



JERRY N. UELSMANN

# Last Night I Had The Strangest Dream

## Jeremy Taylor On Dreams As A Tool For Social Change

KAREN KARVONEN

Jeremy Taylor was in his seventh year studying culture and myth at the State University of New York at Buffalo when he got his draft notice. It was 1969, and U.S. troop levels in Vietnam were at their peak. An active opponent of the war, Taylor obtained conscientious-objector status and was allowed to perform community service in place of military duty. He went to work with the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, and was given the job of retraining white volunteers who had encountered problems serving in a black neighborhood: well-meaning volunteers who had offended African Americans, Taylor says, with their “extra-nice, deferential, and unconsciously condescending attitudes and behaviors.” To unearth their subconscious racism, Taylor tried an unorthodox method: bringing volunteers together to discuss their dreams. Though the participants were initially skeptical, the idea proved highly effective, and Taylor realized that he had stumbled upon his life’s work.

Inspired by the work of pioneering psychologist Carl Jung, Taylor believes that our dreams can not only connect us to our authentic selves, but also foster healing in society. After completing a master’s degree in American studies at SUNY Buffalo, he worked for ten years with schizophrenic teens at the Saint George Homes, a residential treatment facility in Berkeley, California. He led dream discussion groups for patients and found that, even for psychotics, talking about dreams fostered emotional and psychological growth.

After his ordination as a Unitarian minister in 1980, Taylor continued to meld dream exploration and social action. He also taught at universities and went on tours to promote his brand of “dream work” with his wife, Kathryn. He delved further into theology, obtaining his doctorate from the University of Creation Spirituality (now Wisdom University), which was founded by renegade Catholic priest Matthew Fox.

Now sixty-three, Taylor estimates that he has helped people work with more than a hundred thousand dreams in his thirty-five-year career. A founding member and past president of the Association for the Study of Dreams, he has written three books on dream interpretation and mythology, including *Dream Work* (Paulist Press) and *Where People Fly and Water Runs Uphill* (Warner Books). He has appeared as a guest expert on such television programs as *The Power of Dreams* (Discovery

*Channel*) and *The Secret World of Dreams* (NBC). In the mid-nineties, Taylor pioneered Internet dream work as host of America Online’s innovative Dream Show.

Not everyone who has heard Taylor’s message agrees with it. In fact, some of his more vocal opponents are Jungian analysts. (Taylor is a self-taught student of Jung’s ideas, and not an accredited analyst himself.) “There is always a little flurry of controversy when I show up to speak at a Jungian society,” Taylor says, “in part because Jung said some pretty scornful things about doing intimate psychological and spiritual work in groups.”

Taylor has a website ([jeremytaylor.com](http://jeremytaylor.com)) and recently founded the Marin Institute for Projective Dream Work, which trains people to practice dream work in their communities. He still considers himself a social reformer, only instead of organizing around specific issues, he says, “I am organizing around the evolutionary strategy of becoming more conscious and more responsible for ourselves and our society.”

I first heard of Taylor in the eighties when a friend attended one of his workshops. That friend and I subsequently started our own dream group, and eighteen years later, we are still sharing dreams using Taylor’s principles. I finally met Taylor in person in 2004, at a three-day dream-work retreat in Loveland, Colorado. A large man with kind eyes and a full white beard, he wore a t-shirt printed with a map of the galaxy. I began to interview him over breakfast, and the conversation carried through into lunch.

I caught up with him again more recently by phone at his home in Fairfield, California, and I questioned him on how his early interest in myth, the unconscious, and social change had grown into a dream ministry.

**Karvonen:** Why did you initially turn to dream work to heal racism?

**Taylor:** It was out of desperation. I was training a group of Unitarian Universalist volunteers who’d been rejected by the black community they were trying to assist. I’d held some traditional discussion groups with the volunteers, and it had seemed like a success, because people felt better after telling their stories. But all the talk did little to address the underlying problems. Here we were, strong believers in civil rights

and equality, and we had failed to overcome our own unconscious racism.

As I tried to think of another approach, I recalled what my wife, Kathy, and I were going through in our relationship. Though we were both committed to ridding ourselves of society's sexist conditioning, we still drove each other crazy, even dreaming about the fights we'd had. Every time dreams entered the conversation, the discussion got deeper and more interesting, and it became possible to imagine what a relationship free of sexism might actually be like.

It occurred to me that the volunteer group was having the same problem with regard to racism: we were absolutely convinced it was wrong, but we were so subject to the unconscious patterning we'd been raised with that all our efforts failed. I thought maybe discussing our dreams about racism would help in the same way that sharing dreams about sexism had helped heal my relationship with my wife.

When I first proposed the idea to the group, there was surprise and a certain amount of consternation. But, being liberals and Unitarians, they were willing to try anything once. At the next meeting the group began talking about dreams that, on the surface, were filled with racial sentiments. Not surprisingly, virtually all of them were nightmares in which the dreamer was menaced by figures of other races. At another level, everything in the dream is a reflection of the dreamer's own psyche: these menacing characters are in fact representations of repressed aspects of the dreamer's own self. While the dream is occurring, I might be absolutely convinced that these unpleasant figures are "not me." But the fact that I am creating the dream means that it is *all* me. The more I think of figures in the dream as "not me," the more likely I am to be projecting my own problems on others in my waking life.

When I consciously accept the possibility that these figures in the dream are me, it allows me to begin withdrawing the projections I make in my waking life as well. Specifically, when I can acknowledge that this gang of dark-skinned youths who are threatening me in the dream are the disowned, despised, and often dangerous parts of my own being, I am then less likely to project my fears onto the next group of dark-skinned youths I encounter on a real street. Instead I can see them for who they are: kids coming home from school, laughing and talking.

That's what happened with the Unitarian group. With the release of our neurotic self-deceptions came increased mutual respect in our interactions with people in the African American community. The volunteers were able to relate to these people based on who they really were, rather than as representations of unconscious projections. Authentic likes and dislikes began to replace ritual "politeness," patronizing blunders, and repressed fears. And we were finally able to do something of value for the community.



**JEREMY TAYLOR**

**Karvonen:** What effect did this experience have on you?

**Taylor:** It opened my eyes to the potential of working with dreams as a tool for non-violent political, social, and cultural change. I saw that if you can touch the unconscious directly, hearts and minds can be changed.

The primary reasons for terrible race and class oppression at home and perpetual war overseas are not rational but unconscious. We have this unconscious belief that there are parts of ourselves that are not us, perhaps not even human: our aggressiveness, our murderous urges, our jealousy, and so forth. As we deny those traits in ourselves, we start to see them as the exclusive property of other people. These others are so unlike us, in our view, that we begin to question their humanity. This is what allows us to speak so casually

about "collateral damage": we don't really believe that the people suffering are human beings like us.

The moment we set ourselves up as the moral arbiters of the world, engaged in a battle between good and evil, then projection has become public policy, and it leads to disastrous results. What heals these profoundly destructive behaviors and promotes real change in society is awakening a sense of rapport with the rejected and despised aspects of ourselves. You can tinker endlessly with the laws and level the playing field all you want, but if you don't change the way people relate to each other face to face, the law of unintended consequences will simply recreate the problem all over again.

**Karvonen:** What is the "collective unconscious" that Jung spoke of, and how are dreams connected to it?

**Taylor:** Jung theorized that below the personal unconscious, which is connected to a certain individual, there is a vast unconscious that forms the foundation of our common humanity. From a spiritual perspective, it is a realization that we are one family. All my experience tells me that Jung's theory is correct. Dreams give us a more immediate and direct access to that deeper level of the unconscious.

**Karvonen:** But we usually think of dreams as personal messages from our own unconscious. Aren't our dreams about us?

**Taylor:** Dreams carry personal meanings related to our individual experience, and at the same time reach down into the collective unconscious, that vast foundation. One or the other may be of more importance to a dreamer at a particular point, but the dream is working on everything simultaneously — from personal issues like our jobs, our health, and our relationships to larger issues like nature, the cosmos, the divine, the whole psychic and spiritual evolution of human beings on this planet.

To a great degree we human beings have lost our intimate connection with nature. We grow out of nature just like anything else, and the health and harmony of the biosphere is absolutely essential to our health and harmony. But through



JERRY N. UELSMANN

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the various barriers of language and culture — and particularly technology — we have created the illusion that we are not connected to nature anymore. The conscious mind tends to function as if this illusion were true, but the unconscious knows better. We pollute and destroy the environment because of the uneasiness and mistrust that we have toward our own unconscious. If we do not bring this unease up to the conscious level, we will continue to project it out onto nature and burn the natural world down and pave it over.

**Karvonen:** Jung also said that the collective unconscious is made up of “archetypes.” What are archetypes, and how are they related to dreams, myths, and folklore?

**Taylor:** Archetypes are recurring symbolic forms or patterns that carry essentially the same meaning for all people. For example, all human beings are predisposed to associate the direction *up* with light, consciousness, and goodness, and the direction *down* with darkness, unconsciousness, and evil. Part of achieving emotional, psychological, and spiritual maturity is recognizing that the divine resides just as much in the darkness as in the light, because the divine is everywhere. In fact, we can discover more about the divine by exploring our dark side, because we are unconscious of much more than we are conscious of. So God is proportionately more present in the darkness of the unconscious than in the light of what we already know.

Even though I am predisposed to mistrust and fear the darkness down below, it is precisely in that place that everything I don't know about myself — and, therefore, everything I don't know about God — resides. So if I want to become a healthy, mature human being, I must overcome my fear and explore the underworld. For that reason, characters in myths and folk tales often must descend into dark, fearful caves or labyrinths and grapple with evil forces there in order to become enlightened and whole.

A great symbol for this archetype of darkness and light and their relationship to each other is the yin-yang. If you were to wrench the symbol apart into two halves, the black half would still have a white “eye,” and the white half would still have a black “eye.” So we see that even in the midst of the light, the dark is present, and vice versa.

Another example of an archetype would be the image of blood, which is related to family and the obligations of relationship. “Are you of my blood or not?” we ask when determining family. So when blood shows up in a dream, one important question for the dreamer is “What is my relationship to my relatives?” — and not just the ones who are living, but also the ancestors. Though the particular cultural expressions surrounding family, ancestors, and obligations will differ from culture to culture, there will still be this symbolic archetype of blood.

Of course women, because they menstruate, have an experience of blood that men don't. So archetypal symbols can have different levels of meaning. Some of those levels are gender-specific.

**Karvonen:** You've said that there is no such thing as a bad dream, that the more horrific a nightmare may be, the more significant it is to the dreamer's health and wholeness. Why is this?

**Taylor:** From an evolutionary survival standpoint, we are hard-wired to pay attention to threats. So when a dream has information of particular value and importance to us — especially if that information runs counter to our cherished beliefs — the dream is likely to dress that information up in an upsetting, threatening form to make us pay attention. A disturbing dream is a wake-up call that tells us some change in awareness or action needs to occur. Over and over again my work with dreams has demonstrated to me that the worse the dream appears to be on first encounter, the more important and valuable is the information it conveys — *if* we have the wisdom to recognize it.

All dreams, not just nightmares, are trying to guide the dreamer directly to “roadblocks” in the psyche: childhood injuries, current self-deception, repressed desires — in short, all the things that separate us from spiritual health and wholeness. One of the hallmarks of greater emotional and spiritual maturity is that the more gut-wrenching, nightmarish dreams subside. As we pay more attention to our dreams and attempt to follow their guidance, they no longer need to frighten us to get our attention. So the way to handle nightmares is to explore your dreams more, particularly the horrific ones. It's not easy, but it is doable, particularly in the context of a caring, supportive group.

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