

The Not So Big Life

Chapter Five: Listening to Your Dreams

Your Turn: Thinking “Outside the Box”

After reading this chapter, it will be well worth your time to watch The Matrix, or any other movie that encourages you to think “outside the box” of consensus reality. It will help give you another way of thinking about perceived reality...not necessarily how it actually is, but differently from the way we normally think of things. Another favorite of mine is Waking Life, a cleverly animated film that requires some intellect to follow, but that really forces us to inquire into our beliefs about reality. There’s a list of additional movies to consider on the Not So Big Life website if you need some suggestions. After watching the movie you choose, ask yourself, “How do I know that things are the way I’ve been taught to believe they are?” and “What would convince me otherwise?”

Exercise: Exploring Your Dream World

There are many ways of doing dream work, and none is right or wrong. The magic of the process is that once you start, it will guide you to the materials and approaches most suitable for you. We often get so hung up on finding just the right tool, and trying to find the “best” option, that we never actually get started. With dreams, if you simply start somewhere, the process will unfold of its own accord.

I began the process of exploring my dream world by simply keeping paper and pen beside my bed, and telling myself before I went to sleep that I wanted to remember my dreams. The first few nights I didn’t remember anything, but I just remained open to the possibility that when the time was right, I would. Then, one morning I recalled just a glimmer of a dream. I discovered that if I didn’t lie quietly each morning after I’d awoken, and just let the dream images return, they’d slip away. Whenever I tried to force the process, the drawbridge between the dream world and my waking world would roll up, and the images would be gone. What worked best for me, I found, was writing down the words and images as they came to mind, even if I couldn’t yet link them together into a story. As I did this, more things would tend to arise in memory, until I got the gist of the whole dream. But if that didn’t happen, I just let it go.

Sometimes I would sense that there was much more to a dream than I could recall, and sometimes I’d find that a dream had three or four scenes that seemed unrelated except for the fact that I somehow knew they were parts of a whole. Don’t discount anything. Write it all down, and don’t edit. Even things that seem insignificant when you first

wake up can gain value later as you look at them. Make sure to include not just the images, and storyline if there is one, but also the feelings and qualities that accompanied the dream. Were you frightened, excited, enthralled, or lost? Did you feel dispassionate--more of an observer than a participant? Any flavor, color, or light quality in the dream may be relevant, so write it down. And the sooner you commit these details to paper the better, since within a short time they can silently slip from memory.

Over the course of perhaps a week's time, I was remembering one or two dreams a night, and found that I needed to build into my morning schedule a few minutes to devote to the recording process. After a few weeks of dream recording, I was literally inundated with dreams each day, and found I had to select only a couple to record. It's as though once your subconscious recognizes that you are listening, it rushes to fulfill your desire for connection with your own inner world.

I find that it's usually best not to try right away to interpret the dreams you've just recorded. This is a process that takes time and consideration, and when you've just woken up, and have the obligations of your day to consider, you may be inclined to rush through it, which isn't likely to breed meaningful insights. The process I implemented for myself was to set aside an hour or so in the evening, after I returned from work, and to use this time to work with a dream from the night before that was particularly powerful.

Even if you don't have time to do it every day, which was certainly the case for me, pick a schedule that works for you. Whether it's every other day, once a week, or once a month doesn't really matter. It's the commitment to the process that's important. As with almost everything to do with living *Not So Big*, this is not about quantity. It's about the quality of your efforts, and your full engagement in the process, not how much time you have to spend on it. It's a way for you to understand more about yourself, and nothing else.

The next step is to expand on the imagery in the dream. First take the dream and reread it. Underline or highlight the major characteristics, such as people, places, events, objects, feelings, and qualities. Now, take each of the underlined words in succession, and identify your associations to that particular thing. For example, if your friend Penelope shows up as a character in a dream, write down all the associations you can think of for Penelope. What does she represent to you? How would you describe her personality? Is she always helpful to others—perhaps to a fault, in your estimations? If so, make a note of that, because this is a characteristic that your dream is using to help you understand something about yourself. If the dream took place in your high school gym, look at what associations you have with that place. Did something exciting

happen there, perhaps? Did your high school graduation occur there, or did you win lots of basketball games there? Or are your associations more to do with not being particularly good at physical education, and feeling humiliated that you couldn't perform as well as you thought you should?

While you are going through this phase of the process, try not to leap to interpretations of the dream. Although there's a strong pull to do so, this can close you off to the dream's full potential. You may get a taste of its meaning, but miss something more significant. Keep in mind that this process is much more about inquiring than about pinning down definitive meanings.

Don't be surprised if documenting all your associations fills several pages. None of this is wasted effort. Even if it takes you several sessions to expand upon one dream, recognizing just how many associations you have with each object can teach you an enormous amount about your inner world, whether or not you ever arrive at an overall meaning to the dream.

Once all your associations have been identified, now it's time to piece them together to uncover the dream's potential insights and meanings. For example, if your friend Penelope was trying to help you to perform better on the balance beam by offering her hand to support you, and if you were feeling frustrated by her assistance, wishing she'd leave you alone, then the dream might be pointing to your rejection of your own inner support that would allow you to maintain balance. In this example, it would be valuable to look at whether you are rejecting assistance with something in your everyday life. Are you rejecting it because someone presumptuous is offering it? Were you ever humiliated by someone who did this in the past? Why might you be rejecting the very things that could help you achieve more balance?

As we've seen, the meanings you can gather from dreams are not hard and fast. There is no right answer. There are always layers of meaning, and insights often continue to unfold days or weeks after you've worked with a dream. Although this may sound frustrating, if you can live the questions rather than insist upon answers, you'll get much further with the engagement of your inner world. The very act of expanding upon a dream, as described here, will inspire further dreams to clarify the dynamic you've identified—often through new images that point to more precise understandings of what you are dealing with in your life at this moment.

If the process described here doesn't work for you right away, give it time. And if you want to try different techniques for dream expansion, there are hundreds of books on the subject. Just remember that the potential to learn more about yourself comes

through engagement with the dreams themselves, and not through *reading about* the process.