

## Dream Incubation

Dream incubation has been defined as “the practice of going to a sacred place to sleep for the purpose of obtaining a useful dream from a god.” The prime examples come from accounts of the Asklepieia, the dream temples of ancient Greece where sleepers hoped the god Asklepius would heal them in a dream.

This issue of *DreamTime* features three articles on incubation, which make it clear that this traditional definition is probably too narrow. Even in ancient Greece, the gods might visit dreamers elsewhere than the Asklepieia, and pilgrims to the dream temples might have to wait months for the god to reply—stretching the direct connection between incubation ritual and subsequent dream out a bit. (The definition quoted above, by the way, comes from Patricia Garfield’s classic book, *Creative Dreaming*—not Kimberley Patton, whose earlier *DreamTime* article, discussed by Hill, argued for the traditional view.)

In fact, as Meredith Sabini suggests, the process of incubation is happening all the time, in the ongoing response of our dreaming self to our deepest concerns and questions. (See, for example, personal accounts by Anne Scott and Wanda Burch in this issue.) Perhaps the most accurate descriptive model would be a continuum, with historical, narrowly defined incubation practices at one end, and the ongoing dialogue between our waking and dreaming at the other. Any par-

ticular practice or experience would fall somewhere along the continuum.

I have never had much success with dream incubation, understood in the narrow sense. My dreaming self seems to go about its own business undistracted by my waking attempts at influencing it.

To be honest, I haven’t really tried very hard. Most of the times I’ve tried to incubate a particular kind of dream, or a dream about a particular question or topic, have been in response to a specific waking demand—for example, the annual IASD telepathy contest, where my typical experience has been to dream about one of the images, but never the target—as if my dreaming self doesn’t share my waking desire to hit the “correct” target but instead focuses on the image it finds most interesting. Other occasions for attempting to incubate dreams have been various group dream experiments, such as trying to fly or to meet one of the other dreamers in the dream world. One such occasion resulted in a surprising and thought-provoking experience.

About ten years ago, I participated in a project organized by Fariba Bogzaran about dreams of the Divine. The goal was to incubate a lucid dream in which I experienced the Divine. As I recall, the instructions were deliberately vague: the “Divine” was to be understood broadly, and the exact incubation procedure was left to individual design—whatever felt right.

Part of the idea was that by becoming lucid, the dreamer would remember his intention. Mine was, “I want to experience the Divine.” As I practiced my incubation routine each night, I looked forward to meeting a divine figure in my dreams—if not Jesus or Shiva or Buddha, then perhaps a Holy Man or a Wise Old Woman.

For several nights, I recalled no dreams at all—a frequent outcome of my attempts at incubation! But then I had the following dream:

*I’m walking along a street in Oakland. The sky is filled with dark clouds, but the buildings seem to glow with their own eerie light. Suddenly I realize I must be dreaming! I continue walking, enjoying the feeling of lucidity, when I remember Fariba’s project. “I want to experience the Divine,” I tell myself. Nothing happens. “I want to experience the Divine.” No one appears.*

*Suddenly there is a bright light. I look up. High overhead the clouds have parted. A small object comes flying out, hurtling down at me at great speed—a baseball! I try to duck away, but it’s coming right at me. At the last minute I stick out my hand and catch it. I almost wake from the excitement, but manage to calm down enough to stay in the dream. After this odd distraction, I continue walking down the street, repeating my mantra. “I want to experience the Divine. . . .”*

The joke, of course, is that I was so intent on meeting a Divine personage that I missed my experience of the Divine while it was happening.

I’ve thought and written about this experience many



times over the years. Understanding the catching of the baseball as an experience of the Divine (introduced, after all, by a parting of the heavens!) has yielded much material for reflection. The point I want to make here is how tricky this business of dream incubation is. For one thing, one must be careful how the intention is worded; in this case, my dreaming self responded quite accurately to my request as I expressed it, by providing an experience of the Divine. More importantly, the dream may not give us the answer we want to hear or are expecting—so much so that we may not recognize that the incubation has been successful.

Hill points out the importance of cultivating a strong and clear intention if the incubation is to succeed. In the experience described above, my intention was serious, but my formulation unclear. The result was not what I expected, but profound. Other attempts at incubation have been less serious, and consequently less successful. For me, these occasional experiments and dream tasks, although interesting and fun, represent a relatively superficial aspect of my waking life, and I forgive my dreaming self if it has more important concerns to attend to. On the deeper questions—where is my life heading? what is truly of value?—the dreams always come through.