

Somatic Dreams

by Jeanne M. Schul, Ph.D.

Are you a somatic dreamer? We all dream every night, but some of us have powerful body-based experiences that demand our immediate attention. Somatic dreams involve vivid physical sensations that rush through our bodies and shock us into an awareness of a highly significant psychic process at work within us. Those are the dreams that haunt us long after we awaken. These physical responses of the body in the dream state are experienced as inarguably real from within the dream, as well as upon awaking. When asked about this phenomenon, Jungian analyst, Barry Williams replied:

It really did just happen. Those are the dreams that we're drawn into deeply. The attempt of the dreamer upon waking is often to get away from that... but the point is that the dream had you. It was having you, as if it put you to sleep to have you. In those moments, you're completely enmeshed in the reality of that world, and it's hard to return or to move out into ordinary consciousness again, because the valiancy, the energy of the meaning of the dream is extremely strong at that point. It's really got you. It's hooked you. Those are special dreams. Those are the ones that leave trails behind them in your life and are to be paid attention to. (Schul-Elkins, 2005, p.32)

Body-based dream images leave us with profound somatic sensations that can be absolutely terrifying or highly pleasurable. What may start out as a seemingly simple dream can lead to profound intrapersonal revelations when the feelings and physical reactions to the dream are worked somatically. These dreams may draw attention to a physical symptom or issue of which we are not yet aware. By working with the area of the body that was depicted in the dream, the somatic movement therapist or body therapist can help the individual become more cognizant of what is changing and might need attention. Body therapy is defined by McNeely (1987) as “a process occurring between a person and a therapist who uses bodily focus and movement to achieve their mutual goal: the discovery of heretofore unrecognized aspects of the psyche” (p. 13). According to McNeely (1987), “the major prerequisite for training as a body therapist is to have had experience as a patient in body therapy, to overcome one’s own blocks and armors to feeling, and to know one’s own capabilities and limits” (p. 96). It is from this frame of reference—as a Registered Somatic Movement Therapist with a Ph.D. in Depth Psychology—that I take the risk of sharing my personal experiences of working a somatic dream with a somatic or body therapist.



Photo by Nicolas Bruno, *Sleep Paralysis* series

The Bloodsucker

When somatic nightmares have threatened my sense of well being, I have found a more physical approach to working with the embodied image to be extremely effective. Aizenstat (2009) recommends calling upon our allies: “When working with nightmares, going it alone is not a productive path. Instead we develop supportive relationships, both inside and outside of the dream” (p. 65).

On one occasion, I had a dreamtime encounter with an enormous bloodsucker. I awoke from the terrifying dream frantically brushing my right thigh with both hands, desperate to knock off the giant, prehistoric predecessor to the mosquito that was attached to my right thigh. My sense of panic was exacerbated by the fact that I could actually feel my right hand banging into the metal exoskeleton of the prehistoric beast as I anxiously brushed down my upper thigh. I could also feel its straw-like proboscis burrowing into my thigh muscles and sucking out my blood; but to my great despair, I could not get this thing off me no matter how hard I banged into the unyielding frame. This felt sense of being drained of my lifeblood awakened me in a state of complete panic. I dove out of bed and wrote down the dream. However, that was not enough. I needed to draw the beast in vivid colors as I surveyed it with my inner vision.

The dream image suddenly returned months later in a somatic session. The practitioner intuitively brushed my right thigh, sensing negative energy that needed to be removed. I was shocked to find myself re-experiencing the dream image burrowing into my thigh muscles. However, this time I had support. By verbalizing what came up for me with the therapist's touch, I was able to revisit the dream sensations. Then, as she scraped, I was able to remove the energy sucker once and for all. Her intense sweeping motion gave me the somatic sensation of being rid of this blood sucking, life-devouring creature. Sometime after this somatic session, I drew the beastly blood-sucker once again, but this time it was to rid myself of its pene-

Jeanne Schul, PhD, is our May speaker. See her bio on page 2.

trating proboscis and reclaim my lifeblood.

The psychic and physical experience of the somatic practitioner's hands scrapping off the predator enabled me to become aware of the intensity of the archetypal grip that this somatic dream had on me. McNeely (1987) explains this phenomenon by conceptualizing the body as a "point of contact with the unconscious," referring to the "somatic unconscious," through which she uncovers memories buried in the body through touch that were not accessible in analysis (pp. 26, 42). This somatics session took me beyond merely removing the terrifying sensations associated with the dream. I was able to look at the aspect of my life that was draining my lifeblood and realize that I felt as though I could not escape it. In this way, the dream and the somatic practitioner helped me look at my life with greater clarity and gave me validation for what I was feeling, but was deathly afraid to change.

Blood Sucking Archetypes

To associate with the dream image, the bloodsucker attached to my thigh was like a giant mosquito. A common mosquito is an annoying insect. Often, our first impulse is to swat at the irritating buzz. Its bite causes itching and inflammation. However, a tiny mosquito can carry serious diseases that can be debilitating, like malaria, dengue, and zika. Thus, a mammoth mosquito with a virtually indestructible metal exoskeleton is a very threatening adversary indeed!

Archetypally, blood is the life force; to be drained of blood is to have your life force drawn from you. To experience that lifeline being sucked away through a straw—which is the nature of the mosquito's proboscis—is horrifying, especially when that straw is buried deeply into your musculature.

Taking this image to the next archetypal level, vampires are the most infamous bloodsuckers in mythology. Unlike this specific dream image, vampires are often depicted as mysterious, as well as seductive, and their bite has been described as both "erotic and chillingly repugnant at the same time" (Ronnberg & Martin, Eds., 2010, p. 700). Like the simple mosquito, vampires feed between twilight and dawn; archetypally, this reflects the being's inability to face the light of consciousness. As a predator of the unconscious, the vampire in dreams represents an inner character that is potentially deadly or worse. The most horrifying aspect of the vampire is that it turns its victim into "one of the melancholy, exhausted or restless dead" (Ronnberg & Martin, Ed., 2010, p. 700). To be bitten by a vampire is to become one.

But where from here?

In an interview, I asked analyst Barry Williams where one goes with these somatic dreams. He answered: "When great dreams announce the journey you're undertaking, you need to have a guide, because it's an initiatory journey." (Schul-Elkins, 2005, p. 32). Williams recommended working with an analyst, but he also does shamanic work that has a somatic component. As he explained: "Initiation is an archetypal pattern that always requires a death through an ordeal and a rebirth of some sort" (Schul-Elkins, 2005, p. 32). Because initiation usually involves some form of physical testing, a somatic or body therapist can most effectively companion this process. Harris (1987) asserts: "I believe that the

integration of analysis and body therapy contributes to an ongoing universal process of uniting mind, body, and soul" (p. 107). Dealing with this initiatory death can be a grueling experience, as Williams points out: "It's hard to let go of an old pattern, an old identity, an old history, the old drama, the old story, the old way of being, or the old vocabulary" (Schul-Elkins, 2005, p. 32).

Powerful, archetypal dreams come to us with a purpose. They terrify us to get our attention; this is particularly true when we have a series of threatening dreams. Lyons (2002) offers: "A nightmare is an urgent call from the inner world to wake up to an impending emotional-spiritual dilemma—to wake up and to become more consciously whole" (p. 11). Many people, however, are so horrified by "bad dreams" that they want nothing to do with them. As Lyons explains, "Nightmares spotlight a crisis of fragmentation and thrust us into the midst of the upheaval" (p. 11). Many do not feel they have the strength within themselves to look more deeply into the message they are receiving. It is easier to just deny the significance of the terrifying dream. However, Lyons tells us that "a basic principle of dream work is that we will not remember a nightmare until we have both the energy and resources to deal with it" (p. 11).

Taylor (1992) addresses the issue of the nightmare's potential as well as its disturbing aspect: "it requires psychological clarity of heroic proportions to see past the upsetting emotions of the 'nightmare'... in order to see the gift that is literally being thrust in the dreamer's face" (p. 34). This frame of reference of the nightmare coming in service of the dreamer focuses on the necessary ability to recognize the positive in the shadow material: "How many of us have had equally gripping 'nightmares,' but failed to see the healing and creative possibilities that the dream was thrusting at us?" (p. 34).

Our somatic dreams are offering us guidance along the path of becoming more fully who we are capable of being. It is of primary importance not to allow anyone to demean our dreams and divert us from unfolding into our true selves. Surround ourselves with a support team is a healthy choice, whether that includes loved ones, somatic body therapists, and/or dream analysts. By honoring our dreams, we also honor our own psyches and somas, which thereby acknowledges the wisdom of our souls.

References:

- Aizenstat, S. (2009). *Dream Tending*. New Orleans, LA: Spring Journal.
- Harris, J. (2001). *Jung and Yoga: The Psyche-body Connection*. Toronto: Inner City Books.
- McNeely, D. A. (1987). *Touching: Body Therapy and Depth Psychology*. Toronto, Canada: Inner City Books.
- Lyons, T. (2002). *Dream Prayers*. Smyrna, GA: Tallulah Lyons.
- Ronnberg, A. & Martin, K. (Eds.) (2010). *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images*. Cologne, Germany: Taschen.
- Schul-Elkins, J. (2005). Frequently asked questions about dreams: An interview with Jungian analyst, Barry Williams. *Dream Network Journal*, 24(2), 21-23; 32-33.
- Taylor, J. (1992). *Where People Fly and Water Runs Uphill*. : Warner Books.