



Finding Our Way in the Dark

Dream researchers say that a true *nightmare* comes from deep REM sleep, out of which one awakens to a frightening dream one cannot forget. In a *night terror*, by contrast, one is highly aroused, but doesn't wake up. Even if one sleepwalks in the midst of the enormous autonomic arousal, one has no memory of it later. And a *bad dream* from which one doesn't wake is just that.

Yet we commonly think of all three of these as nightmares. I find myself drawn to a different classification. In my analytic practice, I have encountered three different kinds of what I will call nightmare, each of which I believe calls for a very different kind of interpretation.

Two Dreams from *Vertigo*

I will illustrate these types of "nightmare" with some relevant dream sequences from the movies. My first cinematic example is from *Vertigo*. It comes just after the titles, which are superimposed on a woman's face. Her eyes flicker nervously right and left, suggesting the rapid eye movement (REM) researchers had just discovered not long before *Vertigo* was made. The opening

sequence of the film that follows is, I believe, a dream. Scottie, a plainclothes detective played by Jimmy Stewart, is reliving the trauma he suffered while chasing a criminal across a series of rooftops in company with a uniformed policeman. Scottie loses his footing. With impossible precariousness, he clings to a rain gutter as the policeman tries to rescue him by extending his hand. Suddenly gripped by vertigo, Scottie doesn't reach out to take this helping hand quickly enough, and the policeman loses his balance and plunges to his death. Scottie is left alone, clinging to the gutter, looking with terror down at the drop below.

Most audiences are so wrenched by this sequence they would readily agree that it is a nightmare. Certainly it cannot be reality, for there is no way out of the situation in which Scottie ends up—and yet we see him mostly recovered in the next scene, having sustained only a relatively incapacitating injury. If one were to take this as the dream of an actual person at Scottie's stage of life—most likely the middle 40s—what would it mean?

The great Hitchcock film critic Robin Wood has seen in the chase sequence a classic depiction of a Freudian scenario

involving the personified Id (the dark-skinned younger criminal), Ego (the plainclothes detective, Scottie), and Superego (the uniformed older policeman).¹ In what Jung calls the first half of life, a Freudian model like that works reasonably well to explain the conflicts that occur: it corresponds to the inner picture of a man's psyche in which you basically have three male figures and no female figure. For such a man, everything takes place on the sublimated, horizontal level of trying to accomplish the goals of early maturity. The struggle for most of us at that stage is to stay on top of the shadow so that we can be as effective as possible in the world and keep out of trouble. In that effort, our inner cop, the superego, is a great deal of help.

But as we get into the second half of life, many of us find that what happens in Scottie's dream happens to us. We get less interested in what the superego has to offer us, and eventually the superego drops out as the organizer of our life and experience. We simply get tired of having our lives run by what we should be doing; shame and guilt no longer serve as reliable guides to us. At that point,

wary of always trying to be better than we are to stay on top of our game, we have to fall back upon the resources of the self.

For some people, as for Scottie, this transition from the first half to the second half of life is an absolute catastrophe, because nothing in their psychological education has prepared them for it. So, as Scottie looks down from the height of his profession, the ground of his being looks pretty bleak, since, using Jung's terminology, there is absolutely nothing to mediate the transition from ego to self. This would be enough to trigger a midlife nightmare. All someone like Scottie, who is ego-identified, can see ahead is a precipitous falling off of his powers, and a drop down to the finality of his death.

For those who know Jungian psychology well, it is axiomatic that sooner or later the ego's struggle with the shadow has to end in a loss: the shadow gets away and we never succeed in finally controlling our unconscious enough to realize all our goals. At midlife the myth of mastery has to give way to allow another archetype to come in, one that serves the instinct for reflection and allows a connection to the self to ensue. That archetype is the anima, and increasingly Jungian psychology is saying that she also mediates the experience for the woman. *Anima* is the Latin name for soul.

From a Jungian point of view, that there is no female figure in this dream means that there is no mediatrix to the self to cushion Scottie's existential anxiety in the move from horizontal mastery to a vertical confrontation with the

ground of his being. At this moment of entry into the second half of life, that ground seems only like the hard stony floor on which his existence is going to founder. His vertigo expresses his terror at that prospect.

Later in the film, however, with that same famous combination of zoom and tracking shot with which Hitchcock

played with appropriately mysterious identity by Kim Novak. In the movie, Scottie has supposedly been hired by Madeleine's husband to follow her, but as Jimmy Stewart starts to follow Kim Novak the actors move beyond the characters they are personifying into an engagement so private they seem to be enacting Jung's famous title, *Modern*

Man in Search of a Soul.

But, just as the shadow figure gets away in the opening sequence, so too does the anima in the course of the film. Madeleine apparently kills herself.

For Scottie, Madeleine's death is a profound soul loss. In his guilt and disorientation, Scottie falls into melancholia and has to be hospitalized. Hitchcock brilliantly renders the prelude to this state of mute depression by leading Scottie through a second nightmare. This time, various colors flash across his sleeping face. Then Madeleine's flower, rendered schematically in cartoon form, starts to disintegrate, and he sees Madeleine's husband smiling at him from a sinister embrace with a woman dressed like Madeleine's great-grandmother, a woman who had committed suicide a hundred years

before. Finally, Scottie enters a cemetery garden, and begins to fall interminably into this ancestress's open grave until at last he awakes in terror.

From its content, this sequence would seem to continue the first, post-traumatic dream of hanging precariously on the San Francisco rooftop into the actual drop to a ruinous death. The music that accompanies it at the beginning is even the same. We cannot but notice,



Kim Birdsong, Collage II, 11" x 14".

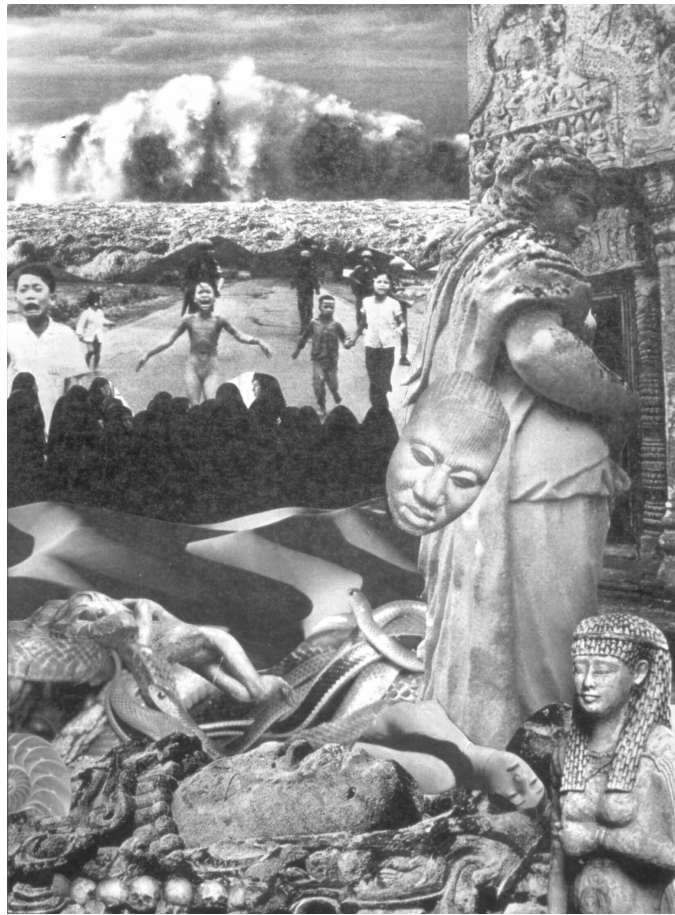
conveys the vertiginous sensation of the ground seeming both closer and farther at the same time, the disorientation of the ego's perspective is accompanied by an uncanny revelation of the self. When Scottie, again in a chase sequence, looks down into the stairwell he is climbing in the bell tower of the Mission of San Juan Bautista, the vertiginous perspective unfolding below him reveals a deep-focused four-cornered engram of the self. At this point in the film, there is an anima figure in his life, Madeleine,

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however, the markedly different visual style with which the second dream is presented to us. The corsage bouquet that disintegrates is a cartoon. If we had not already seen the extraordinarily realism Hitchcock is able to bring to the depiction of a dream, one would assume that the director was limited in his representational resources and felt pushed to rely on the device of a cartoon image to suggest the dreaming mind. But Hitchcock is “the supreme technician of the American Cinema.”²² If he gives us a cartoon image instead of a more realistic one, we have to ask why. In context, the schematic representation seems to mirror Scottie’s depersonalization, and the coming apart of the image, his psychotic state. And, because the grave that Scottie looks at is one he had seen Madeleine visit, where her great-grandmother lay buried, there is the suggestion that, like Madeleine, he has become madly obsessed with a romantic suicide. But *the grave is empty*, and still haunting us is the fact that the great-grandmother’s disintegrating bouquet is a cartoon image.

Is this derealized image merely a signifier of the deconstruction of consciousness that is madness? Earlier in the movie, Scottie had watched Madeleine sitting in front of a portrait of her great-grandmother, who in the painting is holding a nosegay of red and white flowers similar to the one Madeleine holds. Later, Ophelia-like, Madeleine had undone her bouquet and strewn the flowers into the Bay, just before jumping in herself in a trance-like state. The image is therefore associated with the loss of a soul, but we have to come back to the fact that it is a *cartoon* image that

disintegrates. The emotional effect is not the same as in the first of Scottie’s two nightmares, in which he is led to an all-too-terrifying reality. There we were looking, I believe, at a genuine developmental impasse, and the heightened naturalism of the dream style underscored the emotional impression that the dilemma that Scottie was facing was *real*. Here he is being terrified by what is rather obviously a *fantasy*. Watching the second dream,



Kim Birdsong, Collage III, 11" x 14".

the notion of phony or fake starts passing through one’s mind.

Though Hitchcock appears to be asking us to believe that the cynicism engraved in the cartoon image is merely a symptom of loss, the disappointing schematic image serves as the tipoff to the cheap scheme behind it, and represents Scottie’s unconscious intuition of “the possibility that the whole Madeleine ideal is a fraud.”²³

This second nightmare inaugurates the extraordinary last third of *Vertigo*, in

which Scottie is indeed to discover that “Madeleine” is an impostor hired by the husband to cover the murder of his wife. The hired double is supposed to intrigue Scottie into following her up the bell tower, so that he would “witness” her suicide (counting upon his vertigo preventing him from making it all the way to the top, so that he wouldn’t see the husband throwing down the corpse of the real wife). From Scottie’s subjective standpoint, the transaction that stirred the depths of his anima has been little more than an erotic swindle.

I believe the dream connoisseur can learn to experience the difference between upsetting imagery that points to a real existential problem—the developmental demand to transition from one stage of life to another, whether or not we are ready—and the more suspectly terrifying images that point to the possibility that we have been self-deceived in what we have taken for reality. It would appear that whatever it is that addresses us in dreams is just as ruthless in deconstructing the fictions by which we live as it is in tallying the toll of our individuation. These two ways the dream state takes to register alarm, though equally upsetting to us, seem to be very different.

Clinical Examples: Stage-of-Life Challenge Dreams

I have seen these two kinds of nightmare over and over in my practice as a Jungian analyst. The first kind comes when someone is confronted with something they have to do that they feel unprepared for. The challenge of the next developmental stage, whatever it may be; of the next relationship; or the next thing in life that really has to be met, except that one does not have a clue *how*, is the source, I think, of the terror.

The second kind of nightmare is apt to appear when a patient has been proceeding in the assumption that things are a

certain way, but they are not that way. Suddenly the way they really are surfaces in a dream. Or, more precisely, a dream exposes the fictitious quality of the way we thought they were.

Let me bring in some clinical material. An analytic patient would occasionally report variations on a recurrent nightmare that had begun when the patient was a young child. The dream would always be set in the patient's childhood home. In it, the patient was always trying, rather desperately, to keep a tall, dark-haired man from getting into the house. The dreamer rushed around trying to lock all the doors and windows, which seemed to be innumerable, and also, even if the man could not get in, he could look in at the dreamer through the many windows and glass doors, and this seemed nearly as bad.

The nightmares contained no obvious information as to the stranger's agenda, and the stranger, or "bad man," as he was named when the dreamer was a child, exhibited no overtly threatening behavior. Simply *he wanted to get in*, and the dreamer felt that once the stranger did get in, he would do whatever he pleased with no regard for household rules or for anyone else's feelings. This was certainly not the sort of guest the dreamer's parents would approve of! At midlife however, in analysis, the dream took a slightly different form:

I was housesitting in my childhood home while my parents were away travelling. They had left three dogs, which I had to take care of, but I had become so unaccustomed to dogs that I barely knew even to let them out. Finally I did open the door for them, and the two younger dogs ran out into the snow. The older dog, white with a few brown spots, hesitated, and I thought she was too old to go out, but when I almost closed the door again, she nosed it back open, looked out into the snow and spoke a single syllable which I took to be the dog word for *snow*. I resolved to remember this word and repeat it to my parents when they returned, to see if they had

heard it too. After that I went out into the yard myself. It was twilight, but the weather was no longer cold or snowy. I looked around and said to myself: "The minute they die [meaning my parents] I must sell this place." It was a realization in the dream that I no longer had any personal need to hold onto that house. It was only a burden to me. No sooner had I thought this than a big, bear-like man appeared in the yard. I tried to lock the kitchen door, but for some reason it would not stay locked, so in desperation I put it on the chain. The man came to the door, and I opened it a little. He looked as if he could reach in and break the chain with his bare hands, or I thought he might pull a wire cutter out of his pocket and cut the chain. He said that my mother had promised him one of the puppies of the dog. I did not know what to do, if he meant one of the younger dogs, or a puppy from a litter not yet born, or if his story was a lie. There was no way I could reach my parents to ask about it. On waking I saw that the dream was in the pattern of the recurring nightmare of my childhood, but this was the first time the stranger had ever spoken to me. This time my conscious thought on waking was, "Oh, for heaven's sake, why not let the man in the house? Is it really worth the ongoing Herculean effort to keep him out when there is no hard evidence that he intends to do harm? Why not take a chance?"

If you actually knew the person who had this dream and had the chance to work with him in psychotherapy, there are certain things you would find out over time that would not be obvious at first. One of these is the *psychological orientation* of this particular dreamer. I have found that one of the ways to find my way in the dark of someone else's nightmare is to make careful use of Jung's theory of psychological types, which enables me to relate what is going on in the dream to the conscious orientation of the dreamer. Now this dreamer is

one whose tendency is to use what Jung calls introverted sensation as his superior function, and extraverted feeling as his secondary function. (Those who use the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator would call a person with this orientation ISFJ.) This introverted sensation type is characteristically someone who is very precise, clean, tidy, and orderly, and his extraverted feeling makes him careful of the feelings of other people. He was programmed, in fact, to be the model child, someone anyone would love to have grow up in one's house. The toys got put away; mother's needs were heeded, and father's too. But to achieve this adaptation to his parents, what had the person been warding off in himself? That is the question I think that is posed by his recurrent dream.

Who is the shadow figure, the bear-like man who wants what he wants when he wants it, and keeps wanting to get in? In what sense is he the kind of person that would have been unwelcome in the dreamer's house, that is, his usual state of self? From the standpoint of psychological type, it would be someone whose leading functions go in the opposite direction from the dreamer's, that is, someone with *extraverted* sensation and *introverted* feeling. The extraverted sensation type would be someone who likes to move his body around, make noise, perhaps make a mess; and his introverted feeling would make him behave like someone who does what *he* wants even if it is not what his parents want.

Such a personality was clearly unacceptable to the dreamer in the first half of life, but in midlife, a time when all the things that one has left out in the first half tend to come up, the shadow aspects of the usually-preferred functions of consciousness are pressing for integration. From the evidence of the recent dream, they want to come in very badly, and this dreamer is also in my opinion ready to welcome them in.

Although the prospect of the man coming in makes this recurrent bad

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dream almost into a nightmare, even the dog, the extraverted-feeling animal, can see that there is snow on the ground of the childhood world, and can say so. That the childhood home is in its winter means, I think, that the first half of life has come to the end of its cycle. The dreamer himself looks around and sees that it is twilight, and thinks “the minute [my parents] die, I have to sell this place.” In other words, the time of pleasing his parents is coming to an end. The important thing for him, at this midlife juncture, is the opportunity to achieve a more rounded personality by welcoming in the parts of himself he sacrificed earlier through his ability to adapt. Unlike Scottie, this dreamer is prepared to accept his individuation.

On the other hand, just because one is individuating, creative, and able to accept the shadow and inferior functions and the other parts of the self that come up at midlife according to the program of Jungian analysis is no guarantee that one will not be assailed by doubts and fears in the middle of the night. I have such a woman in my practice, also an introverted-sensation, extraverted-feeling type, who after many years of analysis seems to me to be individuating like gangbusters. Her intuition is coming up all over the place, and is showing in creative work in the form of imaginative storytelling for children, where absolutely wonderful things are happening. With superior sensation, her first-half-of-life personality was known for its practical ability to keep track (she was called at work, for instance, “the person who never lost anything”). I knew that she was individuating when, not long ago, she forgot an appointment!

At a recent session she brought her husband, who said that he really needed to come that day. (I occasionally allowed him to accompany her when there was a problem at home, and this seemed to work. I had received permission from his analyst to see the couple together in such situations.) He reported that he was

worried that his wife had a sleep disorder.

“My wife will awake very anxious, saying, ‘I have forgotten, I have forgotten.’ She will sit up and say, ‘Stop that, stop moving that! Where are they going?’ And I say, ‘My dear, you are dreaming.’ And she says, ‘Are you sure?’ And she says, ‘OK!’ and goes back to sleep. But then I hear, ‘Oh, I am sure I have forgotten something and I am going to die.’ I say, ‘I don’t think you have forgotten something and I am sure you are not going to die.’ I hear her scream so terrifying and horrifying, it just seems like it is going to break the universe apart, and she will appear running from the center of the living room, flailing her arms, and will want to confirm who I am. If I am up late at night, writing, she will hotfoot into the kitchen and stand reading the labels on the medications that are kept on a shelf there, saying, ‘You hoodwinked me, I must be crazy, I feel like I have forgotten something, I don’t know what it is.’ The last time she leapt over things and around stuff, her heart racing, and I feared that she would have a heart attack.”

I asked the wife about all this, and she said, “Well, I have always had terrifying nightmares, black shadows, or hands in dark shapes. My feeling then is that bed is a dangerous place and I need to get out.”

This is a very creative woman, a writer of fantasy work who lives fairly close to the unconscious. It is said that people who suffer nightmares have “thin boundaries,” but this woman has a true openness to experience. I am not so worried about her mental health. What I think is happening is that her development has gone almost too well. This woman has, as a result of a long Jungian analysis, integrated quite a lot of her inferior extraverted intuition. She has become unusually open to new possibilities, but this takes its toll on her psyche. It is as if someone really has moved things around. Individuation is not entirely benign, and this night terror registers how hard it has been. Having to grow up is a regular nightmare, not just in infancy or adolescence, but even at midlife.

Clinical Example: A Dream Exposing the Shadow

Now I want to turn to a clinical example of a nightmare that warns you, not about the challenge of the next growth stage, but, like the second *Vertigo* dream, about a danger coming from outside yourself that you have probably underestimated.

Recently I heard the dream of a single gay man. At midlife, he has never achieved what he would call a true life-partnership. In the course of his analysis, he has begun to look more deeply at the problem of intimacy. Recently, he found himself in conversation on a plane with a man about his age. Like my patient, the other man seemed intelligent, emotionally mature, and financially independent. He had recently finished a research study, and said he would send a copy to my patient. The patient came to the next session, saying, “I think I am falling in love.” A few days later the promised study report arrived with a note from the man’s secretary that said, “I understand that you are interested in this material. If you have any questions about it, please contact me.” Reeling from the impersonality of this communication and wondering how to respond, the patient had the following dream:

I was suddenly involved with a person who was sitting next to me and talking to me. We have instant intimacy; I am drawn into his world, but his world is that he is a murderer. He has gotten rid of a number of people, and has gotten away with it. He is very calm and says, “This is my hobby and I am very good at it.” I ask myself, “Why am I with this horrible person? This guy is a murderous *nut*. I have to extricate myself and go.” Two of his lackeys are present; they are like vampires, and I am frightened of them. He devises some ruse to distract them, realizing that I am alarmed by them and that I may rush off before he can kill me.

In associating to the dream the patient said that he actually did watch the man leave the plane and go into the crowd, and he remembered that he had a kind of a split-off thought, “That looks like Hannibal Lecter.”

Of course, the dream picks up the shadow. I think the murderer is the impersonality that we see so often in the way some men relate with their anima, which could be called the pattern of seduce and destroy. He pulls someone in and then rejects. A single person has to be aware of that danger.

The Empathy Dream

There is, however, a third kind of nightmare, one that takes you beyond a threat to yourself, either from within or without, and into an empathy for another person's experience of threat. Such a dream can be found in the midst of Vincente Minnelli's 1950 Hollywood comedy, *Father of the Bride*. Just after the wedding rehearsal, the bride's father, played by Spencer Tracy, dreams that the church floor has turned into a boggy, checkered rubber mess which trips him up as he tries to make his way down the aisle. As he struggles to regain his footing, his formal clothes start to come undone. His pants come down, exposing his underwear, and he wakes up with the sound of his daughter's horrified scream ringing in his head.

Immediately after waking up, the father goes down to the kitchen for a snack, and finds his beautiful, cool daughter (the 18-year old Elizabeth Taylor). She can't sleep either: she confesses to him that she's having stage fright about going down the aisle!

This is what I call the *empathy dream*. Its purpose here is to tune-in the father, who is preoccupied throughout the

movie with his own feelings, to what his daughter must be going through. And the dream enables him to be there for her, so to speak, at just the critical moment.

As a working analyst, I have often had this kind of nightmare to orient me to what one of my patients is going through. And sometimes my clients report this kind of dream in relation to someone for whom they need to show more empathy. I have learned how helpful it can be to consider this interpretation when told a frightening dream.

I received a telephone call from a client who was staying with his sister and her family back east. He had dreamed that he was dying. In his dream, rigor mortis was setting in; he was saying his last words. Now this man has a lot of health problems, so the dream really frightened him. I said some reassuring things, such as the well-known fact that dreams of one's death rarely prefigure it, but of course I did not know what the dream meant. But the next day he called again. There had been an actual death in the family: his brother-in-law's favorite aunt.

This patient needs his sister's family very much, because he is single, his own health is not always good, his parents are dead, and it buoys him up to have a family to visit from time to time. Recently, however, he had been so preoccupied with his own problems that he had not really been attending to the problems of others. I suggested to him that the dream's purpose might have been to get him to take the distant rela-

tion's death more seriously, adding, "After all, the worst mistake you could make, staying as a guest in your brother-in-law's home, would be to show insufficient empathy for the importance he doubtless attaches to his aunt's death. That may seem remote to you, but I think what your dream does is what Confucius calls, 'likening to oneself.' It enables you to realize how you would feel if you died." The dreamer, a man with strong introverted feeling liked this interpretation, and agreed that this was the likely function of his dream.

To summarize, I have shown you three different kinds of nightmare. The first involves facing some challenge that we have to deal with even though we do not know whether we are equal to it; the second requires us to see that what we took for reality may in fact be a fiction that needs to be viewed with suspicion, and the third takes us out of ourselves and into empathy for the worries of others. All of these kinds of nightmare serve to shake up our complacency by disturbing our sleep, but they serve very different functions. I believe they call for very different kinds of interpretation.

Notes

1. Robin Wood, *Hitchcock's Films Revisited* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 380
2. Andrew Sarris, "The American Cinema," *Film Culture* No. 28 (Spring 1963), p. 6
3. Robin Wood, *op. cit.*, p. 117

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