



DREAMS ARE THE  
"ROYAL ROAD TO  
THE UNCONSCIOUS,"  
ACCORDING TO  
SIGMUND FREUD

# Field of dreams

Dreams are finally getting the respect they deserve, as pathways that illuminate our deepest desires, fears, and frustrations. Better yet, they can actually give us the courage and confidence to *act*.

BY BETH HOWARD // PHOTOGRAPHS BY CLAIRE ROSEN

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Jan Brehm of Portland woke up from a dream confused and shaken to her core. Lisa Espich of Tucson woke so deeply disturbed by a dream featuring her husband that she knew her marriage would never be the same. Jennifer Lambert of Virginia Beach felt such agitation over her dream that she cried for 30 minutes straight when she woke up—and then called her sister, from whom she'd long been estranged.

Dreams can rock us, scare us, and in some cases, inspire us. But is listening to our dreams right up there with calling a psychic hotline? Not at all, say leading experts. "People are now using their dreams as tools to make their lives better," comments Marcia Emery, PhD, a psychologist at Holos University.

This is relatively newfound respect. Many researchers used to believe that dreams simply reflected the random firing of nerve signals while we sleep. "The thinking was that the dreams were meaningless and didn't serve any function at all," says Harvard psychology professor Deirdre Barrett, PhD. But today, many scientists feel that dreams play the vital role of clarifying what truly matters to us. "Dreaming is thinking—just in a different biochemical state," explains Dr. Barrett, author of *The Committee of Sleep: How Artists, Scientists, and Athletes Use Dreams for Creative Problem-Solving—*



DREAMS CAN GIVE US BOTH CLARITY AND COURAGE

and *How You Can Too*. "It's a mode of contemplation that's much more visual, intuitive, and emotional, as opposed to the patterns of waking thought."

It's that intuitiveness that makes so-called "epiphany" dreams such a valuable resource. "Dreams can provide inspiration or help you get unstuck from problems because your mind is working on things in this different way," Dr. Barrett says. Case in point: When she gave subjects instruction in a technique called "dream incubation," half of them dreamed about a problem they had focused on prior to going to sleep, and a full 25% had a dream that provided an actionable solution.

## Gather Your Own Dream Girls!

**B**ook groups? Been there, done that. The newest trend is dream groups, in which a "dream worker" or therapist leads a discussion to interpret a dream.

The process solders a profound bond. "We offer feedback on each other's emotional blind spots," says Anne Hill, who is a member of such a club in Sebastopol, CA. To start your own group:

**Gather a few friends who know each other well**—enough to get a good discussion going. Five to nine people seems to be ideal.

**Establish a time limit for each participant to share her dreams and receive feedback.**

**Keep discussions confidential.** "This is soul work and our souls are deeply vulnerable," advises Diana McKendree of the Haden Institute of Flat Rock, NC.

**Give it a trial run.** Take 4 weeks to check out the group's dynamics. If everyone's happy, keep going.

Granted, listening to the dreaming brain isn't easy. "Even though it might feel like it's a bizarre, cryptic language, if you can decode it, what remains is brutal self-honesty," explains Lauri Quinn Loewenberg, a member of the International Association for the Study of Dreams and founder of *thedreamzone.com*. "When you start connecting dreams with your waking life, you're able to see yourself and your true inner thoughts much more clearly."

Finding the meaning in your dreams is

like growing a garden, the pros say: The more you do it, the greater the insights it yields. "If you're regularly tending your dreams, once in a while you'll have a breakthrough that grabs you by the throat," Dr. Barrett says. Here are three women whose dreams provided just such a revelation.

### JAN BREHM, 56, PORTLAND, OR ACTRESS WITH TWO DAUGHTERS

#### ■ THE DREAM

"I went into the bathroom and pulled back the shower curtain. There was my daughter, now twenty-six, at age ten months. I felt a wave of horror. She was sitting in the tub shivering, and her lips were blue. I had forgotten I'd left her there. When I woke up, I was so disturbed that I couldn't shake off the image."

#### ■ WHAT IT MEANS

According to Loewenberg: "When you dream about someone very close to you, human nature is to figure out if the dream is literally about that person. But it may instead represent some part of your current life. I asked Jan what was going on with her daughter: Was there any guilt she was feeling? Jan said that was not the case, which was why the dream scared her so deeply.

"Since there didn't seem to be an issue with her daughter, I suggested that the infant might symbolize something else in her life that she'd been neglecting. We often refer to our ventures and projects as 'our baby,' because, like a baby, they are things that we must nourish and care for so they can reach their potential.

"You might not expect such a frightening dream to be associated with something joyful. But Jan's dreaming mind chose to

send the message through a strong negative emotion in order to grab her attention.”

#### ■ WHAT SHE DID

“Several years back, I’d started to write and produce a DVD series on menopause, but when I couldn’t get the funding for it, I stopped working on it,” says Jan. “So when Lauri asked me if I had a creative project that I had abandoned, it stopped me cold. I knew instantly that the shivering baby was the menopause series. I plunged myself into the work, and I launched the DVD two years ago. The dream gave me the impetus to move forward.”

LISA ESPICH, 41, TUCSON

### MARRIED TO A MAN WITH A DRUG DEPENDENCE

#### ■ THE DREAM

“In my dream, I woke in the middle of the night to find my husband was not in bed. I could hear a loud buzzing sound, so I got up to investigate. When I looked out into the backyard, I could see a spotlight hanging down from a tree. Under the light, I could see that my husband had set up a table saw. As I got closer, I could make out a woman’s bloody torso. Several of her limbs were scattered on the ground.

“I noticed that our neighbor was looking over the fence and I knew that he would be calling the police. I panicked and told my husband that we needed to hide the body. I helped him dig a hole to bury the woman’s remains. As we dug up the dirt, however, other limbs and body parts started to come to the surface. Soon our yard was filled with the remains of these other women. We finished burying the last of the evidence just before the sound of police sirens filled the air. When I answered the door, I acted as if everything

## “I don’t know if my sister and I would have reconciled without that dream”

was perfectly fine, but the police gave me a truth serum to get me to talk. As soon as I took it, the truth came out. When I woke up, I was sick to my stomach. I couldn’t even talk to my husband.”

#### ■ WHAT IT MEANS

According to Dr. Emery: “In the dream, Lisa has gone to investigate the situation, and the ‘spotlight’ is on her. As the dirt is dug up and the body parts start to surface, the facts are coming to light—that is, people are finding out about her husband’s addiction.

“The biggest key turns when you take the word *kill* and associate it with similar words: such as *shoot, gun, murder*. The translation is that Lisa, the dreamer, is putting an end to the secrecy of her husband’s addiction. To use an old cliché, the truth—represented by the truth serum in her dreams—will set her free.”

#### ■ WHAT SHE DID

“What really stuck with me from the dream was the sense of relief I felt once the truth came out,” admits Lisa. “So I gathered the courage to do exactly what the dream was suggesting: I told my secret. Once my family knew the truth, they helped give me the strength to walk away from the situation.

“Amazingly, after I left, my husband was able to find his own courage and seek treatment for his addiction. He has now been clean and sober for more than five years, and our marriage is healthy again.”



DREAM METAPHORS CAN BE RIGHT WITHIN SIGHT

JENNIFER LAMBERT, 35, VIRGINIA BEACH, VA

### HER GRANDFATHER HAD DIED 3 WEEKS EARLIER

#### ■ THE DREAM

“My grandfather came to our house, and I was so excited to see him that I wrapped my arms around his neck for a hug. His first words were ‘Don’t be angry at your sister anymore.’

“At the time, my sister and I couldn’t even be in the same room. While I’m the older one, she is definitely more aggressive,

so I always held back what I thought for fear of her retaliating. When I woke up, I cried for about thirty minutes.”

#### ■ WHAT IT MEANS

According to Dr. Barrett: “Sometimes it takes a dream to ‘see’ our grief and sadness, like what Jennifer felt toward her sister. Dreams are more likely to let the more divergent feelings inside us rise to our consciousness.

“The timing—just three weeks after her grandfather’s death—suggests that this loss may have stirred up feelings about someone else Jennifer was missing: her sister. Her grandfather is someone she associated with a loving attitude, and it’s usually people with a particular trait whom we select in dreams to voice an aspect of ourselves that’s getting shortchanged in waking life. It would be difficult to offer

her sister an olive branch when their relationship appeared so deadlocked, but the dream gave a clear push in that direction.”

#### ■ WHAT SHE DID

“A few days after the dream, I spoke to my sister and told her that I didn’t like the way our relationship was going,” recalls Jennifer, “and that I wanted our connection to be more like our mom and our aunt, who were very close. We still had a few rocky spots after that conversation, but now we’re best friends. I don’t know if our reconciliation would have happened without that dream.” □