

Dreamwork: Four Techniques for Spiritual Direction

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There is a mystery in the world of the sleeping. It is the dominion of dreams. It is the realm in which the unconscious plays and works, teases and teaches, invites and demands, frightens and reassures, exposes and conceals. It is a mysterious gift from God that invites the dreamer to take note of what is hidden within and to bring it into conscious awareness. It is a gift that wants attention not neglect.

Thomas Moore, in his article "Developing a Dream Practice" that appeared in *Spirituality and Health*, says that in his psychotherapy practice he has come to "trust the dreams more than the stories and the complaints" of his clients. Moore says that he has come to recognize the value of dreamwork for the spiritual well-being of his clients and yet finds that most people neglect their dreams. Moore goes on to write that everyone would benefit from practicing dreamwork, especially those tending to their spiritual lives (12). For those of us who journey the spiritual life along with our spiritual directees, knowing how to process dreams can be a valuable tool for spiritual direction.

The most beneficial way for spiritual directors to journey with their spiritual directees in dreamwork is to develop a personal practice of their own, so I suggest that spiritual directors spend time in dreamwork before using it in their spiritual direction ministry and service. I find that my own dreamwork as a spiritual practice has enabled me to assist my spiritual directees in working with their own dreams. This is the story of my journey into the mysterious gift of dreams and how it has enabled me to bring dreamwork into spiritual direction. I hope that it encourages you to make a journey into your own dream landscapes and maybe, therefore, be better able to journey with your spiritual directees into theirs.

The Beginning of My Story into Dreamwork

Dreams that stay with me—*stay with me*. To this day, I remember a dream I had as a first-grader. And over the years, other distant dreams have remained in my memory. They are striking dreams that reveal hidden stories, intro-

duce unusual characters, conjure unfamiliar emotions, and invite thoughtful ponderings. When I was young, dreams were a secret world, a private world, an inner world that was my own. I carried my dreams silently. Occasionally, I would muse over them. But mostly, I did nothing with them. They just were, and I gave them space to be.

At some point in my waking life, I began to write down those dreams that I remembered or that seemed especially significant. A simple lined notebook became my dream-keeping diary. Eventually, the dream diary became a regular practice, and now I keep a dream journal. I try to write my dreams immediately because I have forgotten some that I wanted to remember.

The dreams I remember at waking become dated entries. Some entries are long and detailed, some are brief and vague, and some contain only a sentence, a phrase, or a word. Sometimes my entry is simply a note that expresses my immediate thoughts or affective sensations upon waking. Periodically, I reread my dream entries and am surprised at those I had forgotten. This practice of writing and reading my dream journal aroused a desire to know more about dreams and what to do with them.

The First Two Techniques

I purchased the book *Dreams and Spiritual Growth: A Christian Approach to Dreamwork* by Louis M. Savary, Patricia H. Berne, and Strephon Kaplan Williams. I read eleven of the thirty-seven techniques described and realized that a person could spend hours and days, months, even years, processing one dream using each and every technique. I decided to start slowly. I chose two simple techniques from the eleven I had read. These two resonated with where I was as a beginning dream processor. These two tools have been invaluable for working on my own dreams and for using in my spiritual direction ministry and service.

The First Technique: Story-ing the Dream

This is the first technique described by the authors. I call it "story-ing" the dream. I use this technique for nearly all of my dreams. It involves giving each dream a

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

title, noting predominant themes, revisiting my emotional responses, and allowing the dreams to ask questions of me. So after I have written my dream entry, I reread it with these elements in mind. I begin by looking for a title.

Usually, in the rereading of the dream, one or more titles emerge. I reflect on these titles and reread the dream a few times. I might write down all the titles that suggest themselves; in doing so, one will feel "right," or one will feel "not right," or two or more will feel right merged together. Sometimes, I will key into certain events in the dream, and this helps to narrow my choices. I want my title to be simple and concise. My titles represent the essence of the dream. When a title resonates with my sense of what the dream is about, I write it in my journal. Then, I look for the theme of the dream.

The title usually gives me clues as to the theme of the dream. Sometimes, my theme is an expanded version of the title. I always write the theme in a complete sentence. It is like the topic sentence if my dream were to be a paragraph. It states briefly the subject of the dream. If I am having trouble discerning a theme, I will ask myself, "What is this dream about?" or "What is happening here?" When I have a sense of the theme, I write that in my journal near the title. I will write a theme even if it is vague and mysterious.

Next, I revisit all my emotional experiences in the dream. I write them down sequentially. I start at the beginning of the dream and visit each part again in my imagination. I try to recall what I was doing or seeing or experiencing, and I note my feelings, impressions, and sensations. When my emotional responses seem neutral, I note my behaviors or my actions. I will note whether I am observing or acting. When there are no words to describe my experience, I use metaphors to describe what I am sensing in the dream. I write down my emotional responses in my journal near the title and the theme.

Lastly, as suggested by Savary, Berne, and Williams, I ask myself this question: "What is this dream asking of

me?" (24). Then, I listen with my heart, my mind, and my body. I list responses that come to that particular question. Or I ask, "What is this dream asking me?" Then I list the questions the dream seems to be asking me. In my journal, I write all the responses or questions that come to mind, body, or heart. When the responding and questioning slows and no more present themselves, I might choose a response or a question that seems particularly poignant and speak it aloud to myself. I listen again. And again, I jot down thoughts, ideas, feelings, or any other responses that come from this second listening.

Story-ing the Dream in Spiritual Direction

This technique of story-ing my dreams has become a consistent dreamwork practice for me. Because I am familiar with its use, I am able to apply this technique in a directed way with spiritual directees who come to a session with a dream to share. After spiritual directees tell their dreams, I guide them through the process of forming a title for their dreams and drawing out the themes. I use the same format for them that I use for myself.

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Together we narrow the title down to the essence of the dream. For the theme, we will usually add details to the title until the spiritual directees have a sense of the dream's subject. While the spiritual director guides this process of title-ing and theme-ing the dream, ultimately it is the spiritual directee who intuitively knows what these are. Jeremy Taylor, a noted author of a number of books on dream-work, assumes that dreams bring health and wholeness. In his book *The Wisdom of Your Dreams*, he writes, "The only one who knows what your dreams mean is you. An aha will tip you off that you are 'remembering' what you always knew" (14). He continues by saying that others can help with this process, but it is the dreamer who makes the final judgment. This is my assumption as well. The spiritual director simply enables the spiritual directee to discover these meanings.



"Migration"—Pat Willems

Once the title and theme are uncovered, I have spiritual directees describe their emotional responses as they move through the dream sequentially. At various points, we might pause to explore those responses further. Often spiritual directees will digress when emotions from the dream are brought into their awareness. Again, the spiritual director is simply guiding the spiritual directee through the process of discovering what the dream would have the spiritual directee know and understand. When the digression has served its purpose, the spiritual director can guide the spiritual directee back to the dreamwork.

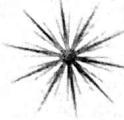
To finish the dreamwork segment, I will ask spiritual directees the same questions that I ask myself when I am processing my own dreams: "What is this dream asking of you?" or "What question is this dream asking you?" The responses that arise become the focus of the spiritual direction session, and we dialogue around the replies. I ask spiritual directees to take these questions with them and use them for further reflection.

The Second Technique: Conversing the Dream

I refer to the second technique that the authors suggest as "conversing" the dream. The dreamer engages in conversation with a dream character or object while awake. To do this, I center myself and then allow the dream to come into my waking imagination. As I revisit the dream in my mind and reflect on it, certain characters or objects seem to outweigh others. It is as though these particular images want to be noticed. So, I choose one character or object that seems to want my attention; and in my waking imagination, I see that character or object and initiate a conversation with it.

I begin with a question that is suggested in *Dreams and Spiritual Growth*: "Why did you appear in my dream?" (58). Then I listen for a response from the dream image. It may come as words or feelings or sensations. A memory might come or a thought or an idea. There is no definitive way that a dream image communicates a response to the question. But often the dream-image response is

What
wants -
Be
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in the
dream



SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

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unexpected or surprising or enlightening.

When I sense that my dialogue with the dream image is finished, and as suggested by Savary, Berne, and Williams, I tell the image what I want it to do either in this dream or in any future dreams. I thank the dream image for whatever purpose it has served in my dream. If there is another image within the same dream that wants to be noticed, I follow the same procedure and engage with it in active imagination. I write my conversations with these images near the dream entry in my journal along with my own thoughts or feelings about the dream images and their responses to my questions.

Conversing the Dream in Spiritual Direction

As I engage with my own dream images and dialogue with them in my waking imagination, I am better equipped to use this technique with the spiritual directees who come to me with their dreams. When spiritual directees bring their dreams, I use the same process that I use for myself. I guide the process without interpreting or judging. I assume for my spiritual directees what I assume for myself, and that is that the dream has a message the dreamer can know. The process enables the spiritual directee to discover what that message is.

After spiritual directees recount their dreams, I have a quiet moment for them to become centered. I then invite spiritual directees to revisit the dream and to notice which dream images want attention. I ask them to choose one image that seems to predominate. This is the image we will engage in conversation.

I invite spiritual directees to see that dream image

and to ask the image the question, "Why are you in my dream?" This asking can be out loud or in their imaginations. But the resulting conversation is processed out loud together in the session. Dream images do not always give direct answers to questions asked of them. Dream image responses can be a feeling, an idea, a thought, a sensation, a memory, or some other experience that flows out of the asking of the question or questions.

The dialogues that arise from engaging with dream images become part of the spiritual direction experience. I continue with questions pertinent to what is emerging in the spiritual directee. And I use whatever other skills I normally use in a session, such as reflective listening, noticing body language, providing a safe space, and offering invitations to delve more deeply. I use these other tools in conjunction with the dreamwork we are doing together.

These two dreamwork techniques, story-ing and conversing the dream, are invaluable when spiritual directees come into the session with a dream that wants attention.

Two Additional Techniques

As I continued with my own personal dreamwork, I added other ways of processing my dreams. Adding them to my own dreamwork has better equipped me to use them in my spiritual direction ministry and service with my spiritual directees. Two of these techniques are particularly helpful. The first is to create a drawing of the dream, and the second is to write a poem that reflects the dream.

A Third Technique: Drawing the Dream

At the suggestion of a counselor, I began to draw my



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dreams. In my journal, I leave a blank page beside the dream entry for my drawing. I use a pencil because I find that the first marks do not always feel right. So I erase them and begin again until the size, shapes, and positions seem to match the sense of my dream. I do not try to draw realistic images. Rather, I draw what seems to best represent the dream.

The images can be simple shapes. Arrows can indicate movement. If a particular color or colors are striking, I use color pencils or color markers to emphasize that part of the dream. If a dream is especially vivid, I paint it on a larger sheet of art paper with watercolor or acrylic paints. This emboldens the dream and highlights whatever message the dream would deliver.

While I am creating the dream as art, I notice my internal responses and engage with them. I note these feelings on the drawing as I am sketching. When the drawing is finished, I look at it and write down any observations, thoughts, or feelings. Sometimes I have other trustworthy persons look at the drawing or painting and express what it is they notice. Another person's observations can be extremely helpful when I am processing a difficult dream.

Often dreamscapes are difficult to render on paper. The drawing looks warped or twisted. Things are upside down, crooked, lopsided, or illogical. Let it be. It is the process that is important to the dreamwork. Additionally, the drawing of a dream brings certain images and events into focus that might not otherwise have been noticed.

In some instances, the title and theme of my dream will change because the art process has brought some-

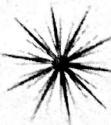
thing new into my awareness. When this happens, the dream begins to ask different questions of me. Thus, dream drawings are useful for uncovering the deeper layers of a particular dream, and ultimately, the deeper layers of the spiritual life.

Drawing the Dream in Spiritual Direction

Suggesting that spiritual directees draw or paint their dreams is helpful when they come with a particularly troublesome dream or with a dream that lingers in their imagination. A drawing can be done after or before working on the dream with the two techniques described previously. The drawing can be done during the spiritual direction session or as a meditative practice to be done outside the session and then brought back at a future date.

Wherever the drawing is done, I invite spiritual directees to engage with the dream by paying attention to what emerges during the dream-drawing process. This is the focus of the spiritual direction conversation. It is important for spiritual directees to know that their dreams can be represented visually in any form that seems appropriate. It is not about creating a perfected piece of art. It is a way to discover what the dream has to say to the dreamer.

Spiritual directees are able to physically engage with the dream art, and with the guidance of the spiritual director, they can use the dream drawing to formulate the dream's title and theme. And it becomes a visual expression of what the dream might be asking of the dreamer. The dream drawing can also be used when dialoguing with dream images. It provides a visual representation of



SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

what is important to the dreamer, and spiritual directees can converse directly with the images in the presence of the spiritual director. The spiritual director can use the dream art as a tool for asking those directed questions that enable spiritual directees to move deeper into their spiritual lives.

A Fourth Technique: Poet-ing the Dream

Another way to process a dream is to write it as a poem. I began this practice after a friend told me that this was one way that she did her dreamwork. Usually, my poetry does not rhyme, but sometimes it does. Sometimes it reflects only my feelings, and sometimes only my thoughts. Sometimes it tells the dream story sequentially. Sometimes it lingers on a certain image. There is no right or wrong way to write the poem.

Writing the poem is simply another way to express the dream. It clarifies the essence of the dream. Those dream images or events that want noticing will present themselves. They will come forward in the imagination. These are what I attend to when writing the poem. I use single words or phrases or short sentences to write the poem. I keep it simple in order to allow the message of the dream to come more clearly into focus.

Just as the process of drawing the dream sharpens the dream's meaning, so does the writing of the poem. I write the poem in my journal with the dream entry and along with any of the other techniques I have used with that particular dream.

Poet-ing the Dream in Spiritual Direction

Like drawing the dream, the writing of the dream poem can be done in the spiritual direction session or outside of the session. In the session, the spiritual director enables spiritual directees to discern what is prominent in the dream by asking directive questions, such as "What predominates in this dream?" It may be that a certain image is most dominant. It may be the "mood" of the dream that predominates. It may be the dreamer's emotional state. It may be the action or the events of the dream. Whatever is most prominent in the dream becomes the subject of

a poem.

The role of the spiritual director in the writing of the dream poem is to help spiritual directees express the subject of the poem in a form that is more specific than what has been written as a dream entry or what has been told to the spiritual director as a dream story. The spiritual director helps spiritual directees do this by inviting them to choose single words or phrases or short sentences to describe the subject of the poem.

Another way to write the dream poem is to have either the spiritual director or the spiritual directee reread the dream entry aloud. The dreamer listens for those words or phrases that linger in the imagination. These, then, in whatever order or format describes the essence of the dream or feels appropriate to the dreamer, become the words of the poem. The words of the dream poem are an invitation to spiritual directors and spiritual directees to further explore the spiritual nature of the dream message.

Thanking the Dream and the Dream Giver

In my opinion, an important aspect of dreamwork is the expression of gratitude as a form of closure. Spiritual directors who practice dreamwork must develop a grateful attitude for what their dreams offer them. It is a way of affirming the value of the dream, its message, and the work done to discern that message.

Additionally, the thankful spiritual director will take this habit into sessions, and spiritual directees will sense that their dreams are valued. As a result, spiritual directees will value their dreams and be open to what the dream would have them know. Whenever a spiritual directee and I are finished processing a dream together, we each express gratitude for what has emerged. The dream is as much a gift to me as it has been for the spiritual directee.

Gratitude can be expressed once or multiple times during the dreamwork process. Thank the dream or Dream Giver upon waking before making the journal entry, or do so after making the journal entry. Be thankful for the story-ing process. Thank the dream images after conversing the dream. Thank the drawing. Thank the poem. And

*Things are upside
down, crooked,
lopsided, or illogical.*

finally, when the work on the dream is finished, be grateful for the message the dream has delivered.

Questions for Dreamwork in Spiritual Direction

The following are examples of directive questions the spiritual director can use with spiritual directees to process dreams in a spiritual direction session. While these questions have proved useful in my own spiritual direction ministry and service, I make the assumption that spiritual directors know their own spiritual directees well enough to be able to ask additional questions that are relevant to those particular spiritual directees.

Questions for Story-ing the Dream

- What title would you give this dream?
- In one or two sentences, what is the theme of this dream?
- In one or two sentences, what is the subject of this dream?
- What emotions did you experience in the dream?
- What thoughts did you have in the dream?
- Were there other sensations in the dream, and if so, what were they?
- What is this dream asking you to be?
- What is this dream asking you to do?

Questions for Conversing the Dream

- Which dream image wants to be noticed?
- Do you feel comfortable having a conversation with this image?
- Are you able to ask this image why it has appeared in your dream?
- Why is this image in your dream?
- How do you feel about the appearance of this image in your dream?
- What would you like this image to do now?
- What would you like this image to do in future dreams?

Questions for Drawing the Dream

- What do you notice most about this drawing?
- How do you feel about what you see in this drawing?
- What in this drawing is uncomfortable?
- What in this drawing is comfortable?

- What is the drawing inviting you to be?
- What is the drawing inviting you to do?
- What in this drawing reflects your spiritual life?

Questions for Poet-ing the Dream

- Which words or phrases from your dream entry want to be noticed?
- What do you notice about the words in this poem?
- How do you feel about what this poem is saying?
- What are your thoughts about what this poem is saying?
- How is this poem a reflection of your spiritual life?
- What is the poem's invitation?

An Example of Dreamwork from My Journal

This entry from my dream journal represents the process I use for dreamwork. Occasionally, I use all four of the techniques described in this article on one dream. But more often, I use only two or three on one particular dream. The following example shows how I use three of the techniques on one of my dreams.

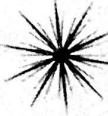
The dream entry is one copied from my dream journal. I write the dream as I remember it upon waking, and I write it in the present tense. Following the entry are the techniques I used to process this dream. I use these three—story-ing the dream, drawing the dream, and poet-ing the dream—most often in my dreamwork.

Dream Journal Entry

March 3

There are things that have been cleaned out. Only the shells remain. The insides of things are gone and what are left are the outsides. Among these things is a cat. I think it is dead. I want to take out the insides so that I can keep the skin or outside of the cat. I find the place where I can begin the cutting. I put the knife in and begin to make the cut to remove the insides. But then I notice that the cat is waking and looking at me. It appears sleepy as though waking from a deep sleep.

When I realize that the cat is not dead but alive, I wonder what to do about the cut. For a fleeting moment, I wonder if I should continue with the cutting. But I soon know that I cannot tell if the cat is alive. I feel bad that I have cut the cat. I don't know what to do about it. I wonder if I should clean it and try to repair it or if it will heal itself.



SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

It is a large cut, and I wonder if the cat will survive. I wake wondering what to do about the cut in the cat.

Story-ing the Dream

Title: The Cat Is Cut

Theme: I am cutting out the insides of what I think is dead, only to find that it is alive.

Emotions: Desire to remove the internal parts to prevent decay and rot of the external parts, hesitant and uncertain, cognizant of what must stop, hurt and sad that I made the cut and created a wound that may or may not heal, helpless.

Questions: What am I helpless to heal? What in me needs healing? How have I wounded myself? What kind of wounding has awakened me? What in me has died but wants to live? What am I trying to cut out of myself?

This dream seems to be asking me to live with those deep cuts that have wounded me.

This dream seems to be asking me to remain whole and intact.

This dream seems to be asking me not to assume that what appears to be dead is dead.

Poet-ing the Dream

The insides are gone.

The outsides remain.

Something is dead.

I make a cut

To remove the inside

And save the outside.

Instead, the cut

Awakens something.

It is alive

But now wounded

In need of healing. ■

Drawing the Dream

Desire to save part of cat.

Uncertain what to do about it.

Mortified that I've made the cut.

What to do?

Will the cat heal?

Hmm... cat/cut gut

That's funny!

Sleepy cat wakes up.

Cat looks at me.

Cat is alive.

But now cat is cut.

Desire to save or rescue something.

Realizing that I've cut something that is alive.

Dead cat

Begin cut here.

Will the cat heal?

Hmm... cat/cut gut

That's funny!

What about my cut gut?
This cat must have lots of guts.

References

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