoolhouse panic doors, and the satanic device above them must have been the Central School logo. The mad scientist and others were the principal and teachers. I had more anxiety than most in converting from a natural life to the socialized environment of school. I hated it and was terrified of it in many ways, but only when I understood the dream did I realize how devastating a conversion it actually was.

For the first few years of my life I had had a tremendous amount of freedom. I lived in an idyllic world where I was allowed to roam freely around the neighborhood, which was full of kids, dogs, undeveloped lots for playing ball, and woods and waterways for exploring. Forcing me into school was like breaking a wild horse. I bucked and fought against going to a place where I was unnerved by the loud noises, aggressive boys, and programs I didn't understand. I spent a lot of time being yelled at in the vice-principal's office. It was several years before they were able to "saddle" me, though I retained a certain wariness for the duration of my school years.

This is the time of our life when we go from freedom to bondage, abandoning our unfettered life for the world of rules and obligations. The school symbolized this process, but it is one which is enthusiastically promulgated by parents and society as well. Words, both written and spoken, begin to replace direct action in the child's life, and other people's interests begin to take precedence over our own. Whether or not it's an inevitable transformation, it's helpful to understand the psychological trauma we went through and how we suppressed and internalized the misery of it.

It's a truism that society clamps down much harder today than it did in the 1950s when I went to grade school. We at least were allowed to retain a small portion of our independence and dignity. Nowadays those children who can't be quickly assimilated are given mind numbing drugs to smash their independent behavior instantly. How much more ghastly than my nightmare will be the dreams of those whose every shred of personal integrity and unmediated expression is instantly and completely demolished? Ask George Orwell. Ask those who bring their dad's automatic assault rifles to school and open fire.

Dream #3 turned out to be my middle school, and represents my life from about age 10 to the beginning of adulthood. The teen years are when we appear to live in a square, comprehensible world but really are doing whatever we can get away with in secret. Or trying to, anyway. The anxiety comes from scheming to stay out of sight—going about through those secret passages—while still living an outwardly acceptable existence.

This is even more graphically represented by the stage performances in the auditorium. I was always neurotic about not understanding what society expected of me. The gap between my inner feelings and my assigned role was vast and disturbing. Like many kids I learned to “ham it up” and make people laugh. While people were laughing they didn't force you to behave according to the rules. And of course the feeling you have at this age is that you are on stage, the center of attention, so you've got to perform every minute or the audience will start throwing rotten fruit. That's a lot of pressure! But it was anxiety, not terror, for the most part.

In fact, as time went on things got better and better. In my life, the last period when my native country flirted with ideas of freedom was during my teens and twenties. Unconventional behavior and antisocial attitudes were somewhat encouraged. It appeared the suffering of children was going to be mitigated. So my nightmares weren't so awful, just confusing and involved.

At the end of my childhood I made a long journey into Mexico and had a wonderful adventure, making many friends and

being totally independent. It was a cathartic event in my life, and is represented by the Mexican market that became the focus of the dream, while the old school sat, visible but unattended, over to the side. This was when I left behind the secret and arcane world of the teen and entered the open marketplace of adulthood.

The fourth dream represented my working life as an adult. A farm is where work goes on, like Maggie's Farm in the Dylan song. I was a firefighter in real life, and the tower was a morphed watchtower just like the ones that used to grace the tops of fire stations before telephones replaced visual sighting as the means to raise the alarm. The different kinds of tower may have been the different fire stations I worked in over time. The terror of that job was very real, what with burning and collapsing buildings and the daily threat of hostile bosses who were always looking for ways to get rid of me. One of the most difficult parts was to overcome my fear of heights to climb tall ladders and walk on slippery rooftops. For years I had to force myself to visit high places and ascend cliffs to get over my fear enough to be able to function in my job. All of those elements were embodied in the dream tower: the high climb, the wobbly, immanent collapse, the chaotic lightning storms which represented fires, and the palpable hostility so reminiscent of the head office and its negative, military mentality.

It seems that everyone realizes that religions become evil when they demand absolute obedience from their members. It's a critical danger signal. But as a society we are in the process of granting absolute authority to the workplace. If you don't immediately obey the boss, you're fired. Why isn't this seen as being just as evil as religious conformity? My inner self recognized it for what it is, and projected it into the tower I was drawn back to night after night, which helped me to deal with it. The fear of not having a job is a primary source of adult insecurity. Why can't we try to mitigate the misery of life with secure employment? Everyone's psyche is delicate and deserving of consideration. There are plenty of unavoidable tragedies for us to process, so whenever we can we should make sure we don't create additional

difficulties for the dear, lithe sprites who have become embroiled in our world, maybe only by accident because they find tunnels attractive.

So there you have it. Since these are archetypal situations for the most part, perhaps you can recognize in your own dreams some similar elements. Or perhaps it's just fun to hear a few of the fancies our infinitely inventive minds cook up to teach us and help us get through the night. I'm more convinced than ever that a powerful force for problem solving and growth is hidden within our own minds and is busily instructing us through symbolism.

Sweet dreams!

Scott Teitsworth, 2004