ONCE UPON A DREAM

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I am standing with my back against a wall while a white ice cream van, obviously out of control, hurtles down the hill towards me. I try to move but am paralyzed with fear. I yell for help, and at the last minute, just before the van crashes against the wall, I manage to skip to one side out of harm’s way. I wake up trembling with terror and relief.

The dream took place in 1971. John, my husband, and I left Virginia early that morning after spending the weekend at the home of Dr. Bob Van de Castle, Director of the Sleep and Dream Laboratory at the University of Virginia Medical Center. It was the first time we had met Bob, his wife Doris, and his family, though we had corresponded from England, and we really appreciated their generous hospitality to a couple of little-known strangers. He arranged a party for us to meet a group of Edgar Cayce people and several famous names in the parapsychological world. He also gave us a guided tour of his laboratory, and told us of ongoing dream work throughout the country. We were very impressed, but it made me feel a little nervous about the reception of my first book, Dream Power (1972), due to be published very soon in the United States. With so much going on over here, would people feel the book had anything new to say?

My sleep throughout the night felt deep and sound, and I was unaware of any dreams—until I found myself struggling with the bedsheets and yelling at the top of my voice for John’s help. It was 9 a.m. and I had just escaped a horrible dream death. When I calmed down, I told the dream to John and wrote it down immediately while it was still fresh in my mind.

Since we were due to be picked up in a few minutes for a meeting at the university, we discussed the dream in the car and our driver-friend asked why I kept referring to the dream-vehicle as a van. Surely I meant a truck? No, I explained—in England we always refer to a large closed vehicle as a van. I stopped as I heard John laughing. “That’s the meaning of your dream,” he said. “It’s telling you that you felt overwhelmed and in danger of being crushed by the Van—Bob Van de Castle...” As I felt the familiar tingle of excitement course through my veins, I knew he was right.
I recalled my vague discomfort as Bob showed us round his laboratory and introduced us to all his impressive friends. I also relieved my anxiety as he openly expressed his scorn about the lack of British dream research. Yes, I had certainly felt “pushed up against a wall,” “squashed” and “put down”—but he certainly didn’t want to kill me, and so I concluded that the “van” was my own inner “academic Topdog” rather than the real Bob. I knew this particular Topdog of old and here “he” was again, using Bob’s remarks to prove how worthless I was.

As I was angrily muttering that I thought I’d resolved that particular conflict, the car drew up in front of the delicatessen where we were to buy sandwiches for lunch. Our friend and John got out of the car, and just as I was about to follow them, I suddenly grew rigid in my seat. Right before my eyes, a large white van was rapidly backing towards the car—and I just managed to leap out before the inevitable crash. It stopped, miraculously, within an inch of collision and no damage was done—which was disappointing from the point of view of the story, but not from mine! It was carrying ice cream.

At the time we were formulating an interesting theory of extrasensory perception: we were no longer interested in trying to “prove” that ESP happens, because the scientific evidence on that score (from Bob’s work, among many others) seems already quite conclusive. We were interested in why ESP happens when it does. Nine times out of ten, it is of no practical use whatsoever; and when it could be of use it rarely appears.

Our study of ESP in dreams had brought us to the same conclusion about paranormal phenomena reached by both Freud and Jung, namely that they are primarily of psychological significance on account of their meaning. Freud repeatedly urged his fellow analysts to take special note of ESP incidents with their patients, both in dreams and in waking sessions, because they always seemed to be linked with important unconscious contents beginning to emerge. Jung similarly held that “synchronicity”—constellations of meaningful coincidences, many of which look like ESP—is experienced at important moments of personal growth, and always reflects archetypal forces at work at the time. Our own studies led us to believe that paranormal occurrences frequently happen, in life generally as well as in therapy, whenever some psychological Underdog in the personality is struggling desperately for recognition.

So the lesson I drew from the van incident was that in some sense this particular dream was terribly important, so important that an Underdog in my psyche had drawn on paranormal powers to make me pay extra-special attention to it. And as I mentally relived the experience of the real van backing towards the car, I got an unmistakable feeling that it was not a Topdog, academic or otherwise, bearing down on me, but an Underdog at the end of his tether. I resolved to get to the bottom of this particular dream or bust.

My opportunity came when we were invited to attend a Gestalt workshop in San Francisco, led by one of the most competent and respected therapists in the country. The group leader asked me to be the ice cream. At this point, I felt even more strongly that it was an Underdog about to “spill its gut” in a vain effort at control. “I am ice cream,” I began, “I am sloppy, slushy, mushy and yukky. I’m a menace to society....” Then, in my best Topdogy voice, I scolded, “Pleasure, pleasure, pleasure, it’s all anyone thinks about these days. But life’s so hard on most people; they get hurt so often that they deserve a little pleasure sometimes....”
The essence of this session showed me that the ice cream symbol was an important part of the dream. In some way, the dream was trying to convey that I had perceived Bob as a “van” trying hard to control his slushy, mushy, sloppy emotions, and failing—a far cry from my conscious feeling that he had criticized me for lack of (academic) solidity. As my mind wandered back over the events of that weekend, light suddenly dawned and I had the meaning of my dream.

Six months earlier, Bob’s eldest son, Brett, had been killed in a motorcycle accident. On our last evening in their home, Bob and Doris had shared with us the events surrounding his death, their grief and overwhelming feelings of loss which were only just starting to lose their pain. We listened, empathized, and felt our own grief for a boy we had never met.

“Sentimentality”—that was the word I was groping for—slushy, mushy, sloppy, soft sentimentality! It was not so much Bob’s own emotion that threatened—that was merely a trigger to start my own suppressed and repressed grief rolling, an avalanche of “ice cream” spilling over from all its years of constraint. When I got home I cried for Brett, for the Vans, for everyone who faces death, and for myself. I was refreshed, if not reborn.

When my insight hit me in the San Francisco group, I shared it with the leader and thanked him for his help in unraveling the dream. I’m not sure he understood my excitement. He is not unusual in my experience. I get the impression that many Gestalt therapists are not really interested in dreams themselves. They use them as a starting point to get into some conflict area of the dreamer, but they could equally well begin with a fantasy, a memory, or the newspaper headlines. Fritz Perls criticized Freud for advocating the use of free association in dream work, saying that it should be called “free dissociation” because it led right away from the dream. In my experience, Fritz’s dialog technique often does the same. Gestalt therapists are far more interested in uncovering a polarity, a Topdog-Underdog conflict of any kind, than they are in getting at the meaning of a dream. And dreams do have meanings—perfect, precise, specific meanings relevant to our current life.

My purpose here is to sing the praises of “ordinary” dreams which are really so “extraordinary” in their own way that my mind continually boggles at their skill, precision, and wit. I am never so creative in my waking life. Even a nightmare is perfect in its own way. And the symbolism in which they speak is truly the language of the soul, spoken throughout the ages in parable, poetry, art and music—conveying meanings, imports, and feelings inaccessible to consciousness by any other means. Both Freud, and more recently Arthur Janov made the mistake of equating the “unreality” of so-called symbolic behavior in waking life with the symbols found in dreams, claiming that dreams become less symbolic as growth proceeds. Well, I have been keeping a record of my dreams for over twenty years, and I am happy to say that I am still dreaming in symbols. Never once have I experienced a symbol attempting to hide or disguise some truth from me: rather, the symbol always expresses clearly a whole constellation of thoughts and feelings too complex and numinous for straightforward presentation. We are never so real as we are in dreams.