

13

Penelope as Dreamer The Perils of Interpretation

Kelly Bulkeley

No matter where it is practiced, the interpretation of dreams is fraught with difficulties, uncertainties, and ambiguities. In contemporary Western society the most common location for dream interpretation is private psychotherapy: A client suffering some kind of mental distress tells a dream to a professional therapist, whose job it is to discover what the dream might be saying about the client's life situation. The methods used by most psychotherapists are drawn in one way or another from the clinical practices of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. These methods include asking for personal associations, identifying puns, metaphors, and wordplay, and seeking homologies between particular dream images and broader cultural symbolism. Although some psychotherapists report great success in the use of dream interpretation to treat their clients,¹ many other healthcare professionals remain wary. One of the major reasons for this wariness is a lack of uniform standards and guidelines to use in the practice of dream interpretation—Freud said one thing, Jung said another, and their followers have gone on to say a thousand other things. With no settled, commonly accepted method for determining how exactly dream image “A” is related to waking life situation “B,” dream interpretation appears inherently unstable, unreliable, and therapeutically suspect.

If dream interpretation is a perilous endeavor in psychotherapy, it must be even more so when practiced in cross-cultural contexts. Anthropologists who seek to understand the dreams of informants from other cultures must contend with languages, religions, and community traditions that in many cases are radically different from their own. (These cultural factors are also present in psychotherapeutic contexts, but in most cases therapists and their clients share significantly more common cultural ground than do anthropologists and their informants.) A further difficulty is that many cultures regard dreams as spiritually powerful experiences that must be honored and carefully guarded, a belief with two important consequences: One, it makes informants cautious about what they do and do not report to the inquiring anthropologist; and

two, in most cases the informants have their own interpretive ideas about what their dreams mean, ideas that are often very different from those of the anthropologist. Unlike psychotherapists, whose clients usually grant the therapist's greater knowledge about dreaming, anthropologists often work with informants who have developed their own distinct ideas about the meaning of their dreams. If the integrity, intelligence, and sophistication of these "non-Western" approaches to dream interpretation are taken seriously (as many anthropologists argue we should—see chapters 6, 7, 9, and 16 in this volume), grave questions are raised about the adequacy and universal applicability of the hermeneutic methods of Freud, Jung, and their conceptual progeny.

At least anthropologists and psychotherapists are able to speak in person with their informants. Historians interested in dream interpretation have no direct personal access to the subjects of their research, no way of asking for associations, no way of questioning the dreamers about what they think their dreams mean. Added to the formidable difficulties of cross-cultural understanding, historians have this further problem of being confined in their interpretive efforts to the impersonal analysis of textual records. When the temporal distance between historians and their subjects is combined with the inevitable distortions that arise in copying, editing, and transmitting texts over hundreds or in some cases thousands of years, it makes the practice of historical dream interpretation seem a nearly impossible affair.

In each of these arenas—psychotherapy, cross-cultural investigation, historical research—the methodological challenges are daunting for those who seek to interpret dreams. Anyone who continues in the face of these challenges must do so with deep humility and chastened expectations. Critics will always have ample material to use in questioning the validity of a particular interpretation of a dream.

I regret having to say that this is not the worst of it. The greatest difficulty of all facing those who pursue the interpretation of dreams remains to be mentioned. This last difficulty is so serious that it threatens to destroy the very possibility of dream interpretation as a legitimate, worthwhile, knowledge-producing enterprise. Even if all the aforementioned methodological obstacles could somehow be overcome, this one problem would still remain, and it would still pose a potentially fatal challenge.

In what follows I will explore this greatest of all interpretive dangers by telling a story. This story is a very old one, a story you probably have heard many times before. I would like to tell it again because even though it is just a fiction, just a make-believe tale from a faraway place and time, I believe it illustrates as nothing else can the *reality* of the ultimate methodological challenge facing any would-be dream interpreter.

The story I would like to tell is of the meeting of Odysseus and Penelope in Book 19 of *The Odyssey*. In many respects this encounter is the most dramatically intense moment in the entire poem, and at the heart of the scene is a dream—Penelope's dream of the twenty geese that are suddenly slaughtered by a mountain eagle. Odysseus, after leading the Achaean army to victory against the Trojans and after enduring a seemingly endless series of trials and adventures, has returned at last to his island home of Ithaca, where he has found a mob of rude noblemen besieging his palace. The crafty warrior has disguised himself as an old beggar in order to gain entrance into the palace without being recognized, and he is plotting violent revenge against the men who would steal his throne. Penelope, who for many years has desperately clung to the hope that Odysseus would someday return to her, has invited this strange wanderer into her private chambers to ask if he can tell her any news of

her husband. The beggar fervently promises the Queen that Odysseus is very close and will return very, very soon.

Penelope replies to the beggar's story by saying she wishes his words would come true, but she doubts they will. She asks her old servant woman, Eurycleia, to bathe the stranger and arrange a comfortable place for him to sleep. The Queen steps away while the old nurse washes the beggar's feet. Then, before parting for the night, Penelope returns to the beggar and they have one final exchange:

"Friend [she says to the beggar],
Allow me one brief question more . . .
Interpret me this dream: From a water's edge
Twenty fat geese have come to feed on grain
Beside my house. And I delight to see them.
But now a mountain eagle with great wings
And crooked beak storms in to break their necks
And strew their bodies here. Away he soars
Into the bright sky; and I cry aloud—
All this in a dream—I wail and round me gather
Softly braided Akhaian women mourning
Because the eagle killed my geese.

Then down
Out of the sky he drops to a cornice beam
With mortal voice telling me not to weep.
'Be glad,' says he, 'renowned Ikarios' daughter:
Here is no dream but something real as day,
Something about to happen. All those geese
Were suitors, and the bird was I. See now,
I am no eagle but your lord come back
To bring inglorious death upon them all!
As he said this, my honeyed slumber left me.
Peering through half-shut eyes, I saw the geese
In hall, still feeding at the self-same trough.'
The master of subtle ways and straight replied:
'My dear, how can you choose to read the dream
Differently? Has not Odysseus himself
Shown you what is to come? Death to the suitors,
Sure death, too. Not one escapes his doom.'

Penelope shook her head and answered:
'Friend,
Many and many a dream is mere confusion,
A cobweb of no consequence at all.
Two gates for ghostly dreams there are: one gateway
Of honest horn, and one of ivory.
Issuing by the ivory gate are dreams
Of glimmering illusion, fantasies
But those that come through solid polished horn
May be borne out, if mortals only know them.
I doubt it came by horn, my fearful dream—
Too good to be true, that, for my son and me.'²

What has just happened here? What is going on between Odysseus and Penelope, and what is the significance of her dream and their exchange about its meaning? The traditional interpretation of this scene, shared with near unanimity by scholars from antiquity to the present, is this.³ Odysseus has heroically controlled his desire to rejoin Penelope and hidden his identity from her for two reasons. One is to test his wife's fidelity during his long absence; Odysseus is well aware that when his compatriot Agamemnon returned home from the Trojan war, he was viciously murdered by his wife Clytemnestra and the lover whom she had taken in his absence.⁴ The second reason for Odysseus' continued disguise is to pick up information about how to destroy the hated suitors. The traditional view is that Penelope's dream of the twenty geese is a straightforward prophecy, whose true meaning the disguised Odysseus instantly recognizes. But Penelope, who has shown a stubborn skepticism throughout the story, refuses to accept the dream's obvious meaning. Indeed, perhaps she unconsciously enjoys the attention of the suitors and does not really want Odysseus to come back.

My dissatisfaction with this widely held interpretation centers on its strange deprecation of Penelope's intelligence. This is a woman whom several characters have praised for her unrivaled perceptiveness, cunning, and guile; this is the woman who devised the famous ruse of the funeral shroud, by which she successfully deceived the suitors for three years. All of the evidence in the poem makes it clear that Penelope is not a fool: She is extremely perceptive and capable of remarkably subtle deceptions. So why, when we come to Book 19 and her meeting with the "beggar," should we now forget all that and regard Penelope as a pathetically unwitting dupe in the vengeful scheming of Odysseus?

The Iliad and *The Odyssey* together contain, up to the point of Penelope's dream of the 20 geese, four major dream episodes: Agamemnon's "Evil Dream" from Zeus (2.1–83), Achilles' mournful dream of the spirit of dead Patroklos (23.54–107), Penelope's reassuring dream from Athena (4.884–946), and Nausicaa's arousing marriage dream from Athena (6.15–79). Viewed in this context, Penelope's dream is unusual in at least two ways. First, this is the only dream that occurs "offstage," out of direct view of the audience. We do not "see" the dream while it is happening; we only hear the dreamer describe it, after the fact. Second, this is the only "symbolic" dream, with its meaning encoded in stylized imagery. The dream thus poses a riddle, which must be accurately interpreted for the true meaning to emerge.

I believe these two details suggest a very different interpretation of the encounter between Penelope and the disguised Odysseus. Could it be that this is not a "real" dream at all, that in fact Penelope has made it up? Could it be that Penelope is deliberately using the riddle of her dream as a test to find out the intentions of this man, whom she consciously suspects is Odysseus? Could it be that while he thinks he is deceiving her, she is really the one deceiving him? This would not be the first time in Homer's poems that dreams have been used to deceive and manipulate others—in fact, it would be the fourth time: Zeus sending the "Evil Dream" to Agamemnon, Athena sending the "marriage dream" to Nausicaa, and Odysseus (at the end of *The Odyssey*, Book 14) making up a story about the "real" Odysseus making up a dream in order to steal another warrior's cloak on a cold, windy night (14.519–589).

But why would Penelope fabricate such a dream? The answer emerges if we think carefully about what is happening at that crucial moment when the old nurse Eurycleia is washing the beggar's feet.⁵ Penelope has removed herself and is standing alone, after a long and intimate conversation with a man who has detailed knowledge

about Odysseus, who looks and sounds very much like Odysseus, who insists with passionate certainty that Odysseus will return to the palace the very next day. The question could hardly not arise for this most intelligent and perceptive of women: Is this stranger Odysseus himself? If he is, then why is he not revealing himself? Penelope has just poured her heart out to him, saying how terribly she has suffered over the years—why will he not drop his disguise and reunite with her this very moment?

When Eurycleia finishes washing the beggar's feet, Penelope returns to him and says she has one last question: What is the meaning of her dream of the geese and the mountain eagle? Without a second's hesitation the disguised Odysseus agrees with the words of the mountain eagle: The dream means "death to the suitors, sure death, too."

Penelope, however, disagrees. Her "two gates" speech that follows is a subtle but unmistakable way of saying "I don't think so" to the beggar's interpretation. She cannot agree with him for a simple reason: The mountain eagle and the beggar have both misinterpreted the dream. There are twenty geese in her dream, but more, many more than that number of suitors in the palace. As we learn in Book 16.270–288, where Telemachus tells Odysseus who all the suitors are and where they come from, there are a total of 108 men besieging the palace. Penelope's refusal to accept the interpretation of the mountain eagle and the beggar is not due to stubborn skepticism, pathetic ignorance, or unconscious desire—she rejects the interpretation because it is wrong. The true meaning of the symbol of the twenty geese is surprisingly easy to find if we do not automatically assume that the mountain eagle and the beggar are right (i.e., if we do not automatically privilege the hermeneutic perspective of Odysseus). The twenty geese symbolize the twenty years that Odysseus has been away fighting the war at Troy and journeying through the world. The exact length of Odysseus' absence, twenty years, is mentioned five separate times in the poem.⁶ The fifth mention is the most significant as a kind of "day residue" because it involves the beggar/Odysseus, who comments to Penelope just a few lines earlier in the same scene that Odysseus has been gone for twenty years.

Thus, the first part of Penelope's dream symbolically, and very accurately, describes her emotional experience of what has happened between them: Odysseus, by going off to fight in someone else's war, has destroyed the last twenty years for her. What should have been the prime years of their marriage, the wonderful years of raising a family and creating a home, the years that Penelope would have "loved to watch" and care for, have been slaughtered by Odysseus. The second part of the dream expresses Penelope's fearful perception of Odysseus right now, still standing apart from her in the disguise of a beggar. He does not recognize her and what the last twenty years have been like for her; all he can see are the suitors and a galling challenge to his honor. By posing this dream riddle to the beggar, Penelope is in effect asking if her suspicion is true: Is the "real" Odysseus as blind to her feelings and as obsessed with killing the suitors as is the "dream" Odysseus? When the beggar agrees with the mountain eagle's words in the dream, Penelope knows the unfortunate answer.

The mysterious poetry of Penelope's two gates speech becomes all the more powerful when it is understood as a response to Odysseus' failure of the dream interpretation test. To his reprimanding words ("My dear, how can you choose to read the dream differently?") Penelope replies that dreams are always difficult to understand, and they do not always come true. The danger is that we will allow our desire to cloud our perception—taking as divine prophecy what is merely human fantasy. But some dreams, she goes on to say, do have the potential to come true, "if mortals only know

them." That is precisely what Odysseus has failed to do. He has failed to see past his own desire for revenge.

I am reluctant to finish with this story, because there is so much more to be told (and so much more to be questioned, if you happen to disagree with my admittedly unorthodox reading of this scene).⁷ But let me come back to the opening discussion of the difficulties confronting those who pursue the interpretation of dreams. The encounter between Penelope and Odysseus is, in the context of our discussion, a cautionary tale about the most profound challenge facing any form of dream interpretation. More than the barriers of language and culture, more than the ambiguous symbolic connections between dream imagery and waking life, more than the subtle complexities of social exchange between interpreter and dreamer, the greatest challenge facing the interpretation of dreams is the danger of self-deception. The human propensity for self-deception threatens the legitimacy of dream interpretation in psychotherapy, anthropology, historical research, and every other context in which it is practiced. Put in the simplest terms, how can you ever know you are not just fooling yourself? How can you ever be sure your own biases, assumptions, and expectations are not subtly determining what you believe you are discovering in a dream? How can you be sure you are not just finding what you want to find?

Considered in the light of the foregoing story, this could be called "the Odyssean fallacy": a dream interpretation that fails to recognize and account for the influence of the interpreter's own beliefs, interests, and desires. Every attempt to interpret a dream is subject to the criticism that it is committing the Odyssean fallacy; every claim about the meaning of a particular dream is open to the charge that the alleged "meaning" is in fact an unwitting projection of the interpreter's own assumptions and prejudices. Indeed, history is filled with examples of misinterpreted dreams, and modern psychologists like Freud and Jung are frequently and justifiably criticized for their failure to recognize as fully as they might have the undue influence of their personal biases and prejudices on their interpretive practices.⁸ In view of this troubling history, it would be hard to argue that the Western cultural tradition has made much progress over the past three thousand years in dealing with the problem of self-deception in dream interpretation.

The ultimate logical extension of the Odyssean fallacy is to deny that dream interpretation can ever be anything other than personal projection. Whether dreams have meaning in themselves or not, interpreters will never know because they can never be certain they have eliminated all the potentially distorting influences of their own expectations. Dream interpretation, in this line of thinking, is doomed to failure from the very beginning. It is reduced to the status of reading Rorschach ink blots, of interest perhaps in revealing aspects of the interpreter's personality, but of no legitimacy whatsoever as a means of producing trustworthy knowledge.⁹

This may appear to end the discussion. I would suggest it is rather the beginning of a new discussion. The pessimism elicited by a full appreciation of the Odyssean fallacy can be relieved at least in part by what I would call "Penelope's response." After twenty years of hoping, dreaming, weeping, and praying for her husband's safe return, Penelope knows as well as anyone the tempting allure of wish-fulfilling fantasy. She knows how easy it is to see what you want to see and believe what you want to believe. And yet Penelope still hopes that her wishes *really will* come true. Despite her sharp awareness of the ever-present danger of self-deception, Penelope maintains a passionate faith that one day her deepest desires will really and truly be fulfilled. Pene-

lope's caution, skepticism, and wariness in defense of this faith are legendary, and even Odysseus is moved to exclaim in amazement and frustration (in Book 23, when Penelope plays the bed trick on him) that she never stops testing, probing and questioning whether she can really believe what she is seeing. Odysseus is right, Penelope has become a supremely skeptical person—yet she has also become a supremely faithful person. She has not allowed her skepticism to overwhelm her with despair, but neither has she let her faith carry her off into vain fantasy. She has learned to live with the vibrant tension between a powerful skepticism and an equally powerful faith; she has learned to hold these two passions together in all their creative dynamism. This, I imagine, is Penelope's response to the Odyssean fallacy: Dream interpretation is always difficult but never impossible. Our desires always threaten to deceive and mislead us, yet the vital fact remains that some dreams, "those that come through solid polished horn, may be borne out, if mortals only know them."

In this spirit, I propose the following four principles for the interpretation of dreams. These principles may be employed in any context in which dreams are interpreted, and I believe they provide a coherent and trustworthy basis for determining the validity of different interpretations and distinguishing better ones from worse ones. Most important, these principles give interpreters specific methodological guidance in dealing with the danger of self-deception.

1. *The dreamer knows best what his or her dream means.* Only the dreamer has direct access to all the images and feelings in the dream, and only the dreamer is familiar with all the memories and associations making up the dream's broader context. This does not necessarily mean that the dreamer's own view on the dream's meaning is the only legitimate one; dreamers are often unaware of many significant dimensions of their dreams. But this principle does imply that the dreamer's perspective must be accounted for. It further implies that interpreters should be concerned if their claims about a dream's meaning deviate too far from what the dreamer says the dream means. This again is where Odysseus failed—his condescending words "my dear, how can you choose to read the dream differently?" express a hermeneutic attitude that fails to acknowledge and respect the dreamer's point of view.
2. *A good interpretation will account for as many of the dream's details as possible.* I call this the principle of internal coherence. An interpretation that brings together more of the various elements of a dream will be better than an interpretation that only refers to a few isolated pieces. Naturally, problems arise if interpreters try to force all the details of a dream into a single fixed idea of what the dream means. But on the whole, the interpretation that accounts for the most details is the best interpretation. A corollary of this principle is that any interpretation should be considered suspect which fails to account for a key detail in the given dream. The exact number of geese in Penelope's dream, twenty, the significance of which countless interpreters have neglected to recognize, is an example of this. Indeed, it often happens in dream interpretation that what initially seems to be a random and unimportant element—the color of a tree, the shape of a character's face, the layout of a house—turns out to be remarkably vital piece of the dream's overall meaning.
3. *A good interpretation will make as many connections as possible between dream's content and the dreamer's waking life.* This is the principle of external coherence, and it is

grounded in the fact that dreams are usually created out of images, ideas, and feelings from the dreamer's daily existence. A good interpretation identifies the connections between those waking-life sources and the various symbolic strands of the dream. Sometimes the connections relate to experiences from the previous day; sometimes they involve events from farther in the past; and sometimes they refer to anticipated events in the future. Indeed, many dreams weave all three temporal strands together. For example, Penelope's dream is directly connected to her present (waking up to find the geese actually outside in hallway), yet it harkens back to her distant past (the twenty years since she last saw her husband), while also envisioning a possible future (a joyful reunion with him). The principle of external coherence asks how well any proposed interpretation has contextualized the given dream in the full temporal span of the dreamer's life and how well it accounts for the waking world origins of the dream's imagery.

4. *A good interpretation will be open to new and surprising discoveries and will look beyond the obvious (what is already known) to find the novel and the unexpected (what is not already known).* This is the most effective methodological strategy for addressing the danger of self-deception. If the interpreter admits to *not knowing* what exactly will come of the process, if she or he stays open to the possibility that startling new meanings may emerge, the potentially malign influence of personal assumptions and expectations will be greatly reduced (if never absolutely eliminated). I share Jung's view on this point: "So difficult is it to understand a dream that for a long time I have made it a rule, when someone tells me a dream and asks for my opinion, to say first of all to myself: 'I have no idea what this dream means.' After that I can begin to examine the dream."¹⁰

These four principles—privileging the perspective of the dreamer, focusing on the details, identifying connections to waking life, and being open to surprise—constitute what I regard as a postcritical hermeneutics of dreaming. It would take a much lengthier chapter to discuss the many ways of applying these principles in psychotherapy, anthropology, historical research, and other interpretive arenas, so I will simply say that if interpreters keep the four principles in mind, they will be well prepared to meet whatever distinct methodological difficulties they encounter in their fields of study.

In closing, I must acknowledge the paradoxical nature of illustrating my approach in the way I have, with a retelling of an old story about a fabricated dream—a fiction within a fiction within a fiction. What could make a reader more skeptical about an author's argument? Well, how about ending with one of the author's own dreams? In March of 2000, when I was anxiously working to organize the American Academy of Religion conference panel at which I presented the essential argument of this chapter, I had a short but quite vivid dream. In the dream I am with Kurt Cobain, the singer-guitarist from the Seattle rock band Nirvana who killed himself with a shotgun in 1994. In my dream he is alive and well, in a classroom with me and several college students at the university where I teach. I feel a strong desire somehow to weave Kurt into the conference panel—I need his creative energy, yet I fear his self-destructive unpredictability.

I awoke from the dream with that tension fresh and vivid in my mind. I hope this chapter has provoked some of that same tension in you.

NOTES

1. See Jane White-Lewis, chapter 10, this volume; Clara Hill, *Working with Dreams in Psychotherapy* (New York: Guilford Press, 1996); Alan Siegel, *Dreams That Can Change Your Life* (Los Angeles: Jeremy Tarcher, 1990); Walter Bonime, *The Clinical Use of Dreams* (New York: DeCapo Press, 1988); Marion Cuddy and Kathryn Belicki, "The Fifty-Five Year Secret: Using Nightmares to Facilitate Psychotherapy in a Case of Childhood Sexual Abuse," in *Among All These Dreamers: Essays on Dreaming and Modern Society*, ed. Kelly Bulkeley (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).
2. Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1963), 19.575, 603–640.
3. Defenders of this basic line of interpretation include F.M. Combellack, "Three Odyssean Problems," *California Studies in Classical Antiquity* 6 (1973): 17–46; Bernard Fenik, *Studies in the Odyssey*, in *Hermes Einzelschriften*, no. 30 (Franz Steiner-Verlag GmbH, 1974); John H. Finley, Jr., *Homer's Odyssey* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978); C. Emlyn-Jones, "The Reunion of Odysseus and Penelope, *Greece and Rome* 31 (1984): 1–18; Sheila Murnaghan, *Disguise and Recognition in the Odyssey* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); M.A. Katz, *Penelope's Renown* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); R. B. Rutherford, *Homer's Odyssey: Books XIX and XX* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and Nancy Felton-Rubin, "Penelope's Perspective: Character from Plot," in *Reading the Odyssey: Selected Interpretive Essays*, ed. Seth L. Schein (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). Katz has usefully summarized modern scholarly debate on this section of *The Odyssey* into three groups. One group takes an "Analytic" approach, arguing that the combination of at least two different story traditions in Book 19 is the cause of the narrative inconsistencies and contradictions. Another group uses an "Aesthetic" perspective to argue that the importance of plot structure made it inevitable that plausible character development in Book 19 (particularly regarding Penelope) would suffer as a by-product. The third group draws on "Psychological" thinking to seek deeper motivations in the characters that would help to account for otherwise problematic or inexplicable events in Book 19. My approach in this essay is, in Katz's categorization, psychological. However, I come to very different conclusions from those offered by the other primary exponents of the psychological view and I thereby avoid the biggest problems that critics have identified in their treatments of this scene.
4. 11.439 ff.
5. Book 19, 364 ff. It is worth noting that just before stepping aside from Eurycleia and the beggar Penelope leaves her guest with this mournful thought: "Odysseus will not come to me; no ship will be prepared for you. We have no master quick to receive and furnish out a guest as Lord Odysseus was. Or did I dream him?" (313–317).
6. The twenty years are mentioned at 2.196, 13.102, 16.235, 19.256, and 19.547.
7. For a more fully developed analysis of this passage, see "Penelope as Dreamer: A Reading of Book 19 of *The Odyssey*," in *Dreaming*, vol. 8, no. 4 (1998): 229–242. In this article I go on from this point to discuss the implications this interpretation of Penelope's dream has for understanding her seemingly capricious decision to hold the contest of the bow the following morning (at the very end of Book 19) and the strange longings felt by Penelope and Odysseus during their "shared dream" the night before the contest (at the very beginning of Book 20).
8. See Frederick Crews, ed., *The Unauthorized Freud: Doubters Confront a Legend* (New York: Penguin, 1998) and Richard Noll, *The Aryan Christ: The Secret Life of Carl Jung* (New York: Random House, 1997).
9. See J. Allan Hobson, *Dreaming as Delirium: How the Brain Goes Out of Its Mind* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), p. 93.
10. "On the Nature of Dreams," in Carl Jung, *Dreams*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 69.

Section III
METHODS

14

Western Dreams about Eastern Dreams

Wendy Doniger

I. WHAT CAN WE LEARN ABOUT DREAMS FROM THE MYTHS OF OTHER CULTURES?

It is often argued that quantum physics confirms Zen Buddhism, that our own “modern” ideas were prefigured by “Oriental” mythologies. This may or may not be so, but I do not think it is a useful path to follow. Instead, I would argue that some of the insights of non-Western mythologies do indeed bear striking resemblances to some of the most abstract formulations of modern science, but only because the same basic human mind is searching for a limited set of metaphors with which to make sense of the same basic human experiences, be the expressions Eastern or Western, “factual” or imaginative. This is the bridge that justifies our attempts to gain insights about our dreams from the stories that other cultures tell about their dreams.

2. WHAT RELEVANCE DOES OUR UNDERSTANDING OF LUCID DREAMS, ON ONE HAND, AND ORGASMIC DREAMS, ON THE OTHER, HAVE FOR THE INTERPRETATION OF MYTHS ABOUT SEXUAL DREAMS?

Stephen LaBerge has summarized the growing literature on what are called lucid dreams, which take place “when we ‘awaken’ within our dreams—without disturbing or ending the dream state—and learn to recognize that we are dreaming while the dream is still happening.”¹ In addition to demonstrating that such dreams do occur, LaBerge goes on to argue that they can be made to occur. He cites, first, a passage from Hervey de Saint-Denys:

I dreamt that I was out riding in fine weather. I became aware of my true situation, and remembered the question of whether or not I could exercise free will in controlling my actions in a dream. “Well now,” I said to myself, “this horse is only an illusion; this countryside that I am passing through is merely stage scenery. But even if I have not evoked these images by conscious volition, I certainly seem to have some control over them.” I

decide to gallop, I gallop; I decide to stop, I stop. Now here are two roads in front of me. The one on the right appears to plunge into a dense wood; the one on the left leads to some kind of ruined manor; I feel quite distinctly that I am free to turn either right or left, and so decide for myself whether I wish to produce images relating to the ruins or images relating to the wood.²

This is also a classical mythological image; the challenge of controlling a horse functions as a metaphor for free will and the harnessing of the senses in Plato, the Upanisads, and many other texts throughout the world. Here the image of controlling the horse expresses for Saint-Denys his ability to control his own dreams.

For LaBerge, "This brings up two questions regarding control of lucid dreaming. The first is, how much is possible? . . . The second question regarding dream control involves what kind is desirable."³ This is a problem on which the mythology of dream narratives, particularly orgasmic dream narratives, sheds some light.

On one hand, orgasmic dreams seem to be significantly different, in physiological terms, from lucid erotic dreams:

Wet dreams may result from genital stimulation and reflex ejaculation. . . . Wet dreams would be the result of actual erotic sensations accurately interpreted by the dreaming brain. In other words, first comes the ejaculation, then comes the wet dream. Apparently, the opposite normally holds for lucid dream orgasms. The erotic dream comes first, resulting in orgasm "in the brain." However, in this case, the resulting impulses descending from the brain to the genitals are evidently too inhibited to trigger the genital ejaculatory reflex. So, reflex dreams are only wet in the dream.⁴

In lucid erotic dreams, by contrast, there is some physiological change, but not as much as in a genuine, nonlucid wet dream. A woman named "Miranda" dreamed, in a lucid dream, that she was flying, found an attractive man, made love with him, and experienced an orgasm. "She said the dream orgasm had been neither long nor intense, but was quite definitely a real orgasm." In the laboratory experiments, measurements of vaginal blood flow and heart rate "Provided the first objective evidence for the validity of Miranda's reports (and, by extension, those of others) of vividly realistic sex in lucid dreams."⁵ And a man who had a lucid orgasmic dream reported, "Although I found I had not actually ejaculated, I still felt the tingling in my spine and I marvelled at the reality that the mind could create."⁶

The mental intensity of nonejaculatory erotic dreams is still more complex than this evidence implies: "Men whose spinal cords have been shattered through injury, so that there is no longer any nervous connection between their brains and their lower bodies, still have sexual dreams in which they experience all the feelings and sensations of orgasm. The basis of this experience is not in their isolated lower bodies. It is wholly within their brains."⁷ In other words, this man, incapable of a physiological orgasm, had a vivid lucid dream of orgasm.

Thus, as LaBerge points out, "In some respects, lucid dream sex has as powerful an impact on the dreamer's body as the real thing. . . . What happens in the inner world of dreams—and lucid dreams, especially, can produce physical effects on the dreamer's brain no less real than those produced by corresponding events happening in the external world."⁸ We are left, therefore, with a paradox: The lucid orgasmic dream produces erection, excitement (often said to be more mentally intense than in a real orgasm), but no significantly heightened heartbeat and no actual ejaculation. Is it, therefore, more or less real than a wet dream?

An orgasmic wet dream is physically real; a real orgasm has taken place, inside and outside the body of the dreamer, and it seems at first to have happened more or less as it would have taken place had the dream partner been physically present. In another sense, however, the orgasmic dream is emotionally unreal; one has had a fantasy of an experience that cannot be entirely real without a partner. The semen is a biological fact, but it is proof only of the fantasy. Unlike other "things" that the hero brings back from the dream world, the semen cannot prove the physical existence of the person who caused it to be present in the dream—the lover from the other world. Like the dream itself, semen is "emitted" by the dreamer in one of the basic processes of illusory creation.

Another way to approach this problem is to return to the question of control, for one cannot control an orgasmic dream as one can control a lucid dream. The element of control brings the lucid dream closer to the *mental* waking world but, there being less physiological response, farther from the *physical* waking world. Indian philosophical texts tell us a great deal about the control of lucid dreams, and Indian mythological texts tell us a great deal about the experience of orgasmic dreams. LaBerge attempts to apply the Oriental dream-control techniques of yogis and shamans to Western goals of improving one's life or even, indeed, one's lifestyle. But this cannot be done.

The yogis' goals and assumptions differ from ours; their gods are not our gods. On one hand, they are not trying to get ahead in the world of *samsara* (material life and rebirth); they are trying to leave it (as the texts that LaBerge cites show). They do not use dream techniques for the sorts of things that yuppies want to have; no Hindu would name a sexy perfume *Samsara*, as Guerlain has done.⁹

Yet yogis are not control freaks; on the contrary, the key to all of their meditational techniques is the cultivation of a complete emptying out of oneself, a complete passivity, so that God, or the force of the universe, takes over. This approach is closer to the old Alcoholics Anonymous slogan—"Let go and let God"—than it is to any self-help creed. So, too, in the "Oriental" stories of shared dreams, the mutuality is always conceived of as passive, and the dreamer is at the mercy of the lover; these are myths of surrender, not myths of conquest. For both of these reasons, therefore, the control achieved in yogic dreams would never be applied to orgasmic dreams, since yogis would not want to have an orgasmic dream, and since orgasmic dreams are, in stories at least, passive.

But these are merely symptoms of the underlying, far more basic problem: that the healing techniques of India are designed to heal what Indians think of as the human person, more precisely to produce what Indians think of as a good (or normal, or healthy, or realized—choose your own ideal) person. And such a person is someone embedded in an Indian social system, someone whose expectations of relationships with parents, children, spouse, and everyone else are very different from our own. Ideas such as "individual" and "maturity" would have been utter nonsense to the authors of the textbooks on yogic techniques. It is therefore problematic—not impossible, perhaps, but certainly more problematic than is usually acknowledged—for a Westerner to achieve an Eastern enlightenment.¹⁰

3. WHAT CAN HINDU MYTHOLOGY TELL US ABOUT THE PROBLEMS INHERENT IN OUR ATTEMPTS TO STUDY SOMEONE ELSE'S DREAMS?

I have attempted elsewhere¹¹ to approach this problem through the use of a story that occurs in the great Sanskrit compendium of dream narratives, the *Yogavasishta*, a philosophical treatise composed in Kashmir sometime between the tenth and twelfth centuries C.E.

The myth is the story of a hunter who meets a sage who has entered another man's body and lodged in his head:

One day a hunter wandered in the woods until he came to the home of a sage, who became his teacher. The sage told him this story:

In the old days, I became an ascetic sage and lived alone in a hermitage. I studied magic. I entered someone else's body and saw all his organs; I entered his head and then I saw a universe, with a sun and an ocean and mountains, and gods and demons and human beings. This universe was his dream, and I saw his dream. Inside his head, I saw his city and his wife and his servants and his son.

When darkness fell, he went to bed and slept, and I slept too. Then his world was overwhelmed by a flood at doomsday; I, too, was swept away in the flood, and though I managed to obtain a foothold on a rock, a great wave knocked me into the water again. When I saw that world destroyed at doomsday, I wept. I still saw, in my own dream, a whole universe, for I had picked up his karmic memories along with his dream. I had become involved in that world and I forgot my former life; I thought, "This is my father, my mother, my village, my house, my family."

Once again I saw doomsday. This time, however, even while I was being burned up by the flames, I did not suffer, for I realized, "This is just a dream." Then I forgot my own experiences. Time passed. A sage came to my house, and slept and ate, and as we were talking after dinner he said, "Don't you know that all of this is a dream? I am a man in your dream, and you are a man in someone else's dream."

Then I awakened, and remembered my own nature; I remembered that I was an ascetic. And I said to him, "I will go to that body of mine (that was an ascetic)," for I wanted to see my own body as well as the body which I had set out to explore. But he smiled and said, "Where do you think those two bodies of yours are?" I could find no body, nor could I get out of the head of the person I had entered, and so I asked him, "Well, where *are* the two bodies?"

The sage replied, "While you were in the other person's body, a great fire arose that destroyed your body as well as the body of the other person. Now you are a householder, not an ascetic." When the sage said this, I was amazed. He lay back on his bed in silence in the night, and I did not let him go away: he stayed with me until he died.

The hunter said, "If this is so, then you and I and all of us are people in one another's dreams." The sage continued to teach the hunter and told him what would happen to him in the future. But the hunter left him and went on to new rebirths. Finally, the hunter became an ascetic and found release.¹²

As we read the story of the hunter and the sage, we become confused and are tempted to draw charts to figure it all out. It is not clear, for instance, whether the sage has entered the waking world or the sleeping world of the man whose consciousness he penetrates, and whether that person is sleeping, waking, or, indeed, dead at the moment when we meet the sage. But as the tale progresses, we realize that our confusion is neither our own mistake nor the mistake of the author of the text; it is a device of the narrative, constructed to make us realize how impossible and, finally, how irrelevant it is to attempt to determine the precise level of consciousness at which we are existing. We cannot do it, and it does not matter. We can never know whether we have become trapped inside the minds of people whose consciousness we have come to share.

Inside the dream village, the new householder (*ne* sage) meets another sage, who enlightens him and wakes him up. Yet although he is explicitly said to awaken, he stays where he is inside the dream; the only difference is that now he knows he is inside the dream. Now he becomes a sage again, but a different sort of sage, a householder sage, inside the dreamer's dream. While he is in this state, he meets the hunter and attempts to instruct him. But the hunter misses the point of the sage's saga: "If this is so . . ." he mutters, and he goes off to get a whole series of bodies before he finally figures it out. The hunter has to experience everything for himself, dying and being reborn;¹³ he cannot learn merely by dreaming, as the sage does.¹⁴

This story can teach us many things. On one hand, it may provide a wonderful example of a lucid dream, to encourage us in our attempts to find out more about our own lucid dreams. But, on the other hand, it may serve as a caveat, a warning of the possible dangers of attempting to get into other people's heads to understand their dreams. Since dreams are often the fulcrum of our whole unconscious personality, to apply *someone else's lever* at this point may uproot far more than we intended; it may tear out not only the roots of our own particular life but the deeper roots that our society has implanted in us, roots that are also, by this time, deeply imbedded in the unconscious. This may catapult us into an entirely different world—and, as the story of the hunter demonstrates, it is not always as easy to get out of such a world as it is to get in.

NOTES

This chapter is taken in large part from an invited address presented at the Seventh International Conference of the Association for the Study of Dreams, Chicago, June 28, 1990.

1. Stephen LaBerge, *Lucid Dreaming: The Power of Being Awake and Aware in Your Dreams* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985).
2. Hervey de Saint Denys, *Dreams and How to Guide Them* (London: Duckworth, 1982), cited in LaBerge, *Lucid Dreaming*, p. 116.
3. LaBerge, *Lucid Dreaming*, p. 117.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
7. Oswald, cited by Charles Rycroft, *The Innocence of Dreams* (New York, Pantheon, 1979), p. 111.
8. LaBerge, *Lucid Dreaming*, pp. 93, 97.
9. See Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Dreams, Illusion, and Other Realities* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984), *passim*.
10. For further discussion of the problems inherent in cross-cultural interpretations of symbols, see Wendy Doniger, "When a Lingam is Just a Good Cigar," in the "Festschrift for Alan Dundes," edited by L. Bryce Boyer, forthcoming in a special issue of *The Analytic Quarterly*.
11. See Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Other People's Myths: The Cave of Echoes* (New York: Macmillan, 1988).
12. *Yogavasishta-Maha-Ramayana* of Valmiki, ed. W. L. S. Pansikar, 2 vols. (Bombay, 1918), 6.2.136–157.
13. See the story of the hundred Rudras and the wild goose in chapter 5 of O'Flaherty, *Dreams*.
14. O'Flaherty, *Other Peoples' Myths*, pp. 7–10.

23

Dialogue with a Skeptic

*Frederick Crews
and Kelly Bulkeley*

This exchange is a revised transcript of a conversation between Frederick Crews and myself at a public symposium titled “Beyond Freud and Jung? The Interpretation of Dreams, Religion, and Culture,” sponsored by the Religion and Psychology Area (Area 5) of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California on September 23, 2000. Fred’s comments and my response to them are a fitting conclusion to this book because they highlight the ongoing challenges that face anyone who seeks to explore and understand the realm of dreams.

COMMENTS OF FREDERICK CREWS

Let me begin by asking what we are really after today, in this largely religious setting and company. Is it a cross-cultural study of dreams? If so, much can be accomplished. It’s a wonderful field of intellectual endeavor, and books on the subject are pouring out. The latest, I believe, is *Dream Cultures: Explorations in the Comparative History of Dreaming*, edited by David Shulman and Guy G. Stroumsa (Oxford University Press, 1999). Books like that can tell us a great deal. However, they don’t tell us about dreams and dreaming per se, much less about an alleged cross-cultural significance of dreams. Rather, they explore what different societies have made of dreams. There can be no methodological objection to such study. But if this present company is inclined to wax transcendental about dream meaning, drawing some kind of spiritual comfort from it, I will have to be counted in the opposition.

The problem is simple and fundamental. If we are inclined to make pronouncements about the meanings of dreams based on our own intuitions, our own presuppositions, we must face the awkward fact that every society has always found just what it wants to find in dreams. That being so, we ought to be wary of showing the same parochialism ourselves. Outside of the sleep laboratory, I don’t believe we even get terribly reliable knowledge of the bare content of dreams. Unless you wake someone up immediately when you sense that he or she is dreaming, you are dealing with summarized dream reports, not with dreams, and those reports reach you with a significant time lag that provides the dreamer with time to interweave the sheer memory of

images with all manner of cultural assumptions. Furthermore, dreaming itself can be influenced by expectations. It's a well-known fact, for example, that Freudian patients after a while dream Freudian dreams, Jungian patients dream Jungian dreams, and so forth. Nothing could be less surprising than this. But it's methodologically sobering, because it suggests how far away we are from an unbiased universal account of "the" purport of dreams.

Perhaps this is why I personally have never taken any interest in the young field of religion and psychology. What little I know of it comes straight from Kelly's book *Visions of the Night: Essays on Dreams, Religion, and Psychology* (SUNY, 1999), a copy of which he was kind enough to give me. I apologize, Kelly, if I exaggerate the typicality of what I find in those pages, but I have a feeling that yours is indeed mainstream work. The assumptions behind it, insofar as I can discern them, are challenging but also open to challenge in their own right.

Kelly talks in this book about what he calls "the numinous power" of human dreams. A provocative phrase! Numinous power, to me, means that dreams are connected to some higher order of invisible reality. And Kelly appears to feel the same way. Early on he discusses his own adolescent dreams and says that he awoke from them with a sense that the dreams were "trying to teach me another way of looking at the world." That's a phrase I want to return to. And Kelly says that when he began studying dreams, "they seemed to lead beyond the individual, beyond the ordinary boundaries of the dreamer's personal psyche."

I suppose this is mainstream language in the subfield of religion and psychology, though of course it's quite foreign to psychology as usually understood in university psychology departments. To me, it's ambiguous language, and not necessarily in a fruitful sense. Does Kelly mean that he was being led beyond the individual plane to mere anthropological diversity and relativism? Or, as I rather suspect, does he mean that he was being taken outside his individual self to a higher spiritual meaning, residing in a world soul of some kind? What power, what mystic personality, is doing the "teaching" and "leading" here? For me this is a basic stumbling block—because, frankly, I can't accept that the invoking of invisible powers and spirit guides, even if you privately believe in them, has a place in legitimate empirical inquiry. My hope, in our forum today, would be that this intention can be clarified and, if I have it right, cogently defended. When Kelly uses words like "numinous" and says that his dreams seemed to be trying to teach him another way, I do suspect that he means an intervention, through dreaming, from another plane of reality. Is this correct? If so, the empirical question that needs answering is "How do you know, how can you show us, that your mystical feelings are responding to an objective, external, culturally uninfluenced source of concern and care?" Of course, if everyone present shares the same fondness for a religious style of explanation, the problem vanishes. But I don't share it, so—show me!

Later in his book, Kelly takes a dream of Freud's famous patient Dora, whose notoriously failed treatment occurred in 1899, though Freud didn't publish his defense of it until 1905. The Dora case was meant to be a showcase for Freud's method and brilliant skill in dream interpretation. By today, however, the case history is usually regarded as a remarkable display of forced interpretation and bullying behavior on the therapist's part.

I think that Kelly shares in this general dissatisfaction, though on rather narrower grounds. He wants to revise Freud's understanding of Dora's dream in accordance with his own sense of dream-messages-from-above. Freud, he says, has missed an "existent-

tial" theme in Dora's report; the dream was really sending advice "that could enable Dora to live a more fulfilling life."

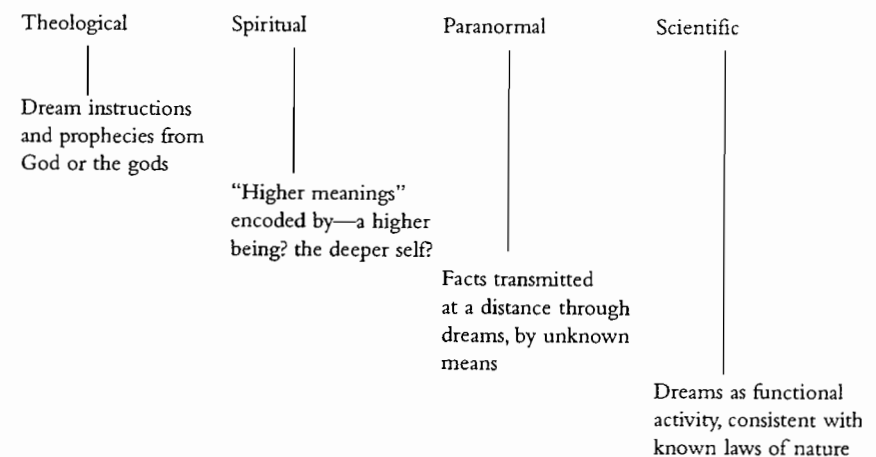
Uh—oh! All of my doubts and questions spring to life again here. It certainly sounds as if Dora was getting taught a lesson from outside, from some realm of divine presence. If this is Kelly's view of the matter, how does he know it's correct? What can he reply to the skeptic's impression that Dora is here being given the standard spiritualizing workup, without any consideration of alternative possibilities? Since every school of dream interpretation—and there are scads of them!—invariably finds that every dream perfectly fits its prior expectations, what evidence or argumentation can show us that Kelly's school is the correct one, in this case or in any other?

Well, I will leave Kelly to ponder these challenges while I try to sketch a context for the whole project of "going beyond Freud and Jung." Please refer now to my handout, "A Spectrum of Perspectives on Dreams and Dreaming" (figure 23.1). In a very simple way, it shows where the two famous theorists can be located on a continuum stretching from the most inductive and cautious to the most metaphysical and speculative approach to dream content.

At this latter pole, you will see, lies a theological attitude to dreams. I take the word "theological" seriously in its root meaning: knowledge of divinity. We're not talking about tentative hypotheses here but about confident pronouncements about the ultimate nature and purpose of reality. Humankind in its long and often delusional history has never been bashful about putting forward theological dogmas. As for dreams, a theological perspective supposedly tells us just what God or the gods intend by them.

Dreams, in a theological account, are indeed messages from the divine; they direct our conduct, prophesy the future, etc. God or the gods want you to win the next battle, turn away from other gods, avoid all that is sinful and taboo, make the right sacrifices, feel better about your troubles, and get into heaven where your ancestors, restored to top condition and equipped with harps, are already belting out celestial tunes. Of course theology gets a lot more sophisticated than this when it is practiced by powerful and subtle intellects. What it never does, however, is admit the embarrassing truth: People through the ages have had no rational basis whatsoever for their culture-bound

Figure 23.1 A Spectrum of Perspectives on Dreams and Dreaming



notions of what God or the gods, if they exist at all, require of us. To be blunt about it, “theology” is a misnomer. It isn’t knowledge at all, but just a body of shifting opinion that sounds right to members of a priestly class and to those who accept their word as authoritative.

At the opposite end of my spectrum lies science, where, obviously, I feel considerably more at home. A scientist would say that dreaming is a natural human function and that the content of dreams is also natural and available to study. Although dreams appear to be at least partly meaningful, that fact does not propel us into some kind of spiritual stratosphere. In waking life, after all, we use language, we think about the past and future, we express our hopes and fears. If all of these elements show up in dreams, the most we are entitled to assert is a degree of continuity between our waking life and our dream life.

Nearly all mammals apparently dream, so far as anybody can tell. Here once again is a fact that might make you want to think twice about dreams being divine messages. It’s hard to see what kind of spiritual direction the marmots, say, are getting out of it. Our dreams are doubtless much more complex and interesting than those of other mammals. But that’s just what we would expect from a routine functionalist perspective on the human brain, which is incomparably more intricate, with more neurons and more feedback loops, than any other brain we know about.

I think what is really interesting here is the middle terrain, which I have charted as spanning the spiritual and the paranormal. The paranormal refers to ideas of precognition, telepathy, and clairvoyance that go beyond the individual. But they don’t go beyond the individual all the way to theological truths. Paranormal theory deals with rather mundane information that is transmitted in highly unusual ways. Thus a typical paranormal experience might be a sudden conviction that something bad has happened to a beloved person; one wakes up in the middle of the night overcome by dread and foreboding. Well, that bad accident, supposing that it actually did happen, wouldn’t necessarily be connected with religious aspirations on anybody’s part. But the paranormal theorist believes that this news can be transmitted through unknown means to a person who is dreaming, thanks to a psychic gift that is either common to humankind or available to “sensitives” alone.

The paranormal realm goes beyond science in a way that most scientists find unacceptable. Why? Because there is no physical medium of communication. Nothing that we know about the visible world allows us to grant that a dreamer can receive a message from, say, five thousand miles away—or even from the next room, for that matter.

Nevertheless, paranormal theory can be congenial to spiritual aspirations. If you want to believe that you’re in contact with a higher realm, you’ll need to posit a means of contact other than what has been available to science thus far. And so, quite frequently, we find people of a religious inclination leaning strongly toward paranormal sympathies. Of course they don’t stop with the mundane information that paranormal experts usually dwell on, but go on to higher matters. Interestingly enough, the most widely used synonym for paranormal activity, from the early nineteenth century until now, has been “spiritualism.” The connection is right there in the language. And Kelly: I note with interest that the bibliographical essay at the end of *Visions of the Night* appears distinctly hospitable toward paranormal possibilities.

Finally, we get to the spiritual range in my spectrum. Spirituality, as you may have gathered, is not my strong suit. What does the term mean? I defer to others, but my guess is that the spiritual has something to do with guidance toward a higher or more

integrated state of being, a guidance that, traditionally, is supposed to come from outside the individual. But it’s not absolutely necessary that it do so—and especially not here in California! Yet even if we reduce the spiritual to a form of talking to ourselves, it’s still a matter of allowing our “better” self to instruct our “weaker” one. Perhaps the most scientifically respectable hypothesis about spiritual dreaming would be that, with our inhibitions temporarily disabled, our deeper selves tell our more troubled, less clear-minded selves what we should be doing, how we should be feeling, and what interpretation we should place on our lives. I don’t actually buy this, but it’s the least objectionable formulation that lets an element of guidance through the door.

Along the spectrum I have sketched, my own predilection is for the scientific point of view—the one that applies rational skepticism to the question of lawfulness in the world that we know, the empirical world. Why this preference? Simply because I’m interested in knowledge. Knowledge deserves the name only if it has been tested. To this end, it has to be presented in such a manner that an independent party, someone without a prior commitment, can examine the evidence and arrive at the same conclusion as the person who is propounding the idea. Science is all about testing for error. If you read a lot of philosophy of science, you will soon perceive that very little of it is concerned with how we get our ideas. Who cares whether or not an apple hit Newton on the head? The whole question is whether a given idea has been presented in a way that is accessible to neutral and very unsparing skeptical evaluation, and whether that idea has proved capable of surviving the most astute objections that can be leveled against it.

A scientific perspective won’t allow us to make a shallow and self-serving distinction between dreaming, a mere physiological activity, and dreams, a realm of spiritual wonder. One sometimes reads, for example, that it’s all very well for a theorist such as J. Allan Hobson to put forward ideas about dreaming as produced by electrical activity in the brain stem; meanwhile, it is said, the meaning of dreams falls outside the purview of science. Here, supposedly, we are in the more congenial realm of hermeneutics, where individual judgment matters more. But dream content is exactly as susceptible in principle to rational, skeptical, empirical investigation as the nature of dreaming itself is. It may be more difficult to ascertain the results that we’re looking for. Indeed, I’m sure it is more difficult to talk accurately about dream content than it is to talk about the neurophysiology of dreaming. But exactly the same standards of rational skepticism must apply to both of these subject matters. This is not to say that dreams have no meaning, as Hobson has sometimes implied. It is to say that dream content demands the same kind of inductive study as dreaming itself, without preconceptions about messages emanating from beyond the dreamer.

What science cannot ever do is make room for miracles. A miracle is an intervention that overturns the laws of nature, and you can’t allow miracles anywhere in science. It’s not a question of our looking around at the world and deciding whether or not there’s something miraculous about it. Science as an enterprise rules out miracles from the very beginning on methodological grounds. Some of you, less jaded than I about theology, may take some comfort from this observation. As my colleague Phillip Johnson [professor of law at the University of California, Berkeley] never tires of saying, if science starts from a naturalistic perspective and then gets only naturalistic results, it may be overlooking supernatural causes that would explain how and why we all got here. Be that as it may, the moment you invoke divine intervention, you have changed the rules of the science game in an impermissible way. And this means that

you can't have a scientific view of dreams and dreaming that allows for any nonphysical means of transmitting thoughts and messages. Paranormal and spiritual accounts of dreaming are ruled equally out of bounds by this principle.

A scientific outlook today, for virtually everyone who takes it seriously, also entails a broad commitment to the Darwinian perspective on human affairs. That perspective tells us that we must regard ourselves as an evolved species whose cross-cultural, universal traits, such as they are, arose a long time ago under harsh tests of survival that we can scarcely imagine today. This is not to say that Darwinism obliges us to regard dreams as having a crucial survival value for our species. A good number of human traits, even universal ones, may have come into existence by taking a free ride on other features that were selected for our survival. Dreams themselves may be one such free ride—a by-product of the facts that humans think, both in waking and sleeping life.

Dreams, then, may not have a powerful adaptive function for the survival of the human individual; we don't really know. Nevertheless, an evolutionary perspective is important here, precisely because it was Darwin who eliminated teleology from science. From a Darwinian point of view, it is unimaginable that dream meaning can be imposed on us from above or outside the organism or its culture, as if the future were speaking to the present. The whole point of natural selection, after all, is that chance variations are continually tested against environmental conditions that change in unanticipated ways. Admonitory messages from friendly spirit guides would utterly sabotage this outlook.

Rational skepticism also entails a certain wariness of "discoveries" that fit too neatly with the predilections of the discoverer. It is perfectly all right to have such predilections and to go out and make assertions, but the closer they are to what one previously believed, the more imperative it is for others to insist that objective grounds for agreement be presented. Is the observer kidding himself? In science, he is presumed guilty until he can prove otherwise.

Here is why my own skepticism was aroused when I read that Kelly's dreams seemed to be leading him beyond his individual self. Was he, in his adolescence, being dragged reluctantly toward the spiritual by his dreams? Or was he the kind of fellow who, like most members of this assembly, harbors spiritual leanings anyway, and who therefore is more inclined to have (or think that he's having) dreams of this kind? In order to say that dreams have spiritual meaning, we need more evidence than a recollection of spiritual awakening in adolescence. Adolescence, as you know, produces awakenings of several kinds, and they can lead in radically opposite directions. We all remember being stirred up wildly in those years. We were the last to perceive—*n'est-ce pas?*—what was obvious to the rest of our family: that hormones might have had something to do with it. And Kelly, I must say, still seems reluctant to weigh that factor against a more ethereal interpretation of his teenage intensity.

Let me get around at last to Freud, who was professedly a Darwinian functionalist. He admired Darwin tremendously and thought of himself as carrying on Darwin's work. At first glance, then, you would want to put Freud all the way to the right of my spectrum here, as the Science Guy. He didn't believe dreams were prophetic, he didn't think they gave us any instructions for right conduct, and he thought they expressed the internal conflicts of the human subject. Dreams for Freud conveyed repressed desires and the defenses against those desires—defenses that the individual throws up because he is ashamed of his filthy wishes and fearful of the retaliation that would descend on him if he acted them out. The Freudian dream is a compromise formation, a vector between the unconscious urges of the individual and his largely

unconscious defenses against those urges. And the ultimate function of dreams for Freud was to protect sleep by allowing for this symbolic discharge. It's a totally functionalist perspective, and even though it happens to be erroneous from beginning to end, there is nothing spiritual about it.

As for Jung, he took the Freudian unconscious and unabashedly endowed it with a soul. First he largely desexualized it, and then he linked up individual minds in what he called a "collective unconscious," which sends its ancestral wisdom across the ether to us. Through Jungian dreams, it says here, we can now be in contact with our wise elders from thousands of years ago. It's a form of channeling, precisely as ridiculous as the claims of Elizabeth Clare Prophet to be tuning into bulletins from a 30,000-year-old man. But since Jung nominally starts from secular observation of disturbed patients, he seems to go nearly all the way across my whole spectrum, from the scientific through the paranormal to the spiritual.

We tend to forget, however, that Freud himself was an enthusiast of the paranormal. He wrote four papers about the paranormal meaning of dreams—papers that caused great anxiety within his circle of disciples. Ernest Jones tried to get him to suppress this work, but Freud wouldn't do it. Admittedly, these papers of his are rather equivocal in what a Freudian might call their manifest content. But it is quite clear to anyone who studies Freud closely that he did believe in the paranormal and that he was casting about for ways of affirming and validating it. He would not leave the subject alone. Indeed, he actually performed paranormal experiments with his daughter Anna and with Sandor Ferenczi, who was himself a great believer in the paranormal—virtually a magician, if only in his own mind. So Freud goes from the scientific end of my spectrum as far as the paranormal, while Jung goes a little farther to the spiritual. Neither one of them, I would say, is truly theological, but Jung's leanings in that direction have been often noted.

What, then, should we make of the Jungian effort to revise Freud? A number of questions come to mind. First, if the Jungian unconscious is universal, how come it proves to be so very Germanic? Why should one cultural tradition be privileged above all the others? For example, why is it that the wise ancestors seem to transmit so many dumb sexist clichés about the eternal feminine? Again, what mechanism, other than a now-discredited Lamarckianism, has allowed the collective unconscious to become progressively wiser through the millennia? How can a source of telepathic information be located everywhere and nowhere? And if it's so smart, couldn't it have told its favorite Teutons, including Jung himself, to be a bit less enthusiastic about the Nazis? Jung never makes any attempt, so far as I know, to answer these questions. And this means, candidly, that his speculations are of no rational interest whatsoever. The beginning of wisdom is to stop reading Jung.

But this is not to let Freud off lightly. Rather than ask yourselves—as some of you, I gather, are doing—whether you prefer Jung's revised version of the Freudian unconscious, you would do well to consider what good evidence we have for that unconscious in the first place. As Bill Domhoff's excellent work shows [chapter 20 in this volume], there is not a single Freudian proposition about dreams that has received significant empirical support. I would add there is not a single Freudian proposition, period, that has received significant empirical support. And for evidence to back this controversial claim, I refer you either to my recent anthology, *Unauthorized Freud: Doubters Confront a Legend* (Penguin, 1999) or to a much more formidable study, Malcolm Macmillan's *Freud Evaluated: The Completed Arc* (MIT, 1997).

It is easy to see why people of a spiritual orientation gravitate to Jung. The harder-nosed, skeptical, atheistic types gravitate to Freud, who seems to them very stoical and tragic and scientifically disciplined. I thought this way myself thirty-five years ago. In fact, however, Freud was not scientifically inclined at all. What he gave us was the idiom of science, the tone of science. But if science is about the prudent, evidence-based correction of errors, there is no science in Freud. His whole method of ascertaining whether or not a proposition was valid was circular. For Freud, any given fact about a human being would always be evidence in favor of his theory. If it seemed to manifestly support his theory, then that was conclusive; but if it seemed to contradict his theory, he would import one of his defense mechanisms to explain how the observed fact was a point in his favor after all. Heads I win, tails you lose. Science cannot be conducted in such a manner.

Of course all this deprecation on my part appears to overlook what many people take to be Freud's rigorous determinism. Humanists who study psychology as a kind of hobby—and that was a good description of me a long time ago—tend to be impressed by Freud's insistence that everything in psychic life is caused by factors that, in principle at least, can be historically traced. That's what enabled Freud to explain adult neuroses in terms of very specific events that had happened in the early childhood of the patient, whether they were sexual molestations or repressions of shameful oedipal thoughts. But in the end, Freud's determinism proves to be utterly gratuitous. It simply expresses overconfidence in his own deductive abilities: "Nothing can escape me!" And indeed, nothing did. When Freud tells you that, in principle, every last detail of a dream can be explained in terms of unconscious conflict, you would do well to regard the claim as a warning flag. As is so often said, a theory that explains everything explains nothing.

Insofar as people with spiritual aspirations are drawn to Freud, who denied that he held any such aspirations himself, I suspect that it has to do chiefly with this overweening interpretative ambition of his. Why not have a go at it yourself? If Freud says that dreams are totally meaningful, and yet you don't care for the sexual and aggressive emphasis he places on them, then you may be tempted to make the following dubious move. Freud took us a certain way toward a true understanding of dreams, you may say, but unfortunately he didn't get the content quite right; here is the more appropriate spiritual content. Remember, that's exactly what Jung did, to grateful applause from people who understand nothing about the constraints of well-conducted science. It's an easy game to play: tennis with the net down. But Jung had the chutzpah to call it psychology. I fervently hope—but I can't be sure—that this isn't the spirit in which Freud and Jung are studied in religion-and-psychology programs. Say it ain't so, Kelly and the rest of you! Show me that, in your studies, a given psychological system isn't being favored simply because it flatters your spiritual yearnings. If you are headed "beyond Freud and Jung" in the same erroneous, anti-empirical direction as their own, you are that much farther away from a truly disciplinary point of view. Freud and Jung are quite irresponsible enough without needing "improvement" in such a manner. So: Is religion and psychology an authentic empirical discipline, or is it only—pardon the expression—a field of dreams?

KELLY BULKELEY'S REPLY

I take Fred's comments as a well-justified challenge to the scientific quality of present and future research in the study of dreams. One of the great virtues of science is its commitment to the free and open exchange of ideas. Scientific methodologies pro-

vide common principles, terms, and standards of measurement that enable people from widely varying backgrounds to share their findings and test the validity of each other's claims. To the extent that dream researchers share this goal of promoting better communication with people both inside and outside their field, the effort to enhance the scientific quality of dream research should be a vigorous one.

At the beginning of his discussion, Fred questions the possibility of gathering reliable data on dream content. This goes to the heart of whether dream research can be a scientific endeavor, because good, solid empirical data are the essential raw materials for any form of scientific investigation. I agree with Fred that this is a central question, and I would add that the methodological difficulties he cites are worse than he supposes. When he says, "Outside of the sleep laboratory, I don't believe we even get terribly reliable knowledge of the bare content of dreams," he gives more credit than is due to the scientific adequacy of sleep laboratory research on dreaming. It is now clear that the sleep laboratory has a strongly homogenizing influence on dream content. For example, people sleeping in a lab report fewer aggressive dreams and fewer sexual dreams than people sleeping outside a lab.¹ People who are frequent nightmare sufferers report having fewer nightmares when sleeping in a lab as compared to when they sleep at home.² Researchers have dubbed this general phenomenon "the lab effect."³ The likely explanation is that when people enter the laboratory setting they remain aware as they go to sleep that professional researchers will be observing them all night long, and this awareness inhibits the reporting and/or experiencing of socially inappropriate dream content (such as engaging in aggressive or sexual activities). With nightmare sufferers, it seems the knowledge that trained researchers will be watching over them all night long provides a sense of security and safety, and this has the effect of diminishing the frequency of their bad dreams.

In light of this, dream researchers are faced with the vexing problem that even the sleep laboratory does not provide a perfect means of access to dream content. Indeed, Allan Hobson has frankly admitted in an interview that the most interesting dreams occur outside the lab.⁴ A truly scientific portrait of human dream experience must therefore include data gathered from settings other than the sleep laboratory, even if this means that the dream reporting conditions cannot be as carefully controlled and minutely observed as is possible in a lab setting.

This formidable methodological challenge is compounded by the inescapable influence of linguistic, cultural, and psychological factors at work in both the formation and reporting of dream content. Although Fred assumes the possibility of distinguishing "the sheer memory of images" from secondary cultural accretions, as a practical matter such a distinction cannot be made. No technology exists that could give researchers access to the pure, culturally unsullied content of a person's dreams (although several science fiction writers and filmmakers have imagined what such technology could be used for⁵). The sleep laboratory, for all its success in creating a strictly controlled experimental environment, does not materially change this situation. A subject in the lab who is awakened from the midst of REM sleep and immediately asked for a dream report is still a person whose imagination has been deeply influenced by some particular culture, who is using a particular language to describe his or her dream, and who is participating in a particular mode of social interaction (namely, serving as a subject in a sleep lab experiment). There is no way around it: For better or for worse, all dream researchers, whether they work in or out of a sleep laboratory, are condemned to the use of personal, subjective, culturally saturated verbal reports as their primary source of empirical data on dream content.

Does this make it impossible to conduct dream research in a scientifically responsible fashion? Not at all. It remains quite possible to propose hypotheses about the nature and function of dreaming, to test those hypotheses by means of carefully designed empirical investigations, and then to analyze the results with a sharp and unsparing critical eye. The sources of data we currently have at our disposal, even if they are mediated by varying degrees of cultural influence, are perfectly sufficient for continuing the scientific process of developing a fuller understanding of dreams and dreaming.

The methodological challenge here is one that many other scientifically inclined researchers have faced, and their success in overcoming these challenges is worth noting. One such researcher is neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, author of *Descartes' Error* (Quill, 1994) and *The Feeling of What Happens* (Harvest, 1999). I believe the following quote regarding his work in the study of consciousness is directly relevant to our discussion of dream research methodology:

Although the investigation of consciousness is condemned to some indirectness, this limitation is not restricted to consciousness. It applies to all other cognitive phenomena. Behavioral acts—kicks, punches, and words—are nice expressions of the private process of mind, but they are not the same thing. Likewise, electroencephalograms and functional MRI scans capture correlates of the mind but those correlates are not the mind. Inevitable indirectness, however, is not equivalent to eternal ignorance about mental structures or about the underlying neural mechanisms. The fact that mental images are accessible only to their owner organism does not deny their reliance on organic substance, and does not prevent our gradual closing in on the specifications of that substance. This may cause some worry to purists raised on the idea that what another person cannot see is not to be trusted scientifically, but it really should not worry anyone. This state of affairs should not prevent us from treating subjective phenomena scientifically. Whether one likes it or not, *all* the contents in our minds are subjective and the power of science comes from its ability to verify objectively the consistency of many individual subjectivities.⁶

I believe that this is the spirit by which future dream research should be guided. If we can make progress toward verifying “the consistency of many individual subjectivities,” if we can do more to identify the broad patterns and deep structures that emerge in and through individual dream experiences, we will have done much indeed.

One of my current research projects is focused on the testing of a particular hypothesis about the function of dreaming, a hypothesis that draws together findings from religious studies, anthropology, neuroscience, and psychology. I would like to present this hypothesis in a somewhat roundabout fashion, by responding to several points that Fred makes in his comments. Each of these points highlights an important methodological principle that is relevant not only to my research but to the research of nearly everyone in this field.

To begin with, I want to respond to Fred's passing mention of the fact that *Visions of the Night* contains a bibliographical essay that in his view “appears distinctly hospitable toward paranormal possibilities.” Why do I get the feeling that that's not a good thing? I am continually surprised by people who proudly pledge themselves to the scientific method and yet who claim that this or that class of phenomena cannot exist because it contradicts the present state of knowledge. Such an attitude must be rejected as a threat to future scientific progress. Science is nothing if it is not hospitable to the possibility that the present state of knowledge is partial, incomplete, or even mistaken; science is nothing if it is not open to the emergence of unexpected phe-

nomena and new ways of understanding the world. Being open-minded toward the possible is the very essence of scientific inquiry.

What I imagine concerns Fred is the frequency with which “open-mindedness” becomes a code word for gullibility, fuzzy thinking, and self-serving fantasy. With the subject of paranormal phenomena, his concern is well justified, as I myself can testify. I remember an interview I did some years ago with a network television producer who, as the interview proceeded, became increasingly determined to induce me to say on camera that dreams can predict the future. I wouldn't oblige him, and the interview ended in mutual frustration.

It would be pleasing to think that humans have prophetic powers; it would relieve some of our worst fears and satisfy some of our most cherished fantasies; it might even make for good television ratings. But none of that makes it true, and as Fred rightly points out we should use extra caution when investigating phenomena that are so heavily laden with age-old wishes and desires.

As I have written elsewhere, I follow Aristotle's categorization of prophetic dreams into three groups: causes, tokens, and coincidences.⁷ Dreams may be the cause of future actions, in that it sometimes happens that “the movements set up first in sleep should also prove to be starting-points of actions to be performed in the daytime.”⁸ Dreams may also be tokens (we might say symbols) of events to come in the future. Aristotle refers to dreams that reveal the imminent onset of an illness, before the person has become consciously aware of being sick. Aristotle says that in the quiet of sleep we become aware of slight “movements” and “beginnings” that are lost to us in the bustle of daily life: “it is manifest that these beginnings must be more evident in sleeping than in waking moments.”⁹ Having granted these two possibilities, Aristotle still believes that most allegedly prophetic dreams are mere coincidences, especially those that are “extravagant” or involve matters with no direct connection to the dreamer. It happens all the time, he argues, that people mistakenly connect two events that are in fact unrelated; this is not prophecy, just faulty reasoning. Aristotle's general attitude is thus quite skeptical toward the majority of prophetic dream reports. But at the same time, he is careful not to deny the possible legitimacy of at least some of these reports:

[A]s to the divination which takes place in sleep, and is said to be based on dreams, we cannot lightly either dismiss it with contempt or give it implicit confidence. The fact that all persons, or many, suppose dreams to possess a special significance, tends to inspire us with belief in it, as founded on the testimony of experience; and indeed that divination in dreams should, as regards some subjects, be genuine, is not incredible, for it has a show of reason; from which one might form a like opinion also respecting all other dreams. Yet the fact of our seeing no probable cause to account for such divination tends to inspire us with distrust.¹⁰

I believe that this is the most appropriate and scientifically legitimate approach to take toward the subject of paranormal dreams. Perhaps someday researchers will be able to explain how, as so many people report, it is possible to dream of a faraway loved one who has suddenly taken ill or died. At the moment we cannot explain the seemingly prophetic power of such dreams except by dismissing them as mere coincidences or outright fabrications. My concern is that we not close the door to the possibility that an authentic scientific explanation for such dreams will be developed in the future.

Another point of Fred's I would like to discuss regards the probative value of the adolescent dreams I briefly describe at the beginning of chapter 1 of *Visions of the*

Night. Fred says, “in order to say that dreams have spiritual meaning, we need more evidence than a recollection of spiritual awakening in adolescence.” Naturally, I agree. I did not present the dreams as decisive evidence in support of my general argument. Rather, I mentioned them as a way of describing how I came to be interested in the subject of dreams and how the questions I pursue in my research are intertwined with my own personal experiences. It seemed a simple matter of intellectual honesty to say as much.

Fred goes on to question whether my “ethereal” approach to the dreams did not overlook the “hormonal” factors that must have been involved in their formation. I don’t believe so. On the contrary, it’s clear to me that these dreams were deeply rooted in the sexual, aggressive, and ego-oriented desires surging through me during adolescence. What I discovered in the dreams, and what made them so significant for me, was a different way of *knowing* these desires—rather than struggling to fight and control them, I learned to understand their power and respect their intelligence, and I began to seek ways of better integrating them with my conscious sense of self. My “wild stirrings,” as Fred puts it, were certainly stimulated by the same basic physiological changes that afflict everyone in adolescence, so in that sense there was nothing unique about my experience. Indeed, my dreams themselves were not especially unusual in their imagery or their impact on my waking life. As I soon found, when I began a serious study of dreams, people in many different cultures and periods of history, including people in contemporary Western society, have reported similar types of dreams, often occurring during times of major life change. Since that initial discovery I have tried in various ways to understand better the imaginative capacity that enables humans to experience such dreams, and I am quite convinced that natural physiological processes, not only in the brain but throughout the whole body, are a major factor in their formation.

A brief but important point of Fred’s concerns my interpretation of a dream of Freud’s famous patient Dora. How, Fred asks, do I know my view of her dream is correct? This is a crucial question, and one that leads into complex philosophical discussions of truth, meaning, and interpretive practice. Before going on, however, I would argue that practical methods of dream interpretation should be conceptually distinguished from theoretical models of dream function. The latter provide explanations, while the former discern meanings; the latter ask “How does dreaming in general work?” while the former ask “What does this particular dream mean?” Because the two pursuits have fundamentally different (though potentially compatible) aims, different standards must be used in evaluating whether they are successful in achieving what they set out to do.

I have written in detail about these matters in *The Wilderness of Dreams*, where I develop a hermeneutic approach to dreams based on the philosophical work of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur.¹¹ The basic premise of this approach is that there is no single correct meaning to any dream; there are many possible interpretations, some of which are more valid than others. The validity of an interpretation is determined by a process of critical testing and questioning, a process guided equally by rational skepticism and creative imagination. In chapter 13 of this volume, I describe four principles by which better and worse interpretations may be distinguished from each other:

1. The dreamer knows best what his or her dream means.
2. A good interpretation will account for as many of the dream’s details as possible.

3. A good interpretation will make as many connections as possible between the dream’s content and the dreamer’s waking life.
4. A good interpretation will be open to new and surprising discoveries and will look beyond the obvious (what is already known) to find the novel and the unexpected (what is *not* already known).

Returning to the subject of Dora’s dream, Freud’s interpretation of it as measured by my four principles was a partial success on points two and three and a spectacular failure on points one and four. Although my alternative interpretation of Dora’s dream cannot be tested by the first principle (this is the inherent limitation of historical dream research), I believe it satisfies points two, three, and especially four. Now, does this mean I claim to have discovered the one true and correct meaning of Dora’s dream? No. It simply means I have offered an interpretation that is plausible, reasonable, consistent with the available data, and significant in terms of opening up new ways of understanding the dreamer’s life.

For people who expect every question to have one simple answer, this approach is bound to be a disappointment. Likewise, for people (such as Freud) who believe they have a system to identify the true meaning of any and every dream, my approach is also bound to be frustrating. So be it. Dream interpretation is not equivalent to solving a mathematical equation, in which a single, unambiguous result is produced at the end of the process. Dream interpretation is much more comparable to art or literary criticism, in which close, detailed analysis is combined with empathetic intuition to produce a fruitful reading of a given text, a reading that asserts its reasoned integrity even as it remains open to critical correction and alternative possibilities. I would think this relatively modest and resolutely non-Freudian approach to dream interpretation would appeal to an English professor’s humanistic sensibilities—but I could be wrong!

Now I come to Fred’s most urgent question: Who or what is doing the “teaching” and “leading” in the dreams I am discussing? He highlights my use of the term “numinous power” to describe such dreams, and he asks whether this necessarily implies an occult connection to “invisible powers,” “spirit guides,” and/or “another plane of reality.” Perhaps to his distress, my answer constitutes a version of what he disparagingly terms the least objectionable and most Californian (!) type of response, a response that refers to the transformative influence on waking consciousness of nonconscious mental powers. This brings me back to a research project I mentioned earlier. The hypothesis orienting this project is that certain extraordinary types of dreaming are generated by numinous powers that connect the dreamer to dimensions of energy, intelligence, and purpose far outside the normal boundaries of individual awareness.¹² I further propose that these extraordinary dreams function to promote greater cognitive flexibility, creative imagination, and adaptive well-being—in short, *they provoke greater consciousness*.

Can such a hypothesis be tested in a scientifically rigorous fashion? I believe it can be. For instance, current sleep laboratory research is providing important new insights into the amazingly intricate neural circuitry involved in all dream experience. The works of Allan Hobson, Mark Solms, Tore Nielsen, and the late Alan Moffitt¹³ are especially helpful in formulating a sound neuropsychological understanding of dreaming in general, and such an understanding stands as the conceptual foundation for an investigation of the unusual types of dreams that are my chief concern. However, neuropsychology is not sufficient for the testing of my hypothesis—recall Hobson’s ad-

mission that the most interesting dreams occur outside the sleep lab. Other sources of data are required, the most important of which are detailed historical and cross-cultural studies of dreaming (exemplified by several chapters in the present volume). A large professional literature has developed in this area to provide a wealth of information about “nonlaboratory” dream experiences, dreams that have occurred in relatively natural life settings. A careful comparative analysis of these dreams enables the development of a phenomenology of typical, cross-cultural themes and patterns in human dreaming. (Knowing Fred’s aversion to Jung as well as Freud, I hasten to note that my approach aims to go much farther than Jung’s does in establishing a broad empirical base for its phenomenological proposals.)

If such a phenomenology depended solely on historical and cross-cultural dream reports, it would be subject to the criticism that the reports did not provide a sufficiently representative sample of human dream experience to be accepted as evidence for a general theory of dreaming. This is where recourse to the content analysis methods first developed by Calvin Hall and Robert Van de Castle and recently reformulated by Bill Domhoff can be so useful.¹⁴ In terms of methodology, content analysis stands somewhere between sleep laboratory research and historical/cross-cultural research. It provides a systematically gathered sample of thousands of dream reports and a well-tested method of quantitatively analyzing those reports in order to generate statistical portraits of what people dream about. This method is one of the best tools available for dream researchers to use in what the earlier quote from Antonio Damasio called the effort “to verify objectively the consistency of many individual subjectivities.” If the content analysis method can be employed in conjunction with historical and cross-cultural studies on one hand and neuropsychological sleep laboratory research on the other, the stage will be set for a fair scientific testing of my hypothesis, as indeed it will be for any hypothesis about the nature and functioning of dreams.

An objection could still be raised about the theological implications of my hypothesis. If I understand Fred’s comments on this point, he assumes that terms like “numinous” and phrases like “dimensions of power, intelligence, and purpose outside the normal boundaries of awareness” necessarily imply the existence of supernatural, nonmaterial divinities who wield ultimate control over human life. I believe this assumption is wrong. Even if we set aside all theological speculations about the existence of God as well as all psychoanalytic theories about the unconscious (as I know Fred would urge us to do!), the growing literature in neuropsychology and cognitive science clearly indicates that the human brain/mind system is built up of a remarkably complex and sophisticated array of neural patterns and processes, very few of which ever become an object of ordinary conscious awareness. There is nothing supernatural about that fact. Nor is there anything supernatural about people having dreams by means of which some of these ordinarily nonconscious neural patterns and processes enter into consciousness. Finally, there is nothing supernatural about the uncanny feeling regularly reported by people who have experienced such dreams, a remarkably sharp and vivid feeling that the dream seemed to come from powers outside themselves. If the “self” is understood here as referring to an individual’s customary waking personality, then the feeling in certain dreams of a connection with numinous forces originating “beyond the self” has a clear empirical basis in the distinctive neuropsychological operations of the dreaming brain.¹⁵

Any claim about the adaptive value of dreaming must specify the evolutionary basis upon which such a function could have developed. As Fred points out, it could

simply be that dreaming has no adaptive function whatsoever and is nothing more than an evolutionary “free rider” that sprouted up as a consequence of genuinely adaptive developments in other areas of brain functioning. Allan Hobson offers a similar suggestion in chapter 21 of this volume, saying it could be that “dreaming is an epiphenomenon of REM sleep whose cognitive content is so ambiguous as to invite misleading or even erroneous interpretation” (p. 328). This is a legitimate possibility, but much more research needs to be conducted before a decisive answer can be given one way or another. In fact, a great deal of evidence supports the contrasting position that dreaming does indeed have genuine adaptive value for the human species, and I believe the following areas of research will provide still more data in favor of this view:

1. Sexual dreams. Given the automatic physiological arousal of the genitals in REM sleep, could sexually arousing dreams serve an adaptive function in the development and stimulation of reproductive activity?
2. Nightmares. Given the frequency and intensity of terrifying dreams, particularly in childhood, could nightmares serve an adaptive function in the development of greater vigilance toward potential threats to self-preservation?
3. Dreams of the dead. Given the historically and culturally widespread phenomenon of vivid dreams in which a recently deceased loved one returns to visit the dreamer, could dreams of the dead serve an adaptive function in relieving the existential despair that comes with the evolution of a mind that knows it is fated to die?
4. Dreams of reassurance. Given the regular appearance during times of major life crisis (e.g., illness, accident, natural disaster) of striking dreams from which the dreamer awakens with a revitalized sense of confidence and optimism, could dreams of reassurance serve an adaptive function in activating people’s emotional resources at just those moments when they are most vulnerable?¹⁶

Note that if the answer to any of these questions is yes, no specific teleological consequences are implied. The Darwinian imperative against teleology (which Fred emphasizes in his comments) will be satisfied if it can be shown that extraordinarily vivid “numinous” dreams make a significant contribution to the adaptive fitness and reproductive success of *Homo sapiens sapiens*. This should not, of course, be taken as foreclosing further theological speculation about the possibility that, in addition to their adaptive value, numinous dreams may have a genuinely teleological dimension. But that is a different discussion, and for the present I will simply conclude by saying that the investigation of extraordinary types of dreams can proceed in a way that is authentically scientific and compatible with a broadly Darwinian evolutionary perspective.

In other conversations I have had with people of a skeptical bent, their final comment often goes something like this: “All this research on extraordinary, ‘numinous’ dreams is fine and well, but I don’t have any such dreams, and I know plenty of people who take no interest whatsoever in their dreams and live perfectly adapted, evolved, contented lives.” I’m not sure Fred would say this, but I believe it is a common sentiment among his intellectual kindred, so I will close my comments by agreeing with the basic point that not everyone has these kinds of extremely vivid, hauntingly memorable, deeply affecting dreams. Although researchers still have much

to learn about why some people are powerfully moved by their dreams and other people are not, we do know that the variability of dream experience is directly influenced by cultural factors. Some communities actively seek to enhance powerful dreams (for example, the Plains Indians described by Lee Irwin in chapter 5), while other communities develop practices that inadvertently suppress dream recall (as in the widespread use of alarm clocks by contemporary Westerners). My ultimate claim is that there *is something* to enhance or suppress: The numinous power of dreaming is observable, lawful, physical, and consistent in its nature with scientifically valid knowledge gleaned from other areas of study; it is grounded in the natural evolution of the mammalian brain and subsequently shaped and mediated by language, culture, and individual personality.

A field of dreams indeed!

NOTES

1. See Domhoff, chapter 20 this volume, and Robert Van de Castle, *Our Dreaming Mind* (New York: Ballantine, 1994), pp. 235–237.
 2. Ernest Hartmann, *The Nightmare: The Psychology and Biology of Terrifying Dreams* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).
 3. For more on the lab effect see Kelly Bulkeley, *An Introduction to the Psychology of Dreaming* (Westport: Praeger, 1997), pp. 63–65.
 4. Cited in “The Power of Dreams,” documentary produced and shown by the Discovery Channel, 1994.
 5. For example, Ursula K. LeGuin, *The Lathe of Heaven* (New York: Avon, 1971), and the film *Until the End of the World*, directed by Wim Wenders, 1995.
 6. Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens*, pp. 82–83.
 7. Kelly Bulkeley, *Spiritual Dreaming: A Cross-Cultural and Historical Journey* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1995), p. 117.
 8. “On Prophesying by Dreams,” by Aristotle, in Richard McKeon (ed.), *The Collected Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), p. 626.
 9. *Ibid.*, p. 627.
 10. *Ibid.*, p. 626.
 11. *The Wilderness of Dreams: Exploring the Religious Meanings of Dreams in Modern Western Culture* (Albany: SUNY, 1994), Sections III and IV.
 12. My use of the term “numinous” relies in part on Rudolph Otto’s elaboration in *The Idea of the Holy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958) of encounters with the *mysterium tremendum*.
 13. Hobson, chapter 21 this volume; Mark Solms, *The Neuropsychology of Dreams* (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1996); Tore Nielsen, “Mentation in REM and NREM Sleep: A Review and Possible Reconciliation of Two Models,” *Brain and Behavioral Sciences*, forthcoming; Alan Moffitt and Robert Hoffman, “On the Single-Mindedness and Isolation of Dream Psychophysiology,” in *Sleep and Dreams: A Sourcebook*, edited by Jayne Gackenbach (New York: Garland, 1987).
 14. Calvin Hall and Robert Van de Castle, *The Content Analysis of Dreams* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts); G. William Domhoff, *Finding Meaning in Dreams: A Quantitative Approach* (New York: Plenum, 1996).
 15. Another quote from Antonio Damasio’s *The Feeling of What Happens* is in order:
The unconscious, in the narrow meaning in which the word has been etched in our culture, is only a part of the vast amount of processes and contents that remain non-conscious, not known in core or extended consciousness. In fact, the list of the “not-known” is astounding. Consider what it includes:
 1. all the fully formed images to which we do not attend;
 2. all the neural patterns that never become images;
 3. all the dispositions that were acquired through experience, lie dormant, and may never become an explicit neural pattern;
 4. all the quiet remodeling of such dispositions and all their quiet renetworking—that may never become explicitly known; and
 5. all the hidden wisdom and know-how that nature embodied in innate, homeostatic dispositions.
- Amazing, indeed, how little we ever know. (p. 228)
16. I discuss these four areas of research in more details in the first four chapters of a general-audience book, *Transforming Dreams: Learning Spiritual Lessons from the Dreams You Never Forget* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000).