

I was driving across a bridge over Narragansett Bay. The road led high up and gave me a view out over the water. Suddenly, however, and without warning, the roadway came to an end and I was confronted with the mortal danger of a sudden drop into the bay below.

This dream, one of many I have saved from long ago, comes from an era in my life when I began to pay close attention to my dreams. They became important to me because I was looking for indications of where my life was heading. Dreaming, or at least becoming aware of this activity, took on a significance that it never had held previously.

Dreams can play a vital role in the spiritual life, although they can be tricky to interpret. If not approached carefully, our dreams may mislead us. Some researchers who have studied them have concluded that they cannot be interpreted literally and have no precise equivalence to daily life. In any event, it would be a mistake to take them as an entirely trustworthy formula for important decisions or as a guide that can stand alone.

Dreams occur in the Bible and are described as important in the lives of some biblical figures. The passages show the influence of folklore narratives in ancient Near East cultures in which dreams were widely held to be a means of divine communication. I will cite only two famous collections of dream narratives here.

The dramatic story of Joseph in the last chapters of Genesis presents him as a person in whose life dreams loom large. His brothers refer to him contemptuously as “the dreamer” and sell him into captivity in Egypt. Years later, because he has interpreted the Pharaoh’s dreams, he is given authority over all of that country.

In the Gospel of Matthew, another Joseph is told in a dream to take Mary as his wife and later to take her and the child Jesus into Egypt. Thus Jesus escapes being killed by the soldiers of Herod. Another similar warning is given the Magi, directing them to return home by a different route, avoiding the king.

In modern times, psychologists write about the role of dreams in revealing our unconscious. The Swiss psychologist Jung says: “The dream is the small hidden door in the deepest and most intimate sanctum of the soul.” And again: “The dream is the theater where the dreamer is at once scene, actor, prompter, stage manager, author, audience, and critic.”

Dreams reflect the oftentimes turbulent rush of images and emotions that characterize our inner life. When written down, these dreams can seem entirely nonsensical unless one connects them imaginatively to the rest of life.

The most frequent theme in my own dreams, in recent years at least, is being away and feeling frantic about getting back home. Often I am madly packing my bags but unable to get everything together. The plane is about to leave without me because I simply cannot cope with all the things I must collect before leaving. Anxiety abounds in these nighttime adventures, along with the sense of being cut off.

My favorite dreams are the rare ones that make me laugh out loud. Such a one happened three

years ago when I shook with laughter in my sleep as I reacted to a weird comedy playing out in fantasy. Another occurred recently: I remember laughing but, as often happens, I let the event escape and cannot describe it now.

However, for me, more important than the content of any single dream is the fact of becoming aware of having dreamed. There was a time in my life when I was too rigid to have this awareness. That I can now gain access to my dream life suggests a more relaxed emotional life than I used to have.

To convey this kind of letting-go, spiritual writer Elizabeth Lesser uses the image of a horse trotting home: “We can’t follow the horse home unless we slow down every now and then, loosen up on the reins, and sense a deeper direction. As much as it appreciates good food, good medicine, and exercise, the body also loves to rest, sleep, and dream.”

Richard Griffin