

Dreams and the Development of a Personal Mythology

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Personal myths are defined as cognitive structures that give meaning to one's past, define one's present, and provide direction for one's future. They serve the functions of explaining, guiding, and sacralizing experience for the individual in a manner analogous to the way cultural myths once served those functions for an entire society. Dreams appear to synthesize one's existing mythic structures with the data of one's life experiences. Some dreams attempt to strengthen old myths, others may illustrate a counter-myth, and still others appear to facilitate a cognitive interaction between old and new myths. Dreams can be used to focus upon ongoing dialectics between personal myths in an attempt to attain a synthesis or to resolve the conflict in another way.

This paper is an attempt to present an interpretive framework for understanding dreams within the context of underlying personal myths. It is held that these personal myths are cognitive structures which shape perception, thought, emotions, and behavior. Dreams process new experiences within the structures of both old and emerging personal myths. Thus, dreams function as both markers and agents in a developmental drama of evolving, and often conflicting, mythic assumptions of the dreamer.

We all confront situations at various points in our lives that force us to make difficult choices: majoring in business or in art, living in the suburbs or "returning to the land," using leisure time to write a poem or plant a garden. Each of these decisions is influenced by the nature of our underlying mythology. If that mythology consistently develops one aspect of our psyche to the detriment of others, a realization may eventually occur when we begin to push in the other direction.

The term "personal myth" was first introduced into the scientific literature by Ernst Kris in 1956 to describe certain elusive dimensions of the human personality for which psychoanalysts needed to account if their attempts to bring about change were to be effective and lasting. Warmoth (1965) later

wrote about the way certain memorable human experiences may become personal myths, fulfilling on a personal level functions that cultural myths have historically performed for an entire society. And Jung (1961) discussed his own "personal myth" in his autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (p. 17). David Feinstein (1979) developed the concept of personal mythology as a central dimension of personality that is closely related to both the pervasive myths of the culture and the inner psychodynamics of the individual.

Ullman and Zimmerman (1979) were the first to make extensive applications of the personal myth concept to dreams. They pointed out that it is the nature of dreams to expose and puncture dysfunctional personal myths, illuminating the self-deceptive strategies one uses to avoid initiating a more functional pattern of behavior (pp. 104-105). Feinstein and Krippner (1981, in press) propose that personal myths continually change throughout the lifespan as the individual's construction of reality develops, and suggest that dreams both mark these changes and serve as agents in the changes that take place.

Stevens (1983) has summarized neurophysiological findings which suggest that nighttime dreams involve a *vertical* synthesis between the "old" and "new" portions of the brain, as well as a *horizontal* synthesis between the cerebral hemispheres. EEG waves that are characteristic of REM sleep, for instance, originate in the brain stem and spread upwards through the midbrain to the cortex. REM deprivation studies using rats have indicated that dreaming plays an important role in the integration of instinctual programs for attachment and territorial behavior with the higher cognitive processes of the cerebral hemispheres. Stevens has suggested that investigations of dream content which reveal such common themes as falling, being pursued, being attacked, and repeatedly attempting to perform a task, provide "evidence that phylogenetically ancient structures play an important part in the nightly dreams of contemporary human beings" (p. 268).

The activation-synthesis hypothesis developed by McCarley and Hobson (1979) postulates that "principle elements of dreams derive from a synthesis of information generated by activation of motor pattern generators and of sensory systems" (p. 112). The authors have detected isomorphisms between the physiology of REM sleep and the content and form of dreams as revealed in dream reports. McCarley and Hobson assert that information from sensory systems, motor systems, and the organism's affective states are all "linked together and compared with information about the organism's experiences in the past, its memories. Dreams are not a result of an attempt to disguise but are a direct expression of this synthetic effort" (p. 125).

Palombo's (1984) analysis of dreams has led him to the view that dreaming is an information-processing activity whose adaptive function involves matching new experiences with representations of past events already stored in long-

term memory. REM sleep has, for instance, been shown to be an important mediator in the integration and retention of new learnings (Fiss, 1979). Since the time of Adler, many dream theorists have observed that dream style provides a reflection of lifestyle, such as when the "tortuous path of a dream may . . . reflect the tortuous way in which an individual moves through life" (Fiss, 1979, p. 334).

The role of dreams in problem-solving has been studied by several investigators. Cartwright (1977) reported that her subjects were better able to recognize and speculate about negative possibilities following dreaming—possibilities they seemed to avoid while awake. Psychotherapy patients whom Cartwright and her colleagues trained to attend to their dreams during REM sleep evidenced a lower drop-out rate, made better progress in therapy, and showed greater depth of self-exploration than control groups. Fiss (1979) found the enhancement of dreams to be significantly associated with increased self-awareness and decreased psychopathology, in contrast with a control group where all conditions were identical except that non-REM mentation (those thoughts that occur between stages of REM sleep) was enhanced versus dreams occurring during REM sleep.

Are Myths Real?

Mythology has not received good press during the past several centuries. The dominant social voices of contemporary culture have relegated all knowledge that can not be grasped by the rational mind into the realm of superstition. But modern people are not well-served by the consequences of this stilted, mechanistic world-view. Levin (1968) has referred to the contemporary tendency to denounce myth as a decision made from the vantage point of what is actually a *rival* myth.

The replacement of one set of myths by another has repeated itself throughout history. Galileo was called before a papal commission of the Inquisition, convicted, and put under house detention for championing Copernicus' notion that the earth rotates around the sun. Eventually, the mythic heliocentric concept advocated by Copernicus and Galileo supplanted the geocentric myth promulgated by the medieval church.

In some parts of the Indian subcontinent, Buddhism superseded Hinduism. After Alexander the Great conquered western India, new deities and myths emerged which proclaimed the falsity of their rivals. However, when Alexander left India, so did the pantheon of Greek gods and goddesses. In a similar fashion, when the Aztecs conquered central Mexico, they dethroned some deities and incorporated others. Their entire cosmology was then obliterated by the Roman Catholic invaders who brought with them a new mythic order.

In another realm of human endeavor, some of the early Greek philosophers

identified air, earth, fire, and water as the building blocks of the universe. In the fifth century B.C., Democritus challenged this myth by proposing the atom as the basic element. While this was a rather advanced notion for its time, Democritus' atom was later divided into electrons, protons, neutrons, and over two hundred other particles. The latest conjecture, which posits the quark as the elementary particle, uses metaphor to describe the quark's properties, relying on such terms as "flavor," "color," and "charm." The emergence of quantum mechanics increased the mythic qualities of "hard science" because of its implication that there is no such thing as an independent observer. Berman (1984) states that the lesson learned from quantum mechanics is that the subject (or perceiver) and the object (what is being perceived) form one seamless whole; everything is related to everything else (p. 138).

The resistance of scientists to the philosophical implications of quantum theory is understandable because of the implication that any version of reality is at its core a mythical construction. As a result, the old notions of "objective knowledge" have been challenged. Quantum mechanics afford scientists a glimpse of the possibility that the totality of human consciousness, including the information stored in the unconscious, is a significant factor in the perception and construction of reality (Berman, 1984, p. 139). Albert Einstein (1954) was not a quantum physicist, but came to a complimentary conclusion when he suggested that science, religion, art, and ethics are all motivated by wonderment in the face of cosmic mysteries.

The word "myth" has been tainted by common usage where it has come to refer to a falsehood. Partially for this reason, however, it is urgently appropriate to revitalize the deep significance of this powerful concept as it enhances the vitality of psychological explanations while reflecting the hypothetical nature inherent in *any* construction of reality. Rather than being judged as true or false, a personal myth can be best thought of as a way of making sense of reality. The myth may ultimately be judged as being functional or dysfunctional for positive growth and development at a particular point in time for a given individual.

A person continually updates his or her basic mythological understanding of the world as new experiences are gathered along the life cycle. Understanding that these conceptions of reality are mythical in nature makes it easier to revise and reformulate old ways of thinking rather than to feel pressure to defend outdated views. A personal myth is a cognitive structure, a pattern of thinking and feeling that gives meaning to the past, defines the present, and provides direction for the future. It serves the functions of explaining, guiding, and sacralizing experience for the individual in a manner analogous to the way cultural myths once served those functions for an entire society.

Defining personal myths in terms of cognitive structures allows the use of those principles that have been established by cognitive psychologists to understand personal constructs (Epting, 1984; Kelly, 1955) in order to better understand how personal myths operate. In addition, psychologists (e.g., White, 1985) have found that cognitive structures may be coded verbally or pictorially, may or may not be within the individual's awareness, may be influenced by heredity and/or experience, may operate at various levels of human life, and may change according to lawful patterns that are governed by the principles of assimilation and accommodation as described by such researchers as Piaget (1952).

Dreams appear to synthesize one's existing mythic structures with the data of one's life experiences. Frequently when there is an incongruity between one's underlying mythic structure and an experience, it is the task of the dream to resolve the difference. Some dreams accomplish this by reinterpreting the experience so that it will fit the myth, a process similar to Piaget's concept of assimilation. Other dreams emphasize weaknesses in the mythic structure, allowing that structure to adjust to the new experiences; this is Piaget's concept of accommodation. Such dreams highlight ways the mythic structure is failing the person, or at least failing to adequately account for the person's experiences.

Changing Myths in People's Lives

Personal myths are tied closely to the complex mythology of the culture. When the *Rolling Stones* complained, "I can't get no satisfaction," and the *Beatles* announced, "She's leaving home," troubled teenagers in the turbulent 1960s and early 1970s found new images to represent the deep discontent they felt with their family lives. This discontent was given voice in the 1980s by the *Police* who sang, "Mother chants her litany of boredom . . . , but we know all her suicides are fake. Daddy only stares into the distance; there's only so much more that he can take."

These lyrics gave adolescents an alternative to the prevailing notion that they were merely going through a stage of teenage rebellion before conforming to social norms and adjusting to the responsibilities of adulthood. In its place emerged a picture that addressed and validated their complaints about societal values and the inability of their parents' generation to understand them. This new image supported their desires to seek out a new meaning and a new ethic for how they wanted to live their lives. Changes in lifestyles, workstyles, education, and religion have resulted.

Like cultures, each individual has an image of how the universe works and of his or her place in it. While personal myths are derived, in part, from the myths of the culture, the process moves in both directions. Each individual's

personal mythology contributes to the ongoing development of the surrounding culture's mythology as well.

Personal myths serve the individual in a manner that is similar to the way cultural myths serve society. One's personal mythology includes all the interacting and sometimes conflicting thoughts and feelings a person harbors about the world, both consciously and unconsciously. These thoughts and feelings share their comprehension of what the world is and of what their place in it can be. These myths shape the actions persons take and the interpretations they give to their experiences. Personal myths do not always engage the conscious mind, but they are constantly affecting people's lives.

An individual is most likely to become conscious of a given myth when a change is occurring within it. Maggie was a commercial artist who had terrifying dreams that she was fleeing from a huge and ugly monster. She was so troubled by these dreams that she tried to draw pictures of the monster, hoping to look more clearly at what was frightening her, but she could not quite capture the image. The next time she had the dream, she was so determined to remember what the creature looked like that she actually turned to face it, but the creature disappeared. The dream occurred again, but this time when the monster faded into the distance, she ran after it, finally catching up and actually touching it. As she touched it, she screamed in terror, and at that moment it turned into a beautiful horse-like creature. Maggie rode it, whirling in a sky of clouds until she found she was in the embrace of a man.

Maggie awoke, realizing that she had once had the same feeling of terror in an early experience with dating. As a result, she had held herself distant and aloof from men, and acknowledged that sexual response was difficult for her. Taking clues from the dream, she allowed herself to permit more sexual fantasy into her awareness and, later, into her life. She finally was able to paint the sequence of events in her dream. Maggie began to open up to intimate contact on both the emotional and sexual levels.

It is from the same realm of inner forces that weaves one's dreams and feeds one's intuition that personal myths are given form. Indeed, it is probably as natural for the human being to make myths as to develop language. While personal myths shape our awareness, they themselves operate largely outside of ordinary consciousness. It is possible, however, to willfully bring many aspects of our mythology into our awareness. The ancient Greek playwrights believed that the tragic hero is a decent person who commits a fatal error, usually by misperceiving reality through pride. It is in acting out an unexamined mythology that one could walk in blindness; the mythology an adult displays was developed as a child, primarily to cope with the conflicts embedded in one's cultural and personal surroundings. Awakening to the mythic dimension of life is to achieve the freedom to inspect those forces that for most people master them without their knowledge. If personal myths are

guiding individuals in a manner that is not in harmony with their needs, abilities, and potentials, they may use techniques such as dream interpretation to initiate changes that are consistent with their deepest sources of wisdom (Feinstein and Krippner, 1981).

If personal myths are largely unconscious, how do they affect people in their daily lives? The quality and direction one's life takes is a product of the choices made every day. Personal mythology forms the foundation of these choices because it determines how one perceives, feels, thinks, and makes assumptions about what actions will cause what outcomes. Ultimately, one's personal mythology will be most usefully understood in the language and images one uses when he or she thinks about his or her life. Such an understanding partakes of the mythic dimension because it is revealed through waking and dream symbols, and through understanding the past in terms of a story that has mythic proportions. The great insight of Freudian psychology is that the past provides the basis of one's unconscious mythic patterns, as well as a person's conscious attitudes and beliefs.

The mythic realm, of course, can be conveyed by folkways other than personal narratives. The prevalence of electronic media in contemporary society has made a powerful impact on the manner that myths are shaped. Music and songs are already among the most ubiquitous means from which old myths are examined and new myths are conveyed. Country and western lyrics sometimes demonstrate how mythic patterns sabotage one's efforts while at the same time help people smile at their personal tragedies, as in the painful romantic drama: "If you won't leave me, darling, I'll find somebody who will." An analysis of rock and new wave music would probably provide as penetrating an understanding of the emerging myths in contemporary culture as any other indicator.

Developing Myths as Revealed by Dreams

The case history of a workshop participant illustrates how dreams can be utilized to detect changes in personal myths. Shana was a 34-year-old mother of two small children; she filled her days with the chores of being a good parent, housewife, and citizen. Her friends viewed her clan as a model family. However, she began to have a recurring dream which interrupted this picture of a contented family life.

A bird in a nest, resting peacefully, feeding its babies, is forced into a terrible struggle against a strong wind that suddenly blows the bird away into a frightening storm.

Terrified by this dream, Shana started having trouble falling asleep. She became irritable. She began to feel constantly troubled, and life with her

children and husband became plagued by her ill-humor and short temper. The greater her efforts to keep things running smoothly, the more depressed she became, until she had almost no energy or vitality. She described this concern to her physician who suggested she make a better adjustment to the demands of her family role and gave her anti-depressant medication. He also encouraged her to get out of the house and become more active in the community.

Shana became involved in a neighborhood theater group which she enjoyed. The drugs did increase her energy, yet she became troubled by a chronic pain in her neck and upper back. She noticed that this pain decreased when she yelled at her children, although the resulting guilt hurled her further into depression. Her ability to control her temper grew weaker, she was frightened one night by a vivid dream about suffocating, and she began to wonder if she was having a psychotic break.

Shana's conflicting myths were competing to direct her life, and aspects of the conflict were being expressed in her dreams, fantasies, daytime thoughts, emotional reactions, and even in her physical difficulties. As is often the case, Shana identified with a prevailing personal myth, which she subsequently labeled as her "dutiful homemaker myth," epitomized for Shana by her memory of the "ideal" housewife and mother in those television series which were popular when she was growing up. At the same time, an emerging counter-myth, quite outside her awareness, was acting as a powerful but disruptive influence on her life. This emerging myth would later serve to support her in the development of autonomy and in the cultivation of her suppressed creative urges. For example, Shana began to fantasize about going on archeological digs in various parts of the world, and these thoughts were even reflected in her dreams.

Shana became involved in a weekly group that helped its members examine and reshape their personal myths. Using guided fantasy, she recreated the dream about the bird in the nest, this time, however, extending it so that the bird learned to ride the winds to exciting new places and to return to the nest whenever she desired to or felt needed. The figure of a heart with wings that she had drawn in a personal journal came to symbolize this myth for her, and she identified Margaret Mead as a hero she associated with the emerging myth. A variety of techniques was used in the ongoing workshop to help Shana develop a synthesis of the old and the emerging myths that incorporated the best qualities of each, and Shana was provided support and guidance for translating this inner synthesis into her life. Her work with the theatrical group gave Shana confidence in her creative abilities.

As Shana's children grew older and more self-sufficient, she took a serious interest in archeology and participated in some of the expeditions she had previously been able to experience only in forbidden dreams and fantasies.

Her husband, who had initially attempted to discourage Shana's new activities, began to feel new excitement in the relationship, and her example stimulated him to give more attention to his own creative pursuits.

When a prevailing myth such as Shana's "ideal homemaker myth" becomes dysfunctional or otherwise outdated, the psyche may generate a new myth and each myth may compete to dominate the individual's feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. Shana's conflict was aggravated by her inability to bring her merging myth to her conscious awareness. Had she paid attention to her recurrent dream with insight regarding the development of her inner life, or to any of a host of other signals, she could have initially worked with the conflict in a much more direct, effective, and less painful manner.

One's personal mythologies are woven from many strands, including all the events of the past, the myths of the culture in which one was raised, the requirements of one's genetic programming, and those inspirational moments which allow people to sense the spiritual aspects of the universe. Since personal mythology has its roots in the ways people learned to make sense of their world in childhood, it inevitably lacks balance. This is inescapable because the mythic world-view that develops during childhood is largely determined by the hopes, fears, strengths, and fallibilities of one's parents and other circumstances beyond one's control. Nevertheless, mythology shapes one's desires, attitudes, and choices just as the unconscious shapes one's dream life. While personal mythologies continually mature throughout the years and people may develop some conscious access to that process, it is a realm that, for most individuals, operates largely below the level of awareness. Nonetheless, people pay a price when imbalances, limitations, and disharmonies exist.

Dreams and the Dialectic

Personal myths appear to form in a manner that is parallel to the way dreams develop. It can be hypothesized that dreams are related to the brain's propensity for language, imagery, and story-telling. As such, they play an active role in the ongoing revision of the individual's personal mythology.

While dreams serve many physiological and psychodynamic functions, the one that receives the greatest attention in working with personal myths involves the role of dreaming in synthesizing a person's existing mythic structure with the data of a person's ongoing life experiences. As Ullman (1979) notes, "Our dreams serve as corrective lenses which, if we learn to use them properly, enable us to see ourselves and the world about us with less distortion and with greater accuracy" (p. 410).

Frequently, there is a conflict in one's personal mythology which is affecting one's feelings, thoughts, or behavior—a mythic crisis is apparent in regard

to one's personal development. This crisis occurs when a prevailing myth becomes so outdated or otherwise dysfunctional that the psyche generates a counter-myth to organize perceptions and responses in prototypical areas. When this occurs, the psyche is in conflict as each myth becomes a psychological entity starting to dominate prototypical situations with its particular modes of perceiving and responding.

The conflict between the old myth and the counter-myth is worked out largely unconsciously. Among the processes that occur are that the counter-myth becomes crystalized and develops within the cognitive system, emerging in response to the old myth's limitations. It challenges the old myth and the two become engaged in a dialectical process.

One can work with a categorization system which describes several aspects of dreams in the ongoing dialectic. A particular dream may involve one or more of these aspects. For people who have learned to understand inner events in terms of personal mythology, this can become a useful framework for understanding dreams. One can not go so far as to say that dreams occur in terms of personal myths any more than one can claim that a Freudian analysand's sexual dreams prove Freudian theory or that a Jungian analysand's archetypal dreams prove Jungian theory. However, the fit has been striking when it has been used clinically to interpret inner experience from a mythic perspective.

1. The dream may attempt to strengthen an old, self-limiting myth (particularly when it is challenged) by (a) emphasizing past experiences which provided evidence for the validity of the old myth (a man was told—in his dream—"You really are a failure, and always have been, your promotion at work notwithstanding"); (b) forcing a fit between the old myth and daily experiences (a woman stayed out later than she had planned; in that night's dream she was berated by her husband, an action he would never have taken in real life, but one which her old myth felt she deserved); (c) providing visions of a future dominated by the old myth or a preview of the future according to the old myth, often with a sense of irreversible fate (a young woman on the verge of moving away from her dominating parents dreamed about herself ten years in the future, still living at home).

2. Dreams may create or strengthen a counter-myth which has grown out of the old myth's deficiencies by (a) reworking old experiences and interpreting them in a less self-limiting, more affirming manner providing an alternative to the old myth's template of reality (a young man dreamed about himself beginning work for an employer who turned out to be unstable and vindictive; in the dream, he made the best of the situation, learning what he could before moving on to another job); (b) interpreting new experiences in this manner or accommodating the old myth to fit new experiences in a manner that corresponds more closely to the counter-myth (an aspiring vocalist, somewhat disappointed that the locale for her first engagement turned out

to be a small night club, dreamed about how much she could learn by trying out new material with her audiences); (c) the dream may organize possibilities into a future with wish-fulfillment qualities (a newly-arrived immigrant dreamed about the potentials she envisioned for her life in the new country).

3. The dream may facilitate a cognitive integration between the two myths. As ongoing experiences bring the two toward a center-point, becoming more compatible, an integration of essential elements of each becomes attainable, and the cognitive forces that work against cognitive dissonance begin to integrate the two. This becomes evident in dreams which (a) highlight experiences from the past in which the mythic conflict was evident and show ways it could have been integrated at the time (a man worked on resolving a new conflict by dreaming of a past workshop in which he resolved a related problem); (b) highlight the conflict as it emerged in recent experiences and show ways of resolving it (a woman dreamed about a conflict with a neighbor, considered ways of resolving the problem in the dream, and was instructed to attempt one approach by an inner voice); (c) portend a future where the conflict is resolved (a woman, anxious because her children were leaving home for college, dreamed about the new opportunities she would have to enjoy her free time once they left).

Once one learns how to interpret dreams on this basis, one can quickly identify which of these nine possibilities are present in the dream (Feinstein, in press). Sometimes none will appear; sometimes more than one will be present in a dream. However, this categorization system demonstrates why more than one dream needs to be studied to determine the way in which mythic content in dreams develops over time.

This system interfaces with aspects of several other dream theories. The counter-myth is the psyche's attempt to problem-solve dilemmas caused by the prevailing myth. Freud's wish-fulfillment also involves the counter-myth, as does Jung's compensatory dream which expresses an undeveloped part of the psyche. Perls' view of dream elements as conflicting parts of the psyche focuses on the conflictual aspect of this system. The information theory approach to dreams is congruent with the adaptive function which this system views dreams as serving.

Feeling tone often gives a clue as to the function of the dream. "Old myth" dreams typically feel pessimistic, hopeless, and draining in terms of energy and vitality. "Counter-myth" dreams typically feel hopeful, optimistic, even exhilarating. "Integration" dreams tend to produce a calm, positive, realistic feeling. Of course, emotion and mood in a dream are dependent upon the dreamer's thinking and feeling style.

Therapists working with this categorization system report that considerable time can be saved: by identifying the *type* of dream that has been reported, less attention needs to be paid to the meaning of every nuance of dream con-

tent. Feeling tone attains salience in dreamwork and the mythic approach to dreams becomes practically-oriented, focused as it is upon current life issues.

In summary, dreams can play an important role in presenting to a dreamer his or her mythic structure. Dreams can itemize each aspect of one's personal mythology and can point out when an old personal myth has become inadequate for the satisfactory handling of current life issues. The dream can point out when personal myths have become dysfunctional, can provide a dialectical encounter between old and new myths, and can mediate conflicts between myths, even providing new mythic structures and facilitating a synthesis.

By monitoring their inner life, individuals can learn about their personal mythology from dreams and can determine the progression being made toward developing functional, positive myths. These myths accommodate one's developmental needs, accommodate unknown parts of the psyche, capitalize on opportunities and strengths, and deal with one's deficiencies realistically. Such myths accommodate polarities and enable a healthy dialectic to ensue that leads the individual to higher and higher levels of synthesis.

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