

RESEARCH ARTICLE

**Can Death-Related Dreams Predict Future Deaths?
Evidence from a Dream Journal Comprising Nearly 12,000
Dreams**

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Abstract—Dreams that appear to predict future events that could not have been anticipated through any known inferential processes have been reported for centuries, and dreams that appear to anticipate the death of an acquaintance or loved one are particularly common. Such reports become more suggestive of genuine precognition if there are no natural cues (such as an illness) to an impending death and if the time interval between the dream and the subsequent death is brief. Most reports are difficult to evaluate because we dream many times each night but typically remember and report only a salient subset of our dreams. Thus we cannot assess whether the time interval between a death-related dream and the death of the dream character is brief or lengthy because we have no control set of non-death-related dreams to which its time interval can be compared. The study reported here provides just such a control set by comparing death-related and non-death-related dreams featuring the same set of dream characters who died after the dreams occurred. These were drawn from the author's own dream journal in which he has recorded his nightly dreams for nearly twenty-five years. The mean time interval between death-related dreams and the person's subsequent death was significantly shorter than the time interval between non-death-related dreams and his or her death, $t(11) = 3.30, p = .004$, one-tailed. Cases in which death-related dreams occurred after the characters had died are also considered. Seven of the cases are discussed in detail.

Keywords: death—dreams—psi—precognition

Introduction

Precognitive dreams—dreams that appear to predict future events that could not have been anticipated through any known inferential processes—have been reported cross-culturally and historically for centuries (Myers 1920). Among such dreams, those that appear to anticipate the death of an

acquaintance or loved one are particularly common (Stevenson 1970). Such dreams provide stronger evidence for a psi-mediated or paranormal process of precognition if there are no clues to the impending death—such as an illness, threats of suicide, or participation in a life-threatening activity—and if the time interval between the dream and the subsequent death is relatively brief.

A major problem with most reports of such dreams, however, is that people are most likely to recall and report dreams that are salient precisely because subsequent events make them appear predictive and to forget or fail to report dreams that have no subsequent related events. This is a real-life variant of the “file-drawer” problem in experimental work, in which studies with positive results are more likely to be published than studies with null results, thereby biasing the known database toward false positive conclusions (Scargle 2000). Thus we cannot assess whether the time interval between a death-related dream and the death of the character in the dream is brief or lengthy because we have no control set of non-death-related dreams to which its time interval can be compared. In the absence of such a control set, we are left with the *reductio ad absurdum* that all death-related dreams about living persons will eventually be predictive of their deaths: All we have to do is wait long enough!

The study reported here provides just such a control set by retrospectively analyzing nearly 12,000 nightly dream scenes from my own journal, in which I have recorded my nightly dreams nearly continuously for twenty-five years (Paquette 2011). For this study, I first used a word search to locate all dreams containing death-related content and to identify the characters in the dream. Next, I located all non-death-related dreams for that same set of dream characters. Finally, I attempted to determine whether the character in each dream was still living or had died. If the character had died, I noted the date of death. For many of the characters, I had already recorded this information in the journal itself, but in several cases I had to check other sources to determine whether the dream character was living or deceased. For this report, I computed for each dream character the mean time interval between death-related dreams and the date of death with the mean time interval between non-death-related dreams. A death-related dream is considered to provide stronger evidence for precognitive anticipation of a subsequent death to the extent that it occurs closer in time to the death than do “control” dreams that are not death-related.

In the psi literature, there are also reports of *post-death* communications, apparitions that occur after the featured character has already died but before the percipient had been made aware of the death through normal non-psi channels (Stevenson 1995). Some of these post-death communications take

the form of what are called “leave-taking” dreams, in which the spirit of a deceased person purports to communicate to the dreamer from within a dream (Barrett 1991/1992). Although I will discuss some of my post-death dreams, most of them were discarded as evidence for a psi-related process because I was aware of the character’s death at the time the dream occurred.

Method

The Dream Journal

The dream journal from which the dreams in this study are drawn was begun on September 15, 1989. Ironically, I started it to demonstrate to my wife that I was not having precognitive dreams but that memory errors and faulty reasoning could easily produce the apparent correspondences between dream content and subsequent events. Instead, several persuasive correspondences accumulated (Paquette 2012).

The cutoff date for the study reported here was February 2, 2014. On that date the journal contained reports of 11,779 individual dreams, an average of 3.1 dreams per night. For purposes of this study, all dreams from a single night are combined into a single dream record, yielding 3,732 dated dream records to be searched for death-related content. Each record in the journal had been entered by hand immediately after waking, and notes of events that appeared to confirm or disconfirm points in the dream were added and dated only after the journal entry itself was committed to writing. These were recorded in the margin of the journals on the date of the verification attempt or any followup attempts. Beginning on October 12, 2012, all dreams were recorded on an iPad and emailed to myself to create an independent time-stamped record at a cloud storage network.

Although dream recordkeeping was fairly constant across the 25 years covered by the journal, there is a block of 1,980 days, from February 9, 1993, to July 13, 1998, during which there were only 32 entries. This was due to my life/work situation at the time and was not due to differences in the number or types of dreams I was having during this period. These 32 entries were included in the search for death-related content.

The level of detail in each entry varies widely depending on dream recall and waking circumstances. If I do not recall much, then the entry is brief. On the opposite end of the spectrum, I may remember far more than can be recorded in the time I have before I must go to work or deal with other obligations. When that happens, I will write as much of what I consider to be the most salient information before I run out of time. Some entries run to more than 20 handwritten pages and took as much as three hours to write. The average record word count is 201, with a maximum

value of 3,018. Many entries are accompanied by illustrations, sometimes multiple pages of them. These have not been counted in full but to date 1,019 of these pages have been scanned. In some records, the word count is close to zero because illustrations arranged as a storyboard were used instead of written descriptions.

Identifying Death-Related Dreams

The database of dream records was searched for death-related content using the following 10 search terms: *Dead, Death, Ghost, Spirit, Deceased, Dying, Die, Murder, Kill, Suicide*. Dreams containing any of the search words were defined as death-related even if the words were used symbolically and did not appear to refer to an actual death. For example, one dream contained the following sentence “*I had twenty-four hours before a wrongly decided death sentence was carried out.*” Later that day, the person I identified in my journal had his position terminated at my office (to my genuine surprise): The ‘death’ in the dream was termination of employment, not an actual death. On the other hand, dream reports were excluded if (a) they included a keyword in an innocuous context, such as in the sentence “*an extremely small chameleon . . . has something like a death grip on my finger*”; (b) appeared in the context of a threat to cause harm “[*Colonel*] *Klink is convinced that Hogan is out to kill him . . .*”; or (c) the dream characters involved were fictional—as in the example given in (b).

Of the 11,667 individual dreams recorded in the journals, 545 (4.7%) were identified as containing death-related content. To be retained as a death-related dream for the study itself, it also had to pass the following tests:

1. The dream character must be identifiable.
2. The dream either mentions the death of the character, the possibility that the character is dead, or contains details characteristic of deceased characters.
3. It was possible to verify whether the character is living or, if deceased, the date of death.
4. In the case of post-death dreams, I must not have been aware of the character’s death when the dream occurred.

After applying these criteria, 87 dreams featuring 50 unique identifiable dream characters remained for analysis. They include both living and deceased dream characters, but this report concerns only the dream characters who are deceased.

Results

Pre-Death Dreams

Of the 50 dream characters identified in the search, 12 of them had died after I had experienced one or more death-related dreams about them. Table 1 displays for each character the mean number of days between death-related dreams and the date of death; the mean number of days between control (non-death-related) dreams and the date of death; and the percentage of total days contributed by the death-dream intervals. For example, for Noah, there was a mean interval of 165 days between my death-related dreams and his death and a mean interval of 6,612 days between my non-death-related dreams and his death. So the percentage of total days contributed by the former is $165/(165 + 6612) = .024$, or 2.4%.

The cases are listed in order of increasing percentages, with percentages less than 50% indicating that the death-related dreams occurred, on average, closer to the date of death than did control dreams. As shown in Table 1, this was true for 9 of the 12 characters.

Because there were no control dreams featuring Hannah or Ken, two data analyses were conducted. The first analysis substituted the mean number of control days for the remaining 9 characters as an estimate for the 2 missing control-dream intervals—displayed in parentheses. With this substitution, the death-dream percentages are significantly less than 50% using a 1-sample, one-tailed t test across the 12 cases: $t(11) = 3.30$, $p = .004$. In the second analysis, the records for Hannah and Ken were simply omitted. When this is done, the death-dream percentage is still significantly lower than 50%; $t(9) = 2.45$, $p = .018$.

Case Descriptions for Pre-Death Dreams

In this section I provide details of my dreams and the circumstances of the subsequent deaths for the first 3 characters listed in Table 1: Harmony, Noah, and Hannah. These are the cases in which the relative intervals between the dream and the subsequent death are the shortest.

Harmony. Harmony is a relative of mine whose case is one of the most remarkable in the dream journal. As can be seen in the first row of Table 1, I had a death-related dream about her on the same day that her death occurred, July 2, 2003. There had been 24 earlier dreams about her, but this was the only one that mentioned her possible death. When I awoke from the dream, I was certain she had died, telling this to both my wife and daughter the next morning. The day after I had entered the dream in the journal, I received an email telling me that she had, indeed, died.

TABLE 1
Pre-Death Dreams: Mean Time Intervals (Days)
between Dreams and Subsequent Death

Pseudonym ^a	Relationship	# death dreams	# control dreams	Mean # days between death dreams and death	Mean # days between control dreams and death	% days contributed by death-dream to death days ^b
1 Harmony	Relative	1	24	0	2479	0.0
2 Noah	Relative	4	14	165	6612	2.4
3 Hannah	Friend	1	0	120	(4297) ^c	2.7
4 Ken	Stranger	1	0	491	(4297) ^c	10.3
5 Isador	Friend	2	17	2255	5973	27.4
6 Lim	Relative	1	17	1389	3335	29.4
7 Chris	Relative	1	9	2466	5037	32.9
8 Yi	Relative	5	28	2614	4033	39.3
9 Jonathan	Celebrity	2	6	3723	5515	40.3
110 Astrid	Relative	1	1	2836	2831	50.0
111 Dominik	Colleague	2	5	4695	3702	55.9
112 Mostafa	Celebrity	3	6	5742	3456	62.4
Total		24	127	-	-	-
Mean (SD)		-	-	2207.87 (1873.75)	4297.28 (1268.77)	0.559 (0.528)

^a Names of dream characters are pseudonyms generated by the online Random Name Generator: <http://www.behindthename.com/random/>

^b If <50%, then death-related dreams occurred closer to the date of death than did control dreams.

^c No control dreams for these 2 dream characters. Mean value from the other 9 cases used as an estimate.

The death-related dream about Harmony is a classic leave-taking dream, a dream in which a spirit of the deceased appears as an announcement of his or her death. In the earlier control dreams, Harmony appeared thin and frail, but she looked very different in my final dream. Here, in full, is my written record of the dream from my journal:

[Harmony] is here briefly. She is literally shining, like sunlight through diamonds. She is very beautiful, radiant. Has she died?

I had not been not in contact with Harmony or other members of this branch of my family for more than a year and I did not know Harmony well. Based on emails I received several years before she died, I knew that she had Alzheimer's Disease and had been in a nursing home. But I did not know at the time that the disease shortened one's lifespan (Burns & Iliffe 2009), so my knowledge of her illness did not serve as a cue that her death was imminent—and certainly not on the exact day of her death. I believe this dream provides good evidence for a psi-mediated process of information retrieval.

Noah. Noah is the first of my three stepfathers. My mother divorced him in 1971, but remained in contact with him until at least 1980, when I saw him with my mother in Santa Barbara. That was the last time I saw him.

On September 29, 2010, I dreamed of Noah. Here is the relevant portion of that dream:

Mom, Karina, Tomoyo, and my first stepfather Noah. It feels like I'm in Los Angeles, walking around with the above-named group. It is puzzling that Noah is present because I haven't seen or heard from him in so long. It is nice to see him again regardless because I've always liked him. . . . After what seems like several hours with Noah, he is gone. I tell my mom that I wished I had said more while he was here, but she said not to worry, that he'd just wanted to see me "One more time." Does this mean he's died? Must check with mom.

After this dream I asked my mother about Noah, but she didn't know where he was living or how to contact him. A little over a month later, on October 19, 2010, I dreamed of Noah again:

. . . I had been with Peter and Karina, all of us talking about Peter's printing press, when Noah appears to say hello. . . . This is [the] second 'Noah' appearance in these pages, making me wonder if he is alive or not. This dream may not be interesting in any other respect, but two appearances in two weeks (? Or so) is a lot from someone I haven't seen in over 20 years and have no reason to be thinking about.

On January 8, 2011, I had a lucid dream that Noah has given me a wristwatch that has something to do with the future. On February 23, 2011, I dreamed I was with Noah again in the context of a party on Memorial Day.

Checking on Noah's status proved difficult because we had both moved multiple times and had not made any attempt to remain in communication. Nor did Noah have a presence on the Internet. My mother was eventually able to turn up an obituary listing Noah's death date as May 19, 2011. Dreams about Noah appeared in the journal 18 times prior to his death. As

shown in Table 1, these four death-related dreams occurred much closer to the date of his death than the control dreams.

The first dream of September 29, 2010, sounds very much like a leave-taking dream. Noah wants to see me “one last time,” as if he is about to leave forever. The second dream of October 19 is only interesting because of the first, but the idea of his suddenly wanting to say hello, a theme that does not appear until the “one last time” dream, is interesting and suggestive of a second attempt. The dream of January 8, 2011, appears to be symbolic. Noah gives me a wristwatch that is somehow important to the future, to something that will happen soon. In the dream closest to the date of his death, I dream of him in the context of Memorial Day, a day to remember the dead. Collectively, the set of dreams can be interpreted as a last-goodbye and a message to me that Noah will die soon. If this interpretation is correct, it would relate to Noah’s actual circumstances as he prepared for death. In that sense he is not saying good-bye because he has already died, but in preparation for death.

These are the only four dreams of Noah to appear within eight years, no dreams outside of this group suggest his death in any way, and two of the dreams explicitly suggest his death while one implies it (Memorial Day)—an interesting coincidence in itself because Noah died nine days before Memorial Day.

Hannah. Hannah was the mother of my best boyhood friend, Donovan. In 1976, my family moved from San Jose, California, to Las Vegas, Nevada, the last time I would see him until decades later. Sometime after I moved, I learned that his family had also moved. I made occasional attempts to find them over the next few years, but had given up by 1981, when my family moved to Santa Barbara, California.

On 24 September 1999 I reported the following dream in my journal:

... next, I realize that Donovan is standing directly in front of me. I am quite happy to see him again. Donovan doesn’t seem to know where he is or what is going on. After realizing who he is, I grab him, pull him over, and give him a big hug. I then give him a business card so that he can get in touch. After that he faded out and disappeared.

A little over a week later, on October 3, 1999, I wrote the following:

[My Uncle Luke] tells me that Donovan [see dream a few nights ago] . . . died in 1995 after getting sick. My impression was he died of asthma.¹ Luke also tells me that several others have had dreams of Donovan recently and that each had a little piece of the story. I think we found out about his death when we were thinking about him and his mom [Hannah] just appeared.

I did not write it in the journal, but that morning I told my wife that when Hannah appeared, she said something that was different from what Luke said, but I didn't remember how it was different, just that she was correcting Luke because he had made a mistake in what he told me. Four months later, on February 20, 2000, I had the next dream in this series. In it, I observe an older man and woman described in the journal as "devout Christians." The focus in the dream is on the wife, who stands near the man as he sits in a chair in a darkened living room, looking bereft. I write "*Is this man a ghost?*" in reference to the man. His wife talks to me in a friendly way, while the man seems completely oblivious to our presence. "*Her aura is on plain view here, and it's a good one,*" I write. Although not written in the journal, this dream character reminded me of Hannah and made me think of Donovan and their house.

Because of these three dreams, I was concerned that Donovan may have died. I made several searches on the Internet, looking for Donovan's obituary, but found nothing. A year later, I was re-reading the dreams when I noticed the detail about Hannah appearing in the dream with Luke and that she had disagreed with what he had said. I then noticed the February 20th dream and realized that the mistake Luke made was identifying Donovan rather than Hannah as the person who had died. Pursuing this hypothesis, I conducted a new Internet search looking for Hannah's obituary. I learned that she had died of cancer at the age of 64 on January 31, 2000—only 120 days after my first dream about her. I also had a dream about Hannah 20 days *after* her death, well before I had learned of it (See Table 2, below).

Post-Death Dreams

The dream journal contained 68 death-related dreams and 25 control dreams that occurred after the death of the death character. When I eliminate all dreams in which I knew of the character's death at the time of the dream, only 8 death-dream characters remain, each one appearing in a single death-related dream. These are shown in Table 2 and include both Hannah and Lim, who appeared also in Table 1. There were no control dreams for any of these 8 dream characters, so it is not possible to conduct an analysis parallel to the one for pre-death dreams. Here I describe the cases of Lim, Robert, Wynona, and Isabel.

Lim. As in the case of Harmony, the case of Lim is persuasive as an example of a psi-mediated dream because there is such a short interval between my dream and her death; in this case, the dream occurs one day *after* the death, but before I knew about it. On the morning of June 24, 2003, I wrote the following about Lim in my journal:

TABLE 2
Post-Death Dreams: Mean Time Intervals (Days)
between a Death and a Subsequent Dream

Pseudonym	Relationship	# Death dreams	# of days between death and death dreams
1 Lim ^a	Relative	1	1
2 Robert	Acquaintance	1	2
3 Rikard	Stranger	1	4
4 Therese	Acquaintance	1	18
5 Hannah ^a	Friend	1	20
6 Isabel	Stranger	1	26
7 Leo	Relative	1	44
8 Wynona	Acquaintance	1	340
Mean			56.9

^a Lim and Hannah also appear in Table 1.

At Leontine's, she complains that I never follow directions properly. As an example she describes a recent wake where she asked people to sit by the "lapidary bench" (what is that?).

A few hours later, Leontine called to pass on the information that Lim had died the previous night. The purpose behind the call was to inquire whether my wife and I would attend the wake, which she was organizing. I didn't know if it was relevant, but asked my wife if she knew of any connection between something called a "lapidary bench" and either Leontine or Lim. She told me that Leontine was an amateur gemmologist, that a lapidary bench has something to do with making jewelery, and that Leontine owned a lapidary bench.

Although Lim does not appear explicitly in this dream, the dream appears to refer to her wake and thus is counted as a death-related dream with her as the dream character. The only death-related dream about Lim that appears in the journal occurred about 4 years earlier.

Robert. As with the case with Lim, my post-death dream about Robert is notable for its temporal proximity to his death. On the morning of February 2, 2014, I wrote the following in my journal:

Someone comes to tell me that “Bobby” has died. I ask for more clarification, get the idea it is Robert W. Green.

Thirteen hours after emailing the dream journal entry to myself, I received an email from someone named “Bobbie” to whom I had spoken on perhaps three other occasions in my life. The email referred to a mutual acquaintance named “Robert H.” or “Bob,” who had died the night before. Like Bobbie, I did not know Bob well. The last occasion I had spoken to him was about 2012, and before that, 2011 and 2010. In total, we had conversed on between three and five occasions, usually for about an hour or two on each occasion. When I met him for the first and only time in person in 2011, he had just had a cancerous growth removed from his nose and he appeared to be quite ill. As with Harmony, this information about his health could hardly have been the basis for an accurate prediction of the date of his death three years later. This is the first and only mention of this character in the journal. It is also interesting that the name “Bobby” or “Bobbie” in the dream journal and my email history occurs only in reference to Robert H.

Wynona. The case of Wynona provides an interesting contrast to that of Harmony, whose death occurred the same day as my dream. In Wynona’s case, the time interval between her death and my subsequent dream is 340 days, the longest in Table 2.

Wynona was a friend of my mother’s in the late 1960s through about 1977. The last time I saw her was in 1977, when I was living in San Jose, California. My family moved away and both my mother and I lost contact with her. On December 9, 2010, more than thirty years after I had last seen her, I dreamed of Wynona. Here is the relevant part of my dream report:

A little later, I hear that Wynona has a gift for me also. I see her go by to see Karina. She says hello as she passes, and then is gone. I notice that a woman has been drawing in Karina’s sketchbook . . . I retrieve it for Karina and then go to a booth at a Wolfgang Puck’s restaurant to find her. She is in a booth with Wynona, who looks better than I’ve ever known her to look. Is she dead?

Checking on Wynona’s death proved to be difficult. A Google search yielded nothing, and my mother had no idea whether Wynona was alive or dead. A year later when I started work on this study, I asked my mother to make another attempt to determine Wynona’s status. She discovered

that Wynona had died in 2010, the same year as my dream. The only other dream in the journal that mentioned Wynona was a pre-death, control dream from 19 years earlier. In other words, the only dream recorded in the journal to mention Wynona's death over a 19-year span occurred in the same year as her death.

Unlike the dream of Harmony, the dream of Wynona does not depict her at what appears to be the moment of death. Instead, it leaves the impression of a spirit that is already dead, coming by to say hello and bestow a gift of some kind. In this sense, the impression is accurate. She did not die on the date of the dream, but was deceased at the time of the dream. It seems unlikely that somehow I had learned about Wynona's death through non-psi channels but then suppressed that knowledge. We had never lived in the same city again. She was not a well-known person and had no presence on the Internet. The possibility that I could have somehow learned her status normally and then suppressed the information seems quite remote.

Isabel. Isabel was a stranger to me at the time she died. The dream occurred on August 12, 2003. Here is the relevant section of my dream report:

... I am talking with someone . . . when I am told that one of the employees of this place may be about to die. I think it was Matthew from Arizona Flooring.² Someone in his family was very sick or had died, so he started taking drugs, drinking, not taking care of himself. He was going to die, or had died also. I am very worried about him here. There is a pervasive feeling of the unnecessary here, that he doesn't have to die at this time but he will if he doesn't shape up.

After waking from the dream, I wrote down the details and then discussed it with my wife. The person I was talking to in the dream was a youngish-looking woman, and she had urged me to contact Matthew to get him to stop drinking and taking drugs. She said that if he didn't, he would die. My wife wanted me to follow through and tell Matthew about the dream. I was less happy about the idea because I barely knew Matthew, having spoken to him on only a handful of occasions when I bought supplies at the store he worked at. My wife persuaded me, however, so I made the forty-five minute drive from North Phoenix to Tempe and entered the store.

After introducing the fact that I had dreamed of him, I asked Matthew if a close relative had recently died and if he had started abusing alcohol because of it. He affirmed that this was true. His sister-in-law, Isabel, had died three weeks earlier, on July 27, 2003. A police cruiser collided with her car from behind while she was stopped at a stoplight. I assumed that this meant that the young woman in my dream was his sister-in-law and told him as she had told me in a dream that he had to stop abusing alcohol

or he would die. Matthew admitted to being self-abusive and to drinking heavily after Isabel's death, and then told me that he had had a dream of Isabel earlier that same week. In it, she gave him exactly the same message I had received in my dream. This dream is the only one in the journal that mentions Matthew and the only one that plausibly contains a character that can be identified as Isabel. What is remarkable is that we both got "the same message" from Isabel.

Conclusion

This article has presented 9 cases of dreams that appear to anticipate the deaths of the dream characters through a paranormal or psi-mediated process. A file-drawer control was provided by comparing the time intervals between the death-related dreams and the subsequent deaths against a set of control (non-death-related) dreams. Some post-death dreams also appeared to provide evidence suggestive of psi-mediated information retrieval.

The 20 test cases presented were culled from a database containing 3,732 nightly dream records that were compiled over a nearly 25-year span. This reveals how difficult it would be to conduct a replication study that similarly controls for a file-drawer effect.

Notes

- ¹ This is a subjective thought on my part, probably a deduction based on my knowledge that Donovan had asthma.
- ² This company name is a pseudonym.

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