It’s easy to assume that dreams are nothing but neural nonsense: a series of random scenes and images, with few discernible health benefits, that distract us while we sleep. But modern neuroscience tells a different story—namely, that dreams can prime us to be spiritual, in one form or another.

To understand why, it helps to understand what happens to our bodies when we dream. Though we may not be physically conscious during sleep, at times our brains remain extremely active, especially in the networks responsible for visual imagination, emotional memories and instinctual responses.

These are the elements that characterize what psychologist C.G. Jung called “big dreams”: intense, memorable experiences such as magical flying, visitations from the dead, nightmares of demonic attack and lucid dreams of higher consciousness. And such dreams are fairly common. My research with the Sleep and Dream Database has found, for instance, that about half of American adults (51% of women; 38% of men) say they’ve had at least one visitation dream, and well over half (75% of women; 68% of men) say they’ve had one involving lucid self-awareness.

Science may not be able to prove the existence of God or the gods. But it can prove that, for many people, dreams offer a way to expand their sense of reality and attain a higher level of being—not unlike religion.