

Dreaming the Shadow **Myka Hanson**

Stephen Aizenstat, Ph.D. tells a story about his grandfather in his book, *Dream Tending: Awakening to the Healing Power of Dreams*. Aizenstat (2011) says, “He [grandfather] helped people realize that nightmares are simply the life force revealing itself in its most raw, wild, and threatening form” (p. 62). I love this quote because it truly describes the infinite depth of our nightmares. Words like raw and wild speak to a force of nature, uncivilized, unrestrained, perhaps even erotic. Threatening is, of course, how people in the West tend to describe nightmares; they are, typically, unwelcome and frightening images and/or narratives that can sometimes plague us in recurring fashion for years. Nightmares are built into the human condition, it seems, so they must have a purpose. Is it possible to harness this “raw, wild, and threatening form” and actually use it to inform how we move in and experience the world?

A nightmare can be considered the shadow of a dream. Shadow, “hidden or unconscious aspects of oneself, both good and bad, which the ego has either repressed or never recognized” is all around us (Luton, 2020). Often, the shadow is seen as negative, but it is worth remembering that Jung did not identify shadow with negativity; he defined it as unseen. Including positive intention as a part of shadow can be useful in working with nightmares. When we experience a nightmare, threatening as it may feel, it is possible to work with the images present in the nightmare to make the unseen seen, to bring the shadow into the light.

How might we bring a nightmare image to light to work with it and, hopefully, resolve the threatening aspects of it? We can begin the process of befriending our nightmare images by working with four processes.

Gather Allies

The more we work with our dreams, the more frequently ally images appear. An ally image is a neutral or friendly image that we can invite to companion us as we work with nightmares. An ally can be an ancestor figure, an animal, or even a helpful occupation. One of my most present allies is a handyman who was fixing a wall in a dream I had years ago; another is my grandmother. Once at least one ally has been identified, more will follow, and soon you will have a group of allies there for you to call on to support your exploration of nightmarish/unpleasant images.

Gather Information

With your allies at your side, you can begin to observe the nightmare image and gather some intel about it. Remember those bullies from elementary school? As adults, we can look back and typically see those bullies as the misunderstood youth they actually were. The bully didn't

change; we became more knowledgeable. Your goal in observing the nightmare image is not to concentrate on how scary the image is; rather, we are looking for what qualities make the image powerful and potent.

Imagine a horrific nightmare image. For me, it's a shadowy figure who moves both ahead of me and behind me, constantly surrounding me but remaining unseen. When I gathered my allies to tend this dream, a trait of this shadowy figure that stood out to me was its stealth. One must have grace to be stealthy; a lumbering klutz would probably never be able to manage sneaking around. The moment I tied the description of "grace" to this shadowy figure, the figure began to open up to me. I also saw "stealth" as a trait I might like to have in encountering other nightmare images. It is possible to turn your nightmare images into allies.

Be Patient

It can take time to discover what your nightmare image's strengths might be; after all, nightmares aren't exactly known for their cooperative behavior! Be patient with the process and understand that some images can take a short time to work with while others may take years. The goal of tending a nightmare image isn't to change the image to a friendly one; rather, it is to learn how to see the image in its own power and strength. We may never invite the image out for coffee, but if we can understand a nightmare image to the degree that it becomes less mysterious, less threatening, then we have gained a depth of understanding not only of the image, but of ourselves as well.

Bring Shadow to Light

Our goal? To find how we might transform a nightmare image into a neutral image or perhaps even an ally. Sometimes a nightmare image becomes a tremendous ally. Consider an image you fear and imagine that image on your side, working for you, and using its power to aid you rather than scare you. Remember that a shadow is not "bad;" it is unseen. Unknown. Perhaps the reason the same nightmare image continues to come forward is not to frighten you, but to get your attention. Only by allowing the shadow to come into the light, to make the unknown known, can we start to understand why nightmare images visit us in their most powerful forms.

Nightmares terrify us, no matter our age or experience with dreams, but it is up to us what we do with the images once they arrive. Do we allow them to continue to frighten us, or do we lean in and befriend the images? Do we invite them to companion our dream time? If you can imagine your most threatening nightmare taking shape and being on your team, it is possible. Take some time today to try to gather your own friendly allies first, and, if one comes forward (or even if it doesn't) drop me a message at <https://mykahanson.com>. I'd love to hear about your experience!

References:

Aizenstat, S. (2011). *Dream tending: Awakening to the healing power of dreams*. New Orleans, LA: Spring Publications.

Luton, F. (2020). *The Shadow: Conflict with the persona and ego responsibility*. Retrieved November 12th, 2020. <https://frithluton.com/articles/shadow/>