

Dreamwork: an introduction

Part of our magic is receptive, the magic of listening, processes like meditation, divination and dreamwork. Some of these techniques are near universal, found among all spiritual people. Others are part of our very specific heritage as Witches.

Without focus, we could not function. Our daytime, conscious minds screen out a great deal of information, allowing us to concentrate on the task at hand. And so we are left with a limited, often culturally programmed, construct of the world. This construct is sometimes called "ordinary reality," and sometimes called "consensus trance." From within it, we perceive what we expect to perceive, which is what we were taught to perceive. In ordinary reality, we cannot hear the voices on the wind.

Receptive magic helps fill in the blanks. Probably most of the time, we are "only" reaching the voices of our own deep minds, telling us about things we have not noticed, patterns we have not perceived, feelings we have not admitted. Retrieving even this information, from the personal unconscious, is a great gift. And, sometimes, these same introspective practices, open a path beyond the self, to the collective unconscious or even to the Otherworld. So we can offer a channel for the wisdom of the Gods.

One important form of receptive magic, and part of our Pagan heritage, is dreamwork.

Ancient Pagan cultures used their dreams as a source of guidance and healing. The Egyptian papyrus of Deral-Madineh, about 4,000 years old, gave instructions on how to obtain a dream. Specialized temples, called "serapims" after Serapis, the God of dreams, were located throughout Egypt. People who felt the need of guidance would spend the night in a serapim, in hope of winning a dream. Similarly, ancient Greeks would travel to the temple of Asclepius in Epidaurus and sleep there, hoping to be granted a healing dream.

This tradition of dreamwork has continued unabated among tribal, shamanic peoples, indigenous faithkeepers, around the world. Vision quests are a normal part of growing up in Native American culture. For many peoples, particular dreams indicate a shamanic calling. Almost everywhere, the ability to recall dreams and apply their wisdom to human needs is an important qualification for training. Some cultures even believe that the dreams alone can provide all necessary training and initiation. Often words like "prophet" or even "shaman" would be better translated as "dreamer."

Dreams fell temporarily out of favor during the gray centuries of European industrialism, along with all other manifestations of the "irrational." More recently, however, a growing interest in psychotherapy has revived interest in dreams, resulting in both formal, scientifically based, psychological dream research and a grassroots dreamwork movement. Both have developed considerable understanding and skills.

So contemporary Witches enjoy a dual heritage. We have equal claim to the shards and shreds of European Shamanism, pieced out with knowledge gathered from archaeology and anthropology as well as with our own creative insights, and to the most advanced discoveries of modern psychological science.

In weaving them together, it's important to remember that modern dreamwork has so far been exclusively directed toward self-discovery and self-development. These things are absolutely necessary - they come first - but they are not sufficient. The briefest examination of indigenous dreamwork, from shamanic cultures all around the world, reveals the obvious difference. A shaman is a dreamer who dreams in service to the community.

If we really mean to restore the Old Ways of Europe, consistent with those of the rest of the world, we must learn to dream for each other, and for Mother Earth.

The most basic fact about dreams is that everyone dreams, three to five times every night. Dreaming is associated with rapid eye movement, one of the normal phases of sleep. If you think you never dream, it's just that you don't presently remember your dreams.

If your dreams sometimes seem illogical, perhaps you remember only fragments of the dream or possibly the dream reveals something illogical about yourself. Or, maybe you don't yet understand this language of the deep mind and the heart. This comes with patience and practice. Also remember that not every dream has to be reduced to ordinary-reality logic. Often it's good just to sit with the images for awhile, allowing them to develop in their own way, without immediately grasping for the logic behind them.

If you aren't working with your dreams right now, you can certainly learn how. Dream recall and dream work are not talents, but skills. Those who seem particularly adept have simply learned these skills informally, often in the family and within a supportive culture. They are not so much *gifted* dream workers as they are *practiced* dream workers. Almost anyone can learn similar skills. Witches have a head start.

Predictably, the more creative, pictorial "right brained" types are more likely to recall their dreams than the analytical "left-brainers." More significantly, people who believe that dreams are important are more likely than others to recall their dreams. If you meditate, participate in rituals, or practice any of the creative arts, you are the "dream recaller" type.

Everyday dreamwork - the magic of listening: The most important kind of dream retrieval is open minded listening, simple receptivity, without specific questions. Questions are a kind of screen, limiting us to that information we already know enough to ask about. The deep mind and the Otherworld are more generous than that. Their gifts are as free as the rain, but, like the rain, they benefit people who build cisterns. Here are basic, no-frills techniques that you can - and should - use almost every night.

- ▶ Prepare to record your dreams. Put a flashlight, notebook and pens, or a tape recorder, beside your bed, so that you can reach them easily in the middle of the night.

If you have to get up and hunt around for writing materials, the dream will fade from your memory. Worse, you will dissipate the dream's emotional feel -- the most important thing about it. Also, these preparations tell your deep mind that you are committed to self-exploration.

- ▶ Use a simple bedtime prayer or affirmation, for example "tonight I will remember my dreams and learn from them."

- ▶ Herbs can help induce dreams: the classic dream pillow is hops for sleep, mugwort for dreams, and lavender for a pleasant smell, sewed into a sachet and slipped into your pillowcase. (Caution: people who are allergic to ragweed, celery or carrots should avoid mugwort, which is related to all of them.)
- ▶ A Witch's Ladder (a knotted cord used as a rosary) is good for meditation at anytime, including bedtime. Make your Ladder of cords or yarn in colors that symbolize dream and vision for you. (Shades of blue and purple are often used.) Braid them to a comfortable thickness, then tie forty simple overhand knots.

Special Occasion Dreamwork - the magic of asking. Although this is less basic, it is sometimes more urgent. All of us will sometimes feel stuck, confused, overwhelmed. At those times, we may choose to take a specific question to the Otherworld or to ask for guidance on a particular issue. The process of trying to generate a topical dream is called dream incubation. Consider the incubated dream as a what-if tool, a sort of pictorial spreadsheet calculator for assessing alternative strategies for coping with issues in your life. Our heritage offers us many techniques to help us seek the wisdom we feel we need.

- ▶ Barring dire emergencies, wait for a night when you don't have to get up and out on schedule in the morning. A relaxed and gradual awakening is far more conducive to dream recall.
- ▶ You are more likely to remember your dreams when you sleep *lightly*, so make sure you get plenty of sleep on the night before you plan to incubate a dream. Also, consider taking a nap in the afternoon or early evening on the day of your dream incubation ritual.
- ▶ Another way to lighten your sleep is to make yourself a bit less comfortable than you normally would. Keep some light on in the room, or, more classically, keep the shades open on a full moon night. Consider using a sleeping bag on the rug instead of your cushy bed. Play some music, but be careful that it has neither words nor obvious emotional tone that might influence your dream. "New Age" meditation music, contentless and calm, might be a good choice.
- ▶ As always, keep your notebook or tape recorder well within reach when you go to sleep.
- ▶ **Do a dream-recall ritual at bedtime:** Spend the time after your nap and before bedtime in formal preparation to welcome a dream. Here are some ideas:
 - a. Set your altar in the West, the Quarter of dreams and visions. Decorate it with the color blue and with symbols of water. Have paper and pencil handy. Use altar and quarter candles in glasses, so you can safely leave them burning.
 - b. Take a leisurely ritual bath, using dream-inducing herbs, so you can relax while inhaling their scent.
 - c. Cast your Circle in the usual way. Invoke Deities that relate to dreams, visions or wisdom (or to your specific question). Include your sleeping place within the Circle.

- d. If you have made a Witch's ladder, you might want to consecrate it in this Circle. Even better, *make* one here, while meditating on your question. Use colors that seem to you to be related to your question. If you have made a dream pillow, consecrate this too.
- e. If you are using mugwort or other herb tea, ritually consecrate it to clarifying or healing dreams. Use it as your Circle beverage.
- f. After meditating on whatever perplexes you, write it down as completely as you can. If there is a decision to be made, list all the pros and cons. Feel free to use diagrams or to draw pictures or symbols. When you feel you have fully described the situation or formulated the question, bless the paper, asking the aid of the Deities you have invited. Then tuck the paper into your pillowcase.
- g. When you go to sleep, leave the Circle up and the candles lit. The gentle, moving light will lighten your sleep and make dream recall easier. If you have trouble falling asleep, meditate, using your Ladder if you have one. For this purpose, reverie is just as effective as actual sleep.
- h. Wake up gently, record your dreams and impressions before becoming too active, thank the Deities and Watchers, and close your Circle.

Recording your dreams: do this regardless of whether the dream was intentionally incubated or spontaneous:

- ▶ Before going to sleep, record the date. Knowing the date will be helpful in relating your dreams to the day's events, and invaluable if you find you are having a series of related dreams. Then write "Dream 1," to establish that you expect to recall more than one dream tonight.
- ▶ Record each dream the moment you awake from it. Dreams tend to fade quickly. No matter how vivid a dream seems in the middle of the night, usually by morning most or all of it will have slipped away.
- ▶ Record every dream that you retrieve. They are all important. Even more important is that when you record all your dreams you tell your deep mind that you really want to remember and learn from your dreams -- and so more dreams will come. Besides, what seems trivial in the middle of the night may show a different aspect in the morning.
- ▶ If there is a narrative plot line, record it in the present tense. This will make your recall more vivid when you read back what you wrote.
- ▶ Record as many details of your dream as you can. Look for all the sorts of things you might look for in a Tarot reading: the setting, the people, the action, the dialogue, any unusually vivid color. If there are any personal or mythological symbols present, be sure to record them, especially any you have been working with recently.
- ▶ Most important: take note of your feelings. This means both your emotional reactions and any bodily sensations you may have as you awake from the dream. These are the most elusive, the first to fade. If you won't be working through the dream till after work,

recording them is critical.

- ▶ Be relaxed about your definition of what a dream is. If you awaken with anything at all in mind, a thought, an impression, or a song, write it down. If you wake with no recall of a dream at all, but with a pervading mood or feeling, stay relaxed in bed and make up a story to fit the mood. Let your imagination run free, and the story you create will be almost as valuable as a dream.
- ▶ After recording the first dream, write "Dream 2" in your notebook, and then "Dream 3" under the second one, and so on. This invites more dreams. Often, dreams of the same night will relate to the same issue, but they will each approach it in a different way. One dream will often shed new light on another dream, and together they provide a great deal of information.

Analyzing your dreams

Transcribe the notes you made in the middle of the night to a more formal dream journal in which you can keep a record not just of your dreams, but of your dreamwork.

Consider the relationship between the dream and the events of the previous day. Even if the dream was fairly close to the day's events, it was unlikely to be just a rehash. Instead, it may be using the day's events to symbolize something that lies deeper in your being. Or it may be showing you something you missed or offering you a new understanding of what transpired.

According to most contemporary dream theory, we dream primarily of ourselves. Other people - and sometimes even inanimate objects - in the dream are different aspects of ourselves, or different roles that we play or, at most, the images of other people that we have built up in our minds. So if you dream your sister, the information is more about your perceptions and attitude towards her than actually about her.

If you share this dream with covenmates or friends, record their insights. Say which ones rang true for you, but record them all. Some may contain truth you were not yet ready to hear.

Dreams can be interpreted both literally and symbolically. First look for literal meanings or warnings, the simple and immediate perceptions of the unconscious mind. For example, if you dream about your teeth falling out, consider whether it's time for a dental checkup. Or, if you dream of eating lots of fruits and vegetables, try improving your diet. If your dream includes a creative idea, by all means, give it form: dance it or bake it or carve it or whatever. If you honor the gift, more will come.

Then also look for symbolism. Go back through the dream and identify all the symbols it held and what they mean to you.

You may find it helpful to make three columns, labelled symbols, associations and feelings. First go through your description of the dream and list all the symbols in the first column. Leave plenty of space. Then fill in the other two columns.

Pay particular attention to feelings - both bodily sensations and emotions. They are a guide to those perceptions we are still not able to articulate. Associate to the feelings as well as to the symbols. Can you remember other times when you have felt this way?

Some of the associations will be traditional. People who are intensely involved with spiritual practice -- of any religion -- work with particular sets of symbols. So Witches may expect to see the elemental colors, or scenes or symbols of the moon's cycles or of the Wheel of the Year, or pictures of the Tarot, or the Runes, or whatever form of divination you normally use. By working intensely with this symbolism, you have given yourself and the Otherworld one or more well-developed vocabularies to speak through. That is one of the great benefits of consistent traditional practice.

But be careful. Don't fall into the fundamentalist trap of confusing symbol with fact. Living symbols are slippery, multi-vocal, downright protean. They won't *always* mean what they usually mean in tradition. Sometimes their meaning will be as mundane as the dentist. Other times, the meanings will be idiosyncratically personal. So let yourself brainstorm freely.

People sometimes experience the same dream repeated several times over a period of months or years. Such dreams may contain a challenging message, one we are not yet fully ready to hear. If the Otherworld keeps presenting it, it's probably very important. In safe space, with supportive friends, explore it as far as you can. At other times, series of related dreams may monitor inner developments.

Talking about your dreams.

Talk to your close ones about your dreams. Sharing your dreams is another way of signaling your unconscious mind that you are taking this process seriously. And, just as talking through an everyday perplexity with a friend will sometimes help clarify it, sharing a dream with a friend may help deepen your understanding.

In traditional dream-oriented cultures, family groups will share their dreams every morning. That's hard for us to do. We may be living with people who are more secularly oriented and not particularly interested. Even in entirely Wiccan households, most workaday mornings are too pressured for self-exploration.

Instead, share your dreams with a dreamwork group or, better yet, with your coven. They already know the importance of dreamwork for inner exploration. If the group has been working together for any length of time, you have large segments of your symbolic vocabulary in common. Also, since Circle is a time set apart to work on your psycho-spiritual issues, you will be more focussed and less rushed. Even so, there will never be time to share all your dreams with a group, so choose the ones that have the strongest emotional tone, those that linger, and those that seemed most perplexing when you worked with them on your own.

Trusted and skilled friends may be able to point out things that you missed, or even sometimes things you were evading. Not all insights are easy to hear. Inner growth requires challenge as well as comfort. However, also remember that people will interpret *your* dream as they would if it were *their* dream. What else could they possibly do? Even in a group that's been working together for a long time, the same symbol does not necessarily mean the same thing to two different people, and it may not even always mean the same thing every time to the same person. Only you know which interpretations ring true for you right now.

When you are the listener, remember that it is the dreamer's dream and about the

dreamer's life, not yours. Offer more questions than statements, and make them open ended: "how did you feel when ..?" "what does that mean to you ..." If you do offer any interpretations, state them very tentatively. Our good friend Lady Alaria, suggests that we always start any interpretive statements with "if this were my dream, it might be saying ...". Present your interpretation as a hypothesis, and let the dreamer correct or refine it. Saying "no, it's not this, it's more like that" is a good way for them to focus in on what the dream means *for them*.

Lucid Dreaming - the magic of willed change - a caution:

There are some techniques for taking conscious control of our dreams, of actually rewriting them as a way of changing bad internal patterns - "old tapes" - that often lead to self-defeating behavior. Basically, these involve remaining aware during the dream that we are dreaming and that we can choose different behaviors and outcomes. These techniques are effective and certainly can be helpful. In the long run, however, they may cost more than they are worth.

Lucid dreaming techniques are about willed change, about projective magic, about giving directions to our inner selves. In contrast, receptive magic is about attunement, about gathering wisdom from our inner world and from the Otherworld, in order to make the wisest possible decisions. It's important to listen more than we direct, or we may risk losing the habit of listening, losing access to the inner voices.

The culture that surrounds us teaches us to tame everything, to control and rationalize everything from the ancient forests to our own dreams, to make everything over in our own conscious image. But to program our dreams is to limit them to that which we already know. All new insights and visions come from the wild, the un-programmed, the uncontrolled.

We have other, and even more effective, ways of changing consciousness in accordance with will. We need not sacrifice one of the major channels of inner receptivity in order to do this. And we very much need a way to gather information from our deepest selves, and from the Otherworld, before we make, let alone implement, our decisions.

Leave room for Her surprises. Listen first, then weigh, then do. In Her service, may you have strong dreams!

Judy Harrow

Bibliography

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This is the "classic" that introduced dreamwork to popular consciousness

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By the former co-leader of the Brooklyn Dream Community

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Presents an excellent method for group dreamwork. Dr Ullman may be the most eminent dream researcher and dream worker of our time. He has several previous books. All of them are excellent!