



A Reflection on Night Terrors

by Darby Christopher

“If we knew why the gods did the things they do, we would be gods ourselves!”

—*Once On This Island*

For me, much of Carl Jung’s genius and contribution is that he made the ultimately logical and correct claim that if something shows up in our minds and inner world, it is just as real as something in the outer world, and therefore deserving of our curiosity, attention and scientific study. Jung speaks to this humorously in his introduction to the book *Man and His Symbols*, when he says “...the unconscious is at least on a level with the louse, which, after all, enjoys the honest interest of the entomologist.”

This article will shine a light on night terrors, and wonder how they might also be deserving of our consideration.

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As we begin to try to look at them, an obstacle is immediately thrown in the way. They are so super charged with energy, that getting close to them can feel dangerous, if not practically impossible. Should we refuse to focus attention on them? This solution would acknowledge they are there, but choose to not look too closely. There is some wisdom in this approach.

Yet, human curiosity and the desire to explore draws us to them. Taking Jung’s perspective, we see that night terrors are facts of nature, like other facts. As such, they have the potential to help us to know ourselves, and indeed to know life itself. If there is gold in the shadow, night terrors represent a huge shadow, and therefore may also hold a lot of gold.

If we choose not to ignore them, we then ask, what would this mean? How do we go about looking at them? We might begin by understanding what they are, and dispelling some of the myths that surround them. Proceeding with caution, going slowly, and looking at them with our peripheral vision might also help.

Night terrors are not the same thing as nightmares. Anyone who has had a night terror and can remember parts of the experience will tell you that, even though they may share some territory in common, experientially they are not anything alike.

Night terrors occur during NR3 sleep (non-REM stage 3, also called stage 4) in the early part of the evening or night. They typically occur within 30 to 90 minutes after falling asleep. Nightmares occur primarily during REM periods, often in the middle to later part of the night. NR3 sleep is characterized by slow delta brain waves, as opposed to the high frequency waves of REM sleep.

The person having a night terror acts out the experience physiologically often by opening their eyes, trembling, moving about, sometimes screaming or talking about their distress, and producing an amazingly fast heart rate, sometimes reaching over 200 beats per minute. Even though the person’s eyes are open, their pupils are dilated as if they were in the dark, and their experience is of being in the dark, even if there is a bright light on in the room.

One of the main and defining differences between nightmares and night terrors is also the content of the experience: Nightmares are based in and suffused with story. There is usually a sequence involved, and something frightening happens as part of the story. When this story is remembered, it can cause distress during the day as the experience of the dream is recalled. As we all know, nightmares can be a completely awful experience and generate a large amount of troubling fear.

Night terrors are unique in that they lack story and a sense of time. However, this is not to say that they lack context. Common scenarios include being chased by something sinister, or having to complete an impossible task.

What differentiates the night terror is the *experience* of these otherwise seemingly routine fears. The person having one “knows” experientially that meaninglessness and hopelessness is the ultimate reality. The usual ways that we construct meaning and hope are stripped away. This reality can also be a part of nightmares, yet it is much more raw and intense in night terrors.

Here is my attempt to describe it to someone who has never had the experience. Most of us have had at least one or

two mystical experiences wherein a sense of indescribable timelessness is present, along with a great warmth and knowledge or feeling that all is one; everything is connected to everything else. Night terrors contain the same feeling of eternal time, yet without the warmth or oneness. The person experiencing the night terror has the embodied experience of hopelessness, despair, and separateness that will never end.

If this sounds too terrible to imagine or contemplate—and it is—there is yet one redeeming factor. Often, the people, and especially children, who have the experience do not remember it later. For many people, once it is over, it is completely over. Often, in a split second, the terror gives way to absolute and total lack of fear, and sleep comes easily (unlike in nightmares). In these cases, care givers are sometimes traumatized by the event in a way the person having the experience is not.

One myth of night terrors is that they are never remembered. This is not true. What is surprising, however, is that, unlike nightmares, even the remembered experience often does not result in an ongoing problematic feeling of trauma or fear once the episode is over.

Somewhere between 1 to 6 percent of all people have experienced a night terror, including babies as young as 6 months old, children and adults. While this statistic indicates that most people have not had and will not have one, it also indicates that millions of people have them. The combined percentage of people who have had a similar experience, such as during a bad drug trip, or more rarely in a bad near death experience, is probably much higher.

So, fellow Jungians, what are we to make of this event that is part of nature? Why do our brains allow this to happen? Why do our psyches need this event to occur? In what way could it be considered a soulful event?

In the Broadway musical *Once On This Island*, Ti Moune—whose name means “saved by the gods for something special”—was spared from a terrible storm by landing in a tree. When she later asks her Mama what she was saved for, Mama replies that we aren’t supposed to know; answers like this belong to the realm of the gods. She accepts that answer as a child, but when she gets older she not only asks the question, she boldly challenges the gods to reveal their plan to her. Taking this story as a model, we do well to ask the questions—and maybe even get a little bit pushy with the gods—while also acknowledging the mother’s wisdom to not need to know too much.

After many years of being with a child who had night terrors, reading what little information is available on them, and writing a paper on them during my time at the Haden Institute’s Dream Group Leadership Training program, here are the questions around night terrors that have constellated for me.

Are they—according to scientist Doug Bennett’s model—a possibility that is held in the quantum field, that drops down into form? Why would this experience be held there, and why would it drop down? Is it unavoidable and even necessary as part of how we perceive the opposites of connection/meaning/warmth versus disconnection/meaninglessness/cold?

Do they help some of us—maybe those who particularly need it—to deal with and somehow integrate the innate terror of death that Ernest Becker talks about in his book *The Denial*

of Death? Would these particular people be less functional in daily life without their night terrors? Do they help humanity in general integrate death terror, with certain people “chosen” to take on the job?

Do they contain a message for the witnesses of the night terrors, as Jeremy Taylor has suggested? Are there traits in common for those individuals or families who experience them?

How have they shaped humanity’s understanding of what we have called “hell”?

Is it intellectually honest or fair to embrace our collective experience of “heaven” (e.g. timeless oneness and bliss) but not our collective experience of “hell?” (e.g. the opposite). Why, or why not?

We live in a world of time. Are we better off focusing our attention on the ways we experience temporality, and leave these “outlier” experiences to the realm of the gods?

I believe that our experiences of timelessness, both extremely positive and extremely negative, have much to offer us. However, the numinosity in them is too great to approach directly. They will be integrated far off in the future. Our attention may help to begin to bridge the gap of the opposites they represent.

Give it some thought ... but not too much thought.