

# The Healing Power of Dreams and Nightmares

## The IASD Dream Work with Cancer Patients Project

Tallulah Lyons  
and Wendy Pannier



Dori Pendergrass, *I Dream* (right panel)

**D**ream literature abounds with accounts of dreams and healing, from the Yellow Emperor's book on internal medicine more than 4500 years ago to the dream temples of Asklepius to current research on psychoneuroimmunology. Physicians from Hippocrates to Bernie Siegel have found that dreams can often predict illness before the symptoms become obvious and readily diagnosable. Additionally, our work with the IASD Dream Work with Cancer Patients Project demonstrates how dreams can serve as powerful allies during the healing process. We believe dream work deserves recognition as a potent force in integrative medicine.

Our work with cancer patients started separately more than a decade ago when Wendy used dreams to help survive a late stage cancer and Tallulah provided support for a friend who died of cancer.

### Wendy's Story

A few weeks after surgery, I had the following dream:

*February 25, 1995—I am going somewhere to research what I should do to treat my cancer. I am driving north. I find myself driving down a street that reminds me of the tree-lined street where I grew up. It is night and everything is black. All of a sudden ahead of me I see a tree that is totally lit up. It is full of different kinds of birds and animals in the most vibrant iridescent colors—the most vivid shades I have ever seen. I am in awe of the incredible life and vitality of the creatures in the tree. It is like a “tree of life” and it feels very positive.*

While I thought it was an interesting dream, it wasn't until my first ASD conference in New York City a few months later that deeper levels of meaning

emerged. At a workshop where Robert Moss drummed and guided the group in re-entering a dream, I had the following experience:

*I go back into my “tree of life” dream and ask all the wonderfully colored birds and critters what they have to tell me. I stare into the eyes of one bird and ask the question. At first I don't get an answer so I keep asking. Finally I tell myself to relax and let go. Then all the birds take the edges of my clothing in their beaks and lift me into the tree. I am sitting on a limb surrounded by all these vividly colored, vibrant creatures. They tell me that their light and life force come from within and they will teach me how. They surround me like a cape and I can feel the energy they generate. Soon I start to feel that energy within myself—starting inside and radiating out. It is an*

*incredible feeling. I feel like I am glowing.*

The power of the experience did not diminish with the end of the conference. Instead, it provided an “aha” for how to integrate dream imagery into the healing process. Familiar with the visualization work with cancer patients started by Drs. O. Carl and Stephanie Simonton in the 1970s, I had previously tried prepackaged visualization tapes, but had not resonated with the imagery offered. The numinous bird dream provided personal imagery I could relate to and engage with all of my senses. I still re-enter this dream whenever I need healing energy, and the practice of working with dream imagery remains the foundation for my work with others who are facing cancer.

### **Tallulah’s Story**

In the early 1990s, I became a dream-sharing companion to a life-long friend who was dying from cancer. Together we encountered powerful dreams of standing at the threshold, moving through the dark tunnel into the light, crossing the river, and at last, going home. These end-of-life dreams brought great comfort and a sense of healing resolution to my friend. They also inspired me to create a dream group for other cancer patients and to focus on the question of how dream work might contribute to the goals of cancer support programs. This question became the topic for my thesis for the dream leadership certification program at the Haden Institute.

### **Partnership Strengthens the Work**

We met at the IASD conference in Washington, DC in 2000, immediately recognized the similarities in the work we were each doing, and became friends. Both of us were facilitators of ongoing dream groups for cancer patients and also were presenting frequent workshops in the Southeast and Mid-Atlantic regions of the United States. We were using the dream work group processes of Dr. Montague Ullman and Jeremy Taylor. We recognized that integrating the personalized imagery of dreams could

greatly enhance the healing potential of well-researched mind/body practices that were already offered in many cancer facilities: guided imagery, meditation, yoga, and expressive arts.

In 2003 we decided to join forces and seek grant funding. We worked through IASD’s Development Committee and submitted a grant proposal through IASD to the Lloyd Symington Foundation, a foundation specifically focused on integrative programs for those facing cancer. They turned us down.

Disappointed but undaunted, we spent the next year addressing areas the foundation had seen as weaknesses in our proposal. We kept careful track of our accomplishments and submitted another grant proposal in 2004. This time the foundation awarded us a small grant, and the H. M. Bitner Charitable Trust awarded us a partial matching grant.

During 2005 the grants enabled us to formalize what we had been doing for years. First, we created a manual for participants in our workshops and ongoing groups entitled *The Healing Power of Dreams and Nightmares*. Intended as a resource, it covers everything from the history of dreams and healing to frequently asked questions about dreams and nightmares, tips for recalling and recording dreams, and symbol work. It also provides techniques for working with dreams and dream imagery. The final sections of the manual cover ways to honor the dream, how to work with dreams at home, and various worksheets and other resources.

Next, we developed a *Facilitator’s Manual* that details key issues in working with those facing cancer, how to work with healing dream imagery and nightmare imagery, outlines for workshops and ongoing groups, and how to use the evaluation and assessment tools we had designed.

Throughout the year, both of us continued our ongoing dream groups for cancer patients and their caregivers. We also gave as many three-hour workshops as we could schedule. Most were at sites of The Wellness Community, an international nonprofit organization providing

free programs of support, education and hope for those facing cancer and their loved ones.

We encouraged dream group and workshop participants to evoke their healing dream imagery in other stress reduction activities available at the cancer centers: journaling, art, yoga, tai chi, and meditation. We also encouraged participants to use their dream imagery during doctor visits, chemotherapy and radiation treatments, thus integrating the supportive energy from their dreams into all aspects of the healing process.

### **The Healing Power of Dream Work with Cancer Patients**

We use the word “healing” to describe a process of returning to a state of balance and harmony from a state of imbalance and dis-ease. It is an ongoing process that takes place on multiple levels of mind, body and spirit. It is possible to experience healing even if a person is not cured. Healing dreams are those that carry a felt sense of reconciliation, resolution of conflict, balance, or harmony and peace. Healing dreams bring a sense of new possibilities, hope and meaning. For many who are facing cancer, healing dreams offer guidance, commenting on medical treatment options and outcomes as well as perceptions, attitudes and behaviors that need attention in order to heal.

In our work with cancer patients, we have seen four types of healing dreams. Some of the most powerful have been dreams of numinous encounter. Such dreams elicit a total positive shift in mind, body and spirit. Wendy’s encounter with the birds in the tree of life is a good example. One dream group member dreamed of encounter with a numinous child:

*I see a silky-haired child who is glowing and I am drawn to it like a magnet. I want to embrace it and hold it forever.*

After sharing the dream, the dreamer reflected, “My life has been completely changed by this dream. A heaviness I have carried since my diagnosis has lifted. I have felt joyful all week. No depression.

Physically, I have felt better than I've felt in years. All I have to do is close my eyes—I can see that child and I am immediately energized and inspired. I've had a strong feeling of hope all week."

The second type we have come to call "resolution and renewal" dreams. There is no numinous encounter, yet the dreamer awakens with a sense that everything is going to be all right. In one workshop, a breast cancer survivor reported a dream she had just after her mastectomy:

*I have just won a swimming competition. My coach walks up and asks why I've been absent from practice. I say, "Because I had cancer." I hear myself speaking in the past tense and I feel the impact of winning the race. I know I'm healed!*

This dream became a source of healing energy during the next few months of chemotherapy. During treatment, she often re-entered the dream and accessed the invigorating experience of winning the race. Now, a year later, she is cancer free.

Eight days before Wendy started an experimental chemotherapy protocol at Fox Chase Cancer Center she had the following dream:

*March 5, 1995—I am driving from 95 up Cottman Ave. to Fox Chase. It is gray and dreary and there is a lot of stop-and-go traffic. The drive seems to take a long time. Then all of a sudden, as soon as I am past Fox Chase, the sun comes out and I am on a bicycle. I am riding downhill through a pastoral setting. Everything is very green and refreshing and spring-like. I feel the breeze in my face and it is exhilarating.*

The dream left Wendy feeling very positive about the outcome of her treatment, and gave her healing imagery she could incorporate into her meditative activities.

We describe the third type as "dreams of guidance." Most cancer patients face many conflicting options throughout treatment. The choices can be overwhelming. Which treatment center,

which oncologist, which surgeon, chemotherapy or radiation—the options go on and on. Members of our ongoing dream groups dream about their options and frequently feel they receive guidance. Recently a five-year survivor whose cancer has just recurred dreamed:

*I'm back in the middle of a war zone. Things are on fire and bombs are falling all around. Suddenly I hear a voice that says, "Wait." I get a strong sense that if I wait, I'll be safe.*

After sharing the dream with the group, the dreamer said she had just seen two different oncologists who offered her three options: surgery, a needle biopsy or wait three months for another CT scan. After the dream, she felt at peace and made the decision to wait.

The fourth type of healing dream arises as the culmination of long-term dream work triggered by a nightmare. We encourage dreamers to explore their nightmares using basic dream work techniques: writing them down, recording emotions, exploring key symbols, themes and questions. Projective group work helps to enrich the dreamer's understanding. Together, these activities can help the dreamer make a bridge to waking life. As a final step, we facilitate the process of using meditative techniques to help re-enter the dream to transform the nightmare and to integrate the resulting healing experience.

### **Enhancing Guided Imagery and Meditative Activities with Dream Experiences**

We teach a dream re-entry technique using a full-sensory, guided imagery experience that helps the dreamer create a safe place. First, the dreamer is guided into a deep state of relaxation by focusing on the breath and on progressively relaxing parts of the body. The relaxed meditative state is further deepened by imagining descending a set of stairs into an environment the dreamer creates that feels totally safe and conducive to healing. After savoring this safe place with all the senses, the dreamer may wish to invite a supportive presence or

companion. It is only after the dreamer feels comfortable maintaining the image of this safe place that the nightmare is re-entered. As nightmares are repeatedly explored in visits to this secure meditative space, most of the disturbing quality gradually transforms and the culminating imagery becomes powerful "medicine" for the healing journey. Sometimes the nightmare evolves through a series of dreams, sometimes through guided imagery experiences, and sometimes a combination of both. Here are a few examples:

- A snarling and attacking dog in one dream evolves into a fierce but unaggressive dog in a subsequent dream, then a friendly puppy in a later dream, and finally a magnificent white dog companion.
  - Frightening snakes in an initial nightmare evolve into quiet, sleeping snakes in another dream, then into fun "play doh" snakes in the final dream.
  - A deformed baby in one dream evolves into a crippled child, then a sad ragged child, and finally into a beautiful, glowing, precocious child through a series of dreams.
  - A barren desert in one nightmare becomes a lush blooming oasis in a follow-up guided imagery.
  - A fire ravaged home in one dream evolves into a small neat hut in a subsequent dream, and then into an elegant mansion by the sea in a later dream.
  - A deformed kitten in a heart-wrenching nightmare evolves into a scruffy kitten in a guided imagery experience. The following night a magnificent cat is the central image in a healing dream.
- In each series, the dreamer did extensive dream work between each dream or imagery experience resulting in a progressive change in emotion and attitude in each series. Dream work, particularly nightmare transformation, restores a powerful sense of connection and control to cancer patients. It brings a strong sense of being a true partner in the healing process.
- The practice of guided imagery forms the foundation for our approach to



*Dori Pendergrass, I Dream (triptych; acrylic on canvas, combined 48" x 108")*

integrating dreams. Positive effects of guided imagery with cancer patients are well documented and in some instances guided imagery sessions are even paid for by insurance. Guided imagery has been proven to be one of the best ways to alleviate the side effects of treatment—reducing pain, nausea, and healing time after surgery. It is also a primary relaxation and stress reduction technique.

What makes our approach unique is that we encourage the use of personal dream experiences as the focus for guided imagery exercises and other meditative activities. We help dreamers direct healing energy toward specific aspects of the mind, body and spirit that the dream has identified as needing attention.

We encourage dreamers to keep a list of the gifts from their dreams and to use their personal healing images in daily meditative activities. We especially encourage the savoring of healing experiences during doctor visits, and chemotherapy or radiation treatments. Dreamers learn to go into a deeply relaxed state of consciousness, to open all their senses and re-enter their healing dream experiences. With practice, the energies can be evoked at any time and in any place. Here are some examples:

- A fierce dream warrior accompanies one man to every chemo treatment. He has made a tape with his favorite meditation music. As he listens

through ear phones during his infusions, he enjoys the companionship of his stalwart supporter.

- Another man, who also had a warrior dream, embodies the strength and power of his dream character when doing the warrior poses in yoga.
- One woman is never without her knitting. When her ovarian cancer returned for the third time, she had a dream about two little girls who were holding hands and walking through fire—and coming through unscathed. This dream brought a sense of new perspective and renewed hope. The woman re-imagined the children over and over as she knitted a shawl. She wears the shawl daily to boost her courage and she takes the courageous energy of the dream children to all her chemotherapy treatments.
- Another woman's most powerful healing dream symbol is a flowing fountain. In her dream, the fountain carried the energy of reconciliation with a long-estranged family member. By accessing the energy of the dream in daily meditation, the woman moved to a new place of forgiveness. Her doctors were amazed at how quickly she recovered from surgery. She credits her healing dream.
- Another group member has repeatedly painted her dream "tree of life" in different ways. Each time, she re-

imagines the powerful energy from her dream.

Frequently dream messages address needed lifestyle changes. Many group members have made changes in nutrition, exercise, relationships and work situations as a result of their dreams.

### **Science and Dreams Come Together**

There is a scientific basis for our work. Psychoneuroimmunology (PNI) research has confirmed the impact of the mind and emotions on the immune system, and also provides evidence for the role of dreams in healing. Candace Pert, a biophysics and physiology researcher, demonstrated the complex interrelationships among the behavioral, neural, endocrine and immune processes in the 1980s. She found that even tiny immune cells have receptors for neuropeptides, which she calls the "molecules of emotion." Neuropeptides are molecular messengers that connect *all* systems of the body—including the immune system.

At the level of neuropeptides, the body and mind are neurologically connected. Every emotional state involves the release of neuropeptides and other biochemical messengers. Our emotions are thus connected to our physiology. It could be said that the mind/body communication is primarily emotion/body communication, because emotions play a major role in

mind/body phenomenon. Pert emphasizes that for maximum functioning of the immune system, it is important to free blocked emotions and to find constructive expression for all emotions.

Dream work is a process for achieving that goal. Candace Pert works with her own dreams and believes, “Dreams are direct messages from your bodymind, giving you valuable information about what’s going on physiologically as well as emotionally. Strong emotions that are not processed thoroughly are stored at the cellular level. At night some of the stored information is released and allowed to bubble up into consciousness as a dream. Capturing the dream and re-experiencing the emotions can be very healing, as you either integrate the information for growth or decide to take actions toward forgiveness and letting go.”

Group participants have reported how they are integrating positive healing imagery at times which could otherwise create stress, and how they are using their dreams for personal growth. Here are some quotes we included in one of our grant reports, requested from ongoing group members as part of our assessment tool:

A. (Ovarian): *“My dreams show me getting braver and braver and I get in touch with this feeling when I meditate at a doctor visit.”*

B. (Breast): *“When I am in a chemo treatment I re-imagine experiences from my dreams that have felt healing. My favorite is a dream about a hurt child who turns into a beautiful white bird.”*

K. (Ovarian): *“I use dream imagery for my medical shots and doctor visits. I am becoming more assertive through dream work. When I am anxious, I seem to have dreams that help me work it out.”*

T. (Family caregiver): *“In dreams I keep going into dark tunnels and each time I feel more confident. I am finding new strengths that are deep inside me.”*

J. (Stomach): *“Dream work has helped me to free myself from the inability to talk about some of the experiences that have kept me imprisoned for years.”*

## Assessing the Work

One of the ways we evaluate our work is to keep detailed records of the progression of positive imagery and evolving nightmare imagery for each member of our ongoing dream groups. Meredith Sabini suggested that what we were doing constituted outcome assessments, which we incorporated into our grant reports. The evolution of nightmare imagery and the quotes above demonstrate the powerful outcome of ongoing dream work.

Another tool we use is a quality of life assessment, which we have based on tools used by The Wellness Community. We have found that for our ongoing group members:

- 80 percent said that they now use positive imagery from dreams in meditative activities.
- 100 percent said that their dream work brings about decreased feelings of anxiety and stress.
- 100 percent reported an increased sense of connection with others, an increased sense of connection to inner resources, an increased understanding of healing at multiple levels and an increased quality of life—particularly emotional, social and spiritual.
- 100 percent reported increased feelings of control over life and health issues, increased feelings of hope, and an increased understanding of how to live fully now, despite cancer.

Does dream work extend life expectancy for cancer patients? We have not been able to study long-term survival rates on an organized basis because we have not worked in a formal medical setting. Nevertheless Dr. David Spiegel, a psychiatrist at Stanford University, is known for his study of 86 women with metastatic breast cancer. The women were divided into two groups: one received state-of-the-art medical treatment only, the other received the same treatment plus weekly group counseling where they learned very basic self-hypnosis and guided imagery techniques. The second group lived twice as long as the first—36.6 months vs. 18.9 months.

Here, group work and imagery exercises

were shown to have profound, long-term physiological results. We are convinced dream work could improve this further.

We are currently looking for more robust quality of life tools that better differentiate the impact of dream work. Additionally, we are working to develop better ways to measure what participants learn from the workshop, and ways we can quantify our results. We hope our project can contribute to future research studies on rates of remission and survival.

We invite and welcome your suggestions!

## Expanding the Work

Having met and exceeded our grant goals for 2005, we submitted another grant proposal for 2006 to train other facilitators and expand our work. The Symington Foundation awarded us another grant and the H. M. Bitner Charitable Trust provided partial matching. When we presented our work at IASD’s 2005 conference we mentioned that we were looking for other facilitators. By the end of the year five IASD members had volunteered—the number we wanted for the pilot expansion phase. After a weekend of training in early 2006, the facilitators went home and began working to set up workshops and groups. Some made it and some didn’t, but there were others who came forward to volunteer. Their ideas and dedicated efforts have greatly enhanced the project.

In addition to our ongoing work in the Southeast and Mid-Atlantic regions, the expansion phase of the project now has ongoing activities in the Bay area thanks to Zoe Newman. Rachel Norment and Dani Vedros are expanding the work in Charlottesville and Norfolk, Virginia, respectively, and Janet McCall is doing so in Pittsburgh. Additional work is also being done in Bethlehem, PA. The biggest challenge has been to juggle our own work while supervising people at a distance. We do not want to add additional facilitators until we feel comfortable that we are adequately supporting our current ones.

Rachel introduced our work to the University of Virginia Oncology Center’s

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Integrative Medicine program. We gave a presentation to a small group of the staff last December, which was so well received that they invited us back to do a full workshop for their staff this spring. Rather than conduct our typical workshop, which is geared to cancer patients, we expanded the workshop to include ways health care professionals, in a limited amount of time, can incorporate aspects of dream work into their patient interactions. We were greatly encouraged by the overwhelmingly positive response.

### A Long Way to Go

In spite of many successes, we have a long way to go. Integrative medicine programs are popping up in hospitals all around the country and many of them are in cancer centers. Except in the limited settings touched by the IASD cancer project, dream work as an integrative medicine practice is almost unknown. Support groups, specialized exercise programs, yoga, tai chi, meditation, guided imagery, nutrition, and Chinese medicine are the practices that are most often integrated with standard medical treatment. These are the practices that are also included in the increasing number of integrative medicine conferences that are being offered each year. At such conferences, rarely is dream work on the program. We have had little success at engaging presenters at these conferences in a discussion of how dream work can enhance other integrative medicine practices. Last year, the first text book on integrative oncology was published. Dream work was not mentioned.

Recently, Jeremy Geffen, M.D., provided the keynote address for the opening of a new cancer center in Atlanta. He is a well-known oncologist who has become a passionate spokesman for the integrated oncology movement. Dr. Geffen places great value on dreams and has worked with his own dreams for many years. When he was told about the IASD dream work cancer project, his response was, "Wow! You are way ahead of the curve."

We're not sure exactly what he meant about being "way ahead of the curve," but there are some important things that we do know. Research confirms that:

- Support groups enhance quality of life for cancer patients. We know that a dream group becomes a very powerful support group when dreams are used as the focus for sharing.
- There are positive effects of specialized exercise, yoga and t'ai chi for cancer patients. We have seen that the positive effects are compounded when dream imagery is integrated as a part of the meditative movement.
- There are positive effects for patients using guided imagery. We know that when a cancer patient uses personal dream imagery in guided imagery exercises, she/he is tending an aspect of the mind, body and spirit that the dream has identified as needing special attention and care.
- Freeing blocked emotions has a positive impact on the immune system. We know that dream work offers a place in the imaginal realm for freeing emotions.
- A sense of loss of control, isolation and loss of hope are three attitudes that almost always inhibit immune functioning. Research also confirms that a sense of inner authority, connection, and a sense of meaning and hope are attitudes that always boost immune functioning. We know that immune enhancing attitudes evolve through long-term dream work.

### Living into the Dream

We have our own dream of where we want our work to go. We thank IASD for its support so far, and the organization will be an integral part and beneficiary of the work we do in the future. Our dream is to expand the work we are doing to reach more people who are confronting cancer. We want to train other facilitators and receive additional grants. We want to create a training program specifically for health care professionals that will help them use dream work with their patients, and perhaps receive continuing education credits for this. We want to create tools—such as CDs—for people who cannot be part of an ongoing group, so they can benefit from the wisdom of their dreams.

At the beginning of this article we said that we believe dream work deserves recognition as a potent force in integrative medicine. Our biggest dream is to do whatever work is necessary to make this happen.

**Wendy Pannier** has worked with Montague Ullman since the early 1980s, and has conducted workshops and dream groups with cancer patients for the past eleven years. She is a Past President of IASD. **Tallulah Lyons** is certified as a dreamwork specialist through the Haden Institute and facilitates weekly dreamwork with cancer patients. She is a passionate advocate for dreamwork as a spiritual path. Additional information about their work with cancer patients can be found on their web site, [www.healingpowerofdreams.com](http://www.healingpowerofdreams.com). They can be reached at [tdreams@mindspring.com](mailto:tdreams@mindspring.com) and [dreamwendy@verizon.net](mailto:dreamwendy@verizon.net), and invite your comments and suggestions.



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