
Case report

Toward a role for dreams and images in a spiritual emergence process: a case study

Sobre o papel dos sonhos e imagens no processo de emergência espiritual: um estudo de caso

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Received: 3/23/2009 – Accepted: 6/1/2009

Abstract

Background: Lukoff¹ advanced religious/spiritual problems as conditions that may be the focus of therapy. One such problem/condition has been termed spiritual emergence². **Objectives:** This case study explored the role of dreams and images in spiritual emergence processes. **Methods:** Methodology involved a single case study and a literature review. Sources of data included six cases, reduced to three that exemplified contemporary experiences of spiritual emergence and/or spiritual emergency, and further limited to a single case due to space constraints. Similarities and differences between the case and literature were used in interpreting the role of dreams and dream-like experiences in spiritual emergence processes. Data spanned written, semi-structured interviews, published literature, historical documents, biographical narratives, and content analysis. Analysis included thematic, conceptual, and descriptive methods. Comparison of the case with findings from the literature review helped identify and validate various roles of dreams and images. **Results:** A primary role of dreams and images in spiritual emergence seems to be to act as signs, with secondary roles as providing direction, or at least information. **Discussion:** Implications of the findings are supportably applicable to spiritually emerging populations and to therapy where dream work is used.

Viggiano DB / *Rev Psiq Clín.* 2010;37(4):178-81

Keywords: Dream, spiritual, therapy, case, interview.

Resumo

Contexto: Lukoff¹ afirma que problemas religiosos/espirituais podem ser foco de terapia. Um desses problemas/condições é denominado emergência espiritual [*spiritual emergence*]². **Objetivos:** Este estudo de caso explorou o papel dos sonhos e das imagens nos processos de emergência espiritual. **Métodos:** A metodologia envolve um estudo de caso e uma revisão da literatura. As fontes de dados incluíram seis casos, posteriormente reduzidos a três deles que exemplificam experiências contemporâneas de emergência espiritual [*emergence*] e/ou de emergência espiritual [*emergency*]*, e então limitados a um único caso devido a limitações de espaço. Semelhanças e diferenças entre o caso e a literatura foram utilizadas para interpretar o papel dos sonhos e de experiências oníricas em processos de emergência [*emergence*] espiritual. Os dados incluíram entrevistas escritas semiestruturadas, literatura publicada, documentos históricos, narrativas biográficas e análise de conteúdo. A análise incluiu métodos temáticos, conceituais e descritivos. A comparação do caso com achados da revisão de literatura contribuiu para identificar e validar os vários papéis de sonhos e imagens. **Resultados:** A principal função dos sonhos e das imagens na emergência [*emergence*] espiritual parece agir como sinais, tendo como papéis secundários o fornecimento de orientações ou, pelo menos, de informações. **Discussão:** As implicações dos achados são potencialmente aplicáveis a populações espiritualmente emergentes e a terapias que utilizam a elaboração onírica como instrumento.

Viggiano DB / *Rev Psiq Clín.* 2010;37(4):178-81

Palavras-chave: Sonho, espiritual, terapia, caso, entrevista.

Introduction

Objective and definitions

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of dreams and images in spiritual emergence processes. To clarify these terms, the following definitions are offered:

Dreams and dream-like experiences – this phrase is used to cover involuntary images/narratives produced during sleep, as well as day-dreams, visions, imagery, fantasies, hypnagogic and hypnopompic experiences, lucid dreams, and mental symbology.

Spiritual emergence – this phrase covers spiritual problems often related to practices that “have been observed to induce some distress as part of the process”³. For example, research on the effects of near-death experience (NDE), the spiritual problem that is most researched, “shows that many individuals experience anger, depression, and interpersonal difficulties after the NDE, and therefore could benefit from therapy with a sensitive and knowledgeable clinician”³.

Spiritual emergency – this phrase includes those “crises when the process of growth and change becomes chaotic and overwhelming.

Individuals experiencing such episodes may feel that their sense of identity is breaking down, that their old values no longer hold true, and that the very ground beneath their personal realities is radically shifting. In many cases, new realms of mystical and spiritual experience enter their lives suddenly and dramatically, resulting in fear and confusion. They may feel tremendous anxiety, have difficulty coping with their daily lives, jobs, and relationships, and may even fear for their own sanity”².

Transpersonal experiences – this phrase refers to individual happenings that have the quality of seeming to come from beyond one’s own sense of consciousness, causing one to feel opened up to or connected with something greater than oneself.

Synchronicity – this is a Jungian term referring to meaningful coincidences, or events that are significantly related yet non-causally so.

Brief review of the literature

Spiritual emergence processes have been referred to as “self-transformational crises”, according to Albert⁴. He noted that these

* Autora distingue esses conceitos no texto [NT].

“have been documented as, for instance, *Kundalini awakening* and *shamanic crisis* in the cross-cultural and anthropological literature” (p. iii)⁴, as delimited by their symptomatology. Albert’s⁴ study took a transpersonal and Jungian approach of viewing such crises “as the challenging aspects of developmental processes, where spiritual development, marked by acceptance, purpose, connectedness, and transcendence, was the primary measure of growth” (p. iii)⁴. His results highlighted the “importance of developing people’s (...) sense of awareness (...) as well as accepting the interplay of unitive and destructive forces in the web of existence and therefore in the human experience” (p. iv)⁴. Albert⁴ concluded, “Nosological systems and transpersonal theory can benefit by viewing mental health crises as disintegrative constituents of a greater, potentially integrative developmental process” (p. iv)⁴.

Regarding dreams and spiritual emergence, Ferrier⁵ studied phenomenologically, heuristically, and hermeneutically the spiritual development of seven participants who “experienced numinous dreams, visions, voices, and/or synchronistic events” that led to lifestyle changes and even relocation (p. ii)⁵. The author found that these transformational experiences occurred in midlife, a discovery deemed to be “related to Jung’s individuation process, rites of passage, alchemy, and to the new dispensation”, i.e. the Aquarian age (p. iii)⁵.

While some have argued that dreams simply originate in brain activation during sleep and function as part of the human neurological network of input and output systems⁶, Jungians and Transpersonal psychologists take a more psychospiritual stance. For example, “Psychiatry, the mystical, and the paranormal” is a report from *The Journal of Parapsychology*, by Thalbourne⁷. This article speaks to the potential co-occurrence of spiritual emergence and mental conditions. Specifically, it was “argued that mystical and paranormal experiences are not necessarily pathological, though they may be associated with these disorders and indeed are more prevalent in these disorders. A single underlying factor called transliminality (‘psychological material crossing thresholds into consciousness’) illuminates the observed correlations between mystical, paranormal, manic, and schizotypal experiences” (p. 144)⁷.

Krippner⁸, in his archival study on shamanism, found that neurotheology researchers were able to use brain imaging to show that contemplatives in prayer or meditation can shift their brain activation patterns towards ones associated with experiencing God’s presence or experiencing a sense of unity with the universe. He also implied that part of the role of dreams may have as much to do with the sharing of them, due to the effect of their interpretations, as with the having of them.

Krippner⁸ even noted that certain shamanic techniques share a strong resemblance with modern methods of interpreting dreams. In fact, he observed that shamans often use the dreams of their clients to help diagnose their condition. Moreover, dream interpretation can be considered a requisite shamanic skill, depending on societal norms. Shamanic awakening itself can similarly depend on the initiate’s dreams and dream-like experiences, including vivid daydreaming and lucid dreaming. In fact, lucid dreams were found to be a source of shamanic information.

According to Greyson⁹ in his comprehensive literature review, near-death experiences (NDEs) have been considered to lead to spontaneous spiritual transformation, as measured by an increased sense of spiritual awakening, purpose, or even crisis. Greyson⁹ leaned on Lukoff’s 1998¹ concept of the spiritual problem, which is now listed in the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition*¹⁰ (DSM-IV), which in turn helps mediate against misunderstanding spiritual phenomena as a mental disorder.

Such phenomena fit under the rubric of definitions offered in this article for spiritual emergence processes, although NDEs were not found in Greyson’s 2007⁹ review to be dream-like experiences. Greyson⁹ did find, however, that repeated nightmares of the NDE are often part of the sequelae to that event, and that people who experienced an NDE were suggested by some studies to be those who more frequently recall their dreams. Greyson⁹ pointed out in his review

that therapeutic response to an NDE can tremendously influence whether the event is accepted by the patient, becoming a catalyst for psycho-spiritual growth, or whether it is shunned as bizarre and to be hidden, lest the patient be deemed mentally ill.

Method

IRB approval

The Institutional Review Board at Saybrook University in San Francisco, CA, approved this study, certifying that safeguards were applied to mitigate potential risks to human participants. Safeguards included a formal, written and signed consent form for each participant, certifying full information about the study had been disclosed prior to a decision to participate, with the caveat that participants could drop out at any time for any reason, and that referrals would be made for therapy regarding any adverse consequences of participants. Participants were additionally entitled to a summary of the report, and there were signed letters of permission/waivers of confidentiality for any participants who did not wish to remain anonymous based on their own reasons.

Sampling process – How cases were selected for interview

Sources of interview participants included half a dozen cases reduced to three whose cases exemplified contemporary experiences of the phenomena known today as spiritual emergence and spiritual emergency. In the final article, these were further limited to a single case, due to space constraints. Participants were interviewed by the author of this study using the following instrumentation.

Instruments

Semi-structured, electronic interviews were used, asking first two closed-ended questions for checking against selection criteria, namely: “Do you feel you have been through a spiritual emergence process in your lifetime?” and if so, “Do you feel that dreams and/or visions (including daydreams, lucid dreams, hypnopompic or hypnagogic experiences) played a role in your spiritual emergence process?” Those queries were followed by the open-ended questions, “What role do you feel these dreams and visions played in your spiritual emergence process?”, “What examples of this life experience can you share?” Follow-up questions were based on the answers to the above, and asked as needed.

Interview registration and analysis procedures

The discovery of similarities and differences between the case and the literature was used for interpreting the role of dream-like experiences in spiritual emergence processes. The nature of the data spanned written, semi-structured interviews, published literature, historical documents, biographical narratives, and content analysis. Specific methods of analysis included thematic, conceptual, descriptive, and graphic.

The researcher mined the sources for cases that fit the criteria of representing¹¹ spiritual emergence processes and the use of dreams or visions. Contact was made with potential participants, and a consent form, waiver, and questionnaire were sent. The project included an analysis of various parts of the narratives collected, a comparison with other narratives, and finally a comparison against an analysis of the literature, culling relevant themes and meanings.

Data analysis

The nature of the data spanned published literature, historical documents, and biographical, narrative interviews. The data were analyzed in a case study format using criterion-based measures for triangulation. Case description and context were as follows: The researcher

examined various phenomena potentially including REM dreams, daydreams, lucid dreams, hypnagogic/hypnopompic experiences, and visions, leaning on the work of Lukoff¹² and Grof¹³ for analysis of the Visionary Spiritual Experiences (VSEs) commonly known as spiritual emergency and spiritual emergence, depending on their severity. The criteria set forth by these researchers helped in terms of data reduction.

Variables in the case were examined against the literature for emerging patterns about the possible role of dreams and dream-like experiences in spiritual emergence processes. The Visionary Spiritual Experiences (VSE) criteria of D. Lukoff¹² helped identify spiritual emergence processes. To differentiate these further from chronic psychosis or acute drug effects, there was major reliance on the DSM-IV criteria¹⁰. A comparison with findings from Viggiano's¹⁴ hermeneutic study helped identify and validate various roles of dreams and visions to provide reduction and triangulation of the data. The model is delineated below.

Analyzing and comparing experiences in the spiritual emergence context, the researcher used various criteria from Lukoff¹² and Grof¹³ to triangulate and validate the data, as well as increasing reliability¹⁵. Literature and case analyses provided indices of comparison for summarizing the data.

For the purposes of this project, a dream or vision was considered as connected with its spiritual emergence process if the participant cited it and it matched a comparison with criteria from either Lukoff¹² or Grof and Grof¹³. Specific examples of these could be dreams or dream-like phenomena such as images that were experienced as mystical, unworldly, or sacred in nature, as opposed to ones that focused on processing the remnants of the day.

Case report

Main issues regarding the case

One issue that is important in studying case material is the fact that mysticism and mental illness are not mutually exclusive. They can co-occur and inform each other. Some of the original interviews had to be used as background rather than as case material because the written responses to the queries were too disjointed and stream-of-consciousness style for scientific coherence. Only those respondents who produced the most heuristically valuable material were included as final participants.

Case description – It seems best to let the participant speak for herself and to highlight the descriptions that seem most pertinent to the topic of study. Therefore, the case is described based on snippets from the electronic interview with significant portions underlined by the researcher for further analysis.

A female, American participant coded as Willow wrote of her process, in part:

... spiritual emergence is a process whereby matters of psychology, religion, science, and philosophy all merge into one meaning. ... my dreams have been signposts, weathervanes, symbols to help me along my spiritual path.

I have been through four (4) spiritual emergence processes to date. Each of them was prompted by some major loss in my life. At age 14, after a break-up with a boyfriend, I began turning inward to find answers to emotional pain. I turned to the Bible for those answers. In my early twenties, I turned away from organized religion. Then, at age 30, I began an internal search again for purpose and meaning after facing a job loss. It was during this loss that I turned to God and specifically asked to be used as a vessel to help people in some way. My third spiritual emergence came in my late 30s upon the break-up with a boyfriend. I began reading everything I could get my hands on with respect to Eastern and Western religion and philosophy, making comparisons between them in an attempt to find what I thought was "Truth". The last spiritual emergence is what I consider to be the deepest and most significant in every way. At age 43, my boyfriend committed suicide and, while my grief lessened after 5 years, my desire to be of service in some humanitarian

capacity grew. Additionally, I now feel I understand the death and resurrection event within Christianity on both a psychological and spiritual level whereby the ego "dies", in a sense, or plunges into a psychological "hell". It could also be compared to what St. John of the Cross refers to as the "dark night of the Soul". In Jungian terms, the ego-Self axis is shortened and the ego moves closer to the Self. From an Advaita Vedanta standpoint, the mind falls into the heart where Brahman is. From a Buddhist perspective, the bodhicitta of the bodhisattva emerges where compassion for all sentient beings blossoms. From a Christian Gnostic perspective, the Pleroma, or fullness, of the Godhead manifests. These are variant perspectives of the identical phenomena, in my opinion. Subjectively, it is largely the same experience, and the outcome is a manifestation of a higher, more transcendent, and altruistic consciousness. After this 4th emergence, I now understand the marriage between psychology and spirituality where the psyche transcends to greet Spirit. While there are multiple dimensions to Spirit, the most obvious one is the manifestation of the spiritual virtues talked about in all major religions such as gentleness, kindness, compassion, patience, tolerance, benevolence, love etc.

I do feel dreams have played a role in my spiritual emergence process. Specifically, I have journaled my dreams since 1994. And since 1997, I have had *hundreds of dreams of the same male*. Initially, I dismissed them because this male is famous. However, after I had a dozen or so dreams about being in an auditorium setting with him and then those dreams manifesting on the physical plane, I began taking my dreams very seriously. Many I use as signposts and symbols; some are portentous. I also have had past life dreams. *Now, I may end up actually meeting this famous male that has been in my dreams since 1997. If I do, it will, ironically, revolve around a specific multi-million dollar fundraiser that will help millions of underprivileged/oppressed people.* So that will be clear evidence to me that my dreams play a role in guiding me on my spiritual path.

If I recall correctly, the few tactile dreams that I have had were around highly sensual/sexual actions. *These dreams were not solely sexual, rather had a very deep and loving component to them.*

Discussion

It is worth remembering in the following discussion that the distinction between spiritual emergency and spiritual emergence lies mainly in the level of crisis involved in the process, and that the distinction between a spiritual problem and a mental disorder with hyper-religiosity lies chiefly in the origin, prognosis, and outcome of the condition. Additionally, the case in this study is well versed in transpersonal language, using the phrases and working definitions provided in the Introduction. Thus, this case is highly selective in that it represents a very sophisticated participant. This limits the generalizability of the study even beyond what is customary for single case studies. On the other hand, spiritually emergent patients are a special population in the first place.

Comparison of case to criteria – The case of Willow fits the criteria for spiritual emergence¹ regarding her first three phases related to loss and the inspiration to serve others. It also fits the criteria for spiritual emergency when the final crisis led to deep depression followed by utter dedication to a lifetime of service.

Case correlation with literature and alternative analyses – It is important to note "The phenomenon of Self-transformation is termed the process of individuation (Jung, 1959), spiritual psychosynthesis or Self-realization (Assagioli, 1965), and spiritual emergence (Grof and Grof, 1989)"¹⁶. Additionally, Lukoff¹² noted that the scientific literature on health care in the PsycInfo and PubMed databases report six types of anomalous phenomena that Lukoff¹² calls Visionary Spiritual Experiences (VSEs). The case presented here can be viewed from any of the above standpoints equally well. For example, among the varieties of VSEs, Willow's case can fit into that of mystical experiences and possibly even psychic ones, if she ends up having an audience with her dream figure.

Comparison of case to hermeneutic evidence – Bulkeley¹⁷ noted that a role of dreams is to provide a wellspring for spiritual speculations, thoughts and reflections. Their role includes challenging dreamers to refine, deepen, and expand their grasp of the sacred. Bulkeley¹⁷ noted that examining and exploring dreams as “spiritual revelations” is a hermeneutic effort, with hermeneutics defined as “the discipline concerned with the rules and principles guiding our interpretations of religious, artistic, and historical texts” (p. 198)¹⁷.

Moreover, Bulkeley¹⁷ added that *hermeneutics* is named after Hermes, whose role included carrying messages – even as dreams – from his world of the gods to the world of humans. “A hermeneutics of dreams, then, involves the attempt to interpret and understand dreams as possible messages from the gods, as possible revelations of the sacred”, Bulkeley¹⁷ wrote (p. 198-199)¹⁷.

Thus, it was very appropriate to use hermeneutics to study of the role of dreams and visions in spiritual emergence processes. A hermeneutic review of the literature offered interpretations of multiple case studies including reported dreams and visions identified as spiritual in content. Evidence from Viggiano's¹⁴ hermeneutic study suggested that one role of dreams and dream-like experiences in spiritual emergence processes might be to make the dreamer more virtuous. This is consistent with the case of Willow, who is currently working on a project to raise millions in funds for an international, good cause – one that the dreamer holds sacred.

Dreams versus dream-like experiences – Only one interview participant focused heavily on visionary images, and this was not the case chosen for final write-up. This differs from the hermeneutic evidence from Viggiano¹⁴, which included visions more on a par with dreams.

Data summary of the thematic analysis

Willow noted four, distinct spiritual emergence processes. The role of dreams and dream-like experiences in these processes was likened to that of signposts, weathervanes, and symbols to help her along her spiritual path. This is a frequently noted way of viewing dreams, especially in Jungian terms, and seems to fit with Willow's spirituality. She also noted multiple periods of emergence/emergency and delineated different levels of spiritual emergence processes. Willow's case involved more loss and depression compared to the other interviews. Perhaps in compensation, the male image emerged frequently. Her case involved some tactile dreams of sexual union, symbolizing a form of wholeness, according to Jung's theories.

Across-case analysis – While the spiritual emergence processes varied in both quantitative and qualitative measures, the role of dreams and dream-like experiences within the final three interview participants had striking similarities. The role of acting as signs showed up three times, while that of indications, information, and direction all appeared twice among the top three participants' cases (though only one was written up due to space constraints). The synonym for indication is also sign. Thus, a primary role seems to be to

act as signs, with secondary roles as providing direction, or at least information. The relationship among these roles is clear and strong.

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