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# *What Did You Dream Last Night?*

Marc Ian Barasch On What The Psyche Is Trying To Tell Us

BARBARA PLATEK

There was a time when Marc Ian Barasch paid scant attention to his dreams. Like many people, he viewed them as intriguing but forgettable, “a nocturnal reshuffling of the mental deck,” as he once wrote. But after a series of vivid nightmares presaged a cancer diagnosis, he had a thorough change of heart. Barasch embarked on a project to explore and document the importance of dreams.

Fifteen years of research led him to the conclusion that dreams play a pivotal role in our lives. After traveling the globe to interview dream experts of all kinds — including scientists, psychotherapists, and indigenous healers — and undertaking an in-depth analysis of the voluminous dream notebooks he’d kept during his illness, Barasch gathered his findings into a book, *Healing Dreams: Exploring the Dreams That Can Transform Your Life*, which won the Nautilus Award for best psychology title in 2001. His other books include *The Healing Path: A Soul Approach to Illness* (1992); *Remarkable Recovery: What Extraordinary Healings Tell Us about Getting Well and Staying Well* (with Caryle Hirshberg, 1995); and *Field Notes on the Compassionate Life: A Search for the Soul of Kindness* (2005).

Barasch was born in 1949 and grew up in New Rochelle, New York. The son of a television and film producer, he studied film at Yale University, along with literature, psychology, and anthropology. He has been an editor at *Psychology Today*, *Natural Health*, and *New Age Journal* (which won a National Magazine Award under his tenure), and he has twice been shortlisted for the PEN Literary Award. A practicing Buddhist, Barasch helped found the psychology department at Buddhist-established Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado, which combines Eastern and Western educational traditions. He has played and recorded with the *Rock Bottom Reminders*, a rock band whose members are all famous authors, including Amy Tan, Barbara Kingsolver, and Stephen King.

In 2006 Barasch founded the *Green World Campaign*, a nonprofit organization whose primary goal is to “turn degraded lands green again” by planting billions of trees. He currently serves on the advisory committee of the United Nations Forum on Forests Secretariat for the International Year of Forests 2011.

I spoke with Barasch several times for this interview: twice while he was visiting Los Angeles and once when he was back home in Boulder. I was impressed by his ability to articulate esoteric concepts in a lively and approachable way. Most striking, however, was his passion for his work. The possibilities of the dreaming mind remain largely untapped, he says, and if you approach even a single dream with respect, insight, and tenderness, you might never be the same again.

**Platek:** Why is it important to pay attention to our dreams?

**Barasch:** Dreams present to us parts of reality and of the psyche that we often overlook or don’t wish to see. They are concerned with the growth of the soul. The word for “dream” in Hebrew — *chalom* — is derived from the verb meaning “to be made healthy or strong.” Dreams tell us that we live up to a mere fraction of our potential and that there are great treasures to be found in the unknown portion of our being. If we heed

our dreams, they can help us develop new attitudes toward ourselves and others. They can deepen our spiritual impulses, expand our emotional lives, and produce all manner of changes in our careers and relationships.

**Platek:** The molecular biologist and codiscoverer of DNA Francis Crick said that dreams are simply “cerebral housecleaning,” that we dream in order to store memories more efficiently.

**Barasch:** From the neurological perspective all learning is a matter of efficient organization, consciousness is simply an emergent property of sufficiently complex matter, and our dreams are just random discharges of the brain sputtering along. But anyone who investigates dreams cannot help but be astonished by their underlying meanings. Personally I think it takes almost an act of will to deny the intelligence that comes through in our dreams.

**Platek:** Where do you think dreams come from?

**Barasch:** A traditional explanation might be that a dream is our unconscious recycling or grappling with problems in our life or long-standing psychological issues. A Freudian might say that they are wish fulfillments. Both these perspectives suggest that the content and meaning of our dreams are already contained within the psyche. But [Swiss psychiatrist] Carl Jung suggested that dreams come from an even deeper place — a collective psyche — and so it is possible for us to dream about things that we have never seen or known. Jung also said that dreams attempt to balance us when we become lopsided — when we lean too much toward one side of our personality or the other.

**Platek:** You had a series of dreams that may have saved your life.

**Barasch:** I was working as a magazine editor when my dreams began to take on an unusual intensity. In one dream the “greatest mass murderer in the history of mankind” had “escaped from a cell” and was attempting to decapitate me with an ax. In another dream, Death was looking through my basement window. There were quite a few about necks: A bullet was lodged in my throat. Long needles were stuck into my “neck brain.” It got to the point where I couldn’t ignore the dreams any longer. I went to a doctor and was eventually diagnosed with thyroid cancer — basically, cancer of my “neck brain” — and had surgery to remove the tumor.

There is a communication system between the brain and the rest of the body that functions without our conscious awareness. Hormones whiz back and forth carrying biochemical messages between the brain and the cells of our body. The brain sometimes processes that information as images, and some of the images I dreamed turned out to be accurate diagnostic information that was not initially reflected in medical tests. At the same time, the dreams were not just a functional scan of the body, like an MRI; they portrayed the *meaning* of the ailment and pointed toward a path to greater wholeness. For example, I dreamed an iron pot was suspended under my chin, burning my throat. Three holes had been drilled in my head, and a voice said, “We are going to boil your brains out.” Naturally this was terrifying at first. It wasn’t until later that

this image of the pot began to resonate with me. My brains were being “boiled out” because I had to relinquish an old way of thinking to discover a new one not based solely on my preconceptions. There is a notion in many spiritual paths of the *sacrificium intellectus*, the setting aside of the purely rational function to access the intuitive mode. In actuality there was nothing wrong with my brain. That is why we can’t simply regard dreams as a diagnostic device. They contain other material of significance to the soul, the personality, the larger self, and so on.

**Platek:** How did this experience change your view of dreams?

**Barasch:** When these dreams came initially, I probably had the same relationship with them that most people do with their dreams: I viewed them as sort of hazy psychic leftovers. But these particular dreams could not be easily dismissed. I felt that they were urgently trying to tell me something, but it all seemed like gibberish. This was before I learned to take my dreams seriously, to regard them as messages from what Jung called the “two-million-year-old self.”

**Platek:** Why do you think signs of illness might show up in dreams?

**Barasch:** It could be an evolutionary trait, a survival strategy in which we experience subliminal cues from the body that all is not well. The waking brain is geared toward daily activities and doesn’t get the message, but on the dream stage things that were in the background can come into the spotlight. So it is possible that we have been feeling something in our bodies that we just didn’t register, and the dream brings it forth. Bear in mind that neuropeptides are generated by every cell in the body, and the brain has receptors for them. So activity in the cells can create images in the brain. It’s a two-way street, of course: we envision a delicious meal in our visual cortex, and our stomach growls.

**Platek:** How do we recognize when we have had a “healing dream”?

**Barasch:** First of all, the emotions accompanying these dreams tend to be powerful and vivid — terror, awe, joy. When we have what Jung called “big dreams,” we know that we have experienced something out of the ordinary. In all the cultures where I did research, people made a distinction between big, healing dreams and regular dreams. Tibetan Buddhists talk about “clear dreams,” which are said to be the unobstructed voice of wisdom. The *sangomas* — traditional healers of South Africa — call them “talking dreams.” They told me that you have to treat these dreams differently, because they are more literally true. They can be prophetic and have social or cosmological implications.

Frequently the sensory aspect of the dream is heightened. The colors may be jewel-like, the spaces vast. There can be experiences like hearing some great voice making proverb-like pronouncements. They often sound like poetry or headlines



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— words that want to be remembered. The quality of light in the dream may be different. People describe a kind of cinematic vividness. Such dreams have complex plots and subplots and dramatic narrative structures. Like ancient Greek theater, they seem designed to produce a catharsis, to lead us to *metanoia* — a change of heart. They make us realize that we are in the presence of something larger than ourselves.

I suspect that the memory traces for these dreams are stored differently so that we can still remember the dream vividly after we wake up. They might be processed differently in the brain as well, the way a traumatic memory is processed by the amygdala. Regular dreams are simply less memorable.

**Platek:** How often do people have healing

dreams?

**Barasch:** I can say it’s more common for people to have them during periods of crisis. When we are at a crossroads, the psyche seems to respond with meaningful dreams. Of course, shamans may have a great many more of these dreams than the rest of us, and every society has shamans, regardless of what we call them.

On the other hand, there are people who tell me that they have never had this kind of dream. I don’t think this tells us anything detrimental about them. Perhaps they are more awake in some other way.

**Platek:** How would you advise someone to respond to a healing dream?

**Barasch:** I think it’s important to talk to someone who knows about dreams, such as a good therapist. I admit I’m partial to Jungians. Jung’s work was based on his own experience of this archetypal realm, and he counseled respect for the living quality of images and circumambulation rather than straight-line analysis. I also recommend a dream group. A healing dream needs to be shared. For example, Gandhi had a dream at a crisis point during India’s fight for independence. There was infighting going on, and the whole independence movement was in danger of falling apart. In his dream all the different factions were marching in the street together in celebration. Nehru, who later became India’s first prime minister, dismissed this dream, but Gandhi wrote to all the leaders of the different factions until, through his lobbying, the march — called a *hartal* — actually took place. It was considered the turning point in the fight for Indian independence.

A healing dream often requires some kind of action. It is a piece of the psyche that has presented itself to us like a flaming meteorite that has landed on earth — or, maybe more apropos, a deep wellspring bubbling out of the rocks. We don’t want to sequester these dreams in an ivory tower and look at them as objects of interest. We need to reenact them somehow: draw them, dance them, tell them. When we do this, we make our outer lives more consonant with the inner life of the soul. If you believe that dreams are in service to growth, then you will want to do something — even something small — in response.

**Platek:** You refer to dreams as “advocates for the soul.”

**Barasch:** Yes, the dreams uphold the soul’s values. They tell us that we — our ego selves — are not who we think we are. They encourage us to live truthfully, right now and always. Of course these messages might not be what we want to hear. Sometimes dreams may advocate

for life changes that are challenging, to say the least. Dreams really have no time for niceties or for the stories we tell ourselves about who we are. In dreams our narrow selfhood is expanded — the dreams will not allow us to be so small — and we experience ourselves as part of something larger. They thrust upon us realities that are too often obscured, either by our tendency to sell ourselves short and smooth things over or by the gap between what we know deep inside and what we prefer to believe on the surface. Healing dreams are straight from the source. They are realer than real. They stay with us.

**Platek:** Is there a danger of placing too much emphasis on our dreams? Could they lead us astray?

**Barasch:** Well, Jung was quick to point out that it is naive to think the unconscious can solve our problems for us. There is a reason we have consciousness. We can’t simply hand over our decisions to our dreams. We need to have a dialogue with them. Jung spoke about engaging with the unconscious. A patient once came to him with a dream about climbing a mountain and stepping out into thin air. The dreamer felt exhilaration, but Jung was concerned that the man was in danger, that this was not transcendence but inflation and hubris, and counseled him against scaling any literal peaks. The man was later killed in a mountaineering accident. There are plenty of cases in which someone assumes naively that a dream is sanctioning certain erratic behavior. Dreams can help us connect to the realm of the soul, but if we have a dream in which we shoot someone, it doesn’t justify doing that in real life. We are better off first looking diligently for the symbolic meaning of a dream.

**Platek:** What would you say to those who think that interpreting dreams is an escape from the real issues of life?

**Barasch:** There is a part of us that has contempt for the psyche and, in a sense, for the truth, because the truth is often disturbing. When we say a dream is just a trifle or a fantasy, we insulate ourselves from reality. We are actually defending ourselves from the wisdom of dreams and their tendency to challenge our beliefs.

**Platek:** Would you tell someone who has just lost a job or a home to pay attention to his or her dreams?

**Barasch:** I think that is exactly the sort of moment when we should pay the closest attention. Inner guidance seems to come to us in a crisis, because the crisis creates a gap for it to pass through. What keeps us from listening to our deeper knowing is our daily routine. If we cherish our dreams, they will guide us through the dark. Mythology tells us that when we are lost in the dark woods, guidance appears from unexpected — often humble and overlooked — sources. The alchemists said that the philosopher’s stone, which turns base metals into

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gold, is “the stone the builders cast aside.” Dreams are like that. They point to what we’ve overlooked — often something that seems weak, small, or quiet. When our lives fall apart, we are more open to that part of the psyche that wants change.

**Platek:** What happens if a dream doesn’t speak to us during a crisis?

**Barasch:** Sometimes it is simply left up to us to decide what to do. We can’t rely on dreams to provide all the answers. Even when a dream does come, we still have to make choices.

**Platek:** You’ve referred to your illness as a “calling.”

**Barasch:** First, it’s important to point out that nobody wants to be ill, and there are plenty of other ways to be “called.” But let me back up and speak about what I see as a kind of new-age Calvinism that blames the sick for their own illnesses. The Calvinists were Christians who believed that if you were healthy and whole, it was a sign you were in God’s favor. The new-age version tells us that if we fall ill, we’ve brought it on ourselves through negative thinking, wrong living, and so on. But many of our health problems are not personal at all. They are just biology, and their causes might be civilizational and collective.

That said, I think some illnesses do ask us to change. There is evidence that persistent emotional patterns create stress in the body. States of disharmony can make us more vulnerable to disease. They are not *the* cause, but one factor, perhaps. So the disease might be approached as a catalyst for greater harmony.

In our culture we are asked to view illness as a kind of mechanistic failure, but our dreams may contradict that as too simplistic. When I was ill, my dreams pointed toward other issues in my life. For example, my cancer was in the throat, so there were images having to do with the voice, with expression, with creativity. The dreams implied that a journey was underway; they hinted at a spiritual process linked to the illness. Before I even understood that something was physiologically wrong, I had a sense of being summoned. Many shamanic cultures understand these moments of crisis or descents into the underworld to be a period of inner growth. Mythologist Joseph Campbell, who spoke of “the hero’s journey,” pointed out that the journey often begins with a wound. The hero or the protagonist is suddenly impeded in his or her progress through the outer world. He or she has to undergo a period of hardship in order to fulfill his or her destiny. Heroes are obliged to leave behind the comforts of life as they know it and undergo a series of trials, after which they reemerge into the world more whole.

**Platek:** Can you imagine a time when a patient’s dreams might be recorded in his or her medical chart?

**Barasch:** Absolutely. In *Healing Dreams* I write about a woman who had been diagnosed with benign fibroid tumors. She had a dream in which she was on a plane that was waiting on the runway, and she saw a woman outside the plane trying to warn her about something. The woman was banging on the window, but the dreamer wasn’t paying attention. As the plane taxied, the woman ran alongside, still trying to warn the dreamer about some danger, running until, horrifically, her feet

were worn down to the bone. After the dreamer awoke, she began to work with the dream and discovered that it felt as though something was wrong with the “belly of the plane.” She went for a second opinion about her fibroids and discovered that, in fact, she had cancer “in her belly,” so to speak. So this dream alerted her to a life-threatening situation that her medical exams hadn’t detected.

It’s not only dreams that need to be interpreted. If we applied the same interpretive process to our waking lives, we might perceive a layer of meaning that is otherwise hidden. In other words, we could see that our experiences have psychological and spiritual dimensions to them and that what are sometimes called “synchronicities” are not random, meaningless occurrences. When we do that, we connect more deeply to life.

**Platek:** A friend of mine who died a few years ago of cancer had a dream about a silver cocoon that was woven for him by his community. In his dream his therapy was to get inside the cocoon.

**Barasch:** People who are seriously ill often have beautiful dreams of death. Usually I would say that a dream of death is not literal but about symbolic death and rebirth: the old self has to die to make way for something new. The cocoon is a classic image of death, transformation, and rebirth. The caterpillar goes into the cocoon, and the butterfly emerges. So your friend’s dream might have been telling him that death is not the end. Sometimes dying people dream that they become a source of life for a tree or a plant. These dreams bring a good bit of healing to the dreamer, but the healing is of the soul, not the body.

**Platek:** What does it mean when we have recurring dreams?

**Barasch:** If a dream comes again and again, it could be because the psyche has an uncompromising intent to draw our attention to something. Perhaps there is an issue we have not faced or resolved. So our dreams might nudge us or even whack us over and over until we get it. Other times it could be a trauma that’s replaying: the psyche is attempting to assimilate and process the traumatic event. Sometimes people ask me how they can get rid of their recurring dreams. The answer is usually to work with the dream and see if it changes. Often it will. But we need to give it our careful attention.

**Platek:** What are some techniques for working with dreams?

**Barasch:** It is helpful to ask for a dream before we go to sleep, even to specify an issue or question about which we hope to dream. It is also good to leave a notebook by the bed and to write the dream down as soon as we awake. Write it out in full. Do not edit or omit details that seem irrelevant or disturbing. The most important element in the dream might be hidden in a corner or be something that fills us with disgust.

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There is a temptation to say upon waking, *Oh, I know what this means*, but too often it is simply our habitual point of view — the waking ego — interpreting the dream according to its own pre-conceived ideas. If we are really trying to understand what the psyche has to say to us, we need to take time with the dream, approach it from different angles. Otherwise we can wind up tossing out the gift and keeping the wrapping paper. We need absolute openness and willingness to receive meaning. It can be useful to write the dream down on one half of the paper, and on the other half write your associations. For example, if you dream of a desk, you may associate desks with the one that was in your grandfather’s study, or the one you saw in a movie the

night before, and so on. Another technique is to explain each person or object in the dream as if to a visitor from Mars. If you dream of a pot, as I did, you might describe it as “something we use to transform that which is raw into that which can be eaten.” You might then ask yourself, *What in my life is raw and needs to be made more digestible or shared with others?*

Looked at with “beginner’s mind,” to borrow a term from Zen, the true meaning of the dream begins to reveal itself. When I was editing a magazine, I assigned someone to interview P.L. Travers, the author of *Mary Poppins*, who was also a Sufi. When the writer asked Travers to describe herself, she said, “I am an Unknower.” We need to approach our dreams with a kind of not knowing.

**Platek:** Have your dreams helped you to see your own path more clearly?

**Barasch:** Absolutely. Dreams have certainly shown me that I am part of a greater universal wisdom. We all are. Jung referred to the “capital-S Self.” Dreams show us the refractions of that Self. There is a line from James Joyce: “We walk through ourselves, meeting robbers, ghosts, giants, old men, young men, wives, widows, brothers-in-love. But always meeting ourselves.” In dreams our conscious self is only one point of view. The secondary characters, our alter egos, have voices and agency in the dream world. We can discover ourselves by asking of each character in a dream, *In what way is that me?*

Dreams tell us how we really feel about something. Let’s say we are in a job that we hate: our dreams may tell us that we are dying in that situation. Dreams use a lot of hyperbole. As I said, they are like ancient Greek plays: the characters wear big costumes to make sure we see them. But if we are willing to find the truth in those exaggerations, our lives open up. We become more authentic and less the product of social constructs.

**Platek:** It was actually a dream that led me to do interviews for *The Sun*. In my dream I was in a room filled with recording and transcribing devices. Two women writers I admire were also there. I woke feeling encouraged to do this.

**Barasch:** Dreams often deliver messages about vocation.



Traditional cultures pay close attention to children's dreams for indications of what each child's role might be as an adult. I have a whole chapter in my book about dreams that caused people to change careers. One man had a dream about a forest and heard a voice say, "This is what I do. I work with the green stuff." That led him to become an environmentalist. A successful businessman had a dream in which he stood in front of a mirror and, instead of seeing his own reflection, saw that of a homely man. The dream stayed with him, and he ended up wandering into a bookstore, where he found a book with that same homely man on the cover. The book was by [Trappist monk] Thomas Merton, and reading it led him to pursue a course of spiritual study. He left his job and became a student of theology, eventually working for a national charity.

If we are willing to listen to dreams and be guided by them, then the aperture of our lives widens. But it takes humility and openness. I think the expression "only a dream" is pernicious. We receive deep wisdom from dreams all the time. The question is whether we listen to them. God asked Solomon what gift he wanted, and Solomon said, "Give thy servant a listening heart." If we cock an ear toward these messages, it makes all the difference.

**Platek:** Many of my therapy clients find their dreams to be an invaluable guide, especially given how bombarded we all are by messages about how we should lead our lives. The dreams can act as an inner compass.

**Barasch:** Jung observed that dreams have a compensatory

function: If our view is skewed, our dreams will correct that. If our opinion of ourselves is too inflated, or, for that matter, too low, dreams will apply a corrective.

Sometimes dreams provide us with a way to accept something that is truly part of our life, though it may be difficult or painful. I am thinking of a woman who had been married for a long time and was considering leaving her partner. She had a dream in which her husband knew that she wanted to leave and offered her one last gift: a magnificent flowering pink dogwood tree whose branches spread throughout her entire kitchen. This woman loved dogwoods and woke from that dream knowing that, despite how her husband might seem on the outside, he had something lovely in his soul. She did stay with him, and her husband slowly began to open up. Transformation in her case was not about changing her life, but rather changing her perception.

In other instances our dreams might tell us to listen to our fears. Another woman was getting married, and she dreamed she was ascending an Aztec sacrificial pyramid in her wedding gown. Her friends said she was just having prewedding jitters, but she *knew*. She didn't go through with the marriage.

**Platek:** How do we know when we have interpreted a dream correctly?

**Barasch:** Jeremy Taylor, a wonderful hands-on dream practitioner and theorist, says that we get an "aha moment." I think that is exactly right. When we have a deep sense of congruity and

rightness, I think we can trust it. We tend to discount intuitive feelings in our culture because they are not accessed through the intellect. But the gut is intelligent too. A gut feeling is not simply a primitive response. There is a knowing in the body.

**Platek:** Is it possible simply to spin our wheels over dreams?

**Barasch:** Dreams are so rich that we can wind up spending most of our day going over them, digging ourselves into a ditch. (We can also drive ourselves over a cliff!) The problem, of course, is that we still need to be engaged with life. Our culture has gone too far in dismissing the value of dreams, but we should avoid swinging to the other extreme. It is a delicate balancing act. If we don't take our dreams seriously enough, we lead a diminished life, but if we take them too seriously, we lose touch with reality and may end up lost in the miasma.

**Platek:** Do dream symbols vary across cultures?

**Barasch:** Many are universal. In all cultures people dream about animals and the natural world; about human relationships, love and hate, sex and aggression; even sometimes about mythic images of good and evil. These categories are universal. But the interpretation of these images will vary. We might interpret a dream of death as a foreboding of actual mortality. But in some cultures, such a dream of death might be viewed as favorable: the death of the "small self." The shaman wears a skeleton costume to symbolize, among other things, that his or her limited self has died. Other cultures might view that imagery as demonic.

**Platek:** What do dreams teach us about our identity?

**Barasch:** They teach us that our identity is multifaceted. There is a technique in Gestalt therapy that would have us inhabit every aspect of the dream as ourselves. In our dream we usually take the role of our ego self, but the dream can allow us to step outside our usual viewpoint and experience other aspects of our psyches: for example, the shadow — that person or thing in the dream that we feel is *least* like ourselves. If we take a close look at this aspect, we often recognize it as something essential to who we are.

**Platek:** You've suggested that dreams can be difficult to understand in part because they sometimes deal with issues we would rather avoid. As the Jungian analyst Marie-Louise von Franz said, "They point to our back."

**Barasch:** Yes, she said they're like a sign that's been stuck on the back of our coat that everyone but us can see! They also point to the dirt under our feet. They point to what's hidden under the bed. Dreams are unerring and merciless about presenting us the buried corpse, the shadow, something that is out of the light. But the shadow isn't necessarily bad. Dreams also show us positive traits that we've ignored. Sometimes we need help understanding our dreams. Other people can see our backs, so to speak, when we can't.

**Platek:** How do you define the "shadow"?

**Barasch:** The shadow is the disowned part of the psyche. Jung said it is what a person has no wish to be. If we want to know more about who we are, we can look at the part of the dream we find repulsive or disgusting. Generally the ego wants nothing to do with the shadow, though, as I said, it may not be as bad as we think. We may have been conditioned to believe that

being emotional, for example, is a negative trait, and then have a character in our dream who is over-the-top, screaming and acting like a fool. But when we really look at the shadow, we often find that there is wisdom in these neglected sides of ourselves.

**Platek:** Can you give me an example of a dream that helped you better to see your own shadow side?

**Barasch:** I once dreamed that I was at a Hollywood party with all these glamorous people. Having grown up around show business, I think some shallow part of me wanted to be famous or to be with the beautiful people. So in the dream I was dressed to the nines, and everyone was brilliant and witty. Then I looked behind me and saw that I was trailing toilet paper from my shoe. I had been in the bathroom, and now the entire roll of toilet paper was unspooling behind me. The word *humiliation*, remember, is related to *humility*.

**Platek:** I once heard a speaker suggest that working on our shadow material can be a form of personal disarmament.

**Barasch:** Yes, the shadow makes us vulnerable; it's our own personal armor-piercing bullet. It can also help us to be less judgmental, more broad-minded, and more tolerant. Most of us disdain the parts of ourselves that we deem unworthy. We deny them, project them onto others, pretend they don't exist. We have to attend to the shadow and hear what it is saying, not just be disgusted by it. The ego can have two responses to the shadow: it can fortify itself and say, "That is not me," or it can follow Saint Francis's lead when he said, "Give thy servant the undefended heart." The undefended heart is the part of us that can sit down with the shadow and recognize these hidden flaws or strengths. Poet W.H. Auden said, "We would rather be ruined than changed / We would rather die in our dread / Than climb the cross of the moment / And let our illusions die." The death of our illusions is one of the dream's goals. This intelligence that we encounter in dreams is intent upon growth. I think many of the ills in our world can be traced to the rejection of the shadow and to the refusal to take responsibility for it.

**Platek:** Dreams seem to let us know about what the Hopi people call *koyaanisqatsi* — life out of balance.

**Barasch:** Traditional cultures don't separate the personal and the collective. If one element is out of whack, the whole thing is out of whack. The idea that dreams are purely personal is largely a Western one. From an indigenous point of view, when an individual has a dream indicating that his or her life is out of balance, it means that the tribe is out of balance; perhaps its relationship with nature or with the ancestors needs correcting. When a member of the tribe falls ill, it's a reflection on the state of the community and the environment. Tribe members might perform a ritual to restore balance. That is a view we would be well advised to embrace. I think when we work on our own imbalances, we help the cosmos. Each individual who can live more authentically is changing the world.

**Platek:** In your book you describe how some Jews began dreaming of the Holocaust before it actually took place. One woman dreamed she had to go to the Bureau of Verification of Aryan Descent, where her papers were thrown into an oven. Another woman dreamed of being alive at the bottom of a pile of corpses.

**Barasch:** We owe a great debt to Charlotte Beradt, the journalist who collected these dreams and smuggled them out of Germany. Of course, Nazism was visible even before the Holocaust began. The uniqueness of these dreams, according to Beradt, was that they were not in response to private events but to a public atmosphere of lies and threatened violence. Even before the full ruthlessness of the Nazi regime was exposed, many already knew the terrible truth in their dreams. It wasn't just Jews who had these dreams. Beradt also collected the dreams of Christian Germans at the time. One man dreamed of trying to raise his arm in a Nazi salute but couldn't do it; his arm finally broke off with the attempt. These dreams presented a sense of impending horror that was in contrast to what most people wanted to believe at the time.

**Platek:** What might our dreams be trying to tell us about the state of the world today?

**Barasch:** I know a lot of people who are having dreams about the environment. In the mideighties I started dreaming about polar bears. In one dream I was drowning in the Arctic Ocean. The polar bear was drowning, too, and we were looking at each other. It was horrible. What was I to make of a dream like that? I knew that polar bears can swim. Back then the polar bears were doing fine in their frozen habitat. But now there are isolated reports of drowning polar bears and grim forecasts for the future of the species.

We are part of the natural world. We are animals, members of an ecology. The imbalance in the atmosphere disturbs the psyche, and our dreams reveal that. I have a friend who dreamed repeatedly of a lynx. A few years later Boulder, Colorado, where she lived, launched a program to reintroduce the lynx, which had neared extinction, and she got involved in the project. Many people who have powerful dreams of the natural world — whether about the beauty of nature or its destruction — become involved with environmental causes. I had a dream in 1998 about a house with a huge, beautiful tree, but then the leaves began to fall off. It turned out the tree didn't have roots. It was artificial. At the end of the dream I was leaving the house carrying a pot that contained a real sapling. I had no idea at the time what this could possibly mean. It seemed big though. I sensed that it symbolized the crash of a rootless, artificial economy, of an unsustainable world order, the death of Nature. Eight years later I started doing the charity work I am still doing today, planting saplings that are grown in pots in seedbed nurseries to combat massive deforestation and global climate change.

**Platek:** There is an Aboriginal saying: "Those who lose dreaming are lost."

**Barasch:** Our psyche has been colonized. Daily life — and especially our surfeit of media — crowds out our dreams. We don't have time for dream work when we have to check our e-mail, listen to the news, work sixty-hour weeks, and so on.

*Jung told of a man who said he was too involved with his business to pay attention to his dreams. "The poor man," Jung said. "He didn't realize that his dreams are his business."*

In some cases it has taken me years to understand a single dream. Our culture's priorities make it difficult to carve out the space. No one even has time to remember dreams, let alone work with them. "What did you dream last night?" should be the first question we ask each other in the morning, instead of "What's on the news?" or "What's for breakfast?" or "What do you have to do today?" If we wake up to the radio, we are immediately invaded by the culture's idea of what is important, but our dreams are the real breaking news.

**Platek:** Though our psyche may have been colonized, in some sense, wouldn't you say that dreams have also changed the culture?

**Barasch:** Absolutely. Director James Cameron credits the original idea for the movie *Avatar* to a dream that his mother had about a twelve-foot-tall blue woman. So his mother's dream has now reached millions of people.

Many artists and scientists have found inspiration in dreams. German chemist Friedrich August Kekulé von Stradonitz famously had a dream about a snake holding its tail in its mouth, which gave him the idea for the ring-shaped structure of the benzene molecule. Albert Einstein had a dream about sledding down a hill that gave him the inspiration for his theory of relativity.

**Platek:** Do you think our lack of appreciation for dreams is a reflection of our lack of connection to the soul in general?

**Barasch:** Yes, and I think there is a broader question of whether we listen not only to dreams but also to intuition, synchronicity, and other intimations of a larger reality. This bigger reality is speaking to us all the time. And if we ignore it, I do think that we become lost. There was a Choctaw Indian I interviewed who said that if you have a dream and don't follow it, then you go into the dark world, and your life becomes meaningless. Jung told of a man who said he was too involved with his business to pay attention to his dreams. "The poor man," Jung said. "He didn't realize that his dreams *are* his business."

To live from a place of resonance and rootedness in the cosmos — *that*, too, is our business. We have gone astray as a culture because we don't listen to that inner voice anymore. The psyche is seen as superfluous. We have succumbed to pure outwardness, a kind of hyperrationality. We are encouraged to live on the surface. One of the first dreams I had that heralded this journey was of a white worm underground, coiling in on itself. When its head reached the center, a blinding light shot out, and a voice said, "You have been living on the outer shell of your being. The way out is the way in."

Another time I had a dream in which I heard the words "God sees the world from everywhere." Over the years I have thought a great deal about this. It seems similar to what Jesus says in the Gospel of Thomas: "Split the wood, and I am there" — this idea that the world is suffused with a kind of divinity. Consciousness peeks out at us from anywhere we care to look. ■