

Part One: A Personal History of Dreaming Bears

Why do they come to us, the animals?

What do they want, inhabiting our dreams?

~ James Hillman [1]

Chapter One: The Dog in the Basement

In the beginning, before the bear, is the big white dog. She sits upon a pillow-bed in the basement of my being. Welcomer, protector, teacher, friend. She is the first clue, the key image, the guardian at the entrance to my personal history of dreaming.

Perhaps you are wondering why a person dreams with polar bears or writes a book about it. Was she called? Was it Polar Bear who sent the invitation to dream? Were there clues in the dreamer's life along the way? How did it begin?

When we begin to engage our dreams in meaningful ways, we soon find ourselves traveling through a multiplicity of worlds. It can be challenging to translate experiences from one world to another, to convey subtleties of contextual meaning across different arenas, through different modes of interpreting reality. As we trudge along, we find ourselves wearing different hats: scientist and artist, detective and intuitive, observer and participant. We need patience and persistence — perceptiveness, too. The journey may captivate, and soon we're frequent fliers along the cross-cultural continuum of

deeper knowing. We become adventurers, exploring the psyche, mapping secret passageways, charting unknown bridges and wormholes within the multiverse.

To begin, however, a foundation is helpful. While this is not a book about cataloging or analyzing dreams, it is based on the idea that some familiarity with how we relate to our dreams is both valuable and necessary. How do we translate the unique symbols and images that appear in our inner theatre? How do we find deeper meaning in what initially seems to be *just a dream*? How does each dream fit within the history of our dreaming life? How may we recall and retain these stories in waking consciousness so that they speak to us — and so that we, in response, may speak to them? Indeed, as when visiting any foreign country, it's useful to learn the language and customs.

What follows in Part One are the significant dreams I've had about bears. I share these for two reasons. First and most obvious: they answer how my polar bear dreaming began. It has been fascinating for me to gather and reclaim the dreams that appear to signify an ongoing connection with polar bears. Though this was not apparent for much of my life.

Second, the dreams serve as examples through which we can try different dream decoding techniques. It's wise to be versatile. It's smart to have a large box of dream tools, for each dream is unique. An approach that helps us one time may not be appropriate another. No one way is advocated here, no four secret steps to success. Rather, we'll try on different styles to discover what works best for each dream, and

consider varied ways to make meaningful connections. The following dreams are held, turned over and inside out, pondered, examined and questioned in this spirit of playful exploration. Some views offer basic observations; others are more arcane. Some may speak to you, others not. Perhaps certain seeds will remain dormant within you for a time until their magic is needed, to help you in your dreams.

In the end, when I finally met the polar bear heart to heart, mind to mind, none of this mattered. We entered a dream relationship in a completely different way. However, I don't know if this would have happened without giving a lot of attention to my dreams — recording them, sharing them, puzzling and playing and wondering about them. The incubation period was necessary. Part Two of this book takes us into a very different world. Before we venture there, however, let us get to know the dreamworld territory. It's good to be prepared. Let us begin...

The First Dream

The first dream I can remember occurred when I was two years old. Most likely the distinction between dreaming and waking hadn't yet lodged in place, and that's why it didn't seem like a dream at all, but a perfectly real event:

My parents and I go to visit some neighbors, a man and a woman. They don't have children, but the woman tells me that I can go play with the dogs in the basement. As the grown-ups walk into the living room, I climb down the basement stairs, step by step, alone.

At the bottom of the stairs is an open room, and in the middle of the room is a big, white dog lying on a pillow bed. She smiles, welcoming me, and I go to lie beside her, my head near her belly. I close my eyes. When I open them, there are two more white dogs, one on either side of me. They are smaller than the first dog, but a bit bigger than me. I snuggle between the three dogs, feeling their soft fur, smelling their warm, doggy skin, and I am very happy.

My parents call to me from halfway down the basement stairs. They tell me it is time to go home. "Or would you rather stay with the dogs?" they ask. I consider this and tell them I will stay, that I would like to live with the dogs in the basement. They laugh, as do the neighbors. Then my mother comes down the stairs, takes my hand, and leads me home.

Several times after this event, I asked my parents if I could visit the big white dogs. I wanted to see them again, to lay with them on the pillow-bed. But my parents shook their heads. They did not understand my question. Eventually I stopped asking and the incident was forgotten. Many years later, as a teenager, I remembered the dogs.

Curious about this small mystery from my past, I asked my mother about the memory. She could not recall any childless neighbors with big white dogs. Even if there had been, she added, did I really think she would have allowed a 2-year-old to go alone into a basement full of dogs? "It must have been a dream."

What Does it Mean?

When I review the history of my dream life, it is the big white dog in the basement that seems the start of everything. She is a forerunner. Since that first dream, she has appeared in different ways, in other situations. Sometimes she wears other furry disguises: a white coyote, a white fox, a white horse, a big white bear. She has also showed up in my waking life, most often assuming the form of a white dog.

Although this dream may not be my first dream, it is my first remembered dream. I have recalled it again and again over the years. In this way, it has become a personal myth — a dream of a dream. It glows softly with a warm patina, a cherished memory from my childhood. And this, too, has become part of the dream.

When I now look at this dream in a symbolic way, I first notice its structure. The child is separated from her parents, sent underground where she interacts with big white animals, and later retrieved by her human family and returned to the world above ground. The progression of the dream brings to mind the three stages of a rite of passage: separation (a moving away from the world we know), transition or liminality (an adventure in the 'in-between' often marked by ambiguous categories and unusual experiences) , and reincorporation (a return to the world, marked by change). This dream holds all three elements.

Leaving home with her parents, the dreamer is separated from them, sent away to a room beneath the surface. She leaves what is known — her home, her parents — for

the unknown: the neighbor's home, their basement. Although the idea of playing with dogs is enticing, the dreamer must venture away from her family to reach the underground room, alone.

The descent into the basement marks the beginning of transition. It's classic: down, down the dreamer goes. At the bottom, she meets a big white dog, a welcoming representative of the animal world. Basic distinctions are apparent here: the human family is above, in the 'living' room; the dreamer is underground, where the animals dwell. Transitional phases are often marked by ambiguity and the merging of categories. The dog smiles at the child as a human might do; the child lays with the dogs in a heap, cuddling as a pup might do. The blending of boundaries between human and animal communing on the pillow bed seems natural here — so natural that the dreamer wants to stay, to live with the family of dogs.

In the third phase, reincorporation, the dreamer is called to return to her human family. But she is also offered a choice: to stay with the dogs in the basement. When the dreamer chooses to stay, there is laughter. This is telling. There is often something that happens in the liminal phase — a wounding, a mark, a symbolic gesture — that separates 'before' from 'after'. Perhaps the laughter causes the child to feel humiliation; she is laughed at for choosing what cannot be in the 'real' world. Perhaps the adults laugh because they are uncomfortable with the child's choice to live with animals rather than humans, something conventional reality will not allow. No matter why, the choice and the laughter signal a change. The dreamer has declared her preference and returns

to her parents not the same child who went down the basement stairs. She now carries a secret, a mystery that has yet to unfold. She has seen something — *felt* something — with the dogs that the grownups have not, and has been changed in the process.

The dream guides the dreamer from what is known (family, humans, neighbors) to what is unknown (basement, dogs), and back again. Through the process, the dreamer is transformed. She has been offered a gift that the above-ground people do not understand (or remember).

In some ways, every dream is a potential rite of passage. We move from the world we know while waking to an inner theater of potentiality. Sleep is our transition, our movement into the basement of our being. We even think of it as going down, as in the phrase *falling asleep*. There, in the inner world, we engage the liminal zone — a place neither here nor there. Not unconsciously asleep, yet not consciously awake, we enter a world of unlimited creation where all things are possible, subject only to the creative rules of the dream. In this sense, dreaming is a liminal state. On waking, we return to where we started: consciously present in our physical body, in a world governed by gravity and other consensual laws, to our unique set of personal circumstances.

Whether we allow ourselves to carry the gift (the secret message or meaning) from the dream and open to change is our choice.

Of course, there are many ways to explore a dream, many avenues that offer different windows through which we can appreciate detailed aspects of the dream. For example,

we might look at each element within a dream, decoding its symbols and the way it represents something about the dreamer.

When considering the basement, we might begin with the idea that it represents a foundation, the base from which we build the house of our personality or conscious self. The contents of the basement may thus represent our subconscious or unconscious elements, the inner or under world of the psyche. Everyone's basement is different, and its appearance may change through time. If we dream of a basement that is shadowy or dirty, it tells us one thing. If it's overcrowded or scary, it tells us something else. In this dream, the basement is large and open, perhaps indicating spaciousness or the absence of categories or clutter within the young dreamer's subconscious.

But there *is* something in the basement: in the middle of the room, a large white dog lying atop a pillow-bed. Clearly, it is the dog that is of importance here, the center of it all. That the dog is big conveys it is something sizable, important, substantial.

That the dog is white holds yet another layer of meaning. White is a color of purity, peace, simplicity or innocence, new beginnings, or even the presence of light. White animals are often rare, and almost always significant in mythology and legend. They are linked to the spirit realm — not hard to see as white is also the color of ghosts and spirits. Sometimes white animals are feared — or revered (often because they are feared). In ancient legends, a white animal is often an intermediary or guide, a being who leads humans to their destiny.

As basic dream symbols, dogs may indicate loyalty, protection, friendship, faithfulness. In this dream, the dog is friendly and relaxed, lying upon a pillow-bed — suggesting rest, comfort, cushioning support or even sleep and dreaming. The dog is welcoming and the dreamer freely approaches the dog to lie down with her upon the pillow bed, head near belly.

This placement is specific and reveals how the dreamer views the dog: open-hearted, trustworthy. Perhaps the pairing of head to belly suggests the coming together of thought to feeling. Or perhaps it hints at how humans sense primarily with their brain and animals with their gut instinct. If we were so inclined, we could also look at chakras here or energetic aspects of the body, and ask why one is brought in touch with the other.

The cohesion of symbols about the great white female dog suggests she is a protector, one who both welcomes and guards the foundation of the dreamer's inner world. Indeed, the dreamer feels comfortable enough to close her eyes. When she opens them, there is the sudden appearance of two additional dogs.

What is this bit of magic? Do the two additional dogs appear so as to emphasize 'dog' in the dream? Why are they there? As I play with dream symbology, it is at this point I notice the motif of pairings and groupings that has been apparent in the dream all along. And here we have yet another way to explore our dreams — and another reason why

it's so helpful to employ a variety of perspectives. As we investigate a dream element by element, we often observe deeper aspects we didn't notice on first reading the dream. Thus we are offered another path, another avenue to explore.

Just for fun, let's look at numbers in this dream since we now notice them. Two, for example, is a significant echo that reflects something about the dreamer, who is aged two and probably just learning her numbers. Returning to the beginning of the dream, we see a trinity: mother, father, child. Three is often a magical number; here it represents a complete family unit. Then we see two parents and two neighbors — a double pair, suggesting partnership, marriage, the duality of male and female. The formation of this double pairing, however, now puts the dreamer alone, the odd one out of this new grouping of five. As the two pairs move into the living room, the 'one' is sent away, downward, to the basement. Is she being abased?

Interestingly, it's in the basement that the dreamer encounters another version of 'one' — the dog. But notice how the dog reflects an entirely different aspect of one: not the odd one out, but the central figure: the *one* who commands attention. Here we see how 'one' can stand for autonomy and leadership; an older, more mature, confident one; one who is self-contained. If we consider the dream a rite of passage, this image of the self-contained one may foreshadow the dreamer's quest for autonomy.

When the dreamer lies beside the dog, there are two. The dreamer closes her eyes and when she opens them sees another set of two. A second instance of double pairing! But

in this case, the pair of dogs are not mates (as with the parents and neighbor adults) but siblings. The two dogs are smaller, younger, more like the dreamer. In this group of four, we have a sense of mother dog and three 'pups' or children. The four lie in a warm, comfortable, safe huddle. The dreamer is no longer the odd one out, but part of a family group.

Then the parents call from half-way down the basement stairs. Why half-way down? What has been halved? Have the parents lost some power or ability so they cannot fully descend? Or perhaps the dreamer has increased in some way from her time in the basement — after all, she was one alone on descending and now is part of four.

Four is three dogs plus the dreamer; four is two parents and two neighbors. One group rests in the basement, one group comes part way down. Interesting how the directional focus is no longer about the one being sent away, but about the adults coming to the basement. Some subtle power has shifted.

To end, the mother comes down the stairs to take the child home (another pairing: mother and child). The newly formed groups dissolve and return to normal: the dogs remain in the basement, the childless neighbors in their home, the mother, father and child go home. The numbers rebalance into their original format.

Many Paths

Again, there are many ways to interpret, many ways to follow threads of meaning in the mystery of a dream. It is up to the dreamer to sense at deeper levels what fits in her life. Further, what the dream speaks to at one time may change in another. A dream remembered is often a dream changed. And a dream remembered from childhood may age along with us, revealing hidden aspects of itself as we mature.

To open a conversation with our dreams, and to keep the conversation alive and relevant, we must be flexible. We must allow for contradiction and paradox. We must welcome a variety of paths to interpretation and multiple levels of meaning. Thus we start to ask ourselves all sorts of wild questions as a means of inviting input from different angles and directions. For example, we might consider another perspective — not from the dreamer, but from the dog's point of view. What does the dog want of the child? Why does the big white dog smile at the dreamer and invite her to rest beside her? Why does the dog visit the dream? Who is the big white dog, really?

While writing this book I spent a good amount of time reviewing a large stack of old dream journals. Obviously, I did not record this dream when I was two, but the significance of the dream has stayed with me. I found I had written about it numerous times, in different journals, as if trying to recall it at different stages of my life. One description of the big white dog read: *She has alert black eyes; small rounded ears atop her head; a long, squarish snout with a large black nose.*

The more I tried to recall exactly what the dogs in the basement looked like, the less doglike they seemed. Round black eyes, curved ears atop the head, a long square snout — could this dog be a forerunner of the great white bear?

I've often felt that bears and dogs share a common resemblance. Their shape, their walk, the compact way they move, the manner in which they sniff the earth and shake water from their bodies. Not all dogs and bears are similar of course, but in my mind there is an energetic link between Bear and Dog.

This observation has some basis in our ancient past. Before any of the eight species of modern bear who now walk our planet, before even the great Cave Bear from which all of these species evolved, there was *Ursavus elmensis*, the dawn bear. Short-legged and well-furred, she was about the size of a terrier, with characteristics that were a blend of modern dog and bear.

When I review the history of my dreams, I notice a recurring pattern in which dogs precede bears. Before the polar bear dreams, there was the dog called Little High Top. And only when I remember Little High Top does the professor in the airplane hand me the invitation to dream with polar bears.

As I look back, I see the big white dog in the basement. She is watching, smiling, welcoming me to the pillow bed of dreams. Great white dog and dream guide, she is a forebear — and perhaps instigator — of all that happens next.