

On Dreams as Life Lessons

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I keep a notebook and pen on the bed stand and record my dreams. If I don't write them down, very often I don't recall their particulars. I seek to remember dreams because I find them personally educative, informative, directive. They are private lectures, lessons: they tell me what is going on in my life. They come in the form of allegories, parables, metaphors, and episodes in which I am a participant, and it is my task is to figure out what they mean. It takes some concentration and persistence, but their messages become clear and their implications apparent. I've found the outcome of this exploration to be good insight, good advice, good direction.

A couple of dreams from about a week ago for illustration:

I'm standing on a gigantic, flimsy metal stool next to a tall brick apartment building, perhaps four stories above the ground. It's scary; I'm afraid of heights, and there I am way up in the air like that. Four or five people on the ground, not in focus, are shaking the stool, making it even more precarious for me. Even if these for-whatever-reason hostile people weren't there, I don't know how I could get back down to the sidewalk.

Just above my head is an open window leading into, evidently, an apartment, though not mine. If I climb through the window I can get to safety. To get to the window, I'll have to jump up off the stool a foot or so to get my forearms on the window sill, and from that position I'll need to pull myself into the room. It's risky though. I could fall trying to reach the window; or the stool could topple, especially with people shaking it, and I might not have the strength to boost myself through the window and end up hanging from the window sill four stories in the air

until my strength gives out I plunge to the sidewalk, very likely resulting in my death.

I look up at the open window. There are no curtains or shade. The silhouette of a woman looking in my direction, long hair and attractive lines, takes up much of the window. The light is behind her and I can't see her face or clothing, yet I know who she is. I tell her I am going to jump up and grasp the window sill. I ask her to help me by pulling me into the room.

Without a word, she leaves the window.

What else can I do? I jump up. I make it; my elbows are on the sill. It was much easier than I had presumed, feared. I boost my way up through window, again not as hard as I thought it might be.

The room is empty. I sit on the wood floor in a corner a few feet from the window I came in. The woman isn't there; I'm alone.

I wake up. It's morning, time to get up. I go to write down the dream but realize I don't have to. This one I'll remember, I'm sure of that. I was right. I didn't forget this one, it was powerful, the height and fear and all.

In the second dream, I sing an old pop song "All the Way." No context, just me singing the song.

I wake up. It is the middle of the night. "All the Way"--I wrote the title on my notepad. I go back to sleep.

When I got up in the morning, I remembered that I had had a dream about singing a song, but I couldn't recall which song it was. When I went to the notebook and saw that it was "All the Way," I was taken back. That is not a song I ever think about. It's completely outside my frame of reference. I couldn't associate "All the Way" with a time and place, where I might have heard it and when. I am vaguely aware of the title and melody and a couple lines of its lyrics. In the dream, however, I seemed to know the whole song well.

I Googled the lyrics:

When somebody loves you
It's no good unless he loves you, all the way
Happy to be near you
When you need someone to cheer you, all the way

Taller than the tallest tree is
That's how it's got to feel
Deeper than the deep blue sea is
That's how deep it goes, if it's real

When somebody needs you
It's no good unless he needs you, all the way
Through the good or lean years
And for all the in-between years, come what may

Who knows where the road will lead us
Only a fool would say
But if you'll let me love you
It's for sure I'm gonna love you, all the way, all the way

Wikipedia said “All the Way” was written by Jimmy Van Heusen and Sammy Cohn. I know of their names, but that’s all. It won the Academy Award in 1957 for Best Original Song. News to me. The movie, “The Joker is Wild.” Never saw it, don’t know about it. “All the Way” was a hit for Frank Sinatra. Perhaps I heard him sing it, I’m not sure. It was covered by many other singers. As I looked through the list, which included Bing Crosby, Celine Dion, and Glen Campbell and, recently, Bob Dylan and Katherine McPhee, I didn’t know that any of them had recorded the song. At some time in my life, I must have heard “All the Way” at least a few times, because I know some of the words and can hum it reasonably well.

This ‘50s song came to me when I was asleep in October of 2018. How that happened is totally beyond me. When I checked out the lyrics on Google, I noticed one difference between them and what I sang in my dream. The lyrics are “It’s no good unless he loves you, all the way” and “It’s no good unless he needs you,

all the way.” In both instances, in my dream I made it “she,” not “he.” So, in my dream version of the song, it was about a woman’s love for a man, not the reverse.

What did I pick up on in the two dreams? What were the messages, lessons, insights?

When I first thought about it, this is what I came up with from the apartment window dream:

It’s understandable how you wound up in that room. Really, there wasn’t an alternative—you’re on the stool way up in the air and there’s only that window into that particular apartment. But look at you, sitting alone on the floor in a corner of an empty room. The woman is gone, and when she had a chance to help you get over the window sill and in to the room, despite the very difficult, even desperate, position you were in, she was unresponsive, mute, before fading away.

Get out of this room, get away from this woman. She doesn’t want you here. This is a barren setting for you. Go out the door. Now. Travel far away. Find somewhere where you won’t end up four stories in air, frightened, anxious, in danger of falling, with people who hold no other feeling toward you than to shake the fragile stool, the foundation, you are standing on. Leave. Exit. Escape.

And from the “All the Way” dream:

Consider the lyrics: When somebody loves you, they love you all the way. They don’t hold back, they don’t turn away from you. They are happy to be near you. They help you. They need you rather than have no need for you. The woman in your life should be someone you can love all the way. If you can’t find this kind of love, this person, be alone. Better alone than in bad company.

As the days went by this past week, I kept exploring the dreams. It was important for me to not just go with my initial conclusions:

I said it was understandable that I wound up in that room. But really, do I in fact understand how I got there? Why was I on that enormously tall, rickety, and being-shaken stool, where my options were so limited? Could I have created a firmer foundation for myself than that stool? can I in the future? Can I expand my options in life beyond a single window? What options, possibilities, do I want to create besides crawling, uninvited and unwanted, into someone else's home?

Why were those people shaking the stool? What is it about them, about me, that led them to do that? Was I really unable to do anything to stop what they were doing to me at that time? Could I have made it down off that stool?

From her side, why did the woman turn away when I asked her to help me, and then not be in the room when I entered it? What part did I play in that?

Is there an good option to leaving that room and going far away? Do I have to be distant from "stool shakers"? or is there something I can become, do, that will make hurting me an unappealing or aversive undertaking? Could I, should I, seek out the woman, take her hand, and propose the idea that together we furnish the room and work to be happy there together?

Why am I in relationships where neither the woman nor I love "all the way"? Is it possible to change that circumstance, either with "the woman in the room" or someone else?

How essential is an "all the way" love to a life well lived?

Is the truth of a dream the first-take conclusions and insights, and anything after that, like the musings and speculations I've been doing the past few days, something else: intellectualization, rationalization, fantasy, self-delusion, etc.?

I'll leave it there. I hope these two examples encourage you to record your dreams and discern their meanings and implications for your life. I think you'll find it well worth your time.