



A mini dreamwork primer

by Rick Belden

*my dreams float
just below the surface of consciousness
like ice floes
drifting out to sea.*

*asleep on an airplane
they are the clouds beneath me
always there and out of reach
real surreal and everywhere
half-seen in drowsy glimpses.*

*invisible as gravity
insatiable as imagination
they are the wings that hold me to this earth
they can take me anywhere
but they always bring me home.*

Introduction

Dreams are an incredibly rich source of information that lies largely untapped in most of us. Unbound by the stifling mundanities of daily waking life, they present us with a seemingly infinite stream of fantastic scenarios, mysterious characters, mythic themes, and transcendent possibilities, often functioning as precursors and companions to major awakenings in our lives.

Dreams and dreamwork played an essential part in the genesis and development of my first book, *Iron Man Family Outing*, and have continued to remain significant for me ever since. In this post, I'd like to share some of the basic ideas and strategies I've learned in working with my dreams over the last 25 years, in the hope that readers might feel

inspired to spend a little time with those mysterious and often forgotten friends that visit us every night, our dreams.

Recall and Record

The first step in working with any dream is to remember it. One of the best ways to encourage and improve your dream recall is to make a habit of recording whatever you remember from your dreams in whatever way is best for you, whether it's writing, making a voice recording, or doing some artwork. Your record of the dream doesn't have to be polished and perfect; the point is to capture the important elements and flow of the dream, as well as your own experience as the dreamer, as best you can.

Some folks have a hard time remembering their dreams. They may say "I never have any dreams" or "I have dreams but I can't remember anything." But in my experience, there's always something you can use as a starting point, even when you're certain there isn't. You may wake up with a feeling, an impression, or an image in your mind. You may awaken with a vague recollection of a person, a place, or just a word that came to you while you slept. That is your starting point for working with your dreams. Record it somehow. If you do just that much, consistently, you'll notice that your dream recall begins to improve and you'll find that you can remember much more than you thought you could.

It's best if you can record something from your dreams, even if it's just a few words or sentences, as soon as possible after waking up, while the information is still fresh and easily accessible to your waking mind. For many of us, finding that kind of time in the morning is a real challenge. But even a few minutes of recording basic information, if practiced consistently, can improve your dream recall significantly and put you in a position to return to the dream later in the day if you choose.

Deepen your understanding

Here are two suggestions, based on my experience working with my own dreams, that may help bring you closer to your dreams and deepen your understanding of them:

- 1) Give each dream a title. This will be, in essence, its name. Naming things is important. Can you imagine a child, or a pet, or a movie without a name?
- 2) If you're making a verbal record your dreams (either written or audio), do so in the present tense. This is a good technique for keeping your dream alive. It draws you back into the experience and activates your memory of additional details, both as you're writing/recording it and later on when you read/hear it.

Every element (person, place, and thing) in every dream is alive and has knowledge and a point of view. Some elements are more articulate, are more complex in nature, and have more to say than others. But nothing in any dream is merely an object without consciousness. One way to gain a better understanding of a dream is record the dream

from the perspective of one of the other players in the dream, i.e., someone or something other than yourself.

Here's an example. Let's say you've just had a scary nightmare about being chased through the forest by a wolf. You've written out a recap of the dream but you're still freaked out and having difficulty understanding what it's all about. You could try re-recording the dream from the perspective of the wolf. Write in present tense and give that version of the dream its own title. You can do the same thing from the perspective of anything in the dream: the trees, the sky, the other animals in the forest, etc. If you let these elements of your dream speak for themselves, you will gain new insights you never expected.

I purposefully chose a scary dream scenario with a threatening character for this example because I've learned that the things that seem the scariest, the most threatening, and the most negative in my dreams often actually carry, contain, or embody useful information that I very much need. So there may be times when it is useful, before chasing that monster away, to ask it, "Who are you? Why are you here?" It may have a story to tell you that you never expected to hear, and a gift for you that you never expected to receive and didn't even know you needed.

Learn your own language

I don't trust dream dictionaries and have not found them helpful. They tend to be too general, too specific to someone else's experience, or both. They also tend to take you out of the moment and cause you to doubt your own experience as the dreamer.

The language of your dreams is unique to you, but it has basic features that are common for all of us. Each dream is composed of numerous elements (people, places, things), and each element is composed of one or more (often all) of the following aspects:

- *universal* (shared) aspects, which are often referred to as archetypal
- *cultural* aspects (also shared), which are specific to a group time and place
- *personal* aspects, which are yours and yours alone
- *contextual* aspects, which are the product of a specific time and place in your life

At best, a dream dictionary might provide some information about the universal aspect of a dream element, but no element in your dream, or anyone else's, can be reduced to a single aspect without losing most of its meaning.

Dreams are so powerful, so rich, and so subtle, and they carry so many layers of meaning that they can be interpreted and understood in any number of ways. I don't know if it's possible to achieve a 100% understanding of any dream, and sometimes immediate understanding is not possible. I've learned that there are some dreams I just have to sit with for months or years before I understand what was being said to me. Some I never understand, regardless of how much time and effort I put into trying. I've

come to the conclusion that some dreams are not meant to be understood, nor do they require it. They simply are.

Learn to listen

Dreamwork is about listening. It's about forming a relationship with the sleeping part of yourself. When you listen consistently and honor what you are given, that relationship will deepen and you will be given more. And that sleeping part of you will begin to speak to you in your waking life more and more, and you will begin to know, more and more, who you really are.

Focus on what matters most

As your dream recall improves, you may begin to receive far more information than you feel capable of handling. You may find yourself having multiple dreams in one night, very long dreams, or dreams filled with an abundance of detail. You may even experience all of these scenarios in combination. This is a classic example of a good problem to have, but can also lead rather quickly to feelings of being overwhelmed, intimidated, and paralyzed by information overload.

If you find yourself in a *too much information* situation, you'll have to make some choices. It's a bit like fishing; you have to decide what to keep and what to let go. So how do you go about separating the big fish from the little fish in your dream life?

One of the most reliable indicators of a big fish is a recurring dream or a series of dreams with recurring themes, characters, locales, etc. A recurring dream scenario is a big bright flare being fired into the sky to get your attention, and certainly warrants high priority in your dreamwork.

Sizing the other fish is a bit more complicated and takes practice. Some dreams will simply feel more significant than others, but even in those cases, some editing may be required to avoid losing your focus in a maze of details and sidetracks, however intriguing they all may be. You may find it helpful to develop some dreamwork shorthand techniques, such as setting a limit on the length of your narrative for the dream (e.g., one paragraph, three sentences, etc.) as a way to contain the dream and keep your focus tight. Another approach worth exploring is the use of poetry and poetic language, which can be a very efficient way to capture the most significant narrative details as well as the deeper information (feelings, imaginative elements, etc.) present in a dream.

Still, no matter what approaches you use, it's inevitable that you're going to have to let some of your dreams go, if only because of the ongoing demands of waking life. However, it's been my experience that important information communicated to me by my dreams will be restated over and over, often in different ways, until I get it. So if you lose a big fish now and then, don't worry. It'll probably keep nibbling at your line until you reel it in.

Learn processes and techniques

Processes and techniques developed and documented by others can be a valuable source of assistance in your dreamwork practice. But bear in mind that not every process and technique works well (or at all) for every person. Your own experience will be the best measure of whether a given approach works well for you and is worth continuing, or not.

With that caveat in mind, here are a few reading suggestions that may help you progress in your dreamwork:

- [*Inner Work: Using Dreams and Active Imagination for Personal Growth*](#) by Robert A. Johnson
- [*Where People Fly and Water Runs Uphill: Using Dreams to Tap the Wisdom of the Unconscious*](#) by Jeremy Taylor
- [*Let Your Body Interpret Your Dreams*](#) by Eugene Gendlin
- [*A Little Course in Dreams*](#) by Robert Bosnak

Work with others

One of the best ways to expand and enhance your experience and understanding of your dreams is to work with others. The assistance of a knowledgeable dreamwork guide can be a powerful catalyst in the development of your personal practice and help you reach new levels of understanding and appreciation of the information you're receiving on a nightly basis.

Group dreamwork is another approach that can accelerate and deepen your insight into your dreams, as well as giving you the opportunity to help others improve their understanding of the dreams they share, and to learn from them.

Have fun and enjoy the ride

Dreams are a tremendous source of wonder, inspiration, and insight. They provide us with a nightly connection to the ongoing, transcendent mystery of life and being that is at the core of every human experience. Whether we're aware of our dreams or not, they're always with us, every day and every night, giving us hints into the underlying truths that lie just below the surface of our everyday existence. They can take us anywhere, but they always bring us home. So when you're working with your dreams, however you choose to go about it, don't forget to have fun and enjoy the ride.

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Rick Belden is a respected explorer and chronicler of the psychology and inner lives of men. His book, [Iron Man Family Outing: Poems about Transition into a More Conscious Manhood](#), is widely used in the United States and internationally by therapists, counselors, and men's groups as an aid in the exploration of masculine psychology and men's issues, and as a resource for men who grew up in dysfunctional, abusive, or neglectful family systems. His second book, [Scapegoat's Cross: Poems about Finding and Reclaiming the Lost Man Within](#), is currently awaiting publication. He lives in Austin, Texas.

More information, including excerpts from Rick's books, is available on his [website](#) and [blog](#). You can also find him on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [YouTube](#).