

# Dreams are a Many Splendored Thing I: Natural or Transcendent/Transactional or Transformational

William Bergquist, Ph.D.

The songwriters, Sammy Fain and Paul Francis Webster, portray Love as a many-splendored thing. Love, after all, is elusive, beautiful, and a source of many etiological theories and psychological interpretations. I would suggest that Dreams are just as splendid as Love—being just as elusive, beautiful, etymologically diverse, and subject to as many psychological interpretations.

In the first of two essays, I consider two different perspectives regarding the nature of dreams. I then turn to consideration of a fundamental distinction to be drawn between dreams that are transactional in nature (addressing issues in the current world) and those that are transformational (addressing issues regarding the future). Our exploration of dreams begins with the consideration of whether dreams are simply natural occurrences or if there is something special—even transcendent—about dreams. In other words, how splendored are dreams?

## Natural or Transcendent Approach to Dreams

To begin with, there is a full spectrum of approaches concerning the most fundamental question: are dreams merely an element of our regular bodily functioning? Or are dreams somehow unique and not fully based on our regular biological functions?

### Transcendent

At one extreme is the belief that dreams are fully transcendent. They are somehow a “gift from the gods” or a manifestation of some second level of existence. Human beings are to be distinguished from animals in that we have the gift of dreaming. This gift may, in turn, be a representation of the soul which only human beings possess. We are *homo sanctus* and must approach our dreams with reverence and with gratitude. They serve as God’s guide to eternal life.

This spiritual, transcendent approach to dreams is a bit hard to affirm, given that many animals also seem to be dreamers (or at least exhibit the manifestations of REM sleep, which is where most dreams occur in human beings). However, there are certainly many aspects of dream reality that are quite different from the reality in which we live when we are awake. Dreams offer a collateral view of reality that complements rather than emulates the activities and events of our waking life. Some cultures of ancient times operated with the assumption that we actually live two different lives. Our dream life may operate in the sacred or spiritual realm, while our waking life operates in the secular or mundane realm (Eliade, 1959).

The life we live when we are dreaming is just as valid and is to be taken just as seriously as the life we live when we are awake. In some instances, members of one’s community are even selected to serve as the leaders or guides of this alternative life. Other members of a community are identified and revered

as those who help us pass safely from one reality to another. Yet other members of the community are to help us translate the insights we have gained and lessons we have learned from our dream life to our waking life.

## **Natural**

At the other end of the spectrum, there is an approach to dreams that is deeply embedded in our natural world. Dreams are fascinating, elusive, and difficult to study; however, they are nothing more (nor less) than the manifestation of normal biological processes. At this naturalistic side, we also find those researchers who are avoiding the content of dreams altogether. They focus on the way dreams appear to be created biologically. Attention is given to the aforementioned correlation between REM sleep and the report of dreams when research subjects are awakened during REM sleep. Having participated in a dream study during the early 1960s, I have personally witnessed the distinct patterns of REM sleep with EEG spikes, eye movements, and even muscular contractions in the throat (as if the sleeper is about to speak). I also witnessed the usual stillness of other parts of the sleeper's body during REM sleep, as if they were blocking all movement while envisioning action in a dream.

Furthermore, I tended to see more active eye movement just before a sleep lab participant reported particularly active dreams, and noticed (as have many other sleep lab researchers) that sleepers tend to have fewer dreams during the second and (in particular) third night in the laboratory—as if the “manager” of these dreams is not accustomed to having the sleeper report and sometimes remember dreams during the evening. It is time to close down the dream-making operations if all of these dreams are going to become public record!! While my informal observations may be nothing more than manifestations of my own drowsy condition, staying up all night, or merely trying to make something meaningful out of the flicking of a pen on an EEG machine.

And then came the dreams that our lab participants shared when we woke them up. We asked, “What’s been going through your mind?” The answer being delivered was often the vivid description of a dream. It became quite clear that the processes of dream production are quite remarkable. From a naturalistic perspective, we might even find that dreams are essential for human existence (and probably the existence of all sentient beings). Furthermore, dreams require the participation of multiple neural systems in the brain, including the activating functions of the brain stem and synthesizing functions of our forebrain (Hobson, 1992). When these quite diverse neural systems are engaged, our dreams can serve many vital functions. Among other things, dreams may help process, select, and store memories. Dreams might also be critical to the processing of emotions, navigating stress conditions, and solving problems. This is much more than just a biological process.

If nothing else, dreams demonstrate that biological processes can be quite complex and multi-dimensional. However, the same can be said about the way our brain operates when we are awake. We enter similar REM-like realms during what’s called an altered state of consciousness. This state is achieved when we are daydreaming, dwelling briefly in the transitional conditions of hypnogogic and hypnopompic states, or when we induce this state through hypnosis, sensory deprivation, or some form of mindfulness, such as meditation or guided imagery. In many traditional cultures, this altered state is highly valued and sometimes assigned to a specific person in a community (often designated as a shaman).

We might even find that the altered state is engaged when we are involved in activities that bring about what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) has identified as a condition of Flow, when the challenge of a setting is matched by sufficient support. Perhaps this state is even entered when we find ourselves in Awe of something magnificent (large, beautiful, complex, surprising) (Keltner, 2023). Furthermore, the altered state might be enhanced by its alignment with what Eugene Gendlin (Gendlin, 1986) calls the distinctive behavioral/body patterns to be found in each of us. Our embodiment of certain behaviors is to be found not only in our waking life, but also in our dreams. When we feel and act empowered when awake and when asleep, there are likely to be more moments when we engage in activities that generate Flow. There might be a form of synergy and resonance that is created when our behavioral/body patterns align with the desires and needs we experience in both our waking and sleeping lives.

At a more mundane (and often destructive) level, we could be producing an altered state when intoxicated (through use of alcohol, drugs, or other mind-altering substances) or engaged in a compulsive act (such as gambling, obsessive buying, or excessive eating). While these states can provide relief and even enthrallment for a short period of time, they ultimately dampen our capacity to experience real Awe and Flow. As Gerald May (2007) has noted, we may be seeking these false mind-altering states precisely to avoid or block out those experiences that are more “awe-filled”, profound, and often sacred (Otto, 1923/1950).

At one extreme end of the spectrum are those theorists and researchers who believe that dreams are nothing more than random firings of neurons that are unregulated while we are asleep. A little further down the spectrum comes the perspective that dreams are the brain’s way of making sense of random neutral activity during sleep. The remarkable feature of dreams is not that important themes and insights are embedded in them when they are being produced, but that we human beings are truly remarkable meaning-makers and story-constructors when confronted with ambiguous stimuli. We do a damned good job of producing stories when given ink blots to “interpret” and can do an even better job of producing stories when waking from sleep and in a drowsy state, “create” our dreams.

The theorists and researchers who take a naturalistic perspective often seek to demonstrate that dreams are simply (and wonderfully) manifestations of neuropsychological functions. These same functions yield many other fascinating products, including daydreams, vivid images of entities and events that aren’t really present in our world (the “unicorn” capacity). We create clear images even when no clear images seem apparent (the “ink blot” capacity). Our talents in telling stories around a fire are legendary. These stories concern people, other entities, and events from the past that may or may not have actually occurred but certainly occurred in a somewhat different form prior to the fireside chat. Even more fundamentally, we can turn simply to human beings as meaning-makers (*homo sapiens*) and the participants in play (*homo ludens*) (Huizinga, 2008).

Yet other researchers approach the biological nature of dreams by trying to find parallels to dysfunctional dreaming in the dysfunction of other bodily functions. Mark Solms, for instance, has set aside his own psychoanalytic training to focus on the relationship between brain functioning and dreaming. In his book, *The Neuropsychology of Dreams*, Solms (2015) applies what is called a “clinical - anatomical method” in his study of dreams. Having studied the impact of brain dysfunctions on dream disorders, Solms arrives at the tentative conclusion that dreams are linked to specific brain functions and that dreams may reflect underlying neurological conditions.

I find Solms' conclusion that the brainstem might play a crucial role in dreaming to be particularly intriguing. Given that the brain stem is one of the oldest and most primitive components of the neurological system in human beings, it is possible to envision dreams often having quite primitive origins. Solms' findings also reinforce the assumption that dreaming (or at least a dream state) is to be found at virtually all levels of the vertebrate subphylum.

I have noted that it seems to be much more attractive to study the physiology of dreams, and even more broadly, the physiology of sleep, rather than studying the psychology of dreams. We obviously have no way of knowing if someone has actually dreamed when they report their dreams. There is no way to discover the "actual" dreams by somehow directly accessing the content produced by this dreamer's neuro-firings.

During my nights watching the wave patterns on the EEG machine, I often wanted to discern when these patterns are telling me. Does that big delta pattern tell me that my dreamer has seen something big and menacing? Does a quick switching up and down of the pen indicate that my dreamer is running or frightened? I will never know, but will patiently await the moment to wake the dreamer up and ask: "What has been going through your mind?" I must rely on subjective rather than objective information. That is the curse (and opportunity) of dream research.

As we nudge a bit closer to the middle of the spectrum, we find a soft naturalist approach being taken when attention is directed to the adaptive evolutionary function(s) played by dreams. If dreams are common among humans in all societies, then we might conclude that they serve some important role in the evolution (and survival) of our species. While other vertebrates might be dreaming, there might be something unique about the role played by dreams in the flourishing of human cultures throughout the world. I have identified some of these potential adaptive functions in an earlier essay in this series (Bergquist, 2022). These functions range from the entertainment value of dreams (that would be of particular value prior to the introduction of modern media) to the role that dreams might play in providing us with important lessons to be learned for the sake of our survival (especially lessons regarding interpersonal cooperation).

For most analysts of dreams, an approach is taken that resides somewhere between the two extremes. The dream is clearly a product of the dreamer's biology. No God has been observed handing the dream to someone participating in the sleep lab. However, the dream is also something quite special. When we dream, it is not only our creativity that is brought forth; the exceptionality of dreams is also to be found in our remarkable capacity to place ourselves in the middle of the action.

We become not just playwrights but also the director and actor. We are "embodied" in the thoughts and feelings aroused in the dream. Our motives are vividly exposed, our insights about interpersonal relationships are keenly present, and our hopes and fears about the future are displayed in "full technicolor, wide-screen and stereophonic sound." Who needs Hollywood when we have dreams? Who needs Broadway when we can create our own extravagant production? Dreams might not be the gift of the Gods, but they certainly are a blessing for which we can all be thankful – even when the dream is scaring the bejesus out of us.

Now on to the diverse themes that are represented in these many splended things called dreams. In this essay, I consider dreams that are convened to address present-day issues (transactional) and those convened to help us prepare for the future (transformational)

## Dream Themes I: Transactional vs. Transformational

The temporal perspective of our dreams strongly influences the content of our dreams, as well as the influence our dreams may have over our waking life. Some of our dreams tend to focus on the present and on the transactions in which we are currently engaged. Conversely, other dreams tend to focus on the future and the transformations we are now seeking or hope to seek in our sense of self as we prepare for the life that we will be living in years to come.

Transactional Dreams tend to provide the dreamer with still-life portraits of events, people, and ideas that currently exist or have existed in the past. Transactional dreams also tend to be reactive, providing diverse responses to these events, people, and ideas. By contrast, Transformational dreams move us into the future. As the dreamer, we are being proactive and in search of something new (transformational) in our sense of self or the world in which we live when awake.

### Transactional Dreams

In some cases, we find that the theme of a dream is based on reactions to and transactions with specific daytime events. We can call on a traditional psychodynamic entity that Freud called the “ego” to help us navigate this type of theme. As portrayed by the ego psychologists (who expanded on and moved a bit away from the theories of Dr. Freud), the ego serves as an adaptive mediator between external and internal realities. In a dream, this mediation can take on many forms, ranging from the exploration of alternative perspectives of external reality to the resolution of focal conflicts arising from the external world (a process I described in one of the first essays in this series: Bergquist, 2023a).

Assuming an ego psychological perspective, I wish to introduce many of the ego-related, transactional themes to be found in dreams. I find that transactional dream themes can be distilled into five fundamental ego psychological functions: (1) identity formation, (2) signaling, (3) synthesizing, (4) problem-solving, and (5) savoring and expanding.

*Identity-Formation:* one of the most noted of the ego psychologists, Erik Erikson (1980) devotes a considerable amount of attention to the formation of identity in his eight-stage theory of human development. While he considers one of the stages to be specifically focused on identity-related issues, the matter of identity is related to all of his stages, ranging from creating a trusting relationship with one’s world to the discovery of ego-integrity at the end of one’s life.

Matters related to the formation of one’s identity are even more challenging in the mid-21st century, given the multiple images that inundate us every day, and that saturate our sense of self (Gergen, 2020). How then are these challenges of contemporary times addressed in our dreams? As Kohut (Kohut, 1977) emphasizes, an agile yet stable self-state is critical to our sense of security and well-being. The self-state dream is common in our mid-21<sup>st</sup> century. And a self-state that is complex, containing nested self-states that interact with one another, might be requisite to successful life in this contemporary setting. This type of self-state might require transformational change from the simpler and often isolated type. It is in our transformative dreams where this struggle for change is often incurred (Stolorow and Atwood, 1992, p. 282):

These dreams portray in their manifest imagery “the dreamer’s dread vis-à-vis some uncontrollable ten-increase or his dread of the dissolution of the self.” Kohut suggests that the very act of portraying . . . archaic self-states in the dream in a minimally disguised form “constitutes an attempt to deal with the psychological danger by covering frightening nameless processes with nameable imagery.”

As I have already mentioned, the engagement of imagery rather than words can provide the dreamer with not only the ability to synthesize and integrate diverse material, but also the capacity to hide or obfuscate a troubling thought or set of words in an ambiguous image or symbol. It is in the struggle to establish an agile, yet stable, self-state that there is the greatest temptation to use this capacity to hide and obfuscate. A clear sense of self (a mature self-state) can be found in dreams that relate to our past. This includes our history (real or imagined) and the homes and rooms in which we have lived (a topic of one of my previous essays on dreams: Bergquist, 2025). There are also identity-related themes in dreams that relate to our present reality. These concern our sense of competence as manifest in the tests we might imagine taking, as well as the profound changes (real or imagined) in which we are now engaged concerning our identity. Each of these themes also shows up in our transformative dreams (change in identity) and supportive dreams (competency)

Finally, there are those dreams many of us have about being revealed as an imposter. This challenging (even traumatizing) experience of being “found out” is portrayed in a dramatic manner by Kets de Vries (Kets de Vries, 2003). He is a leadership expert who applies psychoanalytic theories to the functioning of organizations. It is in the sorting out of our “real” identity from the many “false” identities that “saturate” us. Ken Gergen (Gergen, 2000) suggests that we are often in a state of “multi-phrenia”. Each of the identities competing for our attention may show up in our dreams and be tested out in some powerful and often insightful ways—often leaving us naked and ashamed. Contained in each of these themes of identity in dreams, as identified by the ego psychologists, push us forward in anticipation of the future. These dreams of identity, however, are often accompanied by a pull backwards in fear. Our dreams offer us perspectives on both anticipation and fear.

*Signaling:* this ego-function is a “Biggy”! This is the function of dreams that wakes us up at night with a cold sweat. Many years ago, Sigmund Freud (1934) identified this signaling as an important function served by anxiety:

[Freud observed that] small amounts of anxiety under the control of the ego may act as a signal to prevent the development of a traumatic situation, in which there occurs anxiety of overwhelming proportions. (Mack, 1992, p. 348)

A splash of cold water (or perhaps acid) on our face lets us know that we are treading on dangerous turf. Our ego is telling us (or even shouting at us): “Beware, this is not where you want to go right now.” The fears of childhood reside deep in our psyche and do not wish to be given re-birth in our adult years. Traumatizing experiences don’t want to be re-lived. We experience nightmares when childhood fears are experienced in our dreams, or the trauma is replayed. The signal is being ignored, and the result is a horrible experience that wakes us up, out of breath and sweating profusely:

. . . [A major] factor that contributes to the occurrence of . . . overwhelming anxiety in dreams is the failure of the signal function to prevent the development of more intense anxiety. The ego in the dream situation is unable . . . to ‘sample’ a traumatic situation in the dream or to regulate effectively the amount of anxiety that is experienced. (Mack, 1992, pp. 348-349)

A large number of dream themes are related to this signaling function. These themes include some lightly sounding signals, such as falling in a dream or feeling uneasy. Moderately loud signals include nightmares, being chased, and some forms of disturbing sexuality. Loud signals are to be found in dreams of falling to pieces (like Humpty Dumpty) and experiencing an earth-shattering apocalypse.

At the heart of the matter is a sense that “things are not going very well” with regard to normal ego functions. Our identity is slipping away from us and/or our problems aren’t being successfully solved. While we might want to somehow avoid confronting this failure on our part, the anxiety-filled, nightmarish dream is telling us that we can’t run away from the challenge, for our dreams will keep chasing us and wake us up, shaken and (hopefully) ready to “get brave” and face the challenge.

*Synthesizing:* if signaling is a primitive form of ego-functioning, the capacity to synthesize is one of the most advanced of our ego functions. Many ego-psychologists focus on the creation of schemata or cognitive/affective templates when describing the capacity of our ego to synthesize information. Building on the concepts offered by Frederick Bartlett (1995) and Jean Piaget (1923/2001), psychologists such as I. H. Paul (Paul, 1959; Paul, 1966) have studied the formation and extended use of schemata to not just foster remembering (Bartlett) and the assimilation of new information (Piaget), but also the connecting and extension of diverse experiences and bodies of information.

We find schemata operating not just in our waking life, but also in our dreams. Often these schemata are deeply embedded and perhaps, as the Jungians suggest, inherited, as collective archetypes, from one’s culture (as I shall describe regarding introverted dreams). Even without pushing to the boundaries of Jungian inheritance, we can describe the synthesizing function of dreams. In alignment with the Jungians, we can identify dreams that are filled with symbols or imagery that is multi-tiered. As Sigmund Freud (1900/2010) proposed many years ago, a dream holds the capacity to convey several meanings in a single word or in a single symbol.

I noted in an earlier essay (Bergquist, 2023a) that one of the participants in our sleep lab produced a dream in which the word “bridge” was applied to the dreamer’s nose, the game of cards she was playing, and the structure over which she was rolling in a wheelchair. In another of my essays, I suggested that the act of flying could symbolize several different emotional conditions—both a disguised sexual desire and a feeling of competency (Bergquist, 2024). Deeply felt emotional challenges, as well as internal and external conflicts, are represented via symbols. Symbols and images are engaged in the dream because the emotions, situations, or conflicts are often too complex or filled with too many contradictions to be represented in verbal form or via action. Complex (and even contradictory) emotions, situations, and conflicts are artfully packed together and synthesized.

James Fosshage (Fosshage, 1992, p. 255) similarly notes that dreams (and other modes of primary process) use “visual and other sensory images with intense affective colorations in serving an over-all

integrative and synthetic function.” Like many of the ego psychologists, such as Erik Erikson, Fosshage emphasizes this synthetic function in dreams. Much as Freud focused on the multi-level meaning of many symbols used in dreams, the ego psychologists suggest that vivid visual images in dreams can pull together various psychic “objects” (ideas, thoughts, feelings, and memories) (Fosshage, 1992, p. 259). These images might even serve a function that complexity theories call “strange attraction” (Lorenz, 1995). Much like an avalanche of snow recruits debris as it moves forcefully down the mountainside, a rich visual image in a dream might pull in loosely related psychic “objects.”

Louis Breger puts it this way: “dreams serve to integrate affectively aroused material into structures within the memory systems that have previously proved satisfactory in dealing with similar material.” (quoted by Fosshage, 1992, p. 260). Making use of the metaphor of a peremptory ideational train, we might suggest that the train is often initially composed of closely related memories (in a specific memory system or schemata); then, affectively aroused material which is closely related to these memories will step on the train; this material will, in addition, attract other psychic objects that may only be tangentially related to this affective material or the memories that were the original passengers on this train.

*Moving Forward and Healing:* While the use of symbols and images in a dream to synthesize helps the dreamer gain a complex portrait of their current situation, a synthesizing dream can also help the dreamer move forward, beyond their current condition. These dreams can help us solve problems and heal. In waking life, schemata are often engaged for this healing process to take place. For instance, Jeffrey Young (Young, Klosko and Weishaar, 2006) helps his clients identify maladaptive emotional and behavioral patterns that emerge in response to outdated or imposed schemas, influencing moment-to-moment reactions. New schemata are formed that provide a foundation for safe attachment, emotional expression, autonomy, and realistic limits. These behavioral patterns, in turn, contribute to the stabilization of this new schema. Similarly, dreams can bring together painful (often childhood-based) images and fears, while also bringing in a comforting loved one from the past who provides comfort and reassurance.

There is another theme that can help to provide future-driving synthesis. This is a theme associated with prophecy that has been with us for many centuries and in many countries (remember Joseph in the Torah/Old Testament). However, the matter of prophecy is still filled with controversy and misunderstanding. As I noted in a previous essay in this series (Bergquist, 2023b), prophecy or prediction often has to do with interpersonal relationships rather than droughts; we can act on this insight by altering our way of being with this other person rather than storing up grain. This type of dream often holds great weight. It may represent an exceptionally insightful synthesis of complex, multi-tiered information.

*Problem-Solving:* the dream-based art of prophecy might have a worthy ego-function competitor. In dreams, we can often solve elusive problems. In an early essay in this series, I introduced French and Fromm’s model of focal conflict management (French and Fromm, 1964) and reintroduced their model earlier in this essay. In another essay, I introduced the impressive work of Deidre Barrett regarding *The Committee of Sleep* (Barrett, 2001), and more specifically, the committee of characters in a dream that

can clarify the nature of a problem, identify resources to solve this problem, and go about generating a solution inside the dream.

Members of this committee might be represented in dreams that involve visitations of people of our past (or from fictional sources), reoccurrences, false starts, and direct problem-solving. Visitations are probably the most intriguing of these problem-solving resources, and like prophecy dreams, are among the most controversial dream themes. On the one hand, we have “horrible” visitations by unwanted relatives, business partners, or “ghosts” – as was portrayed by Charles Dickens in *The Christmas Carol*. There are also very positive visitations that might be attributed to some Divine source (a gift of “grace”) or to our clever ego.

Somewhat less ethereal are the reoccurrences of old dream narratives and images. “Oh, it is back again. I thought it was going away.” I personally found I was often confronting a dream during my youth about falling from a cliff at Starved Rock State Park in Illinois. As a child, I was terrified of standing on the deck of this state park overlooking the Fox River. My fear was aggravated by my brother and sister teasing me and threatening to push me off the deck. For many years, in my dreams, I was repeatedly falling off the deck, though never hitting the river below. It might be quite appropriate to ask me: “Why is this unresolved?” An even more important question might be offered, “Why does this still matter?” In many ways, this fear of falling from Starved Rock has been resolved. I no longer dream of this rock. However, I am still fearful of heights, so this issue still matters to me, even though I no longer have this dream.

What about recurring dreams? Just as repetition compulsions during our waking hours can be important motivators, the recurring dream can lead us to take some action. As I will note in the next essay, with regard to challenging dreams, it might be that repetition is intended to push us, in our dreams, toward taking action when faced with trauma. Perhaps I should have taken some action when starting on the Starved Rock deck. I could have asked my siblings to stop teasing me. Or I could have simply stepped back from the edge of the deck. Our ego sometimes provides us with a chance for amelioration and redemption. We should take advantage of this chance.

This leaves us with the dreams that directly assist us in solving problems, as well as the dreams that provide negative feedback and suggest we start again. I will devote considerable time to this important ego-based function when considering supportive dreams in the next essay in this series. It is indeed remarkable that we can form the committee of sleep identified by Deidre Barrett (2001) and are able, as Barrett suggests, to actually “sleep on an idea” and intentionally wait for an answer or at least a glimpse of the answer. It is also worth noting the value of our ego to declare “uncle” when nothing is emerging from our dreams that is helpful.

There is also the matter of false awakening dreams that serve a transactional function. These dreams often blur the boundaries between sleep and waking life and serve as an important bridge between our dreams and our daytime planning. I find that I am a connoisseur of false awakening dreams. I often seem to be waking up with a fresh idea for something I am writing. I write down this wonderful new idea or written passage. I then discover that I am still dreaming. Inevitably, I lose the idea or the passage, much to my consternation.

I might like to consider myself to be “naturally introspective” –at least in my role as an author. However, I suspect that the real issue is my strong desire to find the bridge—to push awareness further into waking life. I love what I have been generating in my dreams and am all too anxious to move these dream-based ideas and images into written form when I am awake. Perhaps I push too hard and too fast. This might be a form of writer’s exhaustion for me.

Fortunately, there is another journey that resembles, but is not a false awakening. I would suggest that false awakening dreams are often actually the strange occurrences of the hypnopompic state. This is the state that exists when we are not quite awake and are still witnessing the swirling remnants of dreams that have not quite closed down. While the false awakening dream that occurs during the middle of the night can be disconcerting, the swirling hypnopompic images can be quite entertaining, and the ideas that swirl around with the images might actually be of great value in terms of their “out-of-the-box” insights and creativity. I will have more to say about this when considering supportive dreams.

*Savoring:* There is one final ego function that is often overlooked. This is where our ego dips into a bit of our Id to produce a deep, rich appreciation for the arts, good food, good viewing, and good friendships. We savor the beauty and joy that life can bring us. This is the aforementioned state of Awe that is featured by Dacher Keltner. He offers the following example of awe and wonder (Keltner, 2023, p. 39:

. . . a mental state of openness, questioning, curiosity, and embracing mystery, arises out of experiences of awe. In our studies, people who find more everyday awe show evidence of living with wonder. They are more open to new ideas. What is unknown. To what language can't describe. To the absurd. To seeking new knowledge. To experience itself, for example, of sound, or color, or bodily sensation, or the directions thought might take during dreams or meditation. To the strengths, and virtues of other people. It should not surprise that people who feel even five minutes a day of everyday awe are more curious about art, music, poetry, new scientific discoveries, philosophy, and questions about life and death. They feel more comfortable with mysteries, with that which cannot be explained.

The state described by Keltner contains not only Awe and Wonder. It also contains Flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). While Awe tends to be a passive experience with powerful forces being observed and absorbed in a psychic storm, Flow tends to be an active experience with the power being found in one’s engagement of activities that exist in the threshold between boredom and anxiety. When Flow and Awe join forces, one may find the kind of openness, questioning, curiosity, and mystery that Keltner has described. And can this state of Awe and Flow exist in a dream? At least to some extent, it can. The theme of food and eating in dreams expands our awareness regarding the benefits associated with the consumption of food. In food dreams, we might see where our Ego not only portrays the nutritional function served by a good meal, it also brings in something of Freud’s powerful and highly emotional Id—we lick our lips and savor the feast that is placed before us!

We might add the dream-based experience of enjoying a beautiful scene with a friend. Or sitting by the sea with one’s departed parent. I often dream of walking on the shore of the ocean, feeling not only the glory of the pounding surf but also the “grace” of being alive to engage in this often care-free walk.

While Allan Hobson (Hobson, 1992, pp. 469-470), as I have already mentioned, focuses mostly on the natural activation-synthesis operations of dreams, he can also share his own experience of beauty with his wife. He is in “awe” of what he discovers:

My wife, Joan, and I are at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston to attend a concert [where someone is] playing a Mozart piano (concerto) . . . As is usual on such “museum” occasions, I am restive, feeling like the third wheel on Joan’s business bicycle, and hence inattention. I decide to explore and go down to the smaller, older theater . . . I hear music and the faint bustle of excitement. Opening the door a crack, I am amazed to realize that Mozart himself is on stage, playing the same concerto . . . on an antique harpsichord from the museum collection . . . I close the door with a shhh!, and try to figure out how to tell Joan of my discovery. Then I wake up.

I wonder if Mona's dreams in Thomas Schlessler's *Mona's Eyes* (Schlessler,2025) reflect and expand on her cherished experiences of touring the Art Museums of Paris with her grandfather? Can we also find the Awe and Flow when we dream of participating in a musical or dramatic play? But only as long as we are not caught off guard in being asked to sing or remember the lines of the play or perform in the nude (as often is reported by dreamers). Flow requires that we are not overwhelmed by impossible challenges or profound anxiety, as occurs in dreams that perform the signaling function.

This is all well and good. Our passion (Id) can certainly be stirred by a great meal, walking on the beach, or singing our heart out in a Broadway musical. What about something more mundane, like falling in love with a machine or embracing a new technology? In our digital, technology-laden world, it is no surprise that a computer screen or mobile device shows up in our dreams. But can these dreams evoke Awe? And can we find Flow while dreaming of digital problems being solved? There is the very real possibility that we can dream about wonderful dreams being produced in our digital world. We can be in Awe of these dreams that are dreamt. We can become our own GameDev, finding Flow in the creation of a digitalized fantasy world involving heroes, journeys, and triumphs. Instead of trading in dreams for fantasy-producing artificial intelligence, we can confiscate the AI and bring it into our dreams. Such confiscation might lead us to a whole other dream function—this being the function of transformation.

### **Transformational Dreams**

Is it sufficient for dreams to help us solve immediate problems in our lives? Might dreams also offer images and experiences that can be transformative in nature and preparatory regarding our future? While we have been solving problems in our Transactional dreams or bringing in our old home or our now-deceased parents in order to portray long-held values and aspirations, the incentive to do this problem-solving and portraying is based primarily on a reaction to something that occurred during our waking hours. We can be proactive in considering what is in front of us and how we can best prepare ourselves for this future. Through our dreams, we can “lean into the future” (Bergquist and Mura, 2011) and “learn into the future” (Scharmer, 2009).

Frequently, our transformational search is conveyed in our dreams as a journey, much as our society is inclined to produce mythic images of the journey to express our collective yearning for transformation. We have only to consider the narrative of the journey to be found in *The Wizard of Oz* or the television

series about *Star Trek* in the future. Journeys were portrayed in the past through noted novels such as *Gulliver's Travels* and *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. There is even the much shorter, but just as transformative, journey of Alice down the rabbit hole and into Wonderland. Classical music compositions called Tone Poems often portray a journey through a perilous life (such as Richard Strauss's *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*) or up a mountain (Strauss's *Alpine Symphony*).

What these various accounts of journey hold in common is what Joseph Campbell calls the universal myth of a hero's journey (Campbell, 2025). This myth typically contains narratives of departure, initiation, and return. A hero who leaves the ordinary world, faces challenges in a special or supernatural world, achieves a decisive victory, and returns transformed, often bringing a boon to their community. There is perhaps no better example of this journey of the hero than the Odyssey of Homer's Ulysses. It is through many lands that this heroic figure travels, "learning as he goes" and arriving home a more complete man. There is even some reason to believe that Ulysses was traveling through the nine states of the Enneagram during his journey (Goldberg, 2006). This is a remarkable example of a fully encompassing transformation—though at the expense of Penelope, his ever-suffering wife.

We find these heroic journeys portrayed not only in the novels, movies, and television series of our society, but also in our personal dreams. While Transactional dreams tend to be relatively short, with meaning packed into a short time interval, the Transformational dreams often are quite lengthy. The journey narrative might even be presented in several successive dreams (we dream, wake up, fall back to sleep, and resume our dream).

The following dream vividly (and poetically) displays and exemplifies the Transformational journey. It would have played out over an extended period of dream time:

I dreamed I was walking along a river that had no beginning and no end. Its waters shimmered with colors I had no names for, hues that seemed to hum softly, as if each shade carried its own note in a vast, unseen symphony. The air was warm but not heavy, scented faintly with something like rain on stone.

I followed the riverbank for what felt like days, though the sun never moved. The light was constant, a golden twilight that made every leaf and pebble seem etched in memory. My feet did not tire, though I could feel the soft give of the earth beneath each step. I knew—without knowing how—that the river was leading me somewhere it had longed to go.

Eventually, I came to a bridge made of woven branches, suspended over the water without any visible supports. As I stepped onto it, the river's current slowed, as though holding its breath. Halfway across, I looked down and saw not my reflection, but scenes from my own life: moments I had forgotten, moments I had wished to forget, and moments I had never lived but somehow recognized. The water carried them away gently, as if promising to keep them safe.

On the far side of the bridge, the landscape changed. The river began to rise—not in flood, but as if it were climbing a hill. Its waters defied gravity, flowing upward toward a horizon that shimmered like glass. I followed, my heart pounding with a strange mixture of awe and inevitability.

At the crest of the hill, the river ended in a vast, still pool. Above it stretched a sky so deep and endless that it seemed to lean down toward the water. The river, without hesitation, lifted itself into the air, becoming a silver ribbon that vanished into the clouds. I stood at the edge, feeling the pull to follow.

I stepped forward—and found myself weightless, rising with the river into the sky. The world below grew small, then vanished entirely. There was no fear, only the certainty that I was going exactly where I was meant to go.

When I woke, the sound of running water lingered in my ears, and for a moment, I could still feel the sky beneath my feet.

This dream contains all of elements found in a transformational dream, including the sense that one's own identity is being "liberated" ("found myself weightless"), and that the fear which might be manifest in any major transformation is not present. There is only "certainty that I was going exactly where I was meant to go." There is even a moment of hypnopompic imagery as the dreamer was waking up ("sound of running water" and feeling of "the sky beneath my feet.").

What then is the source of this remarkable dream? Its source is the Internet. Its author is probably Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) (though the Internet would not admit that this is the case). Remarkably, each time I go back to this site, the dream would change—thus making me conclude that this dream was manufactured. Perhaps, as I noted with regard to the role of technology in transactional dreams, I have "danced" with a dreamer and was enthralled ("awe") with a digitally produced dream. One might even ask: Does A.I. dream? Perhaps it does.

Let me offer my own lengthy dream of a journey that I know to be real and not A.I. generated! This is a recurring dream with minor variations in its enactment each time.

Typically, I am sitting on a bench located in a small park on the West Side of San Francisco, where I used to live and work. I get up from the bench, knowing that I need to return to my home, which is located on the Northeast side of this city. I start to walk eastward and soon find that I am on a street in a very threatening part of town. It doesn't actually seem to be San Francisco anymore. It looks most like a rundown street in a 1930s city like Chicago. There is a small group of very menacing "hoodlums" coming toward me from a dark alleyway. I run away from them, but soon find that my escape route is blocked. I must climb up a ladder to the top of a building. I am staring down at the street from a great height. I scramble over to the other side of the rooftop and realize that I will have to leap down to a lower level of the building. I am afraid of heights [in real life] and am terrified of the leap I must take. I do leap and successfully land on the lower-level roof. I then must lift myself over the edge of this lower rooftop and swing down to the ground.

Suddenly, I am no longer in a city; instead, I find that there is a large field in front of me, as if I were at the edge of the city and were looking at the countryside that edges up to the city. I start walking on the hill and suddenly find that I have come to the edge of a cliff. I am startled by the great depth of the sloop down from the cliff (another height for me to fear). I actually slide down the slope and find that I am once again on a street in San Francisco. I know where I am. It

is a street corner about three blocks south of Market Street in San Francisco. I am very tired, having walked and run a long distance, but I know that I have to make it up to Market Street and turn right for a short journey down this street to the Embarcadero Hotel at the east end of Market Street. I pass by “sleezy” movie theaters, souvenir shops, and a couple of bars. I sometimes go into one of the bars, think about having a drink, and find it to be disgusting and sometimes hostile (the same group of hoodlums who menaced me at the start of the dream).

I eventually arrive at the Embarcadero Hyatt Hotel and go up the elevator to the beautiful Embarcadero Hotel Lobby (which I appreciate when I am awake). There is a large global structure in the lobby that I particularly admire. I sit on a bench in the lobby for a short while to take in the sights of people coming and going at the hotel. I then walk outside the hotel and move to a bench located between the hotel and the waterfront [this is an area that was renovated after the San Francisco earthquake of 1989 and the removal of the freeway section leading into the San Francisco downtown]. Suddenly, I was no longer looking at the hotel and the surrounding area; rather, I was sitting on a bench, looking at the façade of a large cathedral-like structure which had many nooks and crannies. This structure seemed to be very baroque and had obviously been built by a very skillful craftsman. At some level, I knew I was dreaming, and I began to appreciate my own craftsmanship in offering this remarkably intricate architectural display. I would then, typically, wake up.

While I don't feel particularly heroic in making this short journey across the streets (and hills) of San Francisco, this dream does contain all of the elements of Campbell's mythic narrative. There was the beginning, with me sitting on the bench on the West Side of San Francisco. And then there was the harrowing journey on the streets, across the rooftops, and over the hills of this city. I faced adversaries, was tempted sometimes by an excursion into a bar, and ended up in a place of beauty and serenity. My goal ended up being appreciation for the architecture, sculpture, and design of an intricate baroque façade. The dream suggested that I value beautiful things (which is an accurate assessment of my values in life). And that I can even appreciate the way in which I can produce beautiful things in my dreams. While I am not an artist in my waking life, I cherish my ability to be an artist in my dreams. It is worth the harrowing journey in my dreams to arrive at this place of beauty.

This dream has been transformative in that it has repeatedly pushed against my current sense of self. It has challenged me to attend more to my creative side—and perhaps even my long-neglected (and even denied) artistic side. In my dream, I am willing to take risks and confront my fears (especially of heights) on behalf of this important desire to find beauty and perhaps even create beauty in my life. I am gently encouraged to move from my current “bench” to a new “bench” where I have an opportunity to be a somewhat different person.

Bill Bridges provides another portrayal of the Transformational journey. In his books concerning transitions (Bridges, 1980; Bridges, 2001), Bridges identifies a multi-stage process that resembles that offered by Joseph Campbell. Bridges describes the push away from our current state (endings), a journey through a state of ambiguity and ambivalence (neutral zone), and the entry into something new and energizing (beginnings). One of the many insights to be offered by Bridges concerns a “requirement” while dwelling in the neutral zone to come to terms with what we have terminated. This

means acknowledging the positives in what we have left behind. We must mourn the old before we can fully come to terms with what we are about to embrace. My colleague, Agnes Mura, and I have portrayed this three-stage transition as pushing off in a boat from the shore, the travel on a turbulent sea in dense fog, and the glimmering light of a new land to which we travel (Mura and Bergquist, 2020). We related this journey specifically to the collective struggle in the early years of this decade with COVID-19.

The images that Agnes Mura and I used to describe transitions come partially out of our own dreams during the years of COVID-19. For me, in particular, I had dreamt of taking a journey on a boat through seas that were quite threatening to me, with the prospect of monsters emerging from the depths of the sea to devour me and my fragile boat. In the distance, I could faintly see the light emerging from what I assumed to be a lighthouse. I was never quite sure if I could depend on this faint light for guidance; the light might just be my imagination or a light being cast by some malevolent being. I was frightened in my dream but determined to move forward. I then woke up. The dream was incomplete, and my journey failed me. I never arrived on the other shore, nor even gained a clear view of this new shoreline. The incomplete outcome of this dream motivated me to work with Agnes, when awake, on ways to best envision and achieve arrival at the new shore.

At the time when I had this dream, there were changes to be made in my personal life because of the virus, and changes to be made in my professional life as I transitioned from a life filled with administrative duties (serving as the president of a graduate school), as well as teaching and consulting in countries throughout the world. As Agnes and I noted in our essay, returning to the old shore is quite tempting when we are “at sea.” As Bill Bridges proposed, grieving for what we left back on the old shore will (and must) be engaged while we are on the boat; otherwise, grieving will take place when we arrive at the new shore, and will disrupt our adjustment to the new beginnings.

One final point about Transformational dreams and the end points to be reached in a journey portrayed in this dream. I can identify six different types of transformational dreams associated with six different outcomes. The first type is a dream when the endpoint is actually anticipated. This is the classic prophetic dream, such as the noted dream of Abraham Lincoln, when he predicted his own death. Lincoln’s law partner and bodyguard reported that a few days before his assassination, Lincoln told him about a dream he had where he walked into the East Room of the White House to find a small group of mourners. He asked one of the guards who had died, and the guard said, “The president. He was killed by an assassin.” He was shot three days later.

If what is predicted concerns such a thing as increased production of grain or a shift in the stock market, then the prophecy might be considered transactional. Conversely, if what is predicted concerns a fundamental transformation in one’s sense of self (such as Lincoln’s existential transformation from life to death), then the dream might be considered transformational. For instance, if Joseph dreamt not just of droughts and grains (transactional) but also of his new status as a powerbroker in the Egyptian empire, then his dreams could be considered transformational. However, Joseph knew better than to mention his own potential shift in power; so, if his dreams were transformational, he probably would have kept this transformation to himself.

A second kind of transformation dream is one in which the endpoint becomes clearer and more compelling when portrayed in the dream. We find that many utopian images were first produced in a dream. As Fred Polak (1973) suggests, it is in the envisioning of a future state that a society will find a reason to remain viable; without a compelling vision of the future, societies enter into a period of decline. The leader as dreamer might be of great value—and they don't even have to dream of granaries, as did Joseph.

Transformational dreams can also provide endpoints that are quite realistic. We might find that our dreams can be engaged to produce an actionable pathway to a desirable endpoint. The dream can be a testing ground (“wind tunnel”) for alternative pathways to end points or even a testing ground for the end points themselves. Emil Gutheil (Gutheil, 1951, p. 156) even introduces the notion of “personification” into our appreciation of the remarkable capacity of dreams to test out ideas.

Personification is a form of reverse symbolization. Instead of a person or type of person being represented in a symbol, the symbol is replaced by a person. An idea is enacted by this generated person. This allows the person to take action based on the idea. Results of the action (and idea) can be tested out in the dream. For instance, as dreamers, we might consider being more thoughtful and kinder in our relationships with others. We try out one version of this kindness and thoughtfulness in our dream and envision how others react to it. We may, in turn, recall our reactions and other people's reactions to this thoughtfulness and kindness when we wake up.

Something similar occurs in real life when we find a safe place to personify one or more of our “secret” longings and ideas. Matthew Miles (1964) writes about temporary settings in which alternative behaviors can be displayed and alternative endpoints can be achieved. Miles identifies such temporary systems as carnivals, retreats, parades, and festivals. We attend “devilish” festivals devoted to evil forces and death, as well as “frivolous” festivals devoted to carefree celebration, complete with costumes, fanciful displays, and the abandonment of traditional prohibitions. We might even participate in a temporary shifting of social order in the so-called Feasts of Fools (Cox, 1969). In all of these instances, real-like behaviors and displays are dreamlike in their unique and boundary-shattering presentation. They may often be inspired by our dreams, much as is the case with compelling images of the future (utopias). Conversely, we might ask: “Do carnivals, festivals, and parades exist in our dreams?” Yes, they do. And they can be transformative in our dreams, even if they allow for only temporary transformation (shift in sense of self) when enacted during our waking hours.

A fourth type of transformational dream is found among those dreams that confirm a specific endpoint. This often requires that the dream interacts with dream-like states (such as hypnagogic and hypnopompic) that exist immediately before and after we fall asleep. They might even occur in conjunction with our daydreams, our creative productions (stories, paintings, music), and our spontaneous reality-creating interactions (“subjective reality”) with other people (Brothers, 2001). We find this type of transformative dream in full display when Deidre Barrett (2001) writes about the Committee of Sleep. We nap, meet to solve problems, nap some more, and do some more planning and problem-solving. As in the case of prophecies, the committee can be solving mundane (transactional) problems and planning for an immediate future, or the committee can be using their dreams to bring

about major transformations in not only the world in which they are working, but also in the individual roles each member of the committee is playing in this new world.

Finally, we have the transformational dreams that lead us back to a formerly cherished endpoint. Dorothy can find her way back home from the land of Oz, and Odysseus can finally return to his home in Ithaca. In many ways, nothing has really changed, despite a plethora of self-changing experiences. This transformative journey might best be portrayed as a Möbius Strip (which is called a “non-orientable surface”). The two ends of a strip of paper are twisted once and then glued together. You begin your travel at one point on this twisted strip, move along the strip, finding yourself on the opposite side of this piece of paper, and then return to the original point. You have been transformed by moving without interruption to the “opposite” side, yet you eventually travel back to where you began.

## Conclusions

We have considered dreams of a transactional nature that take us back to our former home and/or provide us with the opportunity to interact once more with our deceased parents, siblings, or friends. We then return to the present, having touched once again on our past history. These dreams can move from being transactional to being transformational when we recognize, to quote Thomas Wolfe, that “we can’t go home again” or, to quote a famous French proverb, “the more things change, the more they stay the same.” Did Odysseus happen to dream of playing with a Möbius Strip when he returned home to Ithaca, or did Penelope hand him one of these strips in a dream he had after “leaving the road”? I know that I have had Möbius Strip-type dreams after I retired from my very active life of international travel and cross-cultural interactions.

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