

DREAM TEAM

Internal Family Systems and Dreamwork

by Kerry Backstrom

We are such stuff as dreams are made on...
William Shakespeare

We all dream (whether we remember our dreams or not), and our dreams can be a living theater for the dynamic cast of characters described by IFS. Dreamwork and IFS sit side-by-side, with front row seats at this theater of the psyche, and, like IFS, dreamwork shows deep appreciation for the ways that the various actors on our inner stage play their roles and rely upon one another for their cues. In my view, IFS and dreams share some intrinsically spiritual perspectives, which is to say that both are concerned with meaning, connection, and trust in something within and beyond ourselves. Dreams and IFS invite us to get closer to the unfolding performance of our lives, to experience ourselves and one another with curiosity, compassion, courage, creativity, and other essential qualities of Self.

Just About Dreams

I've been working with my dreams for most of my life, and with the dreams of others in the context of spiritual care for about thirty years. My personal and professional immersion in IFS



came about more recently, but the Internal Family Systems model felt immediately intuitive and familiar, perhaps largely because of my background with dreamwork. My understanding of IFS is informed by professional and personal experience with trauma, hospice, and grief support, as well as with the study and application of Buddhism, shamanism, and a range of psychotherapeutic models—but dreams have provided the most direct, practical evidence that the IFS

understanding of the multiple mind is fundamental to who we are.

There are as many ways to do dreamwork as there are dreamers, so I should be more specific about my own approach. I understand dreams as experiences. As far as our brains are concerned, the events that happen in a dream are real events, producing real neurochemical responses, real emotions, sensations, thoughts. Just as our internal families of parts are real, our dreams are real. Movement in a dream is tracked by the brain as physical movement. Dream sounds are accepted by the brain as actual sounds. When we are seeing things in a dream, our eyes move and our brains perceive these sights visually. I'm not a "dream interpreter" because I don't think dreams can be figured out any more than life as a whole is meant to be figured out. We are always learning, and both dreaming and waking experiences provide opportunities for us to open up or close down. Every experience can be explored from many possible angles and understood many different ways, but dreaming experiences differ from waking ones in the range of possibilities these experiences present; there are things we can do in the dream world that we cannot do in the waking world, and vice versa. We have access to both worlds, and IFS can help make sense of the dynamic relationship between dreaming and waking, inner and outer.

What are dreams, and why do we dream them? The argument that dreams are "random and meaningless" makes little sense when you consider the many millions of people from all over the world throughout history who have found meaning in their dreams.

Although dreams do have a random quality, so does life itself. Recent research suggests that dream randomness is like the random mutations that lead to evolutionary development; without randomness nothing could ever grow in a new direction. In sleep, the mind brings together disparate elements of past and present experience, and probably also elements of ancestral and transpersonal experience, and essentially "free associates" from these unlikely juxtapositions, shaping them into strange stories (or sometimes just jumbles) that can surprise us with fresh insights and jolt us out of habitual ruts in our thinking. Meaning arises in life from intangibles like love, discovery, beauty, humor, even struggle—and dreams offer all of these things, arranged in patterns that we find intrinsically meaningful to a greater or lesser degree.





In our nightly sleep cycles, deep sleep has restorative value, but dreaming sleep (when the brain is quite active) is also essential for renewing our bodies, our souls, our Selves; we need both kinds of sleep to survive. IFS recognizes that parts can use dreams to communicate, and the Self also communicates through dreams. Beyond that kind of communication however, dreams exist in themselves—they have parts, they have Self energy, they are worlds

of experience that may employ languages and metaphors unfamiliar to us but still within our intuitive grasp. Every culture has its own understanding of what dreaming means. There's a lot we don't know about dreams, and this is what makes them wonder-filled, and wonderful.

Dreams and IFS

In psychotherapy, the richness and depth of dreamwork combined with the versatility and effectiveness of IFS could have tremendous potential. Outside of a therapeutic context, there's also a naturally symbiotic relationship between the two, and bringing dreamwork and IFS together in our personal self-care and spiritual practices can result in life-changing insights and breakthroughs. Although such inner work is important, it doesn't have to be laborious. Dreamwork and IFS both offer a sense of radical possibility, so using them to explore our psychospiritual ecosystems can feel more like play.



When I work with a dream, I'm asking some basic questions that have profound implications: What feelings arise in me as I experience and then recall the dream? What are my associations with the dream figures, settings, events? What changes happen between the beginning and end of the dream, and how do I feel when I wake up? Where is the most energy in the dream, and where do things get hazy or dull? How am I writing or telling the dream; what words and phrases do I use? What experiences in my waking life have evoked similar thoughts and feelings, or contained similar images and associations?

Now how does this compare to the questions we are asking in IFS? The IFS model draws upon our natural tendency to view ourselves as complex multifaceted beings as we notice that some aspects of our psyches are familiar to us while others can surprise or offend us. In IFS these parts of the psyche are recognized as sub-personalities, comparable to dream figures, with their own feelings, behaviors, histories, motivations and idiosyncrasies. Our parts, even the ones that other parts consider problematic, all have something to contribute to the wholeness of ourselves, so IFS teaches skills and practices for communicating with these parts, winning their trust, addressing their concerns, and receiving their gifts. To understand my parts and heal them, I learn about their feelings, their relationships, and the roles they play in my inner and outer life. I try to see them in context, just as I see my dreams and dream figures in context. I notice what constellations of parts have the greatest need for my attention, and I notice the patterns that have developed within and among these constellations over time.

IFS also affirms that behind the ecology of parts, our original nature—the Self—has the capacity to bring perspective, presence, patience, persistence, playfulness and meaning to our experiences. If parts are comparable to dream figures, the Self is the deeper wisdom of the dream and the dreamer. As more Self energy is available to the inner family, it's like waking from a nightmare



and recognizing that you are the dreamer of this dream, not its victim. Even the most disturbed and disturbing parts or dream figures have reasons for doing what they are doing. When you, the Self or dreamer, create a trusting relationship with troubled parts or dream figures, you understand and honor what they've been trying to accomplish, and help them step out of extreme roles or patterns of suffering that are stuck in the past. Once unburdened, your parts can contribute their unique gifts to your overall well-being, and that of the larger community. Similarly, even your worst nightmares contain essential life force and the

necessary raw materials for profound positive growth. This may sound like make believe, but when Self and parts come together, or when the dreamer truly invites and explores the dream, the ensuing transformation can be remarkable.

“All the World’s A Stage, and All the Men and Women Merely Players”

The most obvious parallel between dreamwork and IFS is that both work with a cast of characters: the dream figures or parts. One common approach to dreamwork is to assume that every part of the dream (every human or non-human being, every object, etc.) represents a part of the dreamer. Although the term “part” is being used somewhat differently here than in IFS, dream parts and IFS parts still have a lot in common. In dreams, some of these parts fit neatly into the roles of managers, firefighters, or exiles, while others do not; some are clearly playing either beneficial or extreme roles, while others are more ambivalent. Of course, this is true in IFS as well—our parts aren’t always identifiable, and they don’t always stick to their assigned roles. There are exiled protectors and protective exiles; there are parts within parts; and when they are burdened or unburdened, any parts can change their appearance and characteristics significantly. It’s all very dream-like! Nevertheless, even a dream has its own internal logic, and the defining principles of the IFS cast of characters can be applied, at least loosely, to dream figures.

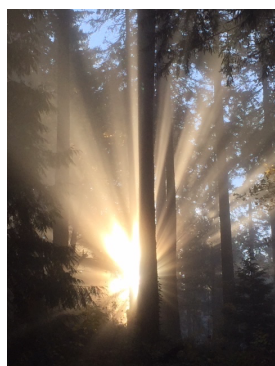
Significantly, the “I” in a dream (known as the “dream ego”) is rarely the Self, although “I” often become more Self-led as the dream progresses. There are some exceptions to this. In numinous, “spiritual” dreams, for example, there may be no separate “I” character at all, and everything in the dream may be an expression of Self. In more typical dreams, however, the dream ego plays an active role as a Self-like manager who resembles the dreamer. The dreamer tends to identify with the dream ego in the same way that we all tend to blend with our Self-like parts. The dream will often demonstrate the limitations of the dream ego’s point-of-view and self-image, just as other protectors can foil the best-laid plans of managers by polarizing with them, and exiles can resist their management.



Sometimes, as in nightmares, the dream ego is not a manager but an exile or firefighter, and in that case the plot of the dream revolves around pain, anger or fear, and dream figures have conflicting ways of handling such distressing experiences. Sinister figures and ones that behave badly are likely to be firefighters (or occasionally exiles) themselves—trapped in reactive patterns with the dream ego.

In all dreams, the parts play off of each other, and by the end of most dreams either stress and uncertainty prevail, or some kind of shift occurs that points to the potential for balance and peace. Similarly, in IFS, if Self energy is not available to parts, their relationships remain strained, but the presence of Self can bring fundamental change and hope to the internal system.

Self may appear in dreams as a teacher, healer or guide in human or nonhuman form, but just because such a character isn't evident doesn't mean that Self isn't there. Self (or the palpable absence of Self) can be found in an environment, object, or mood. For example, a dreamer describes a dream in which she is trapped in a small, cell-like room with no door. The dream ego seems to be a tragically isolated exile. However, when I ask her if there is any light in the room,



she remembers that there is a window, or perhaps a lamp. The window, or the lamp, or even the *quality* of the light could be Self. When the dreamer brings her awareness to that source, she is literally able to see the other objects in the room and the dream ego's experience of that room "in a different light." This leads to a new sense of the dream as a whole, so a dream that initially felt miserable is now remembered as more nuanced.

When her memory of the dream includes Self energy, the dreamer can comprehend how the room's austerity could also be seen as simplicity, how confinement could be seen as containment, and how isolation could be much-needed solitude or privacy.

One of the ways dreams differ from waking life is that everything is much more fluid in the dream world. This can be disorienting, but it can also be liberating. When IFS and dreamwork are combined, IFS can help map a dream's confusing transitions, and dreamwork can add a flexible frame that allows parts to change more freely and relax their rigid roles more easily. Spontaneous unburdenings are common in dreams, and exploring these dreams with IFS can help the dreamer actualize their dream breakthroughs in waking life. Dreams might be seen as rehearsals, where parts can practice unblendings and unburdenings, producing real benefits for the dreamer's internal family. In the rehearsal, dream figures try on different roles more easily than parts do in waking life—an exile or protector can practice being Self; a "bad" character can become "good," or prove to be an inconsistent mix of "bad" and "good"—this changeability

makes dreams a useful IFS tool. When dreamwork accompanies IFS, healing for deep trauma or persistent problems seems more possible as we witness the ease with which dreams unravel our expectations and stuck patterns. Dreams remind us that nothing is as certain as it seems, so the past doesn't have to determine the future.

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For a brief example of how dreamwork and IFS might play together, I'll share one of my own dreams (in bold italics), with commentary (in brackets). I have a history of medical trauma, and also a history of working in medical contexts, which may be evident in the dream. It's helpful to tell a dream in present tense, as if it is happening *now*. The language I used when I wrote this dream down reflects how I felt and thought about the dream experience when it was still fresh for me. In a sense, the way the dream is told is always an extension of the dream itself, so notice the wording.

Dream of Catching the Cat

I'm a patient in the hospital, getting better, but still weak and fragile.

[Here, the dream ego is a protector identified as being "weak and fragile." This description might indicate the burdensome role or self-image that helps them avert or manage pain. How does a "weak and fragile patient" proactively or reactively respond to suffering? We'll see.]

Another patient—a sick toddler in a nearby crib—is crying.

[Exiles typically appear in dreams as children or animals in distress.]

Holly is here visiting me. She picks the toddler up and comforts him, but I'm not sure we should be taking him out of his crib.

[My partner Holly is sometimes a stand-in for Self in my dreams. I see her as someone who can handle things that I can't handle. In waking life and in dreams, I often have mixed feelings about this! Protectors are likely to distrust the way that Self relates to exiles, at least at first. In this case, the dream ego seems to be a manager who has been coping with the exile by ignoring him.]

The baby is wriggling, so Holly lets him walk around a little. But someone opens the door, and the toddler becomes a cat and scoots out. I'm afraid he will get hurt, or disturb other patients and get us in trouble.

[The transformation and escape suggest that this exile has been spontaneously unburdened by the loving attention of Self. Another possibility is that the “someone” who opens the door is Self, and the open door initiates the unburdening. The reason I believe it’s an unburdening is that the word “scoots” seems light-hearted—mischievous rather than desperate. As a frisky cat, the little one no longer needs to be guarded by the manager, but the manager is afraid to let him go. If I side with the manager, this escape is a problem, but if I look at the situation without preconceptions and fears, it’s clear that a free-range cat is better off than a sick, miserable toddler.]

I chase and catch the cat, and he nips my hand.

[Perhaps the dream ego has become a firefighter, reacting to the exile’s escape? Chasing the cat may not be consistent with the “weak and fragile” role that the dream ego initially held as a manager. The former exile evidently doesn’t want to be limited to the “weak and fragile” role either.]

I get mad at Holly, telling her that I'm supposed to be the sick one and don't have the energy to chase cats! Besides, she's the one who let him out, so she should try catching him. She picks him up easily, and cradles him in her arms. But then it's me holding him. Maybe I've become Holly—I seem strong enough to handle him gently now.

[This is the turning point in the dream. The protector has been transformed in a way that parallels the exile’s transformation. As an anxious patient trying to grab the cat, the protector got bitten, but when the dream ego becomes “Holly” (with more Self energy) they are able to handle the cat gently so nobody gets hurt.]

Now, the whole dream scene changes and I'm no longer trying to return a cat to a hospital room at all. There's no cat, and I'm suddenly aware of the activity all around me. I'm checking in at the nurse's station and visiting patient rooms, getting to know the hospital staff and patients, offering them my support. They welcome my presence.

[Holly as a stand-in for Self no longer needs to be present, and neither does the exile. The dream ego has enough Self energy to give attention and care to other parts. Their role now involves “checking in,” “visiting,” “getting to know,” and “offering”—all very Self-led actions. The word “welcome” in the last sentence implies the beginnings of trust and integration in the system as a whole.]

This is an oversimplification of the way IFS generally looks in dreamwork, but it demonstrates how the dream itself can enact a healing process with an IFS cast of characters. The dream ego (protector) is no longer anxious or weak by the end of the dream; the cat is no longer a sick toddler (exile) confined to a hospital room. If the dream had ended earlier, when the cat was biting the dream ego, then the dreamer might have woken up grumpy, distressed, or physically tired—still identified with the patient role as a protector trying to control an impossible situation. Once the dream ego has sufficient Self energy, however, the dreamer will wake refreshed, feeling that some inner dilemma has been resolved.

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Here's another example, with somewhat more complex IFS implications. Again, this is one of my own dreams.

Who’s Driving this Dream?

I’m on a cross-country bus. Just as we are coming to a narrow, winding, precarious mountain road, I see that the driver has abandoned his seat (maybe to discipline some kids in the back).

I’m horrified!

[Dream vehicles can represent the progress and process of a dreamer’s life, and a bus is a vehicle that carries many passengers. These passengers might represent parts, or people in the outside world, or both. Not only is every part of the dream a part of the dreamer, but every individual’s dream is also part of the world dream—so, in indigenous dreamwork for example, dreams are meant for the community as much as for the individual dreamer. IFS emphasizes that our inner work is meaningful on a larger scale, too, as parts of an individual interact like individuals in a society, and like societies in the world. Because I dream of a bus as opposed to a car, the

collective experience is particularly important to consider here. This could describe the situation of an internal system, or the outside world, when effective leadership is lacking. Perhaps the driver is a Self-like manager whose agenda to “discipline” other parts makes him forget his beneficial management role of keeping the bus on the road. This is consistent with an internal dynamic for me, and also has political and social relevance.]

The bus could go over the cliff! I take the driver’s seat and try to keep us in our lane, but steering is difficult and visibility is poor—I’m not used to driving such a huge vehicle and can’t control it, so I’m swinging into the oncoming lane and narrowly avoiding accidents.

[The dream ego is another manager, stepping in to help, but clearly not up to the task. Their efforts increase the dangerousness of the situation, for themselves and others.]

Then, our direction is reversed and we’re going backward, so I can no longer drive from here at all. I run to the back of the bus where there’s another driver’s seat that looks empty. When I get up close, however, I see that it’s not empty at all: there’s a tough little girl sitting there, trying to save the bus. I can’t imagine how she is able to drive, but somehow she’s doing it.

[What’s happening here? The turning point of this dream is a literal reversal of the dangerous headlong progress. In IFS, we often have to go back in time, to relate in a new way to child parts who are carrying burdens. Remember that the original driver abandoned his seat to “discipline” the kids at the back? The result of such harsh and ill-considered disciplinary action was an out-of-control bus. And now we see that this little kid is not actually disruptive at all. In fact, she’s exactly what the internal system needs. Managers would try to suppress or save this exile, but she actually holds some essential child-qualities and she’s proving what those qualities can do. Still, she also carries the burden of responsibility for a situation that adult managers can’t handle. Her size and age make this a heavy burden, and also make her invisible, keeping her gifts from being recognized and valued at first. The implication of a dream like this is that the situation—whether internal or external—is an emergency calling for adult attention, but also requiring a child’s courage and ability to respond spontaneously. The system’s ecology is out of balance, because management has overstepped its mandate and unreasonable burdens have been placed on vulnerable parts, so a radical reversal must occur before that balance can be restored.]

We're coming into a bus terminal. She has to release the steering wheel and slide off the seat to get both feet onto the brake pedal, to slow us down so we won't crash. She's too small to stop us completely, but she's slowing us down just enough. As we hit the rear wall of the garage, I throw myself on top of her to shield her from the impact, and I cup a hand over her eyes to protect them from the shattering windshield. The windshield cracks but doesn't actually shatter, and there's only a bump. We're safe and everyone's helping each other off the bus. I tell the little one how incredible she is, how brave. I lift her up to show her to the cheering crowd. I am so proud of her.

[Here, the Self energy of both exile and manager allows them to unite their skills, and restore balance. There's the "bump" of an unburdening, rather than the "crash" of a catastrophe. The manager is an authentic protector, shielding the vulnerable one, acknowledging her, lifting her up. And the exile is no longer an exile, but a child fully seen and celebrated. All parts benefit. The "terminal" is simultaneously the place where this journey ends, and other journeys, on other buses, will begin. For me, it was a turning point in the process of healing from PTSD. It also may have been a dream with significant meaning for the larger world of which I am a part.]

The Possibilities That Present Themselves

Is there a practical application for these observations about IFS and dreams? Absolutely. When an IFS session seems stuck, a dream (if the client is willing to share one) can immediately open up all kinds of possibilities, while offering the practitioner access to the language and imagery that the client's parts are using to communicate. The way that the client tells the dream and the images that appear in the dream can let you know how to address the client's system. A dream isn't an accurate map, it's a work of art that depicts a particular inner landscape in a particular light from a particular point of view. It doesn't tell you exactly where things are, but it tells you a lot about the artist (the client-dreamer, Self) and speaks directly to the artist in you (the practitioner-dreamworker, Self), so it can help your "therapist parts" to soften back and your Self energy to respond.



Before combining IFS and dreamwork in a session, however, I'd recommend that you become familiar with your own dreams, your own inner artist and art, through an IFS lens. Dreamwork actually makes working with your parts much easier. It's notoriously difficult to sustain sufficient Self energy when working with ourselves, since our Self-like managers tend to blend and take the lead, other protectors tend to polarize, and exiles can overwhelm the system without the container of a therapist/practitioner at hand. But when you start with a dream, even one that's unpleasant, curiosity comes naturally ("What the heck is this wild dream all about?") so you've already got some Self energy relative to the parts that are showing up. The vast majority of dreams don't make it to waking awareness, so when you remember a dream, it is always a trailhead; you will remember the dreams that want or need your attention. Consequently, there are going to be some parts present who are motivated for you to do this work.

You also have a container, because the trailhead is a dream but the one who is working with the dream is *awake* and therefore has some distance from the experience. You probably recognize that the dream does not reflect your life situation literally, and does not give a complete picture of who you are ("That could never really happen!" and "I would never really do that!"), so you'll be less inclined to judge or blend with dream figures and dream events, and there are no "real life" consequences at stake.

You may still need to keep reminding yourself that the dream ego is a *part*, and not "you" any more than a Self-like part is Self. It can be difficult to remember that the dream ego generally has an agenda, and could be mistaken about what's going on. The dream ego's point-of-view often sets the whole tone of the dream, so if the dream ego is scared or disgusted, you might assume that there is something scary or disgusting going on, even though other dream elements (other dream people, or even the trees or the furniture) are *not* scared or disgusted and their point of view matters. However, if you can get a little distance (unblend) from the dream ego, and refrain from concluding who's "bad" and who's "good," you'll probably be able to approach every other aspect of the dream with openness, which is more than can be said for many waking life trailheads.



One of the most useful tools in the dreamwork toolbox is almost identical to a primary IFS tool: the conversational interview. Once some Self energy is present in you as the dreamer, you can get to know any dream figure (even a porcupine or a popsicle or a violent monster) by asking them respectful questions with the assumption that they are playing whatever roles they are playing (being prickly or drippy or dangerous) for some good reason. I especially enjoy talking with the dream figures that the dream ego dislikes, because when I really hear what my antagonist has to say, polarizations start melting away immediately (especially when we're dealing with popsicles!) and even the craziest or most horrifying dream situation can start making a lot of sense. The typical questions when interviewing dream figures sound very IFS: "Who are you and what is your role? What do you want/desire? What are your fears/concerns? What do you like about yourself? What do you dislike about yourself? What do you have to teach me?" (You can be a lot more subtle than this in how you ask the questions, of course. Always pay attention to the responses you're getting, and adjust your asking accordingly.)

Once you've gotten to know the dream elements and can better understand their intentions, even dreamwork with a very obscure dream can provide a smooth transition into IFS work. At this point, your parts (or a client's parts) will be recognizing themselves in the dream scenario, and a specific waking life trailhead may emerge, evoked by the circumstances of the dream. You may choose to leave the dream and begin to work with a more traditional IFS process, using the insights and images the dream has brought up. Or, you may continue exploring the dream (there are many ways to do this, beyond the scope of this essay) while using your IFS tools to recognize the roles that dream figures are playing, the burdens they are carrying, and the ways that Self manifests. Notice how Self energy within the dream changes the dream story, and how reflecting on the dream with your own Self energy afterward changes the way that you experience and understand the dream's connection with your life.

(A cautionary note: If you are combining dreamwork and IFS with clients, please be aware that even a simple or "light" dream can lead very quickly into very deep territory. Especially when you're asking the dreamer to talk to a dream figure, unconscious blending and overwhelm can happen if the client has some traumatic associations with the dream that weren't evident at first. With waking life trailheads, both client and practitioner probably have a sense of the degree of

intensity involved; with a dream, that's not always clear. It's good to have an idea of your client's access to Self energy, and their trauma history, before working with dreams. And, if a dream comes up before you know the client well, assume that any dream figure could be a vulnerable exile or intense firefighter, and don't let the drama of the dream distract you from your practical IFS skills and instincts.)

More Possibilities

Even if you don't do any explicit dreamwork, the IFS model can still be applied meaningfully to a dream, especially if the dream content is baffling or distressing and the dream ends with emotions left unresolved. If your client shares such a dream, or you have one yourself, try using the moment of awakening as the trailhead.

For example, I dreamed recently that I was behaving like "an absent-minded professor," and woke feeling terribly upset without knowing why. Recognizing the emotion as coming from a part, I asked the part what she needed me to know, and distinctly heard her reply that she didn't trust me to keep her safe. She appeared as a small child, crying over something her father had done or had *not* done. My father was "an absent-minded professor," and although some parts of me found his eccentricities amusing, there was a vulnerable part that felt frightened and hurt when he didn't behave like an adult I could depend on. The dream pointed out that a protector in me now (represented by the dream ego) acts like my father, deflecting painful emotions by being distracted and chaotic—and this eccentric behavior is threatening for the vulnerable exile whose upset feelings emerged upon awakening. IFS techniques support my Self-capacity to be responsible and trustworthy, so I can attend to strong feelings (exiles) without being overwhelmed by them, and without resorting to absent-mindedness or other problematic strategies to avoid them. The dream drew my attention to an inner dynamic that I can now address compassionately.

Dreams In A Variety of Guises

Our usual nightly dreams generally fall into a few basic categories. Some present problems, raise questions, and depict situations that we can learn from—these are the ones we're most likely to want to explore further with dreamwork. We also have a lot of "housekeeping dreams" that seem

repetitive and mundane, sometimes about literally cleaning up messes, and these are probably concerned with processing the residue left over from our busy waking lives.

Most people occasionally have nightmares, too. Nightmares are best described as any dreams with an unpleasant emotional tone strong enough to wake us up with physical activation (racing heart, sweating, etc.) and a vivid impression of the moment of greatest intensity.

Regular nightmares contain all kinds of healing possibilities (again, beyond the scope of this essay) when we can see past their obviously distressing scripts and costumes, but some PTSD nightmares are fundamentally different from other nightmares because they can literally re-enact traumatic scenes and are really more like flashbacks than dreams. Again, when working with nightmares, remember to use your IFS skills and Self energy (plus trauma skills if they are PTSD nightmares) so the dreamer doesn't get swept up in the drama and overwhelmed.



Finally, there are what dreamworkers informally refer to as “Big” dreams—the ones that feel extra-ordinary. A Big dream probably doesn't need us to “work with it” much at all, though it calls out to be shared and appreciated. Big dreams might be compared to those rare, breathtaking IFS experiences that come with abundant Self energy (or the intercession of a loving Guide) and just seem to flow, requiring little or no intercession from the practitioner. Sometimes a single IFS session, or a single dream, can change a life.

Here are some types of Big dreams:

- 1) **“Psi” dreams** contain elements like telepathy, precognition, and clairvoyance. Subjective evidence of such dreams is extensive, and these accounts can be quite compelling, though they are difficult to research or prove. Personally, I've had quite a few dreams I can't explain, but I trust such dreams for the same reason that I trust the spiritual dimensions of IFS: because of their demonstrable impact on my life and the lives of others.
- 2) **Death-related dreams** are frequently significant enough to be considered “Big.” For example, visitation dreams (where the dead visit the living) feel very real to the dreamer, and can be tremendously meaningful. Similarly, the kinds of dreams that help prepare

people for their own deaths or the deaths of loved ones can utterly transform lifelong beliefs about death and loss. In IFS terms, the dreams of the dying (or people who are going through life-changing grief), often reflect a process of unburdening, as parts (who are mortal) release their sense of separateness and become one with Self (immortal). Such dreams can depict polarizations between holding-on and letting-go parts, and often contain journeys into the unknown, or to heavenly (or hellish) realms.

- 3) **Lucid dreams** occur when the dream ego “wakes up” to the fact that this is a dream, and can fully explore the experience of dreaming from the inside. Though some lucid dreamers just attempt to control the dream narrative to enact fantasy scenarios, this seems like a waste of a great opportunity to learn what the dream itself has to teach. Similarly, in IFS we want to trust the internal system and get to know parts rather than trying to control and direct them. A skilled, Self-led lucid dreamer can fully experience their own nightmares with curiosity and without fear. Ultimately lucid dreams invite us to ask: what is real and what is a dream, after all?
- 4) **Classic Big dreams** don’t necessarily fit into the above categories, but are simply stunning, awe-inspiring, profound. Big dreams leave us with unanswered questions, while simultaneously relieving any need to answer questions at all. In one such dream, I was a droplet of water falling endlessly into the center of an unfolding mandala-flower, and I was also the mandala expanding endlessly outward from that center. In another, when my beloved cat Libby was dying and I was sleeping beside her, I found myself dreaming *her* dream, which seemed to be her own blissful premonition of what death would be. In the dream, I was Libby, exploring among the canes in the raspberry patch in warm sunlight, my whole cat-body tingling with the smells and sensations.

Just as Self is both an invitation and a response to that invitation, Big dreams are both inviting and responding to that which concerns us most deeply.

Conclusion

I invite you to let your IFS parts and dream figures play together. Let them improvise; let them surprise you. What happens to our dreamwork when we believe that even troubling dreams are meaningful, and troubled dream figures are potentially helpful? What happens to our lives when

we believe the same of our parts? What if we could trust that we are, at the core, truly able to handle our “sick toddlers” (our strong feelings, difficult challenges and disturbing dreams)—with kindness, wisdom, and grace? What if our inner buses can be driven safely even on the most precarious mountain roads, our inner children can be honored and loved, and our inner adults can be responsible, loving and flexible? Even our absent bus drivers and absent-minded professors need our care: they belong to us. In the grand theater of a lifetime, where our waking and dreaming experiences present themselves, all the players deserve our wholehearted applause. If we’re all living a shared dream—parts and Selves alike—let’s enjoy exploring this heavenly raspberry patch together.

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