RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Rarity of Unambiguous Symbols in Dreams: A Case Study

ANDREW PAQUETTE

Abstract—This paper is a response to articles in the literature regarding symbols in dreams. While some neurology-based dream studies reject dream symbols altogether, the preponderance of material available for review accepts that dreams are frequently populated by symbols that require interpretation to be understood. In this study of my own extensive dream journals, the presence of veridical psi dreams makes it possible to rule out symbolic content in some cases. The results of this study show that—at least from the 11,850 dream scenes reviewed here—unambiguous symbolic content is extremely rare. For this paper, it was assumed that no dreams contained any symbolically presented information unless the dreams contained unambiguous indications that symbols were present. Following this method, a distinction may be made between dream content that clearly contains symbols and dreams that are assumed to be symbolic by default. Symbols that met the criteria used here can be shown to be different from conventionally accepted symbols in that they clarify—rather than obfuscate—the communication of complex ideas.

Keywords: dream—symbol—psi—prophetic—precognitive

Introduction

This study proposes to use a single-source database of dream journal records—those of this author—in an attempt to determine the proportionate frequency of unambiguously symbolic dream content and to explore whether there are any traits characteristic of unambiguously symbolic dream content that set them apart from other types of content.

In the study of dreams, three principal views are found: dreams as spiritual revelation, dreams as subconscious communication, and dreams as an organic side effect of physical activity in the brain. Each of these views is largely exclusive. A fourth view of dreaming sometimes incorporates all three of these theoretical frameworks. In parapsychology, precognitive dreams retain elements of religious descriptions of prophetic dreaming, but

attempts are sometimes made to connect them with physical causes—such as geomagnetic activity (Krippner 2006) or as yet unknown faculties of the human brain (Braude 1978). Researchers in this branch of study do not neglect the professional descendants of Freud, and have endeavored to understand some 'psi' dreams in the context of personal symbols. Jung provides very early examples of this in his book *Man and His Symbols* (Jung, Franz, Henderson, Jacobi, & Jaffe 1968).

Ethnographers who have studied dreaming in non-Western cultures refrain from imposing a Western explanatory framework on the dreams they describe. Instead, they report on the beliefs of the people they are studying. Dreams reported in this way are similar to religious interpretations of dreams in the West. They assume the existence of invisible spirits, survival of physical death, God(s) and demons, precognition, omens, and other categories of experience classified as paranormal by parapsychologists but as superstition by others.

Of all the research that has been done on dreams, very few studies openly contest the idea of symbolic content, but some do:

> I see no need and no justification for treating this dream as a disguised, symbolic expression of anxiety about other related themes . . . (Hobson 2002)

> . . . there is no systematic empirical evidence that dreams contain symbols to any greater degree than our typical waking thoughts, let alone has there been any empirical support for a particular system to "decode" these symbols. (Wamsley 2013)

The conflict between brain-based dream research and psychology-based dream research is that meaning is arbitrary in one and ordered in the other. If dreams are the result of an automatic brain-based process, then meaning will be as arbitrary as the process responsible for it. A psychology-based interpretation of dreams allows deeper levels of understanding due to subconscious ordering of content that can be understood consciously if analyzed properly. The psychological interpretation is not much different from the religious-themed dream interpretation frameworks found among indigenous tribes of such places as New Guinea and Brazil, but without the legitimization of religious or supernatural beliefs (George-Joseph & Smith 2008, Gregor 1981).

Paranormal dream researchers provide some evidence to discredit purely brain-based theories designed to explain dream activity. For instance, in a seminal study of telepathy in dreams, Ullman and Krippner (1970:397) designated images as "targets" that would appear in the dreams of their

subject. Out of 8 targets used over 8 nights, the subject had no misses as measured in the study and a distribution of hit scores that was significant at the .004 level. This is only one study among many that have shown strong, real-world connections to dream imagery that could not reasonably be linked to the prior experience or knowledge of study participants (Alvarado & Zingrone 2008, Bem 2011, Graff 2007, Paquette 2012a). If this research is to be believed, brain-based explanations of dream activity cannot be fully accepted because they do not account for paranormal knowledge. For this reason, neurological explanations for dreams are treated as disproven in at least some examples and therefore are not accepted as a proper foundation for, or default position on, dream research.

This leaves other dream research, most or all of which accepts that information in dreams is sometimes conveyed via symbolic means to the dreamer. The agency of these symbols is disputed among psychologists, parapsychologists, and theologians. The divide between these camps is whether the information conveyed to the dreamer has an internal source—such as the subconscious mind—or an external one, such as divine revelation from God, evil spirits, or deceased loved ones. Parapsychologists occupy a middle ground in this debate by accepting the possibility that veridical psi information can be derived internally (from one's own psychic ability) or externally (from any of the other sources just described). However, both of these positions are antithetical to conventional psychology, which does not admit the possibility of genuine psi content. Despite the sometimes heated debate between these camps (Krippner & Friedman 2010), neither meaningfully contests that dream content is often symbolic and can be interpreted to improve one's understanding of a dream.

In the context of symbols and dreams, early Roman ideas about dreams and how they should be interpreted are remarkably similar to those of non-Western peoples in the modern age. For instance, the Mehinaku tribespeople of modern-day Brazil acknowledge that some dreams are no more than *day residue*, or the recycling of previous events from the day, but they also look at dreams as the memory of real events where their soul travels outside of their bodies. In this latter type of experience, they sometimes witness symbolic imagery as part of their direct experience, or it is given to them by a spirit entity within the dream. In either case, upon waking they endeavor to interpret the symbol to understand its meaning (Gregor 1981). This is similar to how dreams were regarded during the ancient Roman empire, where certain dreams were thought to have special importance due to the presence of recognized symbols—called omens—which demanded interpretation by a skilled diviner of such things (Gillen 1989).

The recognized—or fixed—symbols described by Gillen are expressly rejected by Wamsley, but are clearly embraced in cultures in which certain dream imagery has a specific meaning. For instance, among the Mehinaku ". . . a dream of collecting the edible flying ants which descend on the village each fall warns the dreamer that a close relative will die" (Gregor 1981). In this example, the reason given is that the lifespan of these flying ants is short. The Asabano tribe compares waking experiences with their dreams as a way to construct a library of symbols that can be used to interpret future dreams. Despite the existence of a well-developed symbology, they are also aware that dreams can be literal. As an example, when a researcher told an Asabano villager of a dream wherein his laptop computer fell into a fire, he was advised to be careful with his laptop rather than to ascribe symbolic meaning to the dream (Lohmann 2000).

Dream researchers have found examples of psi, day residue, and symbolic content in dreams, but how common are these types of dream content? Among scientists who reject the possibility of paranormal content, virtually all dreams are classified as either day residue or symbolically coded messages from one's subconscious to their conscious mind. Among parapsychologists, symbol frequency has received less attention than psi content. Anthropologists have studied tribes that have ideas about the difference between symbolic and non-symbolic dream content, but they have not deeply explored this difference.

Methodology

The Dream Journals

The data used for this study derive from a series of personal dream journals in which I have made regular entries since September 15, 1989. The cutoff date for the study is February 22, 2015. The time period covered between and including these dates is 9,291 days, or 25.45 years. The number of daily records made during that time is 3,920. This means that 5,371 days (57.81%) of the total span were skipped or have no entry. The remainder comprise 42.19% of the total period, or approximately 2 entries every 5 days. As of the cutoff date, there were 34 journals. The digital transcription of the combined journals contained 801,078 words.

Each of the 3,920 records is broken into 11,850 scenes. Scenes were defined in previous studies (Paquette 2012a, 2012b) as content separated by waking. This has been changed for the present study because some thematically similar material bridged waking states and at other times thematically inconsistent material was contained between waking states.

For example, according to the previous classification method, on an evening when 2 scenes were recorded separately because I woke between making each record, each is recorded as a separate scene. However, there are multiple examples of scenes that have continued where the previous scene left off after returning to sleep. To distinguish these examples from scenes that are not continuous, scenes are now differentiated based on thematically consistent material from the same evening, or *record*. The term *scene* is used to differentiate thematically distinct dream content from the same night's record. Therefore, the word *scene* will be used in the context of records, but the word *dream* will be used when discussing content. The average number of scenes per record is 3.01. The average word count is 67.82 per scene, though many are much longer. The longest word count is 2,948 for 1 scene.

These quantitative details are supplied for the purpose of establishing that the journals used for this study cover a significant span of time, are regularly kept, and possess sufficient material for a study of this type. The number of individual records, scenes, and words in each entry are sufficient to support statistical analysis. The principal goal of a statistical analysis is to determine the actual rate of unambiguously symbolic content relative to content that cannot be reliably identified as symbolic.

Intentions

The purpose of making these journals was to prove to my wife that I was not having precognitive dreams—contrary to her assertion that I was. They were never intended to serve any therapeutic purpose, nor was my original intention to continue recording my dreams for so long a period. Very shortly after the journals were started, I found what appeared to be precognitive content. This occurred so often that I was eventually forced to reverse my position on precognitive dreams. This led to some curiosity about the dreams and a very brief period of experimentation during which I tried to consciously affect the content of my dreams. In total, attempts of this kind were made during 1 month in 1990, and then on perhaps 10 occasions over the next 25 years. In most cases, these attempts were unsuccessful. Another concern was that I found that the most interesting dreams were those that were the least expected. This is particularly true of lucid dreams, which tend to be uninteresting on those occasions when I have used the lucid state experienced in the dream to affect its content. Because of this, long ago I made a conscious decision to avoid any form of dream incubation. There are a few exceptions to this rule, but they are quite rare (less than once a year).

Selection Criteria

The definition of *symbolic* used here depends on the root *symbol*:

> something that stands for or suggests something else by reason of relation-
> ship, association, convention, or accidental resemblance; especially: a vis-
> ible sign of something invisible; the lion is a symbol of courage. (Merriam-
> Webster.com 2016)

This definition is expanded to include the following:

> A shape or sign used to represent something such as an organization, e.g.,
> a red cross or a Star of David: the Red Cross symbol; the Star of David, the
> Jewish symbol. (Oxforddictionaries.com 2016)

In this latter definition, the symbol is created for the specific purpose of communicating an idea to others with a graphic device. For the purpose of identifying unambiguous symbolic content, the following definition is not used: "an object or act representing something in the unconscious mind that has been repressed; <phallic symbols>" (Merriam-Webster.com 2016). Symbols share characteristics with metaphors, but the difference is that a metaphor is used for the purpose of comparison while a symbol is used in place of the thing or idea that the symbol represents. For this reason, although an argument can be made that some of the examples described in this article could be described as metaphors, they can equally be called symbols. Because it is common to describe both as symbols in the literature on this subject, the word *symbol* is preferred here.

To be identified as unambiguously symbolic content, the content must meet specific criteria. The criteria are:

- It is an efficient way to convey a specific message.
- It does not appear to be a regurgitation or reflection of the dreamer's thoughts or concerns.
- Clarity of communication is improved by the use of symbolic rather than literal presentation.

The following criterion is not required to meet the definition of "symbolic" used here, but it is met by some dream content and strengthens identification of dream content as symbolic:

- There is a character in the dream who makes or draws attention to the symbol. This shows that the source of the symbol is—at least apparently—independent.

The criteria described here are designed to prevent the false

identification of symbolic content by ensuring that all symbolic content performs the normal function of *symbols*: to communicate original information efficiently from one or more parties to another. The theory of subconscious to conscious mind communication accounts for the seeming impossibility of an independent source of communication, but other research has demonstrated that psi communication can occur between individuals in dreams (Krippner & Ullman 1970). This removes the obstacle presented by the logical argument that all communication must begin and end with the dreamer. I am aware that some dreamers report that certain indicators recur in their dreams as a way to get their attention or to alert them that there is something special in the dream. However, in the dreams reviewed here, the primary alert mechanism found is a seemingly independent dream character who makes an effort to get my attention to give me a message.

Many dreams are thought to be "day residue," or a recapitulation of the dreamers own thoughts and experiences from the same or earlier days. This cannot be applied to paranormal content of which the dreamer is unaware at the time of the dream. Additionally, in the dream journals used for this study, there are only 6 examples that might be described as day residue out of 11,850 dreams. There may be more examples, but without sufficient detail to identify them as such. This is mentioned because of the pronounced rarity of this type of dream content in the journals reviewed for this paper. For those who may find this surprising—particularly in the context of general acceptance that day residue is common, the following paragraph provides an explanation.

The first argument against day residue as an explanation for some dreams in the journals examined here is that veridical paranormal content references information I had no conscious access to at the time of the dream. Therefore, it cannot reflect my knowledge at the time. Second, I have been aware of the concept of 'day residue' from before the first entry was made in my journal. Indeed, I assumed at the time that every dream would be day residue. For this reason I was vigilant for its appearance. However, very few dreams had the potential to be day residue and even fewer had strong evidence to support classifying them that way. For instance, I have had several dreams wherein I find myself eating a variety of foods. Because I eat every day and the foods usually are not distinctive from my normal diet, it is not possible to classify one of these dreams as related to past knowledge of an event instead of future knowledge of a similar event. Third, significant real world content that one would expect to find in one's dreams as day residue does not often appear in mine. I make entries in the journal when this happens. For instance, one of my cousins died unexpectedly on October

23, 2002, and I was notified within a day that it had happened. However, there are no indications in the journal that I dreamed of this, despite my expectation that I might. After being informed of his death when I woke, I noted the following in the journal "My cousin Jason Paquette died today, but not a hint of it in my dream journal." An examination of dreams on following days similarly had no mention of my cousin, the circumstances of his death, or imagery that could plausibly be linked to his death in a symbolic way. A check of the full journal shows that this cousin appears in only three dreams, two several years before he died and one ten years after his death.

The criteria regarding clarity may seem nonsensical in the context of symbolic content found in dreams. Much of dream analysis and interpretation is based on the idea that dream content is highly subjective and thus cannot be 'clear' in the sense meant here. However, it is fairly easy to argue that the logo for McDonald's—a symbol—is a clearer representation of the restaurant than a photograph of a McDonald's restaurant interior. To give a more abstract example, a literal view of a large-diameter cylinder seen through a doorway, where either side is hidden from view, could be taken to be any one of a number of things: a pipe, a torpedo, an airplane fuselage, an industrial sheath, or a rocket. However, a toy rocket seen in its entirety in the context of damage done to a city is more readily identified as a symbol than a literal image of the thing itself. For this study, "clarity of communication" refers to content where a literal image or scene of the thing represented would be more complex or less clear than the representation in the dream.

It is possible—even likely—that some dreams not identified as symbolic in this study do contain symbolic content. However, the purpose is to study unambiguously symbolic dreams that meet objective criteria even if that means that some symbolic content is not classified as such. One example of how this may happen is provided by extremely brief journal entries. For instance, on October 16, 1989, I entered the following: *'Scenes with water, boats?'* This is the entire entry. It may refer to my having seen boats the previous day, that I would see boats the following day, or any number of symbolic interpretations, but without context it is not possible to differentiate between these explanations. Out of 11,850 scenes, 2,267 (19.13%) had fewer than 10 words and were coded as 'non-symbolic' on the basis that they did not contain enough information to be unambiguously symbolic. In contrast, the average word count for scenes identified as symbolic according to the criteria presented earlier is 286.79.

Figure 1. Sample page from the dream database, with "symbol" tab open.

Search and Analysis

To code the dreams, every scene was read carefully for features that matched the selection criteria. To be clear on this point, 'each dream' refers explicitly to every dream contained in the database. All of these were read in their entirety at least once to identify symbolic content. For an appreciation of the size of this task, the book *Les Miserables* by Victor Hugo contains 655,478 words, or 145,600 fewer words than are contained in the journals.

To accommodate positive results, the database was modified by adding several coded fields relevant to symbols. When symbolic content was found, the scene was then marked and set aside for more detailed coding after the entire database had been read. At that point, the marked scenes were coded by symbol type (personal, warning, visualization, etc.), whether the symbol was complete, how the symbol was presented (seen, heard, shown, or described), and an explanation provided for each symbol (Figure 1).

In some cases, veridical psi content made it possible to determine that a dream was not symbolic. For instance, on October 20, 1989, I dreamed of a talking egg in a sock that is smashed into a wall. At first glance the content appears bizarre and potentially symbolic—such as a metaphor for anger or the fragile state of one's emotions. However, on the following night I

viewed an original episode of *Saturday Night Live* on television that featured a talking egg in a sock that is smashed into a wall. Because the imagery is so unusual and there are hundreds of similarly veridical examples in the journal, it is statistically unlikely that the dream had no psi component or that it was symbolic (Paquette 2012a). It is examples like this that drove me to adopt the assumption that dream content is not symbolic unless it meets unambiguous criteria that identifies it as such. As an aside, veridical dreams also had the effect of inhibiting my willingness to describe dream content as 'bizarre'. The smashed talking egg dream is certainly bizarre, but not in the sense that it is impossible or a break with objective reality. Talking eggs may not exist, but a fictitious representation of one did exist (on the TV show).

Quantitative analysis is sufficient to establish the proportion of unambiguous symbolic content, the distribution of symbol types within symbolic dreams, the relationship of symbolic to veridical content, and the type of content most often found in symbolic dreams. However, a qualitative analysis allows a richer view of the data. For that reason, dreams were coded by type, and then symbolic and non-symbolic dream content was compared to determine if there were any meaningful characteristics in either category. For instance, what kind of information is communicated in symbolic form? The talking egg dream was a literal representation of a scene I would see on the following day. Could it have been represented symbolically just as well? Or was a literal representation easier to understand and remember? In the dream itself I did not understand the content, but recognized the scene when I saw it on television later. Would symbolic communication be any clearer than non-symbolic imagery? To investigate this question, each dream had to be carefully read and analyzed.

Findings

Of the 11,850 scenes reviewed, 80 (0.68%) met the 3 criteria for unambiguous symbolic content. These 80 scenes were found in 78 of the nightly records (2.04%), 2 of which had 2 unambiguously symbolic scenes each. This is a very low proportion of the total number of dream scenes and records reviewed for this study if symbolic content is assumed to be common. Within dreams identified as containing unambiguous symbolic content, 11 were also veridical. This means that only 0.28% of all dreams were symbolic and veridical, in comparison with 10.82% of all dreams (n = 424) containing veridical content regardless of the presence of symbolic elements.

Together, these figures indicate that unambiguous symbolic content is extremely rare and that it is not commonly found in dreams that have

veridical paranormal content. This last finding undermines arguments that veridicality is manufactured on the basis of generous linkages between dream imagery and real world events. Since 99.72% of all veridical dreams in this sample did not contain unambiguously symbolic content but were instead literal representations of later events, veridicality cannot be ascribed to the mistaken interpretation of symbols. On this point it is important to note that it wasn't just the rarity of unambiguous symbolic content, but the presence of unambiguously literal content that argues against an interpretation that symbolic content is common in precognitive dreams.

The way unambiguous symbols were presented favored the form of an explicit message from a dream character (n = 49, 61.3%). As an example of the most extreme form of this, in a dream dated June 8, 1999, a dream character shows me a tree-like network structure as a metaphor for the many paths available to spirits in multiple lives. He then brings me to another character as a way to complete the message. This new character is aware that I am dreaming and explains that the first character was responsible for making the symbol I viewed but that she would explain it to me because her style of communication was more compatible with my abilities. In this dream, the following are explicitly clear: 1) my dream state, 2) that a specific dream object is a symbol, and 3) the meaning of the symbol. Not all dreams are as obvious, but can still be readily identified as communication from an independent source.

In a dream dated February 27, 2006, I first see, as if I am an independent witness, a group of men who wish to assassinate Syria's leader, Bashar Al-Assad. Before they enact their plan, a dream character comes to me and asks me to accompany him. He tells me there is a vision he wants me to see. He brings me to the Syrian desert outside the town we were in where he shows me a giant lion sleeping in the moonlight (Figure 2). This is a symbol of a great danger, not yet awakened, coming from Syria and (presumably) related to the men who wanted to assassinate Al-Assad seen earlier. In this example, I am not lucid nor does the dream character who shows me the symbol make me aware of my sleeping state. However, he addresses me directly—unlike the would-be assassins—and does so specifically for the purpose of showing me something identified as symbolic within the dream. Unlike the previous example, he does not explain the meaning of the symbol.

An image not identified as a symbol can be explicit or implicit, depending on how obvious it is. In an example from December 14, 2010, a dream character gets my attention and asks me to accompany her so that I may see something. She shows me a group of hundreds of people falling
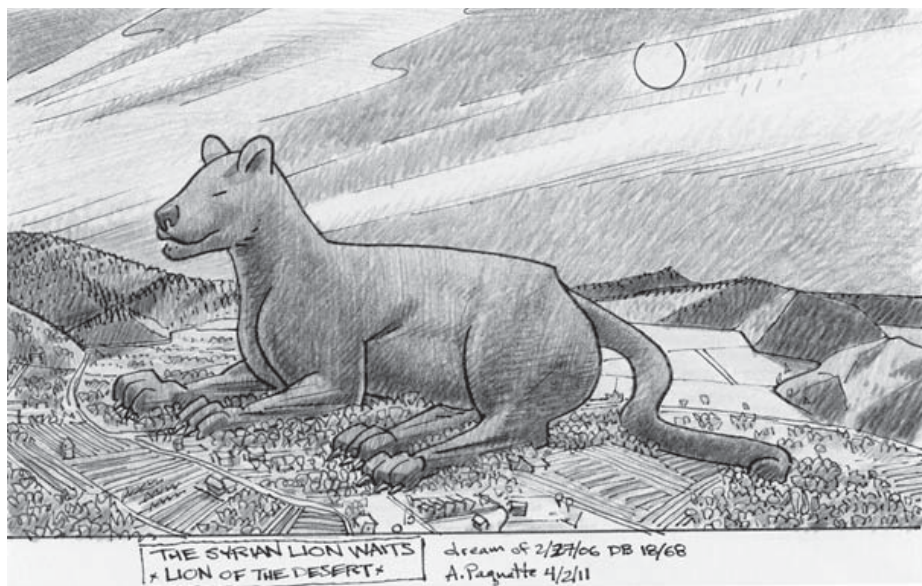
Figure 2. A drawing based on a sketch from the journal on the night of the Syrian lion dream.

from the sky, each of whom has a large wooden cross tied to their neck by a hangman's noose (Figure 3). The effect is very similar to watching a crashing airplane that has been reduced to bodies and debris. In the dream, however, each piece of debris has been supplanted with crosses and nooses. I took this to be a symbol for people who were murdered in a plane crash because of their religious affiliation, assumed to be Christian.

In a minority of symbolic dreams (n = 30, 37.5%), no communicator was present, but the dream content matched the other criteria used here to identify them as symbolic. In an example of this, a dream dated June 4, 1990, referenced an earlier dream from the previous month. In that dream, I saw the 'skyscrapers' in the area of the World Trade Center leveled to rubble, followed by what looked like a 20-story high tidal wave washing through the fallen buildings (this resembled closely the appearance of the dust cloud that followed the actual collapse of the World Trade Center on 9/11/2001). In the June 4 dream, a person asked me about the earlier dream, insisting that I give him as much detail as possible. After I finish talking to him, I see two billiard balls roll off a shelf: the "9" and "11" balls, in that order. This is one of 11 veridical symbolic dreams. It is identified as symbolic for two reasons: First, the reference to the earlier dream establishes the context
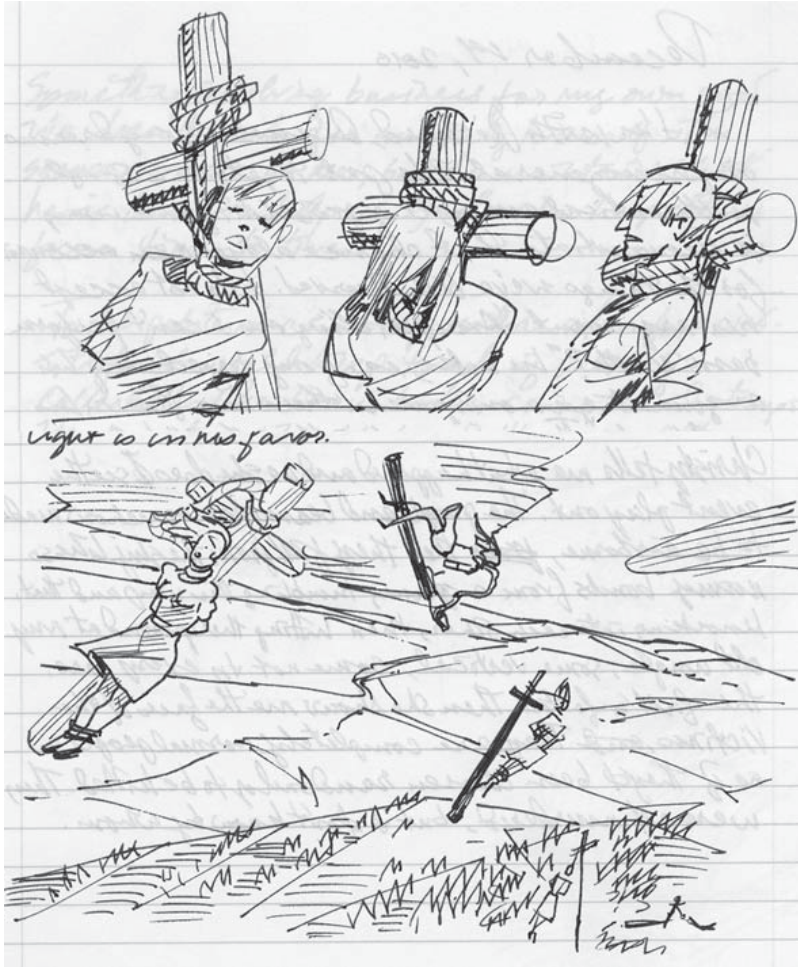
Figure 3. An Illustration from the journal, made the night of the dream, December 14, 2010.

as related to the World Trade Center disaster, and second, the numbers on the billiard balls are presented in the context of an attempt to respond to insistent questioning about the other dream. Therefore, it may be inferred that the numbers represent information relevant to the question I was trying to answer, and they were relevant to the date of the disaster the previous dream appears to reference.

A non-veridical example of an obvious symbol comes from an entry

dated January 15, 1991. In this dream, a piano's keys have been replaced by the spines of a group of war and horror-themed comic books in bound volumes. When I played the piano, I could see visions of real war and carnage. This is not a particularly difficult symbol to master given the obvious relationship between war comics and images of war.

Lucid dreams (n = 16, 20%) were less common than non-lucid dreams (n = 64, 80%) among dreams with unambiguously symbolic content. This differs significantly from the overall lucid dream count for the journal (n = 89, 0.75%), where they are proportionately rarer. This is likely because there appears to be an effort on the part of dream characters who are communicating symbol-related information to inform me that I am dreaming. In one non-lucid example of this from January 3, 2008, a pair of dream characters seem to be making strenuous efforts to 'wake' me within the dream. They do not succeed, but the dream was very intense and rich with detail, making it easy to understand their goal after waking. In another example, from January 31, 2003, a dream character tries to wake me several times within the dream, and eventually succeeds by asking me to smell some herbs. At that point the dream becomes lucid and he is able to converse with me more easily. This type of thing has happened with other dreams, where a dream character induces me to ingest something—usually tea—and this has the effect of making me conscious of my dream state. Once this has been done, the character will impart a message to me, sometimes remarking on the fact that I am dreaming and should take care to remember the message.

Dream intensity was measured on a 6-point scale, from 0 to 5, where 0 denoted a dream that was not intense and 5 described a dream that was extraordinarily intense. Symbolic dreams did not settle on any one value, but were spread out fairly evenly across the middle 4 values (Table 1).

The findings presented here provide examples of dream content that is unambiguously symbolic. The content is described as symbolic within the dream, it is communicated to the dreamer by an independent dream character, the purpose of the communication is given, and the meaning of the symbol is (sometimes) explained. This is in contrast to assumptions made by other researchers that dream content may be symbolic even when there are no overt indicators that it is (Schredl 2010). These findings also explicitly present examples of dream characters who are aware of the dreamer's dream state, that they are independent of the dreamer, and that they have original content to provide the dreamer for the express purpose of remembering it upon waking.

Dreams that have not been assigned to a specific category of interest, such as day residue, veridical, symbolic, death-related, spiritual, etc., are

TABLE 1
Frequency of Dreams, Sorted by Intensity

Intensity	Frequency	Percent
0	6	7.5
1	20	25.0
2	20	25.0
3	22	27.5
4	11	13.8
5	1	1.3

"unassigned." These dreams may belong in a category of interest, but lack sufficient justification to be so. They cannot be described as being homogenous as a group because they contain too much variety of subject matter and type of experience. For example, an unassigned dream entry from June 11, 2001, reads "A receipt for an unused plane ticket from Nice to LAX in the mail. It has the message 'Failure to board' and 'Failure to exit' printed on it." It is plausible that I would fly out of LAX because I lived in LA at the time, but is unrelated to my activities at the time of the dream. I have also been to Nice, but not until 2007, when I flew there from Amsterdam. In a dream from a few days earlier, I watch a group of penguins as their beaks clack open and shut as if they are talking. Not an implausible scene, but difficult to classify because there is no known connection to anything in my life at the time. Other unassigned dreams are simple scenes of me travelling through various locations—local and exotic—observing whatever happens to be there. One thing that is true of many of these dreams—but not all—is that the scenarios they represent are normal and plausible.

Discussion

In a lucid dream dated February, 3, 2006, a dream character first informs me that I am asleep, and then explains that symbols in dreams are a form of communication employed to enhance the memorability and quality of messages given during sleep states. She says that communicators—implied to be spirits of some kind—have different communication styles and skill levels. This, she said, accounts for the sometimes variable quality of symbolic communication in dreams. She says this in the context of a

symbol she showed me earlier in the dream. She goes on to say that the origin of these dreams is not local to my own consciousness, but that they are deliberate productions created by others for my benefit. The explanation is logical, but is it credible?

The argument against accepting dream-derived paranormal knowledge—any knowledge from an external source—is the same as any argument against paranormal phenomena in general. However, those arguments suffer from a lack of accord with data produced by parapsychologists who have studied such diverse subjects as mediumship (Rock & Beischel 2008), telepathy (Braude 1978), reincarnation (Stevenson & Samaratne 1988), and paranormal dreams (Stevenson 1992). Data produced in parapsychology studies strongly indicate that paranormally derived information can be received from nonlocal sources, and that it is not as rare as critics claim (Tart 2009).

What the field of parapsychology has not yet produced is a reliable means to test the credibility of ancillary non-veridical content. In this study, there are 11 veridical dreams. The veridical content can be verified by comparison with the real world events they correspond to, such as in my dream of the Syrian lion. A little research reveals that the group of Islamic radicals currently known as ISIS started in Syria as a group of people described as the 'Lions of Syria' by their inspirational leaders. Their original goal was to assassinate Bashar Al-Assad and restore Islamic rule to Syria. These details correspond to the most obvious interpretation of my dream. However, the way that information is conveyed cannot be verified. There is no giant sleeping lion in Syria, and the dream character who showed this symbol to me cannot be proven to exist. And yet, the symbol and context of the dream appeared to describe something empirically real that I only found out about in 2014, 8 years after the dream, when I ran across a reference in the news to Ayman Al-Zawahiri who referred to ISIS members as the 'Lions of Syria' in a speech on August 20, 2011.

This study originated in a desire to compare the expectation among some that dreams are rife with symbolic content with the reality presented within my journals that symbolic content appears to be rare. More than that, I intended to analyze the dreams to see if any general themes could be established. I was aware of dreams that provided explanations for dream symbols, but until this research was conducted I was not aware of how consistent the content is. Not only is unambiguously symbolic content unusual, but when it appears it seems to follow rules established by dream characters. That is, the symbols are used for a specific purpose (to communicate messages to me) by nonlocal characters, with the specific goal

of allowing the message to make the transition from sleep consciousness to waking consciousness. It is not possible in the context of this research to establish the validity of the explanations provided by dream characters for symbolic content in dreams, but they do provide an indication of how unambiguously symbolic content can be identified, and that can be used as a first step toward further research on this question.

References Cited

Alvarado, C. S., & Zingrone, N. L. (2008). Ian Stevenson and the modern study of spontaneous ESP experiences. *Journal of Scientific Exploration, 22*(1):44–53.

Bem, D. J. (2011). Feeling the future: Experimental evidence for anomalous retroactive influences on cognition and affect. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 100*(3):407–425.

Braude, S. (1978). Telepathy. *Noûs, 12*(3):267–301. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2214740

George-Joseph, G., & Smith, E. W. L. (2008). The dream world in Dominica. *Dreaming, 18*(3):167–174. doi:10.1037/a0013384

Gillen, P. (1989). Myths of the unknown: Omens and oracular discourse. *Journal of Pragmatics, 13*(3):407–425. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(89)90063-5

Graff, D. E. (2007). Explorations in precognitive dreaming. *Journal of Scientific Exploration, 21*(4):707–722.

Gregor, T. (1981). "Far, Far Away My Shadow Wandered . . . ": The dream symbolism and dream theories of the Mehinaku Indians of Brazil. *American Ethnologist, 8*(4):709–720.

Hobson, J. A. (2002). *Dreaming: An Introduction to the Science of Sleep.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Jung, C. J., Franz, M.-L. v., Henderson, J. L., Jacobi, J., & Jaffe, A. (1968). *Man and His Symbols* (60th paperback edition). New York: Dell.

Krippner, S. (2006). Geomagnetic field effects in anomalous dreams and the Akashic field. *World Futures, 62*:103–113. doi:10.1080/02604020500412741

Krippner, S., & Friedman, H. L. (2010). Debating Psychic Experience: Human Potential or Human Illusion? Praeger. p. 236.

Krippner, S., & Ullman, M. (1970). Telepathy and dreams: A controlled experiment with electro-encephalogram-electro-oculogram monitoring. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease, 151*(6):394–403.

Lohmann, R. I. (2000). The role of dreams in religious enculturation among the Asabano of Papua New Guinea. *Ethos, 28*(1):75–102.

Merriam-Webster.com (2016). Symbol. http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/symbol

Oxforddictionaries.com (2016). Symbol. http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/symbol

Paquette, A. (2012a). A new approach to veridicality in dream psi studies. *Journal of Scientific Exploration, 26*(3):589–610.

Paquette, A. (2012b). NDE implications from a group of spontaneous long-distance veridical OBEs. *Journal of Scientific Exploration, 26*(4):791–824.

Rock, A. J., & Beischel, J. (2008). Quantitative analysis of research mediums' conscious experiences during a discarnate reading versus a control task: A pilot study. *Australian Journal of Parapsychology, 8*(2):157–179.

Schredl, M. (2010). Dream content analysis: Basic principles. *International Journal of Dream Research, 3*(1):65–73.

Stevenson, I. (1992). A series of possibly paranormal recurrent dreams. *Journal of Scientific Exploration, 6*(3):281–289.

Stevenson, I., & Samaratne, G. (1988). Three new cases of the reincarnation type in Sri Lanka with written records made before verifications. *Journal of Scientific Exploration, 2*(2):217–238.

Tart, C. T. (2009). *The End of Materialism*. Oakland: New Harbinger.

Wamsley, E. J. (2013). Dreaming, waking conscious experience, and the resting brain: Report of subjective experience as a tool in the cognitive neurosciences. *Frontiers in Psychology, 4*:1–7. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00637