

Discerning Life with Dreams: **The Triadic Relationships Between Dreams, Discernment,** **and Spiritual Intelligence**

B. Anne Frey

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DISCERNING LIFE WITH DREAMS: THE TRIADIC RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN DREAMS, DISCERNMENT, AND SPIRITUAL INTELLIGENCE

By

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Abstract

This study explored the relationship between dreams, discernment, and spiritual intelligence. It focused on the experience of people who use dreams to help them with spiritual discernment or decision-making in a spiritual context. A case study methodology included questionnaires, personal dream records, and interviews to understand the seven participants' experiences of exploring their dreams for guidance. Participants were self-selected by answering an ad seeking people whose dreams had helped them to make a decision, who journaled their dreams, and who consider themselves to be spiritual.

Most participants reported being drawn to dreamwork by a significant life experience. While participants shared different perceptions as to what discernment consists of, each participant reported that dreams helped them to grow spiritually. A number of outcomes were exemplified, falling into two main grouping: a) the use of discernment *in order to* understand a dream (whether or not they ended up reaching a resolution or making a decision *about* the dream) and b) the use of dreams *as part of* a discernment process (whether or not the dreams helped them to resolve their discernment issue or make a decision).

The intensity of emotion attached to an issue seemed, for some, to render it more difficult to arrive at particular decisions. For others, dreams seemed to ease the burden of discernment or decision-making by raising their degree of confidence towards their resolution or decision.

Deepening appreciation of and growing desire for living spiritually, and learning more about spirituality were indicators of a developing spiritual intelligence. For most, spiritual growth occurred through knowledge or learning gained from their dreams. For some, their belief about God's role in their life impacted their experience of the Divine in their dreams. Finally, the study showed that individuals are not always aware of what had helped them, suggesting a subconscious process at work in both discernment and decision-making.

The study affirmed a triadic link between dreams, discernment, and spiritual intelligence among people involved in spiritual dreamwork. It demonstrated ways by which the discernment process can build confidence in people who are turning to their dreams for guidance in a spiritual context.

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I am honored by and grateful for the involvement of a number of people in this project. Seven women participated in this study and were willing to share with me in such a personal way. My brother, Bill, spent countless hours editing, and has helped me in so many other ways, more than he knows. My Mother, my sister Bev, and my niece Jody spent countless hours editing. Kelly Bulkeley has been there for kind and patient teaching, guidance, support, and insights on my dreams as he mentored my dreamwork for the last eight years. Bill Domhoff has been there for me with kind and patient tutoring in content analysis, listening, advice, and gentle reminders that kept me on course. Mary Kay Chess alleviated stress with her gentle way of being, warm friendship, and unique perspective. She has saved me from myself on more than one occasion. Felicity Kelcourse shared a few simple words with me early in this process. Those few words frequently helped me to move forward when I felt stuck. Finally, I am grateful to Daniel Deslauriers, my advisor, teacher, and chair of my dissertation committee, for staying with me to the end, even when our differences made the process difficult or painful for either one or both of us.

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Chapter I: Dreams, Spirituality, and Spiritual Intelligence

Like a net of gossamer, our dream world supports us, weaving itself into every facet of life. Interspersed in the silvery net, we find certain dreams like diamonds glistening, numinous gifts, treasures that grace us and lift us beyond our human frailty into the mystical domain. (Halligan, 1993, p. 139)

The Fire is Lit

I have a bachelor's degree in psychology with a minor in theology. I wasn't far into my studies of psychology and spirituality when the spark of interest I had in dreams was fanned into a flame. I was born and raised in the Roman Catholic faith tradition, so God has always been important to me. However, St. Mary-of-the-Woods College introduced me to the difference between religion and spirituality. A new fire was started. It confirmed something I had felt for years—that there is a difference between being religious and being spiritual. Not everyone agrees with this, as you will read in chapter two. However, my spirituality integrates both. I define religion as being part of a faith tradition and the rules and beliefs that go along with that tradition. I define spirituality for myself as how I live my beliefs. Because I am Catholic, this includes my religious beliefs, but my spirituality is not limited to religious beliefs.

More importantly, it gave me the knowledge and support to deeply explore spirituality both externally. External exploration involved how I lived my life and how I was in relationship to others. Internal exploration involved studying, learning, contemplating, feeling, as well as identifying or achieving clarity in terms of my personal beliefs and values. I became passionate about dreams and

about spiritual life. Through my remaining academic years, the focus of my studies has been dreams and spirituality, including the completion of a two-year internship for spiritual direction. Dreams and spirituality have remained inseparable for me.

I had spent nearly 20 years in corporate America, where I was frequently required to do public speaking. I became a dream practitioner seven years ago, working with individual clients, conducting a weekly dream group, presenting lectures, and conducting workshops. I enjoyed public speaking or presenting workshops and programs. They seldom made me anxious or nervous. It caught me completely off-guard to find myself feeling anxious as I was preparing to give my first talk on spirituality and dreams. Perhaps it was the sacredness of the topic. Perhaps I was asking, "Who am I to be giving talks on such a sacred subject? Am I really knowledgeable enough and qualified? I don't want to provide erroneous information that some may use for guidance."

It was at that time that I had the most significant dream experience of my life. In this experience, a white dove entered the "dreamscape." I immediately woke up sitting upright in my bed with a physical sensation that could best be described as tingling. I sat there awestruck wondering what had just happened and wondering what this physical feeling was. In my faith tradition, a white dove represents the Holy Spirit. After collecting myself, I lay back down and returned to sleep. The white dove appeared again, but this time there was also an angelic presence in the image of a beautiful light. I awoke to the words "You have the knowledge." It was the most powerful experience I have ever had. It was also a

powerful affirmation of the path I had chosen—to study and work with dreams and spiritual life.

The Fuel for the Fire

I believe in a Universal source or energy. People have many names for it. I call it God. I live my life with that belief as my foundation. Because of my dream experiences and studies, I believe passionately that dreams can be an important source of wisdom for our spiritual lives. I believe that continued, deep, personal/inner exploration and learning are essential for my spiritual growth. My spiritual growth results in more frequently expressing or living my spirituality in the way I strive to, whether that is in how I participate in my faith tradition, how I interact with others, or how I treat myself.

I think that discernment can have both spiritual and secular aspects. For me discernment is primarily spiritual. However, it wasn't until a few years ago that I was introduced to the concept of spiritual discernment. Elisabeth Koenig (2003) defines *discernment* as, "The act or process of exhibiting keen insight and good judgment." She goes on to say, "Discernment is a process of learning to make choices that are life-giving rather than destructive. It is a way of focusing our lives on the most valuable dimension of our experience" (Koenig, p. 45).

I think these comments support the idea that discernment can be either secular or spiritual. Some people may discern based on a question such as, "What is the morally or ethically right thing in this situation?" Others may discern based on questions such as, "What is God's will and how is God present in my life?" The latter is the perspective from which I learned discernment. I define

discernment as a process that I enter in an effort to understand God's will for a situation I am discerning or to understand how God is present in a situation. This is how I practice discernment.

As a dream practitioner, I teach others about "The Wisdom of Dreams." I tell others how useful and important dreams can be in their waking lives. I believe that dreams come directly or indirectly from God. I selectively share my own "God-given" dreams with others—such as the one I just shared. I will share other of my spiritual dreams in the final chapter of this document. On numerous occasions I have come across the statement, "An uninterpreted dream is like an unopened letter from God," attributed to various sources. This is a very broad belief that could be viewed any number of ways. Just as some people who believe that the Big Bang Theory proves that there is no God. Who is to say that God wasn't responsible for the Big Bang?

In contemplating my own experience of discernment, I have noticed the following three things. The first is that when I am deepest in discernment I am often in a place of mental or emotional stress or distress. I have noted over the years that when I am stressed or distressed I recall fewer of my dreams. Therefore, I have fewer dreams from which to search for wisdom on any questions, issues, or ideas that I am discerning.

Second is that while my dreams are often very visual and detailed, I do not consider myself to be a very visually acute person in waking life. Metaphorical aptitude is very important in discovering the message of a dream. I consider my metaphorical aptitude to be average at best, and wonder if this absence of waking

mental vision plays a role in that. Finally, discernment is simply not an easy process for anyone—especially those trying to discern God’s will.

I believe that these three things could have one of a number of results. They keep me from exploring my dreams as often as I otherwise would. They keep me from learning as much as I could from my dreams even when I do take the time to explore them. They may also prevent me from engaging in discernment as often or as deeply as I could simply because it can be so difficult, and painful. What would my experience be if I combined the two things that I am passionate about along with discernment? Let’s take a brief look at each of these three elements individually, beginning with dreams.

There are many different theories about why we dream, where they come from, what they can do for us. I suppose my eclectic worldview is represented when I say that I embrace many theories some of the time rather than embracing one or two theories as being right all or most of the time. From my perspective, I am not convinced that there is a right or wrong answer as to what dreams can or cannot do, or do or do not mean. I tend to accept that there is likely some validity in all worldviews about dreams. I have no doubt that dreams have more purposes and meanings than researchers have yet identified. Regardless of the theory or the purpose, I believe the source is God. This would imply that dreams are inherently spiritual. Yes, I think all of life is inherently spiritual. However, as with many things in life, I believe there are elements in dreams that cause us to more quickly or consciously identify them as spiritual. There are things that are more frequently used to symbolize spirituality than others. For example, a church would more

often be used to symbolize spirituality than a house. One goal of this study is to identify some of those elements.

I believe that our dreams give us what we need. It is up to us to find it, explore it, and use it, or recognize those dreams that need no further exploration. For example, I have been working recently on developing my professional brochure for spiritual coaching. I thought I had the text finalized until I woke up one morning "just knowing" that it needed a significant rewrite. I consider this an example of how we can benefit from our dreams even when we do not recall them.

Sometimes our dreams are very direct in their message and do not need exploration. I had been working with a database online one afternoon desperately trying to figure out a mystery that was occurring. There was a piece of data that I wanted to change but the only place I could view it was a screen that did not allow edits. I was sure there had to be a way to get to it. I wasted hours. That night I had a dream that told me exactly what I needed to do. As soon as I woke up, I went directly to my computer, logged into the database, and tried the method that my dream had given me. It worked! That is also why I do not think every dream needs to be explored to benefit us.

I believe that continued exploration and learning about our behaviors, our choices, and our selves are essential for spiritual growth. Through my personal spiritual exploration and learning, I have recently come across the relatively new concept of spiritual intelligence in the article "Dreamwork in the Light of Emotional and Spiritual Intelligence" (Deslauriers, 2000). The paper discusses

how dreamwork contributes to spiritual intelligence. As I contemplated this idea, I asked the question, "Does it go both ways?" I agree that dreamwork contributes to spiritual intelligence, and I agree with Deslauriers that spiritual intelligence could contribute to a better understanding of one's dreams. Spiritual intelligence must be, then, an integral part of this exploration of this dyadic relationship between dreams and discernment.

In one of my early courses at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS), I led a cooperative inquiry on spiritual transformation using dreams with a group of five other participants. It appeared to me that the participants portrayed an unwillingness to identify what is spiritual about their dreams as an inability to do so. They held tightly to their perspectives that all dreams are spiritual, and all things are spiritual, therefore, all things in dreams are spiritual. From my perspective, it made identifying or reporting the experiences or results of the study in any meaningful way nearly impossible.

In my journey of dream studies, I became familiar with the use of content analysis in dreams. Calvin Hall and Robert L. Van de Castle, Ph.D. (Hall & Van de Castle 1966) developed a coding system, commonly called the Hall/Van de Castle system, for dream research. G. William Domhoff, Ph.D. (Domhoff 1996) has continued and expanded on their work on content analysis of dreams.

Unfortunately, there is not yet a coding schema for spirituality. At that time, such a schema had not even begun to be investigated or developed. If there had been spirituality schema at that time, I would have suggested that we draw on

it. I believe we could have better described how the inquiry was meaningful and how deeply meaningful it was to some of the participants.

Apparently, others believe that a spiritual schema for content analysis of dreams would be beneficial. In support of this idea to build a spiritual coding schema, in the book *Visions of the Night: Dreams, Religion, and Psychology*, Kelly Bulkeley (1999) says, "One of our greatest challenges in further developing the interdisciplinary potentials of the contemporary study of dreams is to find a way to integrate the best findings of both interpretive and scientific approaches to dreaming" (p. 67).

Kira Lynn Casto (Casto, et. al., 1999) began to develop a spiritual coding schema to supplement the Hall/Van de Castle system. Bulkeley has also begun to develop a religious or spiritual coding schema to be used in content analysis of the spiritual in dreams. He is building categories of words that he described as "a kind of Religion 101, 201" (Bulkeley, personal communication, July 22, 2003).

Would discernment be a less difficult process if we more often turned to and explored our dreams? If we more often turn to and explore our dreams, would the discernment process simply, somehow be improved? Alternatively, perhaps by engaging more regularly in dreamwork one would more often feel they have received the necessary wisdom or guidance and feel less need to engage in a deep and lengthy discernment process.

For most of the last nine years, I have incorporated dream studies, theology, and spirituality into my academic work. For the last seven years, I have been a dream practitioner, conducting classes and workshops, presenting lectures,

and consulting with individuals about dreams. In addition, after completing my internship, I began working as a spiritual director.

A spiritual director works as a companion and guide to those on a path of intentional spiritual growth. Individuals with spiritual directors come from all walks of life and any profession you might imagine. Because of my many years experience in business management, I am particularly interested in working with business professionals seeking spiritual growth relative to their work life. One reason a business professional may want a spiritual director is to help her/him discern a business decision from a spiritual perspective.

Spiritual direction may be one "method" of dreamwork applied to discernment. It is not unusual for a directee to bring their dreams to me, as their spiritual director, to discuss it in light of an issue they are currently discerning. Another method of dreamwork might be to discuss the dream with someone close or to discuss it in a dream group. Forms of art or meditation may also be employed.

I have so far uncovered little more than mention of the use of dreams in spiritual direction, with the exception of one article dedicated to the topic that will be discussed in Chapter Two. I also find it odd that, given the history of dreams in various faith traditions and cultures, that literature on dreams and discernment is also sparse and does not include, or has minimal inclusion of, the use of dreams in the discernment process.

Various explanations are given as to why Western cultures have gotten away from honoring and exploring the meaning of their dreams. Yet, certainly,

anyone who attends a religious service with any regularity frequently hears the Biblical reminders of the value of dreams. The increased occurrence of research conducted on dreams for the last 20 years has begun a resurrection of the tradition, though we admittedly have a long way to go.

In the current literature available on dreams and spirituality, spirituality is addressed in ways that represent the multitude of definitions that can be used to describe spirituality and the many environments in which people recognize and try to honor human spirit.

Certainly Not a Wildfire

Can dreams help people make important decisions? If dreams have helped people make decisions, what are those dreams like? Are they all the "big dreams" discussed by Bulkeley (2000)? How did the dream help them make the decision? Was the message so clear or obvious that no exploration, dreamwork, or additional discernment was required? Did the dreamers discuss the dream with a spiritual director or group, or employ some other type of dreamwork to arrive at the answer? If they use various methods, what are those methods and how do they compare in experience and results? Did they use discernment along with dreamwork? If so, how did they do that? What was that experience like?

If it was not a "big dream" would they at least consider it a spiritual dream? If so, what was it about the dream that made it spiritual to them? Was it a feeling, situation, location, certain symbols, other? Regardless the type of dream, what was it about the dream that aided their discernment or decision-making process. Was the message so clear or obvious that no exploration, dreamwork, or

additional discernment was required? Did they discuss the dream with a friend, a spiritual director or group, or employ some other type of dreamwork to arrive at the answer? If they use various methods, what are those methods and how do they compare in experience and results? Did they use discernment along with dreamwork? If so, how did they do that? What was that experience like?

When they are discerning, are they trying to do so from a spiritual perspective? If yes, what does that mean? What, if any, other tools do they use to assist them in their decision-making or discernment processes? How does that compare to when they look to their dreams for wisdom? Is the experience different? If yes, how is it different? Are the results different? If yes, how are they different? What, if any, transformation or spiritual growth was experienced and how so? What was that experience like?

After acting on a decision made with the aide of a dream message, did they later regret the action taken? If yes, how often did that happen? Did they less often or more often feel regret for the action taken versus feeling affirmed that they took the best possible action?

While any of the above questions could have applied during an interview with a participant, it would have been both impractical and impossible to try to include all of them with any one participant. A relatively small number of questions were included in a pre-interview questionnaire to be completed by all participants. Another group of questions was identified to serve as a guide for participant interviews. I drew from those questions as appropriate. Additional