

Wake up your Artist!

Lucid Dreaming as a Creative Tool

Clare Johnson, PhD © 2011

At some point in our lives, we've probably looked on in awe or envy as artists dig deep, apparently knowing just where to go and what to do in order to raise some gorgeous, wing-flapping creation from within themselves. Maybe we've felt inspired as a result, or maybe it's made us think, 'I just don't have the imagination to be an artist.' It's remarkably easy to persuade ourselves that we aren't the creative type, but everyone has imagination, and so everyone has an artistic side. To find it, all we need to do is look to our dreams, which teem with symbols, memories, eidetic images and emotions. Becoming lucid in a dream adds an element of consciousness which enables the dreamer to watch his or her imagination at play and react *in situ* to what is happening. Lucid dreams can be guided in an artistic direction, and the lucid dreamer can elicit helpful impulses and ideas to inspire artwork and creative writing.

Dream lucidity refers to an awareness of the dream state - realising that you are dreaming. The lucid attention given to a dream once we have awoken from it can be seen as a continuation of lucid dreaming; another way of being conscious of the dream. As such, the link between dreams and waking reality is lucidity: either in-the-dream lucidity, or post-dream lucidity, or a combination of the two. This workshop aims to share ways of working lucidly with our dreams for artistic inspiration.

In-the-dream experimentation

Once you become lucid in a dream, endless possibilities open up. The dream can be observed like a marvellous, personal film of your imagination at play, with the best images consciously shored up to be re-examined upon waking, or the action can be nudged in an artistic direction. Sigmund Freud likened lucid dreamers to playwrights when he spoke of people who ‘possess the faculty of consciously directing their dreams’; he noted that such dreamers can replay the action, ‘just as a popular dramatist may under pressure give his play a happier ending’ (1965). Lucid dream researchers LaBerge and Rheingold advise: ‘If you want to learn to paint, summon Rembrandt. Go fishing with Hemingway or Hesse and talk about that novel you’ve always wanted to write’ (1990). Artist Epic Dewfall takes a very direct route; he walks into art galleries in his lucid dreams, to gather ideas for his paintings. For most lucid dreamers, keeping it simple and throwing a question such as, ‘What shall I paint next?’ into the dream environment could elicit the forthright, imaginative response we’re hoping for. When the lucid dreamer comes across an image, a tune, or a story idea that makes her spine tingle and her fingers itch to get creating, she can will herself awake and record it.

Disappearing atom by atom

Lucid dreaming can provide a platform for sensory experimentation – we can safely experience sensations such as breathing underwater, skiing at breakneck speed, running with lions... and these highly realistic impressions can inspire artwork and writing. In one lucid dream which had the plot elements and fantastic nature of a fairytale, I magically disappeared, atom by atom, and this dream helped me write a series of novel scenes in which the protagonist enters a state of bewitched invisibility.

One of the characters in my first novel, *Breathing in Colour*, has synaesthesia, a condition where the senses are mingled so that musical notes might be experienced as colours, or textures tasted on the tongue. In a lucid dream, I consciously evoked an experience of synaesthetic perception to help me write about my character’s way of seeing the world:

‘I’m lucid,’ I say. I briefly consider synaesthesia and my research and novel, and suddenly I am standing in front of a wall of textured strips which I decide to touch to see whether any synaesthetic associations occur... nothing comes up and I reflect that taste sensations are fairly rare in dreams. I move on to the next texture. This one is soft and furry, sort of like velour. ‘It tastes of porridge!’ I realise...

This lucid dream shows the level of coherent, reflective thought available to lucid dreamers – my decision to seek an experience of synaesthesia in my dreams was instantly recalled and

put into practice as soon as I realised I was dreaming. In the dream I was able to experience directly what is possibly the closest thing to synaesthesia that a non-synaesthete with no special equipment can experience, and it usefully informed the writing of my novel.

In lucid dreams, your inner artist is 'awake' enough to observe and recall what takes place in the dream, with a conscious view to carrying inspiring images and ideas back to waking reality in order to transform them into art. As researcher Ed Kellogg says, 'Intentionality in the dream state seems almost akin to creation' (1999), so that in a lucid dream the expectation of the appearance of imagery to inspire your artistic process is likely to prompt just that, with no great effort required beyond remaining lucid. Lucid dreamers are free to choose whether to take a stance of passive observation, or whether to direct the dream.

The lucid dream 'nudge'

In my experience, it's often useful to give an initial 'nudge' to guide the dream. If you're a writer, why not call out the name of one of your fictional characters when you next become lucid in a dream. When they appear, talk to them – be ready for surprises (they can be quite rude!). Or sit quietly and compose a poem. If you think it's a really good one, it might be wise to wake yourself up so you can write it down immediately – I've found that words, far more than images, tend to get muddled or forgotten even after the most lucid of dreams if followed by hours of non-lucid dreaming.

Research has shown that practising a motor skill in lucid dreams has positive effects on the waking performance of such actions (Erlacher & Schredl, 2010). Similarly, we can practice art in our dreams, further away from our critical censor since we are asleep, in a world where the imagination rules. If you're a musician, call for your fiddle/piano/trombone and see what happens. If an instrument appears that you have never played before, give it a try and see what happens. If your instrument of choice arrives, see how much better/worse you can play it while dreaming. Or you can simply sit cross-legged, focus on an object in the dream environment so as to remain lucid, and build up an orchestra in your head. I have done this before with thunderous success despite the fact that my waking-life musical ability amounts to playing 'Three Blind Mice' on the descant recorder, and I have never held a conductor's baton in my life. Yet in dreams, and especially lucid ones, anything is possible!

If you're an artist, when you become lucid you could either get stuck in and draw a picture/throw a pot, or announce your intention to find the 'magic box' of images, ideas, and inspiration. Mine turned out to be a treasure chest lolling open behind a tree (I had to shoo away two big guard dogs to get at it) and to my surprise it was bursting with material – scraps

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of silk, twines of coloured wool, armfuls of slippery saris, thick ribbons all in a sumptuous tangle. Soon after this dream, I collaged 'Spiral Energy' using all of the above.



'Spiral Energy' by Clare Johnson
Mixed media collage

One thing I love about lucid dreams is that, as Kelzer observes, 'lucidity does not seem to act as an inhibitor of the unconscious' (1987). Even in the most determinedly controlled lucid dream, there are always uncontrollable elements, so that the spontaneity of the dream shines through. It is this spontaneity that gives us our most original creations, the brightest, boldest ideas to take with us back to waking reality, and turn into art.

After the dream: working lucidly with dreams to turn them into art

There are thousands of different types of artistic expression. Finding the right one for you really isn't that complicated, if you follow your intuition and stay open to the possibility that there might be an as-yet-undiscovered drummer, mask-maker, or calligrapher inside you. Choose a dream to work with. It might be a whole, storylike dream, or a snippet, or one central, numinous image.

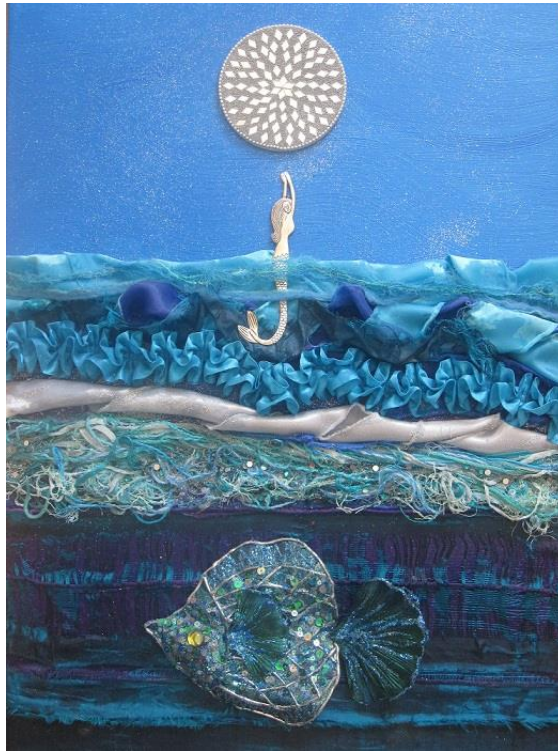
Temporary art

If you are anxious about your art not being ‘good enough’, why not experiment with temporary art? This art is not designed to last; the opposite of cave etchings or steel sculptures. Sandplay is a lovely way to explore a dream, all you need is a tray of sand and some figurines and objects (borrow your kid’s lego animals, use fallen leaves to represent trees, matchsticks for people, an old earring for treasure, and so on). Using these props, recreate your dream scene and create a piece of artwork in the process. Focusing your lucid attention on the dream in this way can be both therapeutic and cathartic. For seasoned artists, painting a dream with the non-dominant hand, or trying an unfamiliar art form with no aim to sell or exhibit it can unlock new creative patterns as old, confining habits are shrugged off. Other forms of temporary art are Play-Doh or any other modelling clay, even a Magic Slate – the children’s toy onto which you can doodle dream images before erasing them and starting again. And remember, you can always make temporary art permanent if there’s something you really want to keep, just by taking a photograph of it.

Here’s a fun form of temporary dream art that I liked so much, I included it in my second novel, *Dreamrunner*: Keeping in mind the dream you’d like to work with, collect items such as handfuls of earth, seashells, beads, dried leaves, rubber bands, flowers, pebbles. Then take all this outside (it gets messy!) along with a thick sheet of paper, a stereo with your chosen song in it, and some pots of coloured paint. Before you start, close your eyes and recall your dream, its energy, its emotion, its colours. You have the length of your song to create your artwork, and as most songs are pretty short, this lends urgency and excitement to the process, with paint flying everywhere and delightfully dirty fingernails. The sheer speed of this creation makes it impossible for your internal critic to discourage you with negative remarks. When you’ve finished, what you’ll probably see is a huge, lovely mess which captures something of the essence of your dream. If you like it, sit with it for a while and feel the pleasure of having bridged the gap between dreams and art.

Shoot for the moon

One very simple yet unexpectedly powerful way of working with a dream is to give it a title. The title can become the heading for a piece of creative writing or music. One of my dreams bore the title, ‘Shoot for the Moon’ (for me, this is the first half of the saying which continues, ‘Even if you miss it, you will land among the stars’). This title so resonated with me that I turned it into a collage of a mermaid leaping for the moon and a creativity fish, its fins coated in sequins and glitter, swimming in the waters of the unconscious.



‘Shoot for the Moon’ by Clare Johnson

Mixed media collage

The writer’s trance

As part of my doctoral research into the role of lucid dreaming in the creative writing process, I developed a technique for entering ‘the writer’s trance’. The writer’s trance can be seen as a waking version of a lucid dream, where we sink as deeply as we can into our unconscious minds while remaining awake, allowing ideas to flow freely and rapidly as dream imagery mingles with our imagination. The basic steps are as follows:

- 1) With pen and paper to hand, close your eyes and focus on your breathing. Take a few moments to relax your body and empty your mind.
- 2) Bring a lucid dream image into your mind’s eye. Allow it to grow in clarity, and feel the core emotion it generates.
- 3) Open your eyes just enough to see the paper. Once you begin writing, keep going as fast as you can for a minimum of five minutes.
- 4) If you hit a blank wall, return to your chosen dream image for inspiration and record the new thoughts or images which appear. Be open to any transformation of the dream image that takes place as you write.

Try the writer's trance technique if you're interested in creating dream-inspired poetry or other creative writing. You'll find that the initial dream image often morphs into something else – a memory, a face, a moving scene – and as you describe this, you slip into writing fiction. My experiments with writing fiction in the writer's trance led to some weird and wonderful novel characters - a dream scarecrow developed into a silver disc-headed man, and a lucid dream image of an elephant emerging from a giant tree trunk turned into a winged elephant with diamond eyes. These creations found a role in the novel as my protagonists' personalised archetypes.

Shouting the dream

Dreams can be danced, sung, explored through mime, or reenacted. Since lucid dreams are often particularly radiant and intense, they are ideal for after-the-dream work. The important thing is to take a quiet moment to conjure up the dream in your mind and feel it in your body before beginning, so that the connection with the dream is there from the start and deepens as the dreamwork gathers momentum. An IASD dream enactment workshop I attended, led by Jon Lipsky, involved shouting out one sentence that represented a dream, and accompanying it with a movement or gesture. This was shockingly powerful, and impressed me so much that I worked it into a chapter of *Dreamrunner* where the protagonist, who is suffering from violent, moving dreams, tries to get to the heart of his recurrent nightmare.

Let's get creative!

Dreams constantly present us with original constellations of imagery and thought. If we can unlock these through in-the-dream lucidity, and further develop them through after-the-dream techniques such as the writer's trance, the potential of lucid dreaming as a catalyst for creative artwork seems prodigious. Playing with lucid dreaming as a creative tool is mind-expanding, fun, and it'll bring out the artist in you.

I'd love to hear from you, so please feel free to post up your thoughts, dreams, and any questions you may have. Maybe you have a dream you'd like to turn into art but you aren't sure how. Or perhaps you'd like tips on how to hone dream-inspired writing into a poem or short story. I am very happy to help. I'd also love to hear your reactions to any of the techniques suggested here. Which ones appeal to you, which have you tried, and to what effect? Do you know any different techniques? And finally, a question that I've grappled with: When you think about your life as a work of art and yourself as the artist, do you know what kind of art you want to create? If you look to your dreams, they'll soon let you know.

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