BY DIANE HANDLIN, PH.D.

NIGHT VISION

Mind

Analyzing your dreams can hold the key to your waking sense of well-being.

In our stress-ridden society, it seems almost impossible to reach what Aristotle called "eudaimonia" (deep, personal well-being). Bookstore shelves are lined with volumes of advice on reaching true happiness, but instead of seeking revelation in the self-help aisle, try examining your dreams to achieve a new perspective — and a more satisfying life.

Dreams can be used to approach the mystery of who we are at our most essential level. A scientific study I conducted on the dreams of 100 women between the ages of 22 and 79 revealed that the subjects who reported challenges or unexpected events in their dreams showed a greater sense of well-being when awake. By reading these dreams as stories — which often address the question "Who am I?" — I discovered that the women who were able to get in touch with more complex aspects of themselves (e.g., anger, fear, love, and friendship) were also the ones who had a greater sense of well-being when measured on psychological scales.

It's no wonder that dreams can hold the key to a better understanding of yourself. Since dreams offer uncensored information, reflecting on them can help you identify emotions and consider new solutions to problems. As a result, many people who reflect upon their dreams report becoming less blindly reactive, which in turn increases their vitality and sense of inner freedom. The practice of mindfulness — often in conjunction with psychotherapy — can help you learn how to interpret your dreams. "Mindfulness has made me more aware of my dreams upon awakening," says Olga Beattie, a New Jersey human resources manager. "Dreams have played such an important role in my life — helping me process my father's death from cancer and even helping me realize I was pregnant before any biological signs clued me in." (For more on the practice of mindfulness, click here.)

When analyzing dreams, I first ask my clients, "What do you think you are trying to say to yourself?" Then I ask them to consider every aspect of the dream as a part of themselves. What sensations arise spontaneously? What cognitive or emotional associations can be made? This starts them on the pathway to plumbing the many-faceted depths of a particular dream. Take, for example, this client's dream: *I am driving from Mendham toward Chester, where I used to work. There are trucks coming each way — one in front and one behind. I pull off the road to let them pass, then get back on, but find myself driving along a curve. I stop and get out. I stand on rocks, watching a sunset of deep lavenders and pinks, then look up and see an exotic tree colored lavender, pink, and pale green. Instead of leaves, it has pendulous, lush tubes of green hanging down. There is a black snake with a white head, reminiscent of a cobra, winding out of one of the tubes and going back in again. I initially perceive this snake as a warning to not come too close. Then the mayor suddenly appears and announces that he must dig up the tree and sell it for $45,000. I become very upset and say, "You can't do that."*

After working on the dream, the client realized that the tree is the "feeling" part of herself — her creative life energy. The snake, which she originally thought of as frightening, is, in actuality, a protector of that energy. As we further analyzed the dream, the patient made the connection that a practical but potentially emotionally debilitating job she had just been offered paid exactly $45,000. The mayor (the practical side of herself) wanted to dig up the tree. The client's analysis: If

she accepted the job, her tree (i.e., her vitality) would be at risk. Although she ended up accepting the position, she did so with the intention that it was temporary and that the right career for her would be found in a different direction.

Decoding dreams as my client did can be a powerful resource for wisdom and opportunity for rejuvenation. It's important to understand that there are "big dreams" (i.e., ones that communicate deeper life meanings) and other dreams that are simply "day residue" (replays of the day). Here are some guidelines to help you remember your dreams. The more you incorporate these practices into your routine, the easier recall will become.

- Remembering dreams is an exercise in spatial and visceral recall, and it takes some practice. Start with this exercise: Close your eyes and think of a room that was emotionally important to you years ago. Take a visual tour, recalling as much detail with as many senses as possible.
- People have an average of five dreams a night, but often do not remember them. Decide before going to sleep that you are going to try to recall your dreams upon awakening.
- Keep a notepad by your bedside. When you wake up, do not immediately move, but do try to "come to awareness" as quickly as possible.
- Write down visual images from your dream. You might remember more details if you "grab the tail of the dream" and work your way backward.
- Once you get up, describe the dream more completely in a journal. Recounting the dream to a friend can aid recollection and can help open up rich, unexpected meanings.

Diane Handlin is a clinical and consulting psychologist in Metuchen and Summit. For more information, visit drdianehandlin.com or mindfulnessnj.com.