

The wisdom of dreamwork

“I don’t interpret dreams,” says poet and spiritual director Rodger Kamenetz. “I bring them to life.”

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [August 2024](#) issue

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Poet and spiritual director Rodger Kamenetz (Photo by Moira Crone)

Rodger Kamenetz is an award-winning poet, teacher, and dreamworker. His books include The Jew in the Lotus, Terra Infirma, The History of Last Night’s Dream, and Burnt Books. He pioneered the creative writing department at Louisiana State University and now lives in New Orleans, doing spiritual direction and dreamwork. A version of this interview originally appeared in season 2 of the century podcast In Search Of.

Tell us how you became interested in dreamwork.

As a kid, I had repeated, scary falling dreams. When I was in college, I thought to start writing down my dreams because they might be fodder for poetry. I had a very

utilitarian attitude: “What is the use of something?” That’s an infection of our culture. Everything is about its use.

That led later to some terrifying lucid dreams where I tried to steer my car into oncoming traffic on a lark. I stopped writing them down.

But then years later I had a dream, after my grandfather died, in which he spoke to me. That became the root of my first book of poetry, *The Missing Jew. Terra Infirma*, about my mother, was also based on a dream. In my experience, certain dreams come to haunt us, bother us, terrify us, or just move us deeply.

After I wrote *The Jew in the Lotus* and met with these rabbis and the Dalai Lama, it was very striking how the Tibetans used techniques of contemplation of images, and they consider themselves the people of the dream. In a way the Jewish people are, also, people of the dream because of Joseph and Jacob. We have these archetypal figures.

I got curious about that. I met with a visualization teacher. Then I met a former postman, Marc Bregman, who taught me everything he knew about dreams. And that got me into the dreamwork.

Over the last 15 years, I’ve had the privilege of spending hours listening to people’s dreams. A lot of people think of other people’s dreams as boring, but for me they’re an endless source of fascination. I wonder at this capacity we have to spontaneously produce these powerful images that can move us so deeply and return us to our heart, to our soul.

You mentioned that your engagement with dreaming has deep roots in Judaism. How important is a person’s religious tradition in how they approach their dreams?

I find that the Jewish language is deeply inculcated in me from childhood, and so naturally it’s a reference point. But dreams themselves do not belong to any particular religion. I would say the dream experience underlies all religion. So it could be accommodated with whatever religious language you speak or don’t speak.

I work with people of all sorts, but ultimately, even though they might come to me originally for what we call psychology, for healing, for therapy—and dreams really do provide tremendous healing by bringing us to a depth of feeling—the practice

deepens to what is generally called spirituality. The word *spiritual* in its origin has a lot more to do with imagination than we often think. We spontaneously create images when we sleep. These are experiences of imagination in and of themselves. It's so remarkable that we each have this gift. But we take it for granted. There's no wonder about it.

If you explore it more deeply, it's like, well, I couldn't have thought of that on my own. How could it be that this just presents itself within me? So there must be something in us that is a source of spontaneous imagination. And, to me, that leads us to the sacred.

How do you go about helping people with their dreams?

Ezra Pound said "go in fear of abstraction" as advice for writing poetry. I would say, when it comes to dreams, go in fear of interpretation. Immerse yourself in the experience of the dream. Treat the dream experience seriously, and notice it more deeply. So we focus on the sensual and felt experiences, and we put aside the storytelling of the dream point of view.

What we focus on are moments of encounter that are full of feeling, encounter with things and people or forces, which we call images only after we wake. If you see a lion in a dream, it's a lion. It's not an image or a symbol; it's an experience.

I'm not totally against interpretation. We just put it to one side for as long as possible and immerse ourselves. How close were you to the lion? I had a dreamer once tell me they could feel his breath on their face. Okay. What were you feeling in your body at that moment? These intense moments of encounter are the site for the healing, the medicine.

The ego, or the I, is a story-making mechanism. Everything we see, we ask, is that a threat to the ego or is that helpful to me? Do I like this? Do I not like this? What's in it for me? is the ego's question. Even inside the dream, the habit of the ego is still there for a long, long time.

For example: someone's driving along and they see a nine-foot giant lying by the curb. Did you stop? I asked. Oh, no. I was on my way to work. I was in a hurry. Well, in the dream, you're not on your way to work, right? The habits of the waking life filter into the dream and contaminate it. What we can do is stop the dream there. Let's see the giant—what do you feel seeing this giant? Get the feeling. You can

really deepen and experience the feelings that were there for you but that you might have missed.

You can redream?

My motto is: I don't interpret dreams; I bring them to life. As much as possible, I don't interpret. I'm not saying interpretation is totally avoidable. It's what the mind does. But can we put it aside and just deepen our experience of the dream? And then we begin to notice more carefully the difference between feeling and reaction.

So often we're not living in our feelings. We don't know how we feel. Dreams can help us learn how we feel in the ordinary sense. What are you feeling? But also, how do we experience feeling in the body? What does it do to us when we're really in a feeling?

Our primary distinction, which I learned from Marc Bregman, is feeling versus reaction. A feeling is a whole body experience, like sorrow or pain or joy or terror. But a reaction is usually feeling plus story, like guilt or shame. We don't get to the underlying feeling because it's covered over by a reaction that also includes a story. So we try to tease that out, question the story, and go back to the feeling.

What kind of truth is available in a dream?

The truth is the truth of feeling. Feelings are how we know the truth of a moment, but only if we can discern the difference between feeling and reaction. Let's put it this way: the deepest feelings of wonder, awe, terror are on a continuum. I call them a harmonic, and we can feel them with greater or less intensity.

It's fundamental to spiritual experience to be able to feel awe. And that means we often have to be able to feel terror. Terror and fear and wonder are all on the same spectrum or harmonic. If we can't feel those things or don't allow ourselves to feel them, then we're not in primary imagination.

In primary imagination, we have these experiences that have a sense of great awe or joy of love. When we're not in primary imagination, when we're in the waking life, we don't have those experiences. So we have to have a kind of consciousness that immerses us, potentially brings us to that place and allows us to experience it, and then gives us a template so that we can begin to live with awe and wonder and pain and terror in waking life.

Notice that a lot of the fundamental feelings are ones we want to avoid. But I don't view feelings that way. They're all necessary. If we try to cut out some feelings, it's like trying to play a piano with only the black keys. When we start to avoid certain feelings we end up dampening all of them.

A lot of your work has been focused on the role of the imagination in spiritual life.

We suffer from a lack of imagination. People often come to their traditions looking for rules and laws of behavior that are very strict—instead of recognizing that all religions originate in creativity, in imagination.

That's how I read the book of Genesis. It's about creativity. The creative in us manifests as dreams, as poems, as art, as imaginative forms of kindness, as relationship, as paying attention. It emerges in memory; it emerges in perception. The word *imagination* obviously has something to do with images. A perception is actually an image that's taking place in consciousness. So is a memory, and so is a dream.

By learning to move fluidly between these experiences of images and taking them in more deeply—which is a form of contemplation—we live a life from moment to moment that's full of God.