

Dreams about Dying

Robert J Hoss

Prepared in support of ABC TV Appearance (2005)

3 Types of Death Dreams:

- 1) **Dreams with a Death Theme** – at times of internal change when some part of you symbolically “dies” in order that a new self can emerge
- 2) **Dreams Prior to the Dreamer’s Own Death** – to help the dying grapple with the fears and move from denial to acceptance
- 3) **Dreams of Someone Who Has Died** – to initiate and assist in the grieving process

1) Dreams with a Death Theme:

- **Possible Stimulus for the Dream:** symbolic “death” of something within you that needs to change or be released in order to let a new self or new potential be “born”
- **Common Themes:**
 - a) **Dream of You Dying** or being Threatened with Death (Death of the Ego) = the old self must symbolically “die” in order that the new self, your new potential, can come forth (Jung referred to this as death of the ego or a death/rebirth theme) – *I dreamed I was trapped on an island and water was rising all around me. Suddenly a voice said ‘the water is simply your unconscious, jump in and you will be fine’ - i.e. embrace who you are inside.* [ref: Hoss – *Dream Language*]; *I dreamed a large skyscraper fell on me and I died. I was also another person in the dream and dug myself out and found I was still alive.*
 - b) **Dream of Unknown Person Dying:** Suppression (death) or Emergence of a part of yourself (certain characteristics) that you are having a hard time dealing with. *“I was wandering through a desert setting and saw an old rusty car. Upon looking inside, I found a man who was not moving. I was going to give him up for dead, but my companion urged me to wake the man. When I did, both the man and the car came to life and began to transform into a newer car. = old self and talents coming to life again.* [ref: Hoss – *Dream Language*]
 - c) **Dream that Someone you Know is Dying/Dead:**
 1. Dependency on, or emotional ties to, that person is changing = “I have a recurrent dream that my husband dies” [Woman’s dream at a time when she was becoming more independent] or *“I dreamed my daughter was*

dead, enclosed in ice”- emotional coldness toward his daughter. [ref: Hoss – Dream Language]

2. Concern or fears about the death of that person. We typically dream about our emotional concerns and fears, particularly things beyond our control that have emotional impact.

3. Precognitive - Only in Rare cases. *While on a trip I dreamed that my husband and I were visiting a friend we knew. We went to open his car up and inside was a coffin. My husband said ‘the man it is for isn’t dead yet’. When I got home I found a letter in the mail, dated the day of the dream, that this friend had just been diagnosed with terminal cancer. [ref: Woman’s dream at time of a friend’s death]*

2) Dreams prior to the Dreamer’s Own Death:

- **Possible Stimulus for the Dream:** These dreams can help the dying grapple with their fears, move through the process - from denial to acceptance, and find the larger meaning in their lives.

- **Themes and Characteristics:** going on journeys, reuniting with deceased loved ones, seeing stopped clocks, symbols of completion, frustration of being unable to control some situation. Pre-death dreams are more urgent, more vivid and more memorable than the run-of-the mill patchwork of dreams, “the need to dream is intensified” – [quote from Alan Siegel in *Dreaming Beyond Death*].

- **Examples:** ref: Dr. Kelly and Rev Patricia Bulkeley in their book *Dreaming Beyond Death*:
 1. Sailing Dream: *Charles Rasmussen, a retired merchant-marine captain in his mid-80s who was dying of cancer was consumed by fear until, in a dream one night, he saw himself sailing in uncharted waters. Once again, he felt the thrill of adventure as he pushed through a vast, dark, empty sea, knowing he was on course. "Strangely enough, I'm not afraid to die anymore," he told Bulkley after that dream. Death was no longer an end, but a journey.*
 2. Candle Dream: *In one woman's dream, a candle on her hospital windowsill is snuffed out, engulfing her in darkness-a symbol of death that scares her, until the candle spontaneously relights outside the window.*
 3. Jung: *The last dream that psychologist Carl Jung was able to communicate to his followers, a few days before his death, was of a great round stone engraved with the words "And this shall be a sign unto you of Wholeness and Oneness." To Jung, it showed that his work in this life was complete.*

3) Dreaming About Someone Who Has Passed On

- **Possible Stimulus for the Dream:** initiating and working through the bereavement process, releasing internal grief, trauma and emotion

- **Common Imagery:** Patricia Garfield, author of *The Dream Messenger*, has examined approximately one thousand dreams about the dead, defines nine basic elements of dreams of persons who passed on (which she calls the "dream messenger"):
 1. **Announcement** = awareness or signal that something is coming (doorbell, knock, telephone, familiar sound or smell, light, opening door) *Just as my father died I dreamed that my mother announced that he was coming – so we went inside to see him emerge through a dark door.*
 2. **Arrival** = you see the person arrive or in a new or familiar setting – *I dreamed of my dad who was now alive, standing in the living room of the home that I was visiting with mom. He was asking why we had taken some of the furniture.*
 3. **Appearance** - age, condition, radiance/light = a) still ill or much worse - *In recurrent dreams I kept seeing my father's body begin to rot and finally turn into a skeleton at which point I woke and finally cried until I could cry no more. After that he appeared in my dreams perfectly healthy and happy;*
 - b) Transformed – at peace, young, vibrant;
 - c) Age = the old usually appear younger or in the prime of life and children may appear older;
 - d) condition = infirmities disappear;
 - e) Radiance and luminosity in clothing and light around them
 4. **Attendants** – those in the dream usually include you the deceased and perhaps a family member or so, but sometimes others appear (shadow characters) that represent death. Per Garfield, these are pictures of your feelings about death and the threat it represents.
 5. **Message** – spoken, conveyed mentally, written words or the actions in the dream = Also **Communications Metaphors** such as a **Telephone**. In general only 3% of dreams have telephones whereas 12% to 53% of the dreams of the deceased can contain telephones. (Garfield's dreams about her dead father = 12%. Deirdre Barrett reports that 53% of what she calls "state-of-death" dreams involved telephone calls from the deceased vs. 24% in other dreams about the dead).

Messages include:

"I'm Suffering" - helping you in the first task of grief, accepting the reality of the death, and in the second task, expressing the painful emotions of grief.

"I'm not really dead" – *I am astounded to see my dead uncle again, singing, laughing and making jokes; I say, "My God, what are you doing here? You're dead!" He smiles and replies, "Honey, when you die, you lose your body, not your sense of humor."* [Garfield – *Dream Messenger*].

"I am ok" – *A young girl who was feeling extreme grief over the death of her friend dreamed of him standing next to an airplane. He looked at her and said 'Don't worry about me I am just in another plane.'* [Hoss- *Dream Language*];

"Goodbye" - usually when a death has taken place at a distance from the dreamer, or is sudden, often happening at the time of death = *When I was a*

teenager I dreamed that my Dad came into my room and said goodbye and then left. I woke up screaming. My mother came in and she said "Daddy was in my room". She then told me "daddy died last night" [ref: Girl's dream the morning of her Dad's death].

6. **Gift** – the deceased may give you an object in the dream = a metaphor which contains a useful healing message for you, something passed on to you, a gift of love, a message – *My son in laws mother came to me in a dream the day she died. She handed me an egg and told me 'please take care of my little egg' which I knew to mean her son.* [ref: Mother-in-law's dream]
 7. **Farewell embrace** = *My father emerged from the dark shadowy door and gave jokingly gave me a poke in the belly* [ref: author's dream of fathers death]
 8. **Departure** = a sense that the deceased must leave NOW, or a leaving or a or a fading away - *I was walking with my father in a field at sunset. Suddenly he walked into the sunset and I said "so long captain".* [ref: Hoss – *Dream Language*];
 9. **Aftermath** = a) happy and relieved, the emotional pain gone – *ex. After the "I am just in another plane" dream the little girl was no longer stressed about her friends death* [ref; *Dream Language*]; b) I can get on with my life. c) forgiveness, love, resentment gone, can see them as a human being not a tyrant; d) hope for the afterlife; e) I felt they knew my feelings and that I loved them and, that they loved me still – *this was my feeling about my fathers death* [Author's comment]
- **Cultural:** [ref: Ernest Hartmann in *Dreams and Nightmares*]: *In many cultures it is believed that souls of the recently dead hover or hang around for a certain time - months or years - before they depart to their final place. Loved ones and friends of the deceased are dreaming of them for a period after their deaths -- the soul of the dreamer meets the departed soul. After enough has time, the deceased is no longer being dreamt of, and thus his/her soul is said to have finally departed.*
 - **Visiting the Departed:** [ref: Ed Kellogg, *Psychopompic Dreaming: Visits With Those Who Have Passed On?*] He makes the distinction of dreaming **of** someone (who appear as they did near the point they died) versus dreaming **with** (where they seem to settle on whatever they consider an optimal body). A woman or man who died at 90 may look a fit and 35 - in any case they end up looking like their personal best, although they can change in appearance from dream to dream. They act spontaneously and independently in the dream. *In a lucid dream Ed Kellogg related that he: once intentionally visited the father of a friend, an Italian man, who had died at 79. The man I knew looked small, flabby and old, pale and almost completely bald, wearing wire-rimmed glasses. The man I found in the dream looked in his 30s or 40s, very lean and self-possessed. He had on an elegant dark gray silk suit, a white shirt and a dark tie. He had a deep tan and looked almost like an American Indian. He also had on a pair of thick-black framed glasses - and an afro! His son confirmed even this most bizarre and*

unexpected detail - the afro - when I related the dream to him later. [ref: presentation at the IASD Conference 2005 Berkeley]

- **Proof of the existence of God or an Afterlife?** Proof of a scientific nature is difficult but these dreams certainly indicate that there is something grander and of a spiritual nature taking place [ref: Hoss], and to the dying these dreams often affirm their faith in the afterlife [ref: Bulkeley]. *On her deathbed, a female cancer patient of Bulkley's was stricken with doubts about the nature of God. For three nights, she dreamed of huge boulders that pulsed with an eerie blue light. To her, they represented a divine being that was unidentifiable, but very real. "I don't need to know anything more than that," she told Bulkley. "God is God." But she had one final dream. In it, the boulders morphed into steppingstones. In the distance a golden light glowed. "It's calling me now, and I want to go," she told Bulkley that morning. She died the next day-at peace.* [ref: Dr. Kelly Bulkeley and Rev. Patricia Bulkley, *Dreaming Beyond Death*]

Books/References:

Robert Hoss, *Dream Language*, Innersource, 2005, Chapter 2, www.dreamlanguage.org

Dr. Kelly and Rev. Patricia Bulkeley, *Dreaming Beyond Death*.

Mary Louise von Franz, *On Dreams & Death: A Jungian Interpretation*, Chicago: Open Court, 1998 or 1986, Shambala, Boston

Patricia Garfield, *The Dream Messenger: How Dreams of the Departed Bring Healing Gifts* (Simon & Schuster, 1997).

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, 1975, *Death: The Final Stage of Growth*, New York, Simon & Schuster.

Parting Company: Understanding the Loss of a Loved One -- The Caregiver's Journey (Seal Press, 1999)

Ed Kellogg, *Psychopompic Dreaming: Visits With Those Who Have Passed On?*
http://www.asdreams.org/telepathy/2004kellogg_psychopomp.htm