

# **Five Keys to Unlock Your Dreams**

By Leonard Szymczak, MSW, LCSW

Have you ever had dreams that were strange, sad, sexy, or stupid? If you responded with a resounding “yes,” consider yourself normal. Everyone has those dreams. Unfortunately, many of them fall to the wayside of the mind and we miss a golden opportunity to access their wisdom.

Dreams are spiritual treasure chests filled with transformational gold. When we discover the keys of knowledge, we unlock incredible secrets. The rewards are precious insights, divine guidance, clarity of vision, and personal and spiritual growth.

Dreams have become an integral part of my life ever since I began recording them in 1976. I have participated in dream groups, and, as a psychotherapist for over 35 years, listened to countless dreams reported by clients. As a result, I have great reverence for the dreaming process. It bestows a sacred font of wisdom every time we sleep. Dreams provide road signs that appear in the early morning mist, beckoning us on an exciting journey toward higher consciousness.

While there are many theories about dream interpretation, my belief is that dreams provide profound insight and clarity about current problems, precognition about future events, and, most importantly, a call to action. Since the language of dreams is symbols, images, and emotions, it requires study and practice to understand their meaning, no different than learning another language.

In this article, I offer five simple keys to reveal the mysteries of dreams. Each key unlocks a box filled with priceless gifts for transmutation. The first key asks us to make an intention.

## **1. Make an Intention to Expand Your Consciousness of Dreams.**

Our critical, judgmental mind often blocks messages from our intuitive self. However, once we set an intention to expand our dreaming world, the lock on the treasure chest rattles open.

A dream journal near your bed reinforces the intention to record the early morning surprises as you enter wakeful consciousness. If you have difficulty recalling dreams, it merely means the lock is rusty and needs lubrication. Reciting your intention before you retire opens a conduit to the dream world. When the dreams appear, write them down without judgment or analysis in the present tense and in the first person. For example, “I attend an improvisation group and the leader is a woman.”

The true challenge with this key is to muster the courage to record your dreams without judgment. We can over-analyze or block disturbing images. All dreams, whether bizarre, erotic, or plain crazy, offer profound messages if we attend to them.

You may ask, “What if I conjure up murderous scenes or weird sexual escapades?” Don’t be alarmed. Your inner guidance system wants to grab your attention. Graphic, juicy symbols and emotional images are surefire ways to bring into the light unconsciously suppressed material that needs exploration, clarity, and release.

Most of us prefer happy, spiritually uplifting dreams in brilliant Technicolor. They are, indeed, phenomenal experiences, but so are the ugly, disturbing scenes that jolt us awake. Some of my greatest revelations have occurred in the dreaming valley of the shadow of death. When I resisted the impulse to suppress alarming images and recorded them without censoring them, I was rewarded with gifts from the soul.

Keep your journal for your eyes only. Sharing with others prematurely inhibits self-expression. Once you’re comfortable with your dreaming process, you may be more inclined to share it with others who are open, receptive, and encouraging.

Since I can be fairly analytic, I gave myself a rule when I first started recording my dreams some 35 years ago to not interpret them as good or bad. I merely recorded what I experienced. As a therapist, I had many preconceptions about the meaning of symbols so, early on, I practiced letting go of what was supposedly appropriate. I learned that everything was appropriate. After all, it was only a dream!

To illustrate the dreaming process, I'll use a recent journal entry: *I attend a mixed improvisation group of men and women. The leader is a woman. She passes a microphone to each of the men with the question, "What's it like to be a man." One by one, each man talks about the burdens of adapting to new expectations and roles. One mentions that he has to be a competent, relational partner. Another says he must be an excellent communicator. Others report a list of expectations as financial provider, loving parent, decent cook, home improver, etc. The list goes on. Hearing all these roles, I feel overwhelmed and depressed. So many burdens. When I'm handed the microphone, I ask the men to stand up and breathe into our genitals. It's time for high balls. We then beat our chest and roar like gorillas. We stamp our feet and with this newfound power, feel lighter, less burdened. We laugh at the ridiculousness of being perfect. Movement, sound, laughter, and breath replace stagnation and depression.*

As you will notice, I recorded my dream as a story in the present tense. Dreams may not be as fluid as this one. Some may jump erratically from scene to scene. If that happens, note the different settings, moods, and experiences. Once the dream has been recorded, move to the next key that underscores the language.

## **2. Highlight the Symbols, Images, and Emotions.**

Every symbol, image, and emotional state has significance. Some dreams reveal a few snippets; others play out like a full-length movie. The key to this highlighting process is that even the silly, mundane, and nonsensical offer treasures so don't merely focus on the extra-ordinary symbols. Pay special attention to the emotional states. They are the secret sauce of the psyche.

When I examined my dream, I was immediately struck by the setting as an improvisation workshop with both men and women. The leader was female and handed a microphone to the men who used their voices to share their experiences. The theme centered on the burdens of adapting and assuming many roles – relational partner, excellent communicator, financial provider, loving parent, decent cook, and home improver. There were other symbols: genitals, high balls, breath, beating chest, roaring gorilla, stamping feet, and laughter.

The emotional tenor of the dream felt burdened, depressed, overwhelmed, and powerless. Breath, movement and sound shifted the mood to empowerment, lightness, and laughter.

Once the symbols, images, and emotions are highlighted, we continue to the third key which requires an atmosphere of openness and play, essential ingredients to translate the dream.

### **3. Associate the Symbols, Images, and Feelings to Your Life.**

Imagine yourself as an improvisational writer who was handed a list of words and emotional phrases. Play with your imagination and weave the symbols and images into a story with you as the main character. Be creative and associate the images with your current life. Don't look for the "right" interpretation. Rather, use curiosity and inquiry to explore and construct a story that emotionally resonates. Since every part of the dream represents aspects of yourself, you could begin with the sentence, "If the dream represents an aspect of my life, it might mean that . . ."

Using my dream as an example, I saw that my feminine part wanting to lead with a voice as represented by a microphone. (My analytical mind may be tempted to define this symbol in phallic terms but, as Freud wrote in his book *Interpretation of Dreams*, "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.") My intuitive, feminine voice invited my masculine parts to be more expressive.

As I played with the images and symbols it became clear that I was feeling overwhelmed, depleted, and burdened about my different roles as a man and my inner perfectionist that drove me to be goal-oriented, a traditional masculine characteristic. My high expectations burdened me. On one hand, I wanted to adapt as a man capable of performing multiple roles but I felt overwhelmed about getting it right.

Since I spend a lot of time in my mind, the images of the dream remind me to be present in my body and to acknowledge my primal energies as represented by the genitals and the gorilla. I am both animal and spirit. Breath signifies spirit therefore I am asked to breathe spirit into my physical being starting at the base level with my genitals and moving upward to my chest. The dream reminds me to have balls of courage and a heart of compassion. As I release roaring, expressive energy through my throat and stamp my feet, I feel like a Neanderthal man, powerfully connected to my senses. The dream teaches me to lighten up with sound, breath, laughter, and movement.

I can play further with one of the symbols such as "high balls." The words resonate on several levels. "Hi, balls! I want to feel the power of courage." It can

also mean that when I am connected to spirit and embrace my senses including the sexual/sensual energy pulsating through my body, I can feel a natural high. (Remember there is no right or wrong interpretation. This is an unfolding process that engages you in a conversation with yourself.)

As you play with the meaning of the dream, it opens like a flower. Some dreams require incubation, reflection, and ongoing exploration. With practice and an increased familiarity with the language of your dreams, you will discover the keys to hidden messages. The fourth key moves us to action.

#### **4. Identify the Call to Action.**

Have you ever dreamt that you were in a bathroom or had to go to the toilet? If you had, you probably found yourself waking up with the realization that your bladder was full. That's a clear example of a dream calling you to action. You probably didn't hesitate to answer the call!

Each dream comes with a kernel of advice and a call to action. It may direct you to connect with spirit, care for your body, release your emotions, shift your thoughts, work on a relationship, express your truth, or respond to a problem.

A woman's dream about her father stirred her to pick up the phone and call her dad. A child's nightmare about monsters triggered her to talk about fear and courage with her mother. A man's dream about angels prompted him to join a spiritual community. Every call to action propels us on a quest to change some aspect of our life.

My own dream called me to recognize when I overwhelm or depress myself. My call to action was to consciously breathe and connect to my body and animal nature. I felt called to go to the health club and release pent-up frustrations and stomp my feet. The other message was to lighten up with laughter.

I mentioned earlier that some dreams are precognitive and offer a glimpse into the future. After I journaled this dream, I bumped into my neighbor later in the day. As it so happened, she had organized an improvisational workshop on the weekend. When she invited me to attend, I immediately flashed to the dream. How could I refuse an invitation stamped by psyche? The improvisational workshop resulted in an afternoon of laughter, thereby lightening my spirit.

Not all dreams provide such clear answers. Sometimes the call to action becomes apparent days later with an “aha” experience. If the dream is particularly troubling or complex and you have no idea what it means, consider sharing it with a trusted friend or someone who works with dreams. An outside perspective can turn frightening and puzzling images into gifts of gold.

### **5. Follow the Wisdom of Your Dream.**

Now that you’ve used the four keys – Made an intention to expand your consciousness of dreams; highlighted the symbols, images, and emotions; associated them to your life; and identified the call to action – you’re ready to implement the dream’s wisdom.

A friend of mine once described a significant dream she had about a snake entering her vagina. In the dream she tugged at the snake’s tail and pulled it out. She realized that it meant that the man she was dating at the time was a snake in the grass. The dream’s call to action was to pull him out of her life. She followed the wisdom and had no regrets, for she later married the man of her dreams.

If we avoid taking action, we’ll eventually get another wake-up call. So whether the message is to act immediately or plan for the long term, let your inner guidance direct you. It may require letting go of the ego and trusting the wisdom of your soul so that you can take a transformative, integrative path back home.

Integration involves insight and change. The wisdom gleaned from dreams allows you to see what you need to change so that you can be more balanced and whole. You may be directed to take a different path that involves spirituality, career, or relationships. You may be shown ways to improve your health or financial situation. You may be guided to solve common day problems. You may even be mentally prepared for a future event such as a wedding, relocation, health challenge, or travel.

When you embrace the mystical dance of dreams, your life will never be the same. You will open a portal to the divine who will shed light and wisdom on your amazing journey back to your true self.

Discover the keys, unlock the treasures, and reap bountiful rewards. Pleasant dreams!