

Writing In the Dark

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"Who's got a dream?" I asked.

The dozen dreamers on weekend retreat looked slowly around the circle. For a full minute the only sound was the cheerful popping and crackling of the fire. Thin February sunlight danced through the blinds and shimmered in abstract stripes across Steve's chest. Gradually a dozen gazes rested on him.

Steve cleared his throat. "I had a dream about bricks."

"Will you tell us the dream?" I asked. "Tell it in the present tense, as if it is happening to you right now."

"I dreamed I was standing in front of---"

"I *am* standing in front of---" I coached.

"---I *am* standing in front of some bricks. There are lots of them. Two men tell me to buy the bricks. I buy them, but I don't know what I'll build. Either a house or a wall. Then I see some cleared ground and I know that's where I'll build. There were some other details, but they don't seem as important."

"What's your best guess about how this dream relates to your life today?" I asked.

Steve frowned in concentration. "I don't know if this is right, but.... my wife died almost four years ago. I wonder if this dream is telling me that I'm ready to come out from behind my wall and begin building a new life for myself - or that I'm doomed to stay isolated and lonely."

Why Dreamwork?

Every night when you go to sleep, you script and direct a movie starring yourself. You create the sets, design the costumes, order in the props. You play every character. Your own life dramas are acted out on the stage of your psyche. You are the only audience. Each performance is startling in its freshness and creativity.

"Dreams are like letters baked into pies," says Jungian analyst Clarissa Pinkola Estes. They are answers to questions we haven't yet thought to ask. Dreams are like carved ivory Chinese balls that contain increasingly smaller and more intricately carved balls within them.

Dreams offer us glimpses into the inner workings of our own minds and hearts. They lift the veil between the worlds and drop a drawbridge. When you approach them with reverence and curiosity, your dreams will reward you by offering a map of your psyche and soul.

Journal work and dream work are natural allies. Just about every program of dream study recommends capturing your dreams in writing. From there you can process your dreams using a wide variety of journal techniques and devices.

Dreamwork lets you practice your intuition. When you encounter a truth, there is an unmistakable sensation of knowing. Your skin may tingle, you may gasp sharply, a cartoon lightbulb might explode above you, you may feel zapped with a rush of energy. Dreamwork expert Jeremy Taylor calls this sensation the "aha of recognition" and attributes it to memory. Taylor writes:

When you discover some true thing about a dream, you are likely to experience the aha of recognition because in that moment, you *remember*, consciously for the first time, what you *already knew*

unconsciously the dream meant at the time it occurred.... The aha of recognition.... is the only reliable touchstone of dream work. (From *Where People Fly and Water Runs Uphill*, Warner Books).

Befriending Your Dreamkeeper

Dreams love to be noticed. The good news about this is that even if you don't remember your dreams now, you'll probably start remembering them once you pledge your attention to them.

Pay attention to dreams the same way you pay attention to friends knocking at your door: Invite them in. Ask them about themselves, and listen with interest when they answer. Offer your own ideas and opinions. Express appreciation for little gifts.

Invite your dreams to visit you by writing a note in your journal to the Dreamkeeper just before retiring. "Dear Dreamkeeper," you might say. "Tonight I'd like a dream that I can remember and write down. I promise that I'll pay attention to it. Thanks!"

You can get as specific as you want in your request, asking for guidance and clarity about any number of life issues. Dreamkeepers are mighty obliging!

A week or so before I taught the dream journal workshop where Steve told his brick dream, I asked my Dreamkeeper for a dream that I could use as an opening story. That night I received a dream in which an old friend was pregnant. With her was her son, who in the dream was about seven years younger than he was in real life.

I awoke from this dream with a question: *What idea was I gestating about seven years ago that is now ready to be born?*

How was I going to make a story out of this dream? I didn't know.

Two nights before the workshop, I again asked my Dreamkeeper: "Tonight I request a dream that will help me turn the first dream into an opening story. Thanks. Over and out!" The next morning I awoke from a dream in which my father had a heart attack.

There's a tendency to become alarmed when illness or death comes in a dream. But dreams containing scenes of accidents, heart attacks, sudden illnesses or even death aren't usually literal warnings. Like almost everything in the dream world, they are symbols and coded messages. So I gratefully accepted the *symbol* of my father's heart attack as an answer to my request. Now I had an exact date to work with - the date of my father's mild heart attack seven years earlier!

Within minutes I had uncovered the associations. When my father had his heart attack, I had just returned from teaching journal workshops in Arizona. At my Tucson workshop was a man who had recorded more than 5,000 dreams! He had three or four dreams a night and catalogued them meticulously. However, he had no idea how to interpret them. The class was so fascinated at his questions about dreams that I spontaneously added an extra session specifically on working with dreams in the journal. It was the first time I had formally taught ways to use the journal to crack the code of dreams.

So the question from my first dream, *What idea was I gestating about seven years ago that is now ready to be born?* was answered: Self-interpretation of dreams through journal writing. The opening tale for my workshop was the story of how my Dreamkeeper obligingly led me down narrow cobblestone dream-streets to present me with my dream journal origins.

Writing in the Dark

After you have invoked a dream, fall asleep with a sense of anticipation and receptivity. Then prepare yourself to record a dream, and plan some processing time into your day. Here are some suggestions for dream recall and journal work. For more information on the writing techniques suggested, see my books

Journal to the Self, The Way of the Journal or The Write Way to Wellness.

1. Capture your dream as soon as you awaken. Keep your notebook and pen or a tape recorder right by the bed. Don't move around if you can help it; movement seems to make your dreams leak right out of your brain. If you can't remember every scene or part of the action, just get down what you can. There seems to be a natural dream-editor in the psyche that deliberately leaves some scenes on the cutting room floor. Don't worry about them. They'll be back if they carry messages you need to receive.

2. Write your dream in the present tense. This adds immediacy and puts you back in the action. Start by describing the opening scene. How does the dream open? Who's in the scene? What's going on? Replay the dream like a video. Follow the action. What is the mood of the dream? Are there any odd or interesting symbols that don't seem to relate to anything? Often the seemingly "throw-away" symbols or details hold the secret to cracking the code. Follow the dream until it shifts or ends. When you're finished, give the dream a name. Keep a separate lists of dream names; themes may jump out at you.

3. Take your "best guess" about the dream by writing quickly and continuously for a predetermined, brief period of time. A *Ten-Minute Sprint* on the question, "How does this dream speak to my current question or situation?" This first fast sketch will not address the dream's subtle layers of meaning, any more than an artist's first sketch will reveal the nuances of tone, detail and perspective found in the finished painting. But a quick write will give voice and shape to your first intuitive understanding of the dream.

4. The Clustering technique (visual free-association around a central word or phrase, with lines and circles connecting key thoughts and associations to the core) is an excellent device to find out what individual dream symbols or characters might represent.

5. Write a Dialogue (an imaginary conversation in which you write both parts) with dream symbols or characters. Give them voice and find out what they have to say for themselves.

5. Write a Captured Moment of a scene from the dream, focusing on sensory details.

6. Write in first-person ("I") voice from the *Perspective* of a dream character, symbol or scene.

7. Represent the dream in art through collage, paint, drawing or sculpture.

8. Write a poem about your dream. Focus on the images and feelings, and let the inner meaning emerge organically. Try an *AlphaPoem* by writing the name of a dream symbol or theme vertically down the side of the page, then writing a poem in which each successive line begins with the next letter. Steve's journal dreamwork led him to an awareness of the invitation to accept beauty into his life - the beauty of new love, the beauty of new beginnings. He ended his exploration with an AlphaPoem on beauty:

Build it and she will come, whatever and whoever "she" may be.

End the planning and replanning hesitation. Build it

And she will come, the right one for whatever you choose to build.

unbuilt-upon ground yields nothing. Build, and your right "she" will come

To

You.

Excerpted from [Mightier Than the Sword: The Journal as a Path for Men's Self-Discovery](#), (c) 1994 Kathleen Adams, Warner Books.

