

## "The Antecedents of the Experience of Light in Dreams"

Gregory Scott Sparrow, Ed.D., Asst. Professor

University of Texas-Pan American

Since the beginning with my work with dreams, I have maintained a special interest in the ecstatic experience of light in the dream state. While white light is the predominant, if not exclusive visual element that characterizes these experiences, the ecstatic feelings and sense of holy presence that accompany the vision of light renders the experience intensely personal as well as transcendent. My initial experience took place in a lucid dream when I was 19, and was included in my 1976 book, *Lucid Dreaming: Dawning of the Clear Light*. It was as follows:

I am returning home from my college classes, carrying some books, when suddenly I realize that I am dreaming. I look at my hands, and then everything around me, and notice how vivid everything appears. I think to myself that this is somehow real in a three-dimensional sense.

I walk up to black double doors, and open them. Light pours through the opening, enveloping me with intense joy and a sense of profound purpose. As the light courses through me, I walk into the room, which appears to be a chapel. No one is there to explain the immense sense of purpose that I feel. At one point, I carry a crystal rod or wand, upon which a spinning crystal circlet is poised. The light passes through the crystal, and is beautiful.

I can still feel the effects of this dream, even now 36 years later.

Jung's words capture the universal significance of the vision of light. He says,

The phenomenon itself, that is, the vision of light, is an experience common to many mystics, and one that is undoubtedly of the greatest significance, because in all times and places it appears at the unconditional thing, which unites in itself the greatest energy and the profoundest meaning.<sup>1</sup>

Not surprisingly, the experience of light represents an especially elusive phenomenon, both from the standpoint of the one who seeks it, or seeks it again, and from the perspective of one who wishes to understand what precedes or gives rise to it. Of course, we have the literature of the mystics, both East and West, who have described their moments of ecstasy through their own metaphors, and within their own systems of philosophy and faith, thereby enriching their accounts with the uniquely personal context of their spiritual journey. However, such accounts reflect the particular orientation of the recipients in such a way that may effectively obscure the state of the mind and of the heart that typically precedes what the Tibetan Buddhists refer to as "the dawning of the clear light."

I propose to you that we can learn more about what accounts for this core mystical experience by examining, in particular, *dreams* which culminate in the experience of light. By analyzing the antecedent images, dreamer awarenesses, and dreamer-dream interactional dynamics, we might ascertain the processes that are at work without depending as much on the retrospective analyses of the recipients, or imposing constructs that subtly appropriate the

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<sup>1</sup> Wilhelm, R. 1962. *The secret of the golden flower*. New York" Harcourt, Brace and World.

experience into convenient theories. Out of such a study one might be able to articulate an approach to dream work and spiritual practice which would make previously inaccessible experiences more available to a wider population. Before we examine a few light experiences in the dream state, and their antecedents, let me first say that initial experiences of radiance often seem to occur without apparent dream or waking precursors. Such experiences appear to be spontaneous "gifts" that may serve to awaken the recipient to one's spiritual nature or calling (Sparrow, 1994). Indeed, these early experiences do not evidence the kind of complex antecedent processes that later experiences in the same person's life may exhibit. The dream I just shared with you seemed like a gift—surprising, free of conflict, and without requiring anything from me. In contrast, let me share another dream that occurred three or four years later. Unlike my first experience, this dream reveals a barrier that stands in the way of the light's recurrence. I believe that this so-called failure dream sets that stage for appreciating the dreams that follow.

I become lucid and decide to search for the white light. I begin to see it here, and then there, as it seems to shine through the form of every ordinary object around me. I see a bicycle shining, and concentrate on the shimmer in hopes that it will expand into a full-blown experience of radiance. However, as soon as I do this, the shimmering disappears, and the bicycle becomes "just itself" again. I am frustrated when I notice a woman approaching. She walks up and says, "You must first learn to love the form before you can see the light within it."

The woman's simple prescription conveys immense psychological, philosophical, and spiritual implications, does it not? With a paucity of words, the woman asserts that one must love the world of form—the differentiated realm of metes and bounds—in order to experience the uniting essence of everything. This simple dream implies a lot, as well, about an approach to dreams in general, and to lucid dreaming in particular. It suggests that if one wishes to experience the highest states of ecstasy in the dream state, one would do well to respect the *particular* imagery that arises in the dream state, regardless of its outward appearance. Certainly, lucid dreamers have considerable freedom over the forms that arise in their dreams, and in many instances can modify them or avoid them at will, and so an attitude of embracing the specific form of the dream may seem to curtail unnecessarily the creativity and freedom of the lucid dreamer. If the dream is, as some say, a self-created reality, then why subordinate the creator to the creation?

There are two threads—transcendence and immanence—running through every spiritual tradition. The path of transcendence promises enlightenment through an elevated, unifying perspective, whereas the path of immanence offers enrichment through a complete, wholehearted involvement in the diversity of here-and-now events and relationships. The work of Carl Jung, Jack Cornfield, Michael Meade and others advocate this latter position, and effectively counterbalance the emphasis on transcendence and salvation in the Judeo-Christian myth. The recent preoccupation with Mary Magdalene reflects this shift in the popular interest toward a fully "incarnated" spirituality. In Buddhism, a similar dialogue exists between Hinayana, which supports the individual quest for the transcendence of incarnational existence, and Mahayana, which espouses the Bodhisattva ideal of returning to incar-

national life to assist others in their quest for enlightenment. In Tibetan yoga, we are told that there are two paths—the path of form and the path of formlessness—each of which leads to same destination. Along these lines, I once had a dream that a woman and I were both seeking heaven. I knew that we had to pursue our singular goal in different ways. I had to embark on a journey through a dark, wooded land, whereas she had to find her way to heaven through deep meditation. This balancing act between transcendence and immanence, between spirit and soul, can be found in every spiritual tradition. But instead of digressing into a topic that is much bigger than the time we have, let's examine some dreams in which the dreamer has succeeded in experiencing the interior light to see if this conversation between spirit and soul can be discerned.

The following dream of a middle-aged man reveals a remarkable progression of strategies for engaging the form of the dream, each of which resolves the dream conflict with dramatically differing outcomes.

I am alone in a log cabin on a barren plain. The door opens and three figures come inside and stand before me, side by side. They are Dracula, Werewolf, and Frankenstein. At first I am terrified as I recall my childhood fear of these three characters. However, I suddenly realize that I am dreaming. My first thought is that I can make them go away. So I say, "Get out!" And they disappear immediately.

I begin to think that I didn't do the best thing by having them leave. I think, "Maybe I should have surrounded myself with light instead." So I

shout, "Please come back." The door opens, and the three figures enter again and face me. I mentally surround myself with light, and a pinkish white cloud appears all around me. I peer through the haze, and can barely make out the three characters standing there quietly.

Again I wonder if I have done the best thing. I think, "Maybe I should invite them into the light." So I say, "Please come into the light." I see them walking toward me, and suddenly the light comes into me. The characters and the cabin disappear in the radiance of my inner experience. I am on fire with love, and remain in an ecstatic state for some time before coming back into consciousness in my bed. The effects of this most exalted experience of my life remained with me for weeks.

In this remarkable experience, the dreamer applies three approaches to the unsettling encounter. The first two reflect common "transcendent" strategies for dealing with threat: banishing the threat, or insulating oneself from it through invoking the protection of higher power. Both remedies seem to work, but neither satisfies the dreamer's sense of the "very best." It is only the third strategy—that of respecting and welcoming the threatening form of the dream—that gives rise to the experience of light.

The second dream is one that was included in my book *Lucid Dreaming: Dawning of clear Light*. It is as follows:

I am the prisoner of the devil, along with a crowd of other people. The devil appears as an ordinary man, who is very powerful, cold and brutish. We are

free to walk around, but the understanding is that there is no escape from his power. Even so, a woman and I decide to try to escape while he is distracted. It is night time, and we run across a lighted expanse of lawn toward an area that is not lit by the light. As I run, a voice says to me, "If you go further, you will fall into a well." I stop abruptly, not knowing what to do. Then I see a shadow creep pass me, alerting me to the devil's approach. Feeling powerless, I turn around, drop to the ground, and say, "Lord have mercy!" However, instead of seeing the devil, I see a woman clothed in white, surrounded by light. She walks up, bends down and touches my forehead. Immediately, I am infused with light and ecstasy, and I know that I have been healed. The light pours through me for some time before subsiding as I awaken in bed.

In this dream, the dreamer is also aware of a profound dilemma. He does the normal thing and tries to get away from the threat, but in the process, he becomes aware of another problem created by his flight. The dreamer is caught between two untenable choices with no way out. When he turns, he invokes the protective intervention of higher power, but one can sense that the words are uttered in desperation rather than faith. However, in this state of resignation, the light comes to him through an unexpected source.

These first dreams reveal clear conflicts of which the dreamers become starkly aware. The dreamers do not resolve their respective dilemmas by piercing the illusion of the dream's ultimate reality, but they come to the point where they accept that they must face, and even coexist with, these troublesome influences.

As as you may have surmised by now, the thesis that emerges from these experiences and the ones that follow is this: that the recognition and acceptance of an apparently unresolvable internal division precedes the experience of light, which then incorporates the respective viewpoints or paradigms into a greater whole. The dreamer's apparent role in the process is not one of solving the problem, nor of transcending it: it is to become aware of, and to accept the presence of inner conflict or division. In these first dreams that I've shared with you, the division is between good and bad, acceptable and unacceptable. But the antecedent conflicts of the experience of light are sometimes based on contrasting ideals, both of which have obvious value. For instance, in one dream, a male dreamer comes face to face with the basic differences in male and female perspectives.

I am with Ruth Ann, a girl from my childhood neighborhood who seemed to enjoy manipulating me because of my unspoken, but obvious attraction to her. For some reason in the dream, she is angry with me, and swings her arm to hit me. Instead of hitting her back, I block her swing, and reach forward to embrace her. I say, "You are the feeling, the intuitive. I am the thinking, the rational. But together we serve the same Father." At that moment, light fills my visual field, and love infuses me. Ruth Ann is gone, but I remain in ecstasy for some time before becoming aware of being in bed.

The dreamer, who is not lucid, faces an immediate attack that seems unwarranted in the context of the dream. However, he faces the attack without judgment or fear, and acknowledges the fundamental differences between himself and the woman. While not resolving the conflict himself, he appeals to a unifying ideal through which the two can relate. A

simple and bold shift away from conflict to acceptance of differences, and then to unexpected union and ecstasy.

Another dream of light—this time a lucid dream—implies a conflict of ideals that remains only tacitly expressed in the dream, but later became clear with the dreamer's help. In this dream, again in the first person present tense,

I am outside my childhood home in the middle of the night. The moon is full, and the wind is calm. I think that the morning would be a good time to go fishing. At that point, I notice that another orb light appears alongside the moon. As in many other dreams, I am at first confused, and then realize I am dreaming. I watch as the two orbs of light approach each other and become united. A bright star now appears superimposed over a bright disc of light. I lie down on the grass and meditate on the light. Clouds pass over the light, but a clear tunnel opens between the light and where I lie. Suddenly, a shimmering light descends down the tunnel toward me, and enters my chest. I am filled with ecstasy and love, and remain in that state for some time. I hear a voice say, "You have done well with this."

When I come to, it is morning and I am no longer aware that I am dreaming. My wife and sister are sitting nearby on the grass. I consider asking them if it is okay for me to leave and go fishing. Then I realize that it is my choice, and so I tell them that I will soon be leaving.

In understanding this dream, it is useful to know that the principal conflict in this dreamer's life was the question of whether to remain in his marriage. Having felt emotionally estranged from his wife for some time, he had remained in the marriage out of fear of failure, a sense of obligation, and later, out of a commitment to his only child. His relationship with his sister was similarly obligatory and codependent. The dream helped him find the courage to move on in spite of a conscious sense of failure. When asked about the words that he had heard, the dreamer said that he thought it referred to his willingness to balance the tension of the competing ideals of duty to others and duty to oneself.

Another dream—this time, a nonlucid dream—reveals a conflict for which there seems to be no resolution available; that is, until the light appears.

I am with Mike on the streets of a Mexican border town. It is evening, and we run into an attractive woman, who may be a prostitute, but we are not sure. We flirt with her, and make arrangements to get together later that evening. Just at that moment, I notice my father standing nearby. He wears a stern look, as if to express his judgment of me. I am unsure of what to do or to say. At that moment, there is an explosion to the east. I turn and see that an orb of white light has appeared about 100 yards away, hovering above the ground. I look at my father and see that his face is rapt with wonder, and illuminated by the light. We stand together, transfixed by the sight. The orb approaches us, and passes slowly over us. Again, there is an explosion and the orb appears to the east of us again. It is so powerful that it begins to attract everything toward it. I feel the wind becoming so powerful that I lose my footing and rush upward

into the light, until there is nothing left of the dream but light and a sense of intense love and fulfillment.

Again the dreamer is caught in a conflict between competing values. He admitted that his father, for whom sexuality had been an uncomfortable matter, could never have understood or accepted the unbridled play depicted by the dream. While there is at first no solution whatsoever between these competing ideals, the light appears as an unexpected solution that unites, or supercedes, the respective ideals of father and son.

Finally, I'd like to share one last dream with you that commences with a stark view of the dreamer's impoverished condition, but which gives ways to ecstasy and healing.

I am aware that I am terminally ill, and I am with a woman who also will soon die of an incurable disease. We are at a spiritual retreat, and sleeping in open rooms. She and I have beds beside each other, but we do not sleep together. That night, we lie down in our respective beds and fall asleep. In the middle of the night, I am overwhelmed by a white light that comes in intense waves, subsiding briefly between each exquisite pulsation. For a while, there is only light. I receive the light more fully than on many other occasions where I resisted somewhat out of fear or discomfort. I am aware that the light is pouring through me into the sleeping woman beside me, and that we are both being healed of our illnesses. As I surrender completely to the light, a voice says, "Your mortal life is over." Then later, we both awaken, and realize that we

have been healed. Further, I know that she and I will remain together for all eternity.

This nonlucid dreamer comes to the realization that he will soon die. In effect, the dreamer experiences his fate and everyone's else's fate. Like the Russian poet, who begins her poem, "I know the truth, you can forget all other truths," referring to the fact that we all will soon die, the dreamer apprehends the gritty truth of his own inescapable existential dilemma. But in the context of this bleak realization—in the darkness of the night—light comes, as if to say that we must go to the depths of our human predicament before we can rise to a level where we can live free of despair.

We are seeing in these dreams a clear view of what precedes, at least in some cases, the experience of inner light. First of all, a sense of inner conflict, impoverishment, or disease—for which there is no apparent resolution—sets the stage. Then the dreamer comes to terms with the intractable nature of one's condition. Out of this apparent final realization comes something wholly unexpected—the fusion of differences into a greater whole, signified by the experience of radiance and ecstasy. It is significant, I believe, that the experience of light is not merely one of mental clarity; it is also an experience of deep love, exquisite feeling, and abiding presence. That is to say, the experience is profoundly immanent or soulful, as well as spiritual or transcendent. While it announces the presence of something higher that is uniquely capable of resolving the conflict, it crosses graciously to the human side of the equation, as well, by intensifying one's experience of love and relationship.

Of course, once a person has learned to accept the form of whatever arises in dreams and waking life; that is, to accept his or her own limitations, and to move comfortably in the harness of life's daily losses and contradictions, then the level of inner conflict will presumably lessen. If so, the experience of the light should either subside altogether, or arise without as much antecedent conflict. If it subsides, then we might conclude that the light effectively comes from outside the dreamer's consciousness as a healing influence in response to the dreamer's need. If it continues to arise without preliminary conflict, however, then we might assume that it manifests as a function of an integrative awareness already possessed by the dreamer. In regard to the latter possibility, Underhill's classic treatise *Mysticism* supports the view that the mystic eventually reclaims the earlier vision of light after resolving whatever barriers have stood in the way, and enters a period of development that Underhill refers to as the "unitive way." In support of this view, consider a final dream. Recall, if you will, the first dream that I shared with you in which the woman told me that I first needed to love the form in order to experience the light. In this dream, 30 years later, I finally seem to know this. It was a simple dream.

I am with an unknown man in an outdoor scene, and I abruptly become lucid. I say to my companion, "If you want to see the light, meditate on whatever you see." Following my own advice, I immediately see a children's outdoor swing set. I lie down on the grass and meditate on the image of the swingset. The light comes after a moment's hesitation, obliterating the imagery and leaving me to receive it in gentle pulsating waves of ecstasy.

Instead of existing outside the dreamer, in some specific locale, the light resides within everything observable, and by the implication within the dreamer as well. In a more recent lucid dream, I apparently forgot this great truth, at least initially. I was again lucid and looking for the light. There were Christmas light adorning trees in a nighttime setting, so I focused on the lights, hoping that they would reveal the great light. But again, as in my earlier failure, the lights dimmed upon examination. I sat down to contemplate my difficulty, and suddenly the answer came. It was an enigmatic statement from Cleary's translation of *The Secret of the Golden Flower*. It was simply, "The Light is in the eye." After receiving the light as a gift early in my life, then seeking it futilely, then having it manifest in the midst of inner conflict, the dreamer finally realizes the ultimate truth. It's already there, in the eye of the beholder.

One might ask, since very few people report having experiences of light, how these findings can be useful to a broader population of dreamers? Actually, the preliminary findings that I have reported herein support the view that dreamers are often very close to experiencing the light within the context of the ordinary dream drama. If grappling with our intractable inner conflicts brings us closer to the light, then we can be on the lookout for when dreamers are engaged in such a struggle, and thus poised to receive the fullness of light. For instance, a member of one of my therapeutic groups reported a dream in which she heard scratching on the back screen door in the middle of the night. When she nervously went to investigate, which is quite surprising—think about how much courage that took—she saw a jackal standing just outside, apparently hungry. The woman prepared some food, opened the door, and fed the waiting animal. From what we've seen in the previous examples, this

dreamer may have very well been on the verge of experiencing the light. Certainly, the principal quality of the light of resolving intractable differences into a great whole is embodied by the dreamer's own respectful attitude toward the hungry beast, and so the light is, essentially, in the eye—that is, expressed by the integrative consciousness of the dreamer. Another client of mine reported showing up for a family picnic too late to get any of the food. An empty platter, covered with fish bones was all that was left. Unable to explain why, the dreamer—who was severely abused and orphaned as a child—took the platter down to the shore of a lake and lowered it into the water. The fish came to life, and swam away. The dreamer's response to her own perceived impoverishment reflected the spirit of unity and love conveyed by the light itself. While these dreams represented highly significant experiences in their own right, they also constitute dreams that could easily have given way to the phenomenal experience of radiance, given what we have seen about the antecedents of the light experience. Indeed, these dreams are not unlike another dream that was reported to me that culminated in the fullness of light. In the dream, the dreamer became aware of a baby that was covered in feces, and knew that it was her responsibility to clean and care for the child. As she reached to take the child into her arms, she looked into the child's eyes, which were full of wisdom, and suddenly the imagery dissolved into an experience of light and ecstasy.

Perhaps one can never know why some momentous dreams give way to the fullness of light, and some do not, but we can point out to dreamers the profound significance of their willingness to become aware of the apparently unresolvable conflicts of their lives. Rather than representing a negative indication of growth, the awareness of conflict in the dream can

be reframed as a state of awareness which may invite, or culminate in an experience of inner radiance. We can also share examples of similar dreams in which similar courageous actions precipitated the awareness of interior light. Such "displacement stories" are used in family therapy all the time in order to gently encourage a client to see the promises inherent in their willingness to acknowledge their own inner complexes or conflicts.

Some lucid dream experts consider the dream imagery self-created. However, the origins of the imagery cannot be ascertained, and further, dream characters often behave autonomously with their own agendas. I can cite several instances when a fearless, lucid dreamer was not able to alter whatsoever the content of the dream, and ultimately had to deal with the imagery on its own terms. In one, I was in the presence of a deceased friend, who appeared demonic and intent on hurting me. I became aware that I was dreaming, which resolved my fear. I said to him, "You are only a dream, may the light of Christ surround you. Go away." He laughed at me, and began to attack. I won that battle, and in a later dream found the courage to love him in spite of his continued aggression. Looking back, it was more important for me to enter that relationship completely, and to deal with the dream character on his terms, rather than lucidly dismissing him as "unreal." Indeed, resolving the dilemma that one faces often calls for *more involvement, rather than less*. This approach respects the form of the dream, regardless of its origins, and considers that the highest that we can rise to is to engage it appropriately. The resolution of the conflict does not seem to be in the dreamer's power, but enters as a consequence of our willingness to be human enough and present enough to respect the requirements of the moment.

In summary, the anecdotal evidence of the aforementioned dreams suggests that when a dreamer is willing to embrace the specific form of the dream—however afflicted it may appear to be with its inherent duality, conflict, and limitation—the dreamer may experience the fullness of light. This dark, troubled journey contrasts with the view what we need to do is to become lucid and acknowledge the self-created nature of the dream. The path of transcendence has its place, but the project we too easily overlook is becoming more aware of the complex division within us—the apparently irreconcilable aspects of impulse, habit and character that seem to prevent us from becoming the person we aspire to be, and which often appear in our dreams as fully autonomous characters with their own agendas. And yet, the courage to acknowledge and accept the apparent irreconcilability of our complex inner condition may be the price of admission into the mystic's ecstatic vision. In the words of Yeats, "Nothing can be whole or soul that has not first been rent." The apparent paradox in all of this is that by becoming aware of our internal conflicts, and suffering the burden that this awareness brings us, a consummate radiance—call it what you will—may graciously intercede to conceive a new being capable of a greater life than before.