

# Dreaming During Pregnancy: The Search for Birth and Rebirth. An Intensive Case Study

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## **Abstract**

Recent research has suggested that women with complicated obstetrical histories tend to report more dreams during pregnancy. The present study presents an intensive case study of the dreams of a pregnant woman, whose previous pregnancy had ended in an unwanted Caesarian operation. The dreams reveal her desire for a “tikkun” or reparation of the first birth and indeed a desire for rebirth relating to the traumatic circumstances of her own birth. Dreams of women during pregnancy provide important biopsychosocial information of the woman’s experience of the birth and are worthy of further study.

## **Zusammenfassung**

Neuere Untersuchungen haben ergeben, daß Frauen mit komplizierten Schwangerschaftsverläufen eher dazu neigen, während der Schwangerschaft zu träumen. Dieser Artikel stellt einen ausführlichen Fallbericht über die Träume einer schwangeren Frau vor, deren frühere Schwangerschaft mit einem unerwünschten Kaiserschnitt endete. Die Träume decken ihren Wunsch nach einer Wiederherstellung der ersten Geburt und den Wunsch ihrer Wiedergeburt in bezug auf die traumatischen Umstände ihrer eigenen Geburt auf. Träume schwangerer Frauen geben wichtige biopsychosoziale Informationen über ihre Geburtserfahrungen und machen weitere Arbeiten darüber lohnenswert.

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## Introduction

In the life of a woman, pregnancy is a special period, involving great inner change and outward adjustments. Although there have been studies of menstruating woman (Hertz & Jensen, 1975; Benedek & Rubinstein, 1939; Shuttle & Redgrove, 1980), menopausal woman (Mankowitz, 1984) and even expectant fathers (Zayas, 1988), there is little work on the dreams of pregnant woman. A review of the cross-cultural literature, moreover, suggests that dreams of midwives and pregnant woman (Von Franz, 1988; Martin, 1987; Mallon, 1987; Delaney, 1981; Jones, 1978; Winget & Kapp, 1972; Cheek, 1969) are often considered to have special significance and may constitute a distinct dream genre. A recent study of immediately post-partum women in a maternity ward (Sered & Abramovitch, 1992) found that woman with complicated obstetrical histories were more likely to report increased dreaming during pregnancy. "The more complicated the pregnancy and birth, the more likely one was to report dreams." (op. cit. p. 1408)

The present paper presents a follow-up of that finding in the form of an intensive case study of a woman who became pregnant for a second time, following the very traumatic birth by Caesarian section of her first child. The 38 dreams were collected during psychotherapy and are presented here with the permission of the dreamer. Given the C-section is now the most common of all surgeries performed in USA (14% of all births!), we suspect that the implications of this case may have broad significance for woman dreaming during pregnancy.

## Case of Ruth

Ruth, a redheaded 33 year old woman, came to see me eight months after her first daughter was born. After a few weeks she became pregnant again and this was her first dream shortly after becoming pregnant:

*Dream I (1st month of pregnancy):* I put the key to my mother's home into a nutcracker. The key gets stuck, and my mother tries to close the nutcracker. I think to myself, 'no need to do it so forcefully because the key will break.' But she does it with force and the key breaks in two.

Association: My heart was broken by the sheer force of my mother who told me to go to hospital; and by the doctors who operated on me. "Nutcracker," for me, means a riddle, a secret. The key is broken so that it is impossible to get to the secret. Something is broken and cannot be mended.

In this dream, Ruth's mother holds the key to the secret of motherhood, a key she breaks by force. After we talked about the dream, Ruth revealed to me that her mother told her that she was anesthetized when giving birth to Ruth and did not feel anything. This "unfeeling" was perceived by Ruth as a primary evil done to her by her mother. In contrast, Ruth desperately wanted a natural childbirth at home. She prepared herself physically and mentally for this "ideal" birth with the cooperation of her husband, but in the 38th week of her pregnancy her water broke. Pressured by her mother and giving in to her own fears, she went to hospital. For four days Ruth found herself alone in an alienating medical atmosphere ridden by fear that something terrible would happen whether she stayed there or if she went home against doctors' advice. Finally, her daughter was delivered by an

emergency Caesarian section under anesthesia. For Ruth this was the worst that could happen. Against Ruth's deepest wishes, the evil done to her by her mother's "unfeeling" had repeated itself in her own daughter's birth. She came out of the traumatic experience depressed, feeling worthless as a woman and mother for what she called her body's betrayal, and for not holding to her principles. Even though Ruth managed to function as a mother, and her daughter developed into a healthy and happy baby, she could not overcome these feelings and contacted me after reading my book *Women in Pink* which deals with postpartum depression.

For Ruth, dreams were the "royal road" to her inner world. Typically for a woman who had a traumatic experience with her first childbirth, she came to every therapy session with four–five dreams she had dreamt during the week. Most of her associations to the dreams revolved around the same theme; hospitals, C-sections, trauma, the wrongs done to her, or around pregnancy and her wish for a new, different birth, and her work on the loss of the idealized childbirth.

From the wealth of Ruth's dreams, we chose eight dreams which represent the main issue of her therapy. They are presented in the forthcoming pages and we will give our comments on each. We do not present here dreams dealing with sexuality in pregnancy, transference in the therapeutic process, etc., as our focus is on coping with the trauma of the first birth and preparing for the second.

Dream II was dreamt during the second month of Ruth's pregnancy:

*Dream II (2nd month):* A nightmare. My husband and I come to a children's home, to take our daughter. I open her diaper and I see that she was raped.

Associations: We gave up our child and put her into an institution. We thought it was right for her, but we were wrong. They did not take care of her, and she got hurt. The rape reminds me of the C-section done by doctors while the woman is unconscious and helpless.

Who is the raped child in the dream? On one level, the dream expresses Ruth's guilt at the C-section which she experienced as a rape both of herself and her daughter, rape being a metaphor for an unwanted intrusion.

On another level, Ruth felt herself to be the child raped by her mother's unprotectiveness, during and after her own birth. This is related to Ruth's disturbed relationship with her mother.

Ruth's mother escaped from Germany at the beginning of the Nazi regime to South America where she met Ruth's father. Their relationship was difficult almost from the start and they divorced when Ruth was fourteen years old. She lived with her mother until she immigrated to Israel at the age of twenty, followed by her only sister, and later by her mother. When Ruth came to see me, she was convinced that her main problems were with her aggressive tyrannical father. As therapy progressed, and especially after Ruth became pregnant, the focus shifted from the problematic relation with her father to that with her mother. Through her dreams, Ruth became aware of her wounded "inner mother," the result of the distorted motherhood she got from her mother. As her pregnancy progressed, she struggled with her mother image, achieving her inner separation and developing her own separate motherhood, or "inner mother."

In her third month of pregnancy, Ruth brought this important dream:

*Dream III (3rd month):* I am with my mother and daughter. My daughter and I change all the time – one moment it's me and the next moment it's her. We come to a bakery and

my mother gives me something to eat. It's uncooked and makes me feel bad. Suddenly, the scene changes. I am in a house, there is a young man there dressed in a doctor's gown, and he shows me around the house. We go through the rooms and I think to myself how similar this house is to mine, except that here, it is all arranged better and I must learn some ideas from them. We arrive at the second floor. There is a big white hall and in the room opposite the hall, women are lying on beds. We sit opposite each other and the young man starts to talk. He says: "When I was in hospital, I saw a woman dressed in a white gown and three experts standing round her bed, near her head, looking in the direction of her legs. I passed by and stood behind her, and moved my finger in front of her eyes. Her eyes went backwards and I got frightened. The experts saw me and drove me out of there." I ask him: "What happened to the woman?" and he says, "I don't know." I sit beside him and I feel good and calm, and he asks: "And what happened with you?" and I say, "Before I had a tummy ache, but now I feel calm and it feels good." He comes nearer and kisses me on the cheek. I caress his hand and feel good.

Associations: I was very moved by the dream because there was sensuality in it and the feeling was so good. Also because there is a male figure who is giving, and not dangerous. The man in the dream is dressed in a gown because he is going through the birth together with the woman. It is a hospital, but there is calmness and people can be together.

The dream starts with presenting a problem: the confusion between mother and daughter continues. The physical birth of Ruth symbolizes her own lasting trauma while she in turn passed it over to her daughter who was born "uncooked." But there is a new element – the presence of the helpful Animus, her inner masculine figure. He tells her the story of her traumatic childbirth and by that puts it in the past – it happened, it's not still happening. The good treatment (therapy) can change destiny. There is a possibility of reparation with the partner going through childbirth with her.

Dream IV is one of a series of dreams on birth. These dreams become more frequent as pregnancy progresses, expressing Ruth's evolving struggle with the impact of the trauma of her first birth.

*Dream IV (4th month):* I stand inside a shower. It is dark, there is no light. On the floor, there is a black plastic mat. The shower is open on one side and closed with an iron door and chains on the other. I stand there naked and think to myself, "one has to let the water flow, one has to let the water flow." Associations: The water is pleasant. Water is life. The dream has a message for me, that I have to connect with life in order to let the birth progress.

The objective level of the dream is the memory of the traumatic birth and her water breaking. On the subjective level, the dreamer is imprisoned in her life situation and her trauma. There is not enough life in her to help the birth to progress.

Dream V was brought by Ruth in the 6th month of pregnancy. From this month on, birth dreams became more and more frequent, reflecting Ruth's inner preoccupation with the approaching birth which aroused both anxiety and expectations.

*Dream V (6th month):* I am at home and my water breaks. Twelve hours have passed and I am alone and fear that my body is not working the way it should and it will get infected. It is "shabbat," the Jewish Sabbath and all the shops are closed. I cannot even go and buy garlic capsules which they say help prevent infection.

Associations: I woke up and was anxious, even depressed. Again, my body betrayed me. I became helpless and alone.

The dream expresses distress, isolation, helplessness. On the objective level, the dream is a reconstruction of the situation before the first childbirth. The dreamer cannot help herself. She is cut off from her body. On a deeper level, the dream depicts the loneliness of childbirth. It is not only the baby who is traumatised by its birth, getting out to face all by itself a strange world, being flooded by stimuli which it cannot absorb and suffering in loneliness the anxiety which becomes the prototype of anxiety through life. It is also the mother who is lonely in childbirth as all human beings are lonely in dying. Anthropology teaches us that because childbearing and dying are uncontrollable and unpredictable, you need special rituals and magics to deal with them, an expression of which we find in the next dream.

Dream VI is from the 8th month. In it prevails the ritualistic atmosphere mentioned before.

*Dream VI (8th month):* I am moving with two other women to a strange house, full of rugs, old furniture, pieces of cloth, all in dark colors. There are no stairs to the house and I do not know how to climb there; and then I am there. There are no separate rooms in the house and I don't have a room for myself. there is no place for me because there are no walls. I ask the other women to make place for me and they move some cases and things and make me a place.

Associations: I have a strange feeling that I have to be in that place. It is neither good nor bad, just that I have to be there. I have no more associations...

Moving to another place symbolizes the developmental transition of childbirth. The woman has to move from her personal space into another space – the women's collective space. In order to connect herself with the collective level of childbirth, Ruth has to lose for a time her feeling of her individual personality and *submit to the archetypal feminine*. For Ruth this is not easy since it raises inner resistances, so she has to ask the women in that strange apartment to make place for her.

The question is – will Ruth give herself over to the experience of childbirth? Will she submit to whatever comes or stay stubbornly with her image of the ideal childbirth which might interfere with the birth process as it will evolve?

While dream VI had a hidden warning it it, Dreams VII and VIII are predictive dreams.

*Dream VII (9th month):* The baby lies in me with his head up, looking forward and gives me a leg to hold. Everything is upside down, not like it should be.

Associations: I dreamed this after I visited the midwife. She said that the baby is upside down. She was not worried, but I am.

*Dream VIII (a few days before the birth):* I see two women dressed in white, ready with knives and all the instruments for a Caesarian Section.

Associations: I have had contractions now for a few days. I hope for a natural childbirth, but this time I will not fight, come what may.

The dreams tell Ruth to take care and prepare herself because the birth might not go according to her phantasy and plan.

Ruth gave birth to her second child, a son, after more than two weeks of contractions. She stayed at home with a midwife as long as possible but as the birth did not progress, she decided to go to the hospital. There she waited a while longer, but when she realised that the baby might be at risk, she herself asked for a C-

section so that the baby would be safe. A healthy child was delivered. This time her husband stayed with her in hospital all the time, and both worked through the mourning for the idealised birth which was lost.

## Discussion

We suggest that Ruth's dreams, like those of other women with complicated obstetrical history, are searching for a Tiqqun. The literary meaning of Tiqqun is mending or repair, but in Jewish mysticism, Tiqqun has a cosmic meaning of repairing the fractured world, a mending that can be achieved by human action.

For Ruth, dreaming was part of the Tiqqun, the repairing of the way she was mothered by her own mother in order to be able to mother her own children and repair the basic fracture in her life.

Ruth came out of this second birth not retraumatised but repaired. She did not sink into depression, and she was sure that she had made the right decision by requesting the C-section. She was disappointed but not in despair. Ruth realised that her Tiqqun is an inner Tiqqun, not a Tiqqun on the physical level. After the birth, Ruth went through a mourning period for the loss of her idealised mother-child relationship, at the end of which she achieved a new strength coming from the integration of her life reality with an inner mended self.

Dreaming during pregnancy thus does appear to be a distinctive dream genre. This case study has illuminated a possible reason for increased dreaming among those with complicated obstetrical histories – the search through dreams for a Tiqqun.

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