



# Healing Dreams

by Tallulah Lyons

All dreams are part of a consciousness-expanding process that can lead the dreamer into a deep sense of meaning and an enlarged appreciation of life. The entire process of dream dialogue is a process through which the dreamer gradually comes to feel a sense of deep relationship with self and others, and with an underlying source of relationship and wholeness which Jung called the archetype of the Self. As the dreamer participates in ongoing dreamwork, corresponding positive physiological effects can be observed, especially enhancement of the immune system.

Sometimes, a single dream will stand out as feeling particularly healing. When any dream brings awareness of a shift in something that is very out of balance moving into a state of harmony and balance—this is a healing dream. When a dream brings a sense of connection, meaning, purpose—this is a healing dream. When a dream brings a sense of renewal or reconciliation—this is a healing dream. When a dream brings a sense of joy and peace—this is a healing dream.

Through many years of work with those facing cancer, I have

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identified five major types of healing dreams:

- ◆ dreams of numinous encounter
- ◆ dreams of resolution and renewal
- ◆ dreams of guidance
- ◆ dreams that arise from transformed nightmares
- ◆ dreams that remind us of past survival strategies.

## DREAMS OF NUMINOUS ENCOUNTER

In these dreams, the dreamer encounters a powerful presence which evokes a strong sense of healing. It may be a person, animal, or spirit—and sometimes it may be an object, like a flower or magic rock. The dreamer always experiences the “presence” as having a numinous quality—a quality that evokes awe, reverence, and wonder—a quality akin to holiness. Sometimes the experience evokes fear and trembling, such as when Moses encountered the burning bush. The encounter brings confrontation with intense energy, but always a sense of blessing—a sense of certainty that one is transformed. Carl Jung wrote that an encounter with the numinous was the essence of the healing experience (Jung 1973, 1:377). Research shows that a sense of awe and wonder, the hallmark of numinous encounter, has high correlation with enhancement of the immune system.

Example: Sandra, a breast cancer survivor, began to have panic attacks as the date for her surgery approached. A week before surgery, she had a numinous dream.

*Dream: I'm standing in a field, watching in awe as a magnificent white stallion gallops towards me. An aura of light surrounding him rivets my attention and as he stops before me, I understand that he wants me to climb on his back. It takes every ounce of effort I can give to pull myself up, but when I'm finally on, we gallop toward a narrow opening between two rocks. I feel I am totally at one with the horse as we speed through the passage way. On the other side, we're in a brightly lit meadow. I feel calm, assured, supported.*

In the following days before surgery, whenever she felt the beginnings of panic, Sandra re-entered her white stallion dream. Using all her senses, she relived her transformation from a state of panic into a state of support and calm. On the day of surgery, Sandra meditated with the sensations of herself on the horse—becoming calm, centered, supported. She imagined and lived into the experience of coming through the narrow rock passage to the bright meadow on the other side. Sandra feels that the dream and dream meditations have greatly contributed to her healing process.

## DREAMS OF RESOLUTION AND RENEWAL

There are dreams that bring about a sense of healing without the dramatic element of a numinous healing presence. Many dreams during illness or crisis evoke a sense of renewal, peace, calm, or strength just when the dreamer feels the most in need. It is as if the Self offers a balancing experience. Dreamers report waking up with a strong sense of restored balance, with a strong sense of alleviation or transcendence of conflict, or with the strong sense of survival of a difficult ordeal. They report movement away from fear into a sense of hope, movement away from isolation into a sense of connection and relationship.

Example: Agnes is undergoing her third round of treatment for ovarian cancer.

*Dream: I'm swimming underwater and I'm running out of air. I'm terrified. Just as I'm about to pass out, I put everything I have into one last upward breast stroke. I burst through to the surface, sucking in a saving breath of air. I know I've survived.*

This dream has become a focus for Agnes's meditations. She finds it particularly powerful when she's doing movement meditation such as in dance class and in water therapy. Each time she reenters the dream, she renews healing energy and reinforces her hope for survival.

## DREAMS OF GUIDANCE

When facing illness or crisis, when seeking a creative solution for any aspect of life, dreams point out the stuck places and give glimpses of the way through. Sometimes dreams offer highly specific comments on decisions about treatment options and life-style changes. Dreams always offer guidance concerning emotional and spiritual growth.

Example: When Barbara was told she needed radiation for her breast cancer, she was very apprehensive. Years before, her sister had been burned during a poorly administered treatment. Barbara decided to refuse treatment. Then she had the following dream.

*Dream: I'm walking down a dark alley. Suddenly a glowing man in a white coat is beside me. He looks at me, and I feel safe, understood, and loved. Softly he says, "You must stand in the light," and in the dream I know immediately that the radiation treatment will heal me.*

Barbara created a painting of the dream in the expressive arts class and looked at it before each radiation treatment. She often told others that she had found a mantra which she would repeat throughout her treatments, "I will stand in the light, I will stand in the light." As time passed, the dream and the mantra continued to yield new depths of meaning and resolve, particularly as she sought to deepen her spiritual life.

## DREAMS FROM TRANSFORMED NIGHTMARES

Healing dreams often arise as the culmination of long hard inner work. Frequently nightmares are the trigger for the focus of this inner work.

Example: Andrea was diagnosed with breast cancer and was treated with radiation before surgery. As her surgery date drew near, she had a series of nightmares about her father. Andrea worked with her nightmares at home and shared several of them with her dream group at the cancer center. Gradually she found support and courage to face her life-long feelings of frustration and rage in the relationship with her father. A few days before her surgery, she had a "healing dream" in which she was with her father and they were reaching out to one another for forgiveness. In the dream they embraced. Andrea reported that the sensations of that moment were "realer than real" and that she knew on waking that her whole past relationship with her father had changed.

That moment of forgiving embrace became the dream im-

agery that Andrea directed toward her long-festering father wound. Several times a day, she relaxed and re-entered the embrace with all of its sensations and emotions. She imagined directing the healing energy from the dream toward the place of her surgery. Doctors were amazed at how well Andrea responded during the surgery and how quickly the wound healed. Andrea credits the dream.

A year after the surgery, Andrea continues to re-enter the experience. She feels that today she has a totally new relationship with her father, who actually died six years ago. The transformation through dreamwork of a relationship with someone who has died is a very common phenomenon and is always a healing experience, an experience of reconciliation and renewal. Andrea feels that the process of integrating her healing dream through imagery has been a prime factor in her recovery. Her doctors agree.

## DREAMS OF PAST SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

In dream groups with cancer patients, we emphasize the importance of the feelings in a dream as contrasted to the feelings about a dream. This important principle is easy to forget when dreams take you back to past traumas. We have observed that there are often nightmares immediately following diagnosis that seem to be about previous traumas in the dreamer's life. These dreams usually emphasize not only fear and vulnerability but also the enduring strengths and coping mechanisms that brought the dreamer through the crisis. A situation that might seem nightmarish sometimes actually helps the dreamer to re-experience times of great personal resourcefulness.

Example: Years before diagnosis, a woman with ovarian cancer escaped from a fire by letting herself down from a balcony with sheets that she had tied together. It required extraordinary courage and strength. Since diagnosis, she has dreamed about her resourcefulness three times.

*Dream #1, shortly after diagnosis: I'm trapped in a wrecked car, terrified—then escaping, climbing down a steep embankment. I'm amazed at my strength and wake up feeling, "I can do this!"*

*Dream, #2, in the middle of chemo treatment: I'm caught in a burning building—then someone hands me a rope and I'm amazed I have the strength to climb down to safety. I wake up feeling, "I can do this!"*

*Dream #3, during a stressful decision time about moving to a new town with a different health care system: I'm caught between sheer cliffs and feel hopelessly trapped. Then I throw a rope around a rock and begin to pull myself up. I'm amazed at the feeling of my determination and strength.*

Dreamer's comment: It seems that when I'm feeling down and stuck, a dream comes to remind me of a strength that once saved my life that can now help me again and again. I'm learning I can be intentional about using this energy in guided imagery whenever I'm feeling helpless or stuck.

**OVER AND OVER AGAIN**, dreams bring healing experiences to those who are suffering. These dreams can become the content for ongoing meditation and guided imagery and can serve as powerful "medicine" each time the imagery is re-experienced.