

# SYMBOLIC LIVING: UNDERSTANDING SOUL THROUGH TAROT AND DREAM IMAGERY

by Toni Gilbert

In the last hundred years, our culture has begun to realize value in our nighttime dreams. Freud thought dreams held sexual meaning, Adler believed they represented a struggle for identity, Jung saw archetypes or basic patterns of human behavior that is universal (Taylor, 1992).

Others have seen an existential meaning for dreamers, a concern about death, a psychic or pre-cognitive meaning, and/or multi-sensory information about the health of the mindbodyspirit. For many, dreams hold religious meaning and intuitive spiritual realities.

More recently, research and experimentation has shown that working with Tarot cards will give us similar archetypal information to the dream. At the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, Dr. Culberson presented a dissertation that investigated the relationship between inner dream symbols, received through dream incubation and external waking symbols illustrated through the media of Tarot cards. The hypothesis she set forth and experimentally tested was that the symbols of dreams and Tarot are archetypally connected. They come from the same unconscious realm, and therefore, the symbols of both an incubated dream and a focused Tarot spread for a given individual, at a given point in time, will reflect the same themes, issues and content (Gilbert, 2004). After many years of study, I find this to be true.

Physiologically, according to dream research, our dreams are, in fact, part of an innate biological rhythm of a cycle; they ebb and flow throughout our sleep like waves upon the shore. Our central nervous system undergoes activation every ninety minutes or so while we sleep.

During sleep the body undergoes several changes; brain

waves slow down, breathing becomes more regular, heart rate lowers and steadies, body temperature falls, and large muscles relax. These changes continue through four stages of progressively deeper sleep.

Psychologically, the archetypal dream images are thought to come from a level of consciousness named by Sigmund Freud as the unconscious mind. Before Freud, mystics of antiquity described the attributes of this same consciousness and called it soul. The soul, or unconscious mind, always speaks to us in symbolic thoughts and images.

Any way you want to look at it this level of consciousness is a universe of energies, forces, forms of intelligence and distinct personalities that live within us. It is a larger realm than we can realize, one that has a complete life of its own running parallel to the ordinary life we live. This place in us is the source of much of our thought, feeling and behavior. It influences us in ways that are all the more powerful because it is unconscious (Johnson, 1986). Two examples of the

unconscious working in your life might be:  
1. A quick intuitive insight comes to you about an issue you have been struggling with.  
2. Imagery of plans and visions suddenly popping into your imagination.  
This universe of energies is there to serve and inspire us as we go about our lives. The information and images are a part of who we are... Whatever that is in its totality.

Working with dreams and Tarot art images help the questioner to contact the unconscious mind with its unrecognized emotions and subtle sensations. The unconscious mind holds symbolic information about what the bodymind is experiencing during our life's challenges.

Both tools teach clients how to contact the curative and wise powers within our minds to find creative solutions to difficulties and assess progress in personal development and healing.

In working with my own and other people's dreams and art images, I find that the unconscious mind (or soul) has a dynamic relationship with the conscious personality. It reflects and validates our waking reality when we are whole and centered, and compensates and corrects when the personality becomes too one sided. One who has learned to work with the psychology of symbolic thought is able to take some degree of control over his or her spiritual growth and psychological health. Simply stated, one does this by learning to observe the archetypes operating during the emotional and physical events in life.



Learning to be an archetypal observer makes living much easier.

In my transpersonal counseling practice, I recommend that clients accept their dreams, and any insights that occur during a Tarot session, as spiritual gifts that come from a deeper more authentic part of themselves. Symbolically, dreams and art images hold information that can help a person get in touch with and express emotions they weren't fully aware of; discover meaning in past experiences; receive guidance for future and present actions; evaluate current health conditions; and learn to enjoy life at deeper levels of the self.

### Using Tarot Cards with Nighttime Dreams

There are a number of ways to use Tarot in combination with dream work. I will discuss two ways that you can use these esoteric tools to deepen your understanding of a current life challenge.

1. List the symbols in a "current" nighttime dream. Shuffle the cards as you keep one of the dream symbols in mind. As you shuffle, imagining the dream image will bring up the same archetypal energies as the dream. Synchronistically, the card drawn will give you more information about that particular symbol.

Keep throwing a card for each symbol until you have garnered the information you need to receive the insights of the dream and you "feel" done.

2. Close your eyes. Meditate upon your dream, visualizing and becoming centered in your dream. With your eyes still closed, when you "feel" ready, shuffle the cards. Then place the cards in any predetermined layout. Using a dream technique,

read the cards as if they were a dream. This exercise will give you a broader understanding of the nighttime dream and the current life challenge.

The meditative discipline required in working symbolically can lead to increasingly clear awareness of our subtle experiences both asleep and awake. If you take the time to contemplate and understand the archetypes operating in your life, you will find guidance, illumination, and attitudes for developing the conscious part of yourself. By learning to express a deeper part of yourself, you will not only learn how much you have in common with others but also increasingly realize your own uniqueness.

Lastly, it is important to keep in mind that the full growth producing potential of working symbolically will not be realized unless your insights are followed by conscious and sustained effort towards personal growth.

### References

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*Card Images from the Osho Zen Tarot*

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