

# The Transformative Power of Dreams: A Critical Perspective

## Book Review of “*The Spirituality of Dreaming: Unlocking the Wisdom of Our Sleeping Selves*” by Kelly Bulkeley in 2023

Ayush Srivastava

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, Mumbai, India

*Summary.* In this review, I will examine the importance of *The Spirituality of Dreaming* as an interesting examination of dreams for spiritual and personal transformation. Bulkeley describes his personal narratives and mixed approach to present dreaming as a transformative practice for individuals. I found the book to be far-reaching in discussions surrounding dream consciousness and spirituality.

*Keywords:* Consciousness, Dreaming, Nightmares, Personal Growth, Spirituality, Transformation

*“Dreams, and especially nightmares, can be powerful sources of ‘irritating’ stimuli, poking us in parts of our personalities we have neglected or avoided and prompting us to move toward greater awareness, integration, and growth. Toward a life of greater spirit. (p. 16)”*

In *The Spirituality of Dreaming: Unlocking the Wisdom of Our Sleeping Selves* (2023), Kelly Bulkeley embarks on a personal and philosophical journey in the world of dreams.

He spans his life experiences into a more universal look into the spiritual and philosophical dimensions of dreaming. This book serves as a memoir and guides us on how to develop our use of dreams as a spiritual practice. In this review, I will examine Bulkeley’s approach and draw connections with other pertinent literature about dreams and spirituality. Moreover, I will discuss the book’s contribution to contemporary debates on the intersection of philosophy, religion, and personal growth.

The book begins with an autobiographical sketch of the author’s early life in a California suburb and how unexpected events led him to study dreams when no one would have thought that he would. The approach is engaging; readers have a place from which to come into the otherwise somewhat complex subject matter. In this regard, the author’s remembrance of childhood in sports and competitions, counterpointed against his later interest in horror movies and nightmares, is one perfect example of how our interests and passions can sometimes develop in entirely unpredictable ways. That autobiographical arc is across so many other

genre pieces, too, such as Carl Jung’s *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1963), in which Jung similarly weaves his personal experiences with his professional insight into the nature of the psyche.

The author’s shift from childhood to adolescence, now haunted by stark, nightmarish visions, provided a background for his lifelong fascination with dreams. In describing these nightmares and then going on to explain their meanings, one is strongly reminded of the work of Ernest Hartmann, especially *The Nightmare: The Psychology and Biology of Terrifying Dreams* (1984), in which Hartmann maintained that nightmares represent windows to the unconscious mind. The author’s decision to start keeping a dream journal and his realization of a dialogue occurring between his conscious and unconscious mind are, in fact, two of the practices prescribed by dream researchers such as Robert Moss in *The Secret History of Dreaming* (2009). In this context, both Hartmann and Moss concur in their argument that by relating to one’s dreams, an individual is able to reach deep personal insights through a process of transformation, something on which Bulkeley also emphasizes and places great significance (2023, pp. 107 & 160-168). In Bulkeley’s words:

*“What’s the best way to interpret dreams? Play with them. What’s the best way to share dreams? Play with them, with others. How should you deal with the disruptive unconscious energies embodied in the archetype of the shadow? Play with them. How can you bring the healing effects of predeath dreams and visions into the waking world? Play with them. What is the most spiritually responsible way to explore lucid dreams? Play with them (p. 160).”*

One of the book’s strengths lies in its exploration of the spiritual dimensions of dreaming across various cultures and periods. The approach adopted by the author, with references to the ‘Bible, ancient Greek mythology, and the philosophies of Hegel and Nietzsche, provides us with a deep understanding of the historical and philosophical contexts within which dreams have been interpreted (pp. 15 & 153).

Corresponding address:

Ayush Srivastava, Ph.D. Scholar (Philosophy), Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, Mumbai, India- 400076.  
Email: ayush.srivastava@iitb.ac.in

Submitted for publication: May 2025

Accepted for publication: May 2025

DOI: 10.11588/ijodr.2025.2.110311

This is reminiscent of Bulkeley's works in *Dreaming in the World's Religions* (2008), where he examines how, across world religious traditions, dreams have been conceived and put into practice. In both works, Bulkeley underscores that, across cultures, dreaming has been a universal spiritual practice, and it is through dreams that a bridge can be reached between the self and the divine (for more, see, chapter 2). The author contends:

*"We hear of it in the Geist of German philosophers like G. W. F. Hegel and Friedrich Nietzsche, the concept of life as constant dialectical unfolding and self-realization. Spirit, in this sense, can take religious and nonreligious forms. It can manifest in quiet personal contemplation and in large group activities. It reflects a vivid awareness of the primal forces that animate our existence, drive our growth, and fuel a process of continual self-transcendence (pp. 15-16)."*

However, despite the wide-ranging sources consulted in this work, the book under review is marked by an overall lack of exposure to non-Western theories and views about dreams (chapter 2). For instance, one can reflect upon the great indigenous traditions of dream interpretation explored by Anthony Shafton in *Dream-Singers: The African American Way with Dreams* (2002) or Dream Yoga practices from Tibetan Buddhism, as discussed by Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche in *The Tibetan Yogas of Dream and Sleep* (1998), which have hardly been included (also see Wallace, 2012; Holecek, 2016). Similarly, there are some interpretations of dreams in Indian philosophical schools of Advaita and Yoga (see Thompson, 2015). These omissions narrow the scope of this book and may leave readers who are interested and seeking a more comprehensive understanding of the global dimensions of dreaming.

The author's focus on nightmares as a catalyst that got him interested in dreams is very valuable psychologically to the nature of dreaming. As Bulkeley suggests, nightmares can play the role of "irritating stimuli" that propel or even force self-reflection and personal growth (p. 16). This idea finds support from contemporary research in the area of dream studies. For example, Rosalind Cartwright's work in *Crisis Dreaming: Using Your Dreams to Solve Your Problems* (1992) draws attention to how, in particular, those distressing dreams set an individual on a course through which they can process emotional upsets and gain new perspectives on waking life.

Such an understanding of nightmares as a form of conversation between the conscious and unconscious mind tallies with Carl Jung's (1963) theories, which viewed dreams as a means of communication from the unconscious, providing insights into unresolved conflicts and hidden desires. Jung's idea of the 'shadow,' the dark psyche elements often revealed in dreams, parallels the author's experiences of being chased by some terrifying antagonists. One of the strong themes running through Jungian psychology is that confrontation with these shadowy elements in dreams can result in greater self-awareness and integration, a point of view that the author very skilfully interweaves into his own narrative (pp. 38-55).

This book's central thesis, that dreaming is cultivatable as a spiritual practice, expresses an interest growing in contemporary thought toward the intersection of religion and psychology. His approach has been in tandem with that of Jeremy Taylor's work. For instance, in *Where People Fly*

and *Water Runs Uphill: Using Dreams to Tap the Wisdom of the Unconscious* (1992), Taylor similarly held that dreams can turn into a very great tool for spiritual growth and self-discovery. What both authors are calling for is, therefore, an attitude of consciousness in the face of dreams, and what both suppose is that this deep look may give profound insights into personality and even personal transformation (Bulkeley, 2023, p. 114).

However, some readers may have difficulty with the fact that, for Bulkeley, 'spirituality' means the same as 'religion.' That is, while the book shows recognition of religious traditions where dreaming plays a role, it tries to make an appeal that is translatable to a broader secular readership by defining spirituality in terms of personal growth and self-transcendence. The double approach is, at the same time, a source of both weakness and strength. While allowing the expansion of target readers from among people who would not readily identify with reading a book on scientifically inclined traditional religious practice, it runs the risk of shallowness and lack of depth and complexity where it pertains to the depth and context of religious experience in relation to dreaming in a historical context. This is indeed where the tension lies in the 'realization or spiritual' meaning of the dreams of the Bible's Joseph when considered through a religious context but applied to generalized to contemporary, secular readers (p. 49).

In the final chapters, the author transitions from a personal and historical examination of dreams to the prescriptive, giving the reader practical steps towards developing such spiritual dreaming practices (chapters 8 & 9). This last set of chapters strikes readers as analogous to works like Robert Waggoner's *Lucid Dreaming: Gateway to the Inner Self* (2008), wherein Waggoner outlines techniques for increasing dream awareness to enhance one's dream control. Both authors expect the reader to take the initiative over an active role in their dreaming lives and to recognize that there is power, personally and collectively, to transform through dreams (Bulkeley, 2023, pp. 156-168).

Bulkeley's call to 'big dreamers' (p. 191) to work together for collective health in communities is timely and necessary, particularly for issues concerning health, considering where we are today with respect to global civilization. Within this context, the idea of dream-inspired resilience during crisis becomes even more salient, fitting neatly into greater contemporary psychological themes regarding resilience and creativity. Nevertheless, I must state that the book would only be enriched more with a philosophical exploration of how these ideas would apply in different cultural and social contexts, considering the multiplicity of world values and conceptions of what a dream is.

To sum up, I believe *The Spirituality of Dreaming* is an excellent, practical introduction to the spiritual dimensions of dreaming. In this grounded exposition, the author has drawn from his own experiences, and it also combines rich historical and philosophical resources. This book is a wonderful source for anyone who ponders dreams at the interface of spirituality, philosophy, and psychology. The general impact of the work, even though seriously flawed in terms of Western-biased content and ideals, which strain to appeal to both religious and secular audiences simultaneously, would be seriously diluted. Taken as such, without the stringent application of prior limitations, the book's core message is very inspiring and timely: *Dreaming can be a potent tool for personal and collective transformation.* It

gives hands-on advice on how readers can cultivate their own spiritual dreaming practices.

### Declarations

There are no conflicts of interest, and no funding has been received for this work.

### References

- Bulkeley, K. (2008). *Dreaming in the World's Religions: A Comparative History*. New York University Press.
- Cartwright, R. (1992). *Crisis Dreaming: Using your Dreams to Solve your Problems*. HarperCollins.
- Hartmann, E. (1984). *The Nightmare: The Psychology and Biology of Terrifying Dreams*. Basic Books.
- Holecek, A. (2016). *Dream Yoga: Illuminating Your Life Through Lucid Dreaming and the Tibetan Yogas of Sleep*. Sounds True.
- Jung, C. G. (1963). *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. Crown Publishing Group/Random House.
- Moss, R. (2009). *The Secret History of Dreaming*. New World Library.
- Shafton, A. (2002). *Dream-Singers: The African American Way with Dreams*. J. Wiley & Sons.
- Taylor, J. (1992). *Where People Fly and Water Runs Uphill: Using Dreams to Tap the Wisdom of the Unconscious*. Warner Books.
- Thompson, E. (2015). *Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy*. Columbia University Press.
- Waggoner, R. (2008). *Lucid Dreaming: Gateway to the Inner Self*. Moment Point Press.
- Wallace, B. A. (2012). *Dreaming Yourself Awake: Lucid Dreaming and Tibetan Dream Yoga for Insight and Transformation*. Shambhala Publications.
- Wangyal, R. T. (1998). *The Tibetan Yogas of Dream and Sleep*. Snow Lion Publications.