

Are There Dreaming Talents?



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My column is written with the intent of broadening our understanding of dreams and dreaming and expanding the field of dream studies. Topics I've selected over the years draw upon empirical observation, research findings, and clinical experience. This particular column, by contrast, is speculative. I want to propose for consideration the notion that within our human capacity for dreaming, there may be a variety of dream talents, just as there are talents within other human capabilities—such as language learning, athletic skills, artistic ability. Interpreting dreams is also an area in which people's level of talent varies, but that is a separate topic, and I want to focus here on dreaming talent.

That individuals may have a signature style of dreaming is fairly well recognized, and members of long-term dream groups can often name which person has long narrative sagas with lots of action, who has sensory dreams replete with physical detail, who has the epic story akin to a fairy tale or myth, and who has the dream that is layered with images like a collage. Not that every dream each person has is in their singular style, but simply that there is a tone or tenor that characterizes their dreams.

That dreams do have a given shape is well described in psychiatrist Iago Galdston's 1952 article, "Dream Morphology," in which he identifies four basic categories: the consistent story; the montage or episodic dream; the meander dream with several linked scenes; and the amorphous dream. He is referring to the *gestalt* of a dream, and suggests that dreamers have their own pattern of "dreamaturgy," a term I think deserves more press.

What I have in mind, however, goes beyond a style of dreaming. Talent refers to an ability that is recognizable by others because it stands out. The dictionary defines "talent" as a gift, ability, capacity, genius, or endowment. When we say a person is "talented," it is meant as

a compliment, indicating that something they do surpasses the median level thereof. I may be able to carry a tune and enjoy singing, but my voice does not and will never have the depth and range of Roy Orbison's or Yma Sumac's. Their talents were natural ones that manifested early in life and were easily recognized.

Applying this notion of "talent" to our dreaming capacity is an idea that has been germinating in my mind for a long time. It stems in part from observing the striking patterns of dreams among members of my dream groups: one person has a talent for having big dreams of collective significance; another has dreams highly relevant to family and kinship relations; several receive guidance regarding their creative endeavors.

It also stems from reading accounts in the now-vast literature on dreams about the many types that have been recognized and valued by societies throughout history: dreams that were political, religious, artistic, prophetic, divinatory. Lee Irwin's wonderful article "Native American Dreaming" (DreamTime 2002), describes eight different types of dreams recognized within Iroquois society. Presumably there have been individuals gifted at having one type or another, and known for this talent.

Deirdre Barrett's excellent book, *The Committee of Sleep*, offers myriad examples of dreams that contributed to the talents of those they came to. Biologists Margie Profet and Louis Agassiz and physiologist Otto Loewi each had dreams that provided answers to scientific puzzles on which they were stumped. Musicians as different as Tartini and Billy Joel credit dreams as influencing their compositions. Poets and writers Robert Louis Stevenson, William Butler Yeats and Maude Meagher relied on dreams not only for inspiration but for specific pieces of work.

I am acquainted with a woman whose dreaming

talent lies in an unusual realm: she is able to incubate dreams for others. She does not advertise but through word of mouth accepts clients whose own dreaming ability is perhaps temporarily blocked. For the 1996 ASD conference I put together a panel of colleagues whose dreams, along with my own, shed light on the background of illnesses we'd each suffered for an extended period; they gave meaning to the symptoms so that their presence could be woven into our life story rather than viewed as merely troubles to be overcome. Just before the conference, I dreamed in words that for each of us, the individuation process went through the body. I hadn't conceptualized our presentation in this way, and was grateful to be able to incorporate this formulation. Perhaps one might say that some people have a talent for dreaming about the psyche-soma connection.

The word "talent" was once a unit of money or weight, prevalent throughout the ancient Middle East, Greece, and Rome. It differed in valuation by time and place, but typically was a significant amount. The Biblical parable of the talents in Matthew 25 refers to talents being given to individuals according to their ability; those who used them well were rewarded further.

We live in a culture that holds dreams and dreaming in little or no esteem; those whose gift is in this realm may feel that it is more a burden or curse. Recently, a young woman from Los Angeles called me for advice because her sleep is regularly disturbed by precognitive dreams about disasters that subsequently occurred in distant parts of the globe. I mentioned that Jung himself had been plagued by precognitive dreams and visions prior to World War I, which he too feared, and I suggested she read his account of this in his memoirs. I referred her to the LA Jung Institute clinic in the hope that a therapist there would take her talent seriously while also exploring its possible origin in some rupture in her early holding environment. That trauma, if healed, could narrow her receptive channel to a more modest range, so that her talent might then function as one she could "expend" appropriately.

Chitra Divakaruni's novel, *Queen of Dreams*, features a main character, Neehar, whose talent as a "dream teller" was noticed when she was very young. A council of elders took this orphaned girl into training, along with similarly gifted young women, giving them lessons in how to perceive not only the dreams of the living but also the interrupted dreams of the departed, in order to "examine the patterns of these old dreams and

determine their effects on the city's future" (p. 166.) The elders, familiar with the potency of this talent, offered guidelines for how and when to employ it. The novel's tension centers around Neehar's refusal to submit to their wise counsel: she reads and interprets people's dreams whether they wish it or not; rather than take monastic vows, she goes back into ordinary life, marries and has a child. These violations of the gift bring about serious disruption not only for herself, her husband and child, but also for those whose dreams she reads. The novel is an eloquent depiction of what happens when a visionary gift is not held within a sacred framework where it can be developed and used with integrity. I include this fictionalized example from a culture very different from our own because it describes a type of dreaming talent known there.

It may be that the mere capacity to have dreams and understand their symbolic language and applications is, by itself, a talent. I once dreamed that if this were a tribal culture, my job would be that of "dreamer." Though I am not especially talented at having dreams for others or perceiving the unfulfilled dreams of the departed, I am unquestionably a dreamer and track dreams better than I track other strands of life. If someone returns to see me for dream consultation after, say, a year or two, I am more likely to recall the flavor and general tone of their dreams than I am to recall which town they live in and whether or not they have children.

In conclusion, my proposal is that dreaming is a talent, if not a job description in some cultures; and within that general talent, there are individuals talented at having certain types of dreams more often than they have other types and more often than such dreams come to other people. This notion is still in a formative stage, and I welcome your comments on it as well as examples of dream talents you have yourself or have observed.

