

# Children's Dreams: an exploration of Jung's concept of big dreams

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**ABSTRACT** *Since ancient times, humankind has recognised that some dreams are different from the majority, and that they can possess spiritual qualities. Jung adopted the term 'big dreams,' to describe them. This paper proposes that Jung's theoretical concept of big dreams can be applied to children's dreams, through the application of an analysis scheme that is derived from his theory. The article describes Jung's understanding of the notion, and translates it into criteria that can be applied to empirical data that has been obtained from children about the content of a dream, and their understanding of it. Seven big dreams are analysed, illustrating how the children's experiences relate to Jungian thinking. The paper concludes that his theory, despite some limitations, is relevant for a limited type of children's dream in contemporary western society.*

## **Dreams with a Difference**

The human race, the world over, has long recognised that not all dreams are simply a mixture of images and memories from our waking lives. We have long known that not all dreams fade from our mind as quickly as they entered it, that some of our dreams are 'different'. These may come rarely but when they do, they bring with them instinctive feelings of significance, arousing our suspicions that there is something more to these nightly journeys than first meets the eye. The content of these dreams may remain in our memory for the rest of our life. These are 'big' dreams, dreams that, as Carl Jung observed, 'stand out for years like spiritual landmarks, even though they may never be quite understood,' (Jung, 1946, p. 117); these are dreams that are the 'richest jewel in the treasure house of psychic experience' (Jung, 1948, p. 290).

The recognition that some dreams are unusual dates back to ancient civilisations. Such dreams were historically linked to religion, with people throughout the world believing that the gods could bring messages to them in their dreams. Such a belief persists today in some African churches (see Charsley, 1973; Curley, 1992), and with some children in contemporary western society (see Coles, 1990; Adams, 2002). In addition to dreams related to religion, Hay and Nye's (1998) interviews with children about their spiritual lives ( $n = 38$ ) showed that over one third of the sample referred to dreams to express their awareness of the spiritual.

This paper explores the possible application of Jung's theory of big dreams to data on children's dream reports, and their understanding of the dream. In order to do this, I will first provide an outline of Jung's conceptual understanding of big dreams. From this, I will devise an analysis scheme that can be applied to children's dream data. I will subsequently apply it to a sample of dreams, which will enable an exploration of how some of them might be classified in this way.

This paper is drawn from work on a wider, multi-faith, doctoral study that explores children's experience and understanding of their dreams about God, and/or dreams that they believe God/Allah has sent. The historical association between significant dreams and religion supports the focus on divine dreams in this study. Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge that a dream does not have to be believed to have a divine source, nor to be about God, in order to be classified as 'big.' Similarly, as Bulkeley (1999) argues, a dream does not have to contain conventional religious imagery, nor be dreamt by a religious person, in order for it to possess spiritual qualities.

### **Jung's Concept of Big Dreams**

Jung borrowed the term 'big dreams' from the Elgoni tribes of central Africa, who differentiated between them and ordinary dreams (Jung, 1935, 1948). Jung (1935) defined them as dreams that are characterised by having left an instinctive feeling of significance in the dreamer. The dreams often have a numinous quality (Jung, 1936, 1939) and can contain strange or beautiful imagery, wisdom or horror (Jung, 1946). One of the key features is that they, unlike the majority of dreams, are often remembered for a lifetime (Jung, 1948). Jung also proposed that they could occur during psychologically important circumstances. He defined these as times in which tribes would have seen it necessary to perform religious or magical rites in order to achieve a favourable outcome to a situation (Jung, 1939). These include situations in which the dreamer faces mental or spiritual difficulties (Jung, 1933). Jung also included the appearance of archetypes as a common feature of big dreams (Jung, 1939, 1946, 1948). He perceived an archetype to be a pre-existent form, that is hereditary and thus often unknown to the individual's conscious mind (Jung, 1936). They can be found repeatedly in myths and religions worldwide, throughout history (Jung, 1933).

### **From Theory to Practice: devising an analysis scheme**

Having outlined Jung's understanding of big dreams, it is necessary to devise a scheme that can be applied to children's dream reports. As this is primarily focussed upon dreams about or from God, further study would be required in order to establish whether or not it could be applied to children's dreams related to other content. The fact that Jung's work on big dreams was predominantly related to adults' accounts, and that this is focussed on 10 to 12 year olds' reports, makes it necessary to adapt some aspects of his dream characteristics, particularly that related

to remembering the dream for a lifetime. I will expand upon this in the relevant sections.

The essential, and defining, quality of a big dream is that it leaves a feeling of significance in the dreamer. Thus, indicators of significance need to be identified in the children's comments about their dreams. However, to empirically define significance is a complex task. What is meaningful to one person is not to another, and this hinders the provision of a list of objective indicators. For example, two children might have a dream that foretold a future event in their lives. For one, this might impact upon them, and they might have experienced feelings of wonder that a dream could perform such a feat. The second child might respond differently, perceiving it simply as a coincidence, and dismissing it from their mind. Similarly, identifying spiritual aspects of any significance to the dream is impeded by the elusiveness of a definition of spirituality. Thus in identifying this aspect of the dream, a subjective approach is necessary. Some indicators will arise from the children's comments. In describing their response to the dream, they might refer to; heightened emotion, feelings of awe and wonder or transcendence, reflection upon the purpose, meaning, or source of their dream, or subsequent changes in thinking or behaviour. However, this is not an exhaustive list and serves only as a guide. This element of significance is essential for the definition.

I defined a further four criteria. Any two or more of these four are necessary for the definition in addition to the first element, that of significance. It was not essential for all four to be evident for two reasons; firstly, because Jung described these features as being often, but not necessarily, related to big dreams. Secondly, because there are inherent difficulties in applying some of them to children's dreams, as I will outline.

The second characteristic to be identified is the length of time that the dream has been remembered. Jung's proposal that these dreams are often remembered for a lifetime was based on his work with adults, who often reported dreams to him that had occurred during their childhood. Thus an adult may have remembered their big dream for a period of forty years or more. This characteristic needs to be adapted for work with children's dreams, given that they have not had the life-span of the adult; dream researchers have illustrated that the majority of people forget their dreams soon after they have experienced them, with only a small minority remaining in their memory. When an individual is still able to recall a dream after a period of time, it is for a specific reason, possibly because it was particularly vivid, frightening, or unusual in content. For what period of time does a child need to have remembered a dream in order for it to qualify as a big dream? One that was dreamt only two weeks prior to recounting it to the researcher may, in time, prove to be particularly memorable and may be retained into adulthood. This, however, can only be a speculative assumption. Researchers who investigate dream content usually label one that has been remembered for six months or longer as a 'memorable' one, in contrast to 'typical' dreams that are indicative of the subject's usual dream content (Saline, 1999). This can provide a guideline in identifying a memorable dream given that we cannot predict whether or not the child will remember it for a lifetime.

The third criterion relates to Jung's assertion that the dream may have occurred at a time of psychological importance. The children were asked about any circumstances they referred to in the dream report in order to see whether or not it might indicate a psychologically important event at the time of the dream. However, where this might have caused distress, for example after reporting a dream about a person who had recently died, I did not question them on ethical grounds.

The fourth category explores the possible numinous qualities of the dream. As the Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church states, Otto coined the term 'numinous' as that which is experienced in religion as 'holy,' including feelings of awe and religious fascination (2000). The Concise Oxford English Dictionary defines the term as relating to 'a strong religious or spiritual quality' (2001). In this study the concept is particularly relevant given that the only dream reports that were sought were those that were related to God. However it is important to state that a dream about God does not necessarily have numinous qualities. For example, a child may see an image in their dream that they identify as God but that may merely be, in their judgement, a superficial image to which they do not attach any importance, nor respond to with any emotion. Conversely, children may also have dreams, which contain numinous experiences but cannot be classified as dreams about or from God; these latter dreams were not included in this study, thus placing limitations on this work. However, Jung (1946) also referred to dream imagery that was strange or unusual compared to most dreams. This is another factor that can contribute to this aspect of the analysis.

The final concept is that of archetypes. These might include the shadow, anima, animus, the self, wise old man or woman amongst many others. I will return to the limitations of this study with regards to archetypes in the analysis below.

In summary, the analysis scheme for defining a child's dream as 'big' in this study is as follows: The dream must meet three of the following criteria. These must include (i) and any two or more of the remaining four.

- (i) The dream left the child with an instinctive feeling of significance.
- (ii) The dream occurred at a psychologically important time for the child.
- (iii) The dream has been remembered by the child for a 'long time'—more than 6 months.
- (iv) The dream had a 'numinous' quality, and/or strange or beautiful imagery compared to usual dreams.
- (v) The dream contained archetypal symbols.

### **Collecting the Dream Data**

The scheme was applied to data gathered from a sample of Christian children aged 10 to 12. 'Christian' refers to those who reported that their immediate family were Christians. This definition was based on the children's description of their family's beliefs, both in terms of religious practice and/or verbal expression of commitment. The research was conducted in the children's primary schools in Scotland.

Children were given a questionnaire that asked if they had had a dream that either

featured God, or one that they believed had been sent by God. If the children reported a dream they were asked to write down as much about the content as they could remember, which emotions they experienced during the dream and upon the first recall of it, and when they had it.

The questionnaires could not provide sufficient information upon which a classification of 'big' could be made. In order to gather further data about the dream's content and the children's understanding of it, I implemented a follow-up interview as this provided greater depth of findings than other methods of data collection could provide (Cohen *et al.*, 2000). The interviews were semi-structured and were conducted, subject to children's consent, four weeks after they had completed the questionnaires. I interviewed the children individually in order to reduce the possible influence of peers' opinions. The questions sought to confirm, clarify, and/or expand upon the written details, and to seek the children's understanding of their dream. It was thus possible to explore any significance that they might have attached to it.

Prior to analysis, I studied the interview transcripts for evidence of possible fabrications ( $n = 2$ ). I also looked for indications that the child may have been led by the research question. For example, that a child had not previously considered the concept that God could send dreams prior to hearing about my project ( $n = 5$ ). After excluding these dreams, a total of 37 dreams about or from God were included in the Christian sample. In two cases only a questionnaire, and not an interview, was obtained, thus leaving 35 that could be subjected to the big dream analysis. Of these 35, seven (20%) were defined as 'big' dreams according to the criteria above. Three of the children were male and four were female. None of these seven dreams met all of the criteria in the analysis scheme, but all fulfilled point (i) and a minimum of two of the others.

### **Analysis: why are they 'big'?**

In this section I will address each of the seven big dreams in turn. I will outline the content of the dream, and will briefly refer to the significance of the dream, before expanding upon it in the subsequent analysis. The first six dreams also occurred at a time of psychological importance to the dreamer, which will also be described in this section as in each case it was integral to the dream's plot. Children's names have been fictionalised.

David's dream took place just after an argument with his best friend. In the dream David was floating up through the clouds and saw a concrete path. On the path he saw a large 'shining' man, whom he believed to be God, and the friend with whom he had fallen out. The shining figure floated away, leaving David and his friend together. They shook hands and the dream ended. David explained that he thought that the reason they achieved reconciliation in the dream was because the man had left them alone. This gave them the time 'to think,' and the opportunity to resolve their differences 'in quiet instead of making up in crowds, or crowds of children.' Shortly after the dream, the two friends were reunited. David described the dream as 'a special' dream that showed him what God was able to do.

Mark described the time when his dream occurred as one when he was feeling guilty for having done something wrong. The dream was set in a battle in which a green, 'big, gooey monster' was encouraging him to misbehave. He explained that the monster 'was trying to get me to grow apart from God.' Mark felt that the dream had been sent to teach him 'a lesson' about his behaviour. He explained that the result of the dream had been 'to concentrate more on my behaviour ... [*God has*] helped me get along with my brother ... I'm starting to talk to him and play with him more.'

Like Mark's dream, John's was also experienced at a time when he was reflecting upon his own behaviour. John described how he had been fighting with other children, and a few days before the dream he had hurt another boy in a fight. In the dream groups of children were exchanging blows and the child with whom John had previously fought with in waking life stood on him, 'like triumph ... revenge.' John perceived the dream to be a message from God telling him to stop fighting because one day the opponent might be the victor. Like David's dream, one of its consequences was that it led to reconciliation. In this case, John 'made up with the person [*he*] beat up.'

Ann had been experiencing difficulties with her schoolwork and told me that she had been hoping that someone would help her. She believed that God had sent Jesus to visit her in a dream. In it, Jesus appeared in her bedroom and gave her words of reassurance that she could cope with the situation. On waking, this left Ann with a sense that she was being helped. As a result, she 'tried her best' with her work, and her teacher began to praise her for her efforts, which had not happened prior to the dream.

Like Ann, Sarah's dream also occurred at a time when she was anxious about a school-related activity. Sarah was nervous about participating in a cross-country run. The night before the race, she dreamt that she was running the course without difficulty, completed it, and was not last over the finishing line. Sarah interpreted the dream as an indication from God that she had the ability to run the race successfully. The outcome of the dream was that on the day of the event she was less nervous than she had been prior to the dream, and she finished it without being last.

Jane reported having fallen off her bike when she was four years old, which left her so nervous about cycling that she avoided the activity. When she was five years old, she dreamt that she was in her local park standing next to her bike. She heard a voice, which she believed to be God's, 'saying like He would protect me as much as He could.' As a result of the message, she regained her shattered confidence in her ability to ride her bike.

Maria, unlike the other children in this sample, did not refer to an event occurring in her life at the time of her dream. However the dream's content and her interpretations of it, indicate that she might have been concerned about issues of war and peace. Whether this had been a concern of psychological importance is difficult to determine from the data. Her dream was set in the midst of a war with the battleground being divided by a wall. She and other people were in the war zone and then jumped over the wall. This side of the wall was 'nice and peaceful' and they sat down with God in a circle and started praying whilst the battle raged on the

other side. Maria described the dream as 'special,' as one she 'had to remember.' She felt that it might be a prediction of the future that God would be trying to make the world peaceful.

### **Significance: resolving the psychological and spiritual difficulties**

The first six of the children's dreams concur with Jung's theory that big dreams can occur at the time of psychological or spiritual difficulties. Just as Jung (1939) described the ancients invoking the gods or initiating magical rites in order to solve their problems, it is not difficult to imagine these children pondering their dilemmas. Unlike some of the ancients, who deliberately called upon the gods to bring answers to them in their dreams, none of the children mentioned anticipating that they would find a solution in this way. However, that is what appears to have occurred.

Dream researchers from different disciplines generally agree that the majority of our dreams reflect our recent waking concerns and experiences. These include Freud (1900), Jung (1948), Crick and Mitchison (1995), Hobson (1990) and Flanagan (2000). It is thus not surprising that the content of the children's dreams related to events that were current in their lives. However, in order for the dream to resolve or assist with the psychological or spiritual difficulties, it cannot simply re-play the waking events. It has to, in some way, provide help for the dreamer to deal with their problem. How did this happen?

A commonality of the dreams was that all of the children had reflected upon them and found in them a message. In essence, they had independently interpreted their own dreams, finding the 'wisdom' that Jung (1946) referred to in them. For Ann and Jane these solutions had come literally, as spoken messages. For the other children, the messages were symbolic; that is, the dreams contained images that for them were representative of something else. In some cases the symbolism was close to the images. For example, when Maria saw God praying in the peaceful area next to the battle zone, she interpreted it as meaning that God would be trying to bring peace to the world. In other cases the dream images were less literal. For example, Mark interpreted his dream of the monster who was tempting him to behave badly firstly as meaning that the monster was trying to move him away from God, and secondly that this was telling him that he should alter his behaviour.

A key feature of the children's response to their dreams was that this reflection brought with it subsequent changes in their waking lives. Ann, Sarah and Jane all found reassurance in their dreams, reassurance that they could cope with their respective anxieties of difficult school work, cross-country running, and cycling. In each case the result was that they enjoyed newly found success in these activities. Mark and John, who had both been contemplating their behaviour, considered their dreams to be telling them to modify it. As a result, they tried hard to behave in a more positive manner. David's dream gave him 'space' in which he could renew his broken friendship, resulting in their reconciliation. Maria interpreted her dream as a symbolic message that God would try to bring peace to the world. Whether this affected her waking life was not clear from the data.

### **Memorable Dreams with Numinous Qualities**

All of the children were able to give an approximate indication of when they had had their dream. Jane's had taken place furthest back in time, five years before we met. Maria's had occurred between three and four years previously, John's two years, and Mark's and David's ten months ago. Ann said that her dream had occurred approximately three months before, and Sarah's cross-country dream two months before. Sarah also described a second and similar dream that had occurred one year earlier. This had taken place whilst she was anxious about participating in a school swimming gala. She compared the dreams, explaining that she had also been nervous before the swimming event and how the dream had helped to ease her nerves about participating in it.

The religious aspects of these dreams can be split into two categories; those in which a religious figure either appeared or whose presence was indicated, and those in which the children did not see or hear a character, but intuited a divine connection with their dream. In the first category, Ann saw Jesus in her dream, and David and Maria both reported seeing God in their dreams. Although Jane did not observe a religious figure, she heard God's voice. In the second category, Sarah, John and Mark all felt that God had sent them the dream, each being sent for a purpose.

When an individual, particularly a child, attempts to describe an experience that could be termed 'numinous,' words may be inadequate. Ann provided an example of this after calling her dream 'special,' a term also used by David and Maria. When I asked Ann to expand upon her comment that it was a 'special' dream that she 'had to remember,' she could not express the reason in words, explaining that it was a feeling she had. From the visual clues that I obtained during the interview, it was clear that the dream had impacted upon her on a deep level.

Jung (1946) also suggested that big dreams might contain strange or unusual imagery compared to other dreams. Whilst the children did not comment on unconventional imagery specifically, they did state that such religious dreams were rare for them. David identified another unusual quality of his dream, commenting that it had 'lasted the whole night.'

### **Archetypes**

What has become apparent in the analysis to date is that the children had undertaken their own method of dream interpretation. For observers, it is easy to understand how each arrived at their own conclusions, based on the information that they offered about the dream's content and their personal circumstances at the time.

A Jungian analysis of the dream symbols, including those of an archetypal form, would provide a deeper understanding of the dream's conceivable meanings. For example, it is possible that the monster in Mark's dream could be viewed as a representation of the archetypal shadow, appearing as an unknown threatening character. However, Jung (1936) cautioned that the interpretation of big dreams is



fraught with difficulties because the archetypal elements are not concerned with personal experience, but with universal human concerns, having been drawn from the collective unconscious. As he noted, an analysis of the symbolism would demand of the therapist a deep knowledge of the dreamer's circumstances and personality. Jung (1936) further emphasised how it is necessary to carry out a dialectical process in order to integrate archetypal and numinous dream content with the dreamer; tasks that I was unable to undertake in the course of this study. This is therefore an area for further research, to build upon the understanding that we have of how *children* interpret the meaning of their dreams in this study.

### **The Future for Big Dreams**

Given the historical and cross-cultural evidence of the recognition of big dreams, it is reasonable to assume that individuals will continue to occasionally experience them, thus making them a valid focus for further study. There are various possibilities for future research in the application of Jung's theory to dream accounts. Firstly, as this paper is limited to children from a Christian background, there are possibilities for studies with young people from other religions and cultures; I will submit dream data that I am presently gathering on secular children's dreams about and from God, and Muslim children's dreams from Allah, to the same analysis scheme. This will allow for a comparative study of big dreams that are related to the divine across children from different religious/non-religious backgrounds. Secondly, Jung's theory can also be applied to different types of children's dreams, irrespective of their subject content. As spirituality can be defined without reference to religion, it would also be valuable to explore children's understanding of memorable dreams that are not specifically related to religion. Thirdly, Jungian analysts who work with children could undertake explorations into their client's big dreams. Given that they possess personal knowledge about the children's circumstances, a fuller interpretation of their dream's symbolism may be possible. Fourthly, an analysis can be applied to children of different ages in order to trace any differences in the content of memorable dreams and their understanding of them.

In undertaking such studies, future research may gain further insights into how some dreams relate to children's spiritual lives, and how they perceive those dreams. This would result in a wider understanding of the relevance of Jung's theory than this article can offer.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has illustrated that Jung's theory is applicable to some, but by no means all, children's dreams that are related to the divine. It has highlighted that the dreams in this study had similar characteristics. For six of the seven 'big' dreamers, these dreams changed something in their lives. They reflected waking concerns but also went one step further, providing the children with a message that gave them a much-needed solution. The dreams had sufficient importance for the children to contribute to a resolution of their problems or concerns. We do not know whether

these dreams will remain in their memories into adulthood, whether they are or will be the 'most precious jewels' for these children. But we can be sure that the dreams gave them the help that they were seeking at the time when it was needed, thus aiding them on their journey through childhood.

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