



# *Dream Divina*

## Leader's Guide

A Contemplative Practice for  
Encountering Dream Images

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# WORKSHOP NOTES AND SCRIPT

## BACKGROUND

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## TIMING AND SETUP

The script as written is designed for an activity lasting approximately 75-90 minutes. This activity may also be extended for a longer period, if, for example, it is being used as part of a half-day or longer retreat. In such a case, the leader may invite participants to leave the room during the Meditatio: Meditating on the Dream portion to allow a longer period for journaling on the images and associations.

The recommended set up for this activity is to arrange the chairs in a circle. If desired, the leader may want to give some thought to how to create a “sacred space” for the activity; for example, you may set up an altar area in the center of the circle with a lit candle. Although you may want to have soft music playing as people gather, once the activity begins, the room should be silent.

A suggested script for the activity follows.

## PARTICIPANT PREPARATION

In this workshop, we are going to approach a dream in a style that draws from the Christian contemplative spiritual tradition. So please take a moment to identify a short dream you have had (either recent or past) that you would like to work with in a contemplative way today. You will also need a notebook and pen, or some other way to capture your thoughts in writing. We will be spending long periods of this workshop in silence.

## INTRODUCTION

In this workshop we're going to explore **how we might approach dreams in a contemplative way** so that embodied experiences of wholeness can unfold.

Instead of interpreting dreams analytically, today we will practice **encountering dream images the way contemplative traditions encounter sacred texts and sacred images**—with attention, patience, and reverence.

The practice Dr. Sheri Kling has named **Dream Divina** draws from three time-tested contemplative practices in the Christian tradition:

- Lectio Divina
- Praying with Icons
- Praying with the Imagination

After a brief introduction to these traditions, we will move into a period of guided contemplation conducted mostly in silence.

After the period of silence is over, we'll have some dialogue around what you observed during this time of contemplation and any new insights that may have arisen into your dream.

## BEFORE WE BEGIN

Please take a moment to identify a short dream you have had (either recent or past) that you would like to work with in a contemplative way today. You will also need a notebook and pen, or some other way to capture your thoughts in writing (other than typing into the computer you are using for Zoom).

## THE CHRISTIAN CONTEMPLATIVE TRADITION

The Christian contemplative tradition stretches back at least to the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the third century. These traditions were built around a simple insight: **Deep spiritual knowing does not come primarily through analysis, but through sustained attention.**

Gregory the Great described contemplation as “*knowledge of God impregnated with love.*” He talked about it as “resting in God,” and a practice where “the mind and heart are not so much seeking God, as beginning to *experience* what they have been seeking.”

In contemplation we are not trying to figure something out.

Instead we allow ourselves to **rest with a mystery long enough that it begins to speak.**

During this workshop I will occasionally use the word *God*.

By this I mean what Michael Dowd calls “**Big Reality**”—the deeper,

primordial mystery at the base of life that is the source of creativity, vitality, and transformation.

## CHRISTIAN CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICES

The practice of *dream divina* draws from three traditional contemplative Christian practices – *lectio divina*, praying with icons, and the Ignatian practice of praying with the imagination. Let me give you a bit of background on those three practices:

### LECTIO DIVINA

*Lectio divina* is a Latin phrase that means “sacred reading,” and in this practice, one takes a “long, loving look” at a sacred text so as to encounter the Sacred or Divine Mystery in that text. *Lectio divina* has been practiced since at least the 5<sup>th</sup> century and it is understood as a way to engage scripture for deeper or hidden meanings that may not be immediately discernible in a literal reading.

For Origen, the literal reading was just the surface; below this level is the “spirit of the scripture...the spiritual dimension.” Augustine described this as “hidden fruit” and other Christian writers have often used the metaphor of eating to describe how we can “taste” and “chew” a sacred text to find its “joy” and “refreshment.”

In the practice of *lectio divina*, we at first just read or listen to the text, simply allowing it to wash over us. Then, in a second or third reading, we would notice any word or phrase that seems to “shimmer” or hold special energy or interest. We might then sit in silence, holding this word or phrase in our

minds, contemplating it as a sacred presence, ruminating or reflecting on it, and especially noting any feelings or images that arise.

The important thing here is that lectio divina teaches us to approach a text **slowly and receptively**, allowing a word or phrase to “shimmer” and draw our attention.

## PRAYING WITH ICONS

The practice of praying with icons has been primarily used in Eastern or Orthodox Christianity. What we refer to as Western Christianity was centered in Rome, and the Eastern tradition was centered in Constantinople or what was called the Byzantine Empire.

An icon is considered a sacred image, and has traditionally referred to a painting, often done on wood, of Jesus, Mary, or the saints. The people shown in icons generally have common characteristics, such as “almond-shaped eyes, faces often encased in silver and crowned with gold-disk halos.”

Thomas Merton wrote that icons reflect “an interior presence in light,” and Henri Nouwen believed that icons “are created for the sole purpose of offering access, through the gate of the visible, to the mystery of the invisible.”

In recent years, however, other sacred objects and even parts of the natural world – such as a tree or bird’s nest – have come to be used in the same way. Icons are used for prayer, but also are *created through prayer* – or “written” – by artists who may prepare for their work through fasting or meditation.

A practice of Praying with Icons moves from focusing our attention on the icon, to stating our intention to encounter God, to opening our mind and heart, to gazing at the icon, allowing it to reveal God's presence, to gratitude for this presence, and, finally, to reflection on our experience.

In this practice, the image becomes a **window to the sacred**. We gaze at the image not to analyze it, but to allow it to reveal something deeper.

## PRAYING WITH THE IMAGINATION (IGNATIAN CONTEMPLATION)

Praying with the Imagination is a practice that was taught by St. Ignatius of Loyola, who founded the Jesuit Catholic religious order. According to Jesuit brother Kevin O'Brien, "Ignatius was convinced that God can speak to us as surely through our imagination as through our thoughts and memories.

In the Ignatian tradition, praying with the imagination is called contemplation. In the Exercises [developed by Ignatius of Loyola], contemplation is a very active way of praying that engages the mind and heart and stirs up thoughts and emotions. (Note that in other spiritual traditions, *contemplation* has quite a different meaning: it refers to a way of praying that frees the mind of all thoughts and images.)"

Ignatius encouraged Christians to contemplate the Gospel by imagining scenes from its stories, and to actively visualize the action and pay close attention to the details, including "the sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and feelings of the event." In such an approach we are encouraged to place ourselves *within* the scene of the Gospel story. "Through the act of contemplation," writes O'Brien, "the Holy Spirit makes present a mystery of Jesus' life in a way that is meaningful for you now.

Use your imagination to dig deeper into the story so that God may communicate with you in a personal, evocative way.”

Ignatius believed that imagination is one of the ways the Divine communicates with us. By placing ourselves within a sacred story, we allow new meaning to arise through **experience rather than explanation**.

## DREAM DIVINA: A PRACTICE FOR CONTEMPLATING DREAMS

Dreams are made of **stories and images**—exactly the kinds of material contemplative traditions have worked with for centuries. So rather than approaching dreams primarily through analysis, we can also approach them **contemplatively**.

Dream Divina simply applies these ancient contemplative mechanics to dream material. Here we treat the dream as if it were a **sacred text and sacred icon simultaneously**.

I’ll guide you through a process that will help you contemplate one of your dreams as you might a sacred text, icon or story, spending time with it, reflecting on its elements and images, and then asking what it might have come to teach you.

What the three contemplative practices of lectio divina, praying with icons, and praying with the imagination share is a simple rhythm of attention.

First we **attend carefully** to what is given.

Then we **linger with it**, allowing associations and feelings to arise.

Then we **contemplate it deeply**, allowing it to reveal something of its deeper meaning.

Dream Divina follows this same contemplative rhythm. We'll follow these steps:

1. **Centering** ourselves to be open to a Sacred presence in our dream
2. **Lectio: “Reading” the Dream** - Reviewing our dream from the perspective of an intimate observer
3. **Meditatio: Meditating on the Dream** - Journaling the dream, to record the images and then listen for what our psyche gives us in terms of our associations with those images. For those who are new to dream work and image association, let me give you an example now of what you might write down later. If, in your dream, you are in a house with a blue door, you would write down “blue”, and then – as another image – “door”. Then you would ask, “What do I associate with ‘blue’?” You might then write down: sky, ocean, sadness or depression, my grandmother’s house. You might write down several associations for every image.
4. **Contemplatio: Resting in the Dream** – After we have spent some time writing down associations, we’ll gaze upon our dream images and then choose one image that “shimmers” for us, and deeply contemplate that image, holding it in our mind as a sacred “icon” and allowing that Big Reality to speak to us through the image, as if it is a window to the sacred.

5. **Oratio: Responding to the Dream with Gratitude** - A brief time to pause in silence and gratitude
6. **Reflectio: Honoring the Dream** - Finally, we return to the everyday world, where we might look for a way to honor the dream and the dream giver and make it more concrete or real for ourselves.

What we're doing is allowing the dream to move from **something we analyze** to **something we encounter**.

**Dream Divina** simply follows the natural rhythm through which dreams themselves reveal their meaning.

What we do in Dream Divina is to essentially slow down the natural intelligence of the dream. Instead of waking up and losing the dream's depth, in this practice we **stay inside its contemplative field**. In a sense, Dream Divina simply allows the dream to continue its work of becoming—moving from image, to meaning, to transformation.

Any questions?

## DREAM DIVINA PRACTICE (APPROXIMATELY 45 MIN)

Does everyone have a dream in mind?

The most important attitude for this practice is **curiosity and patience**.

We are not trying to force insight. We are simply giving the dream space to speak.

So if you're ready, let's begin.

*[Light a candle.]*

I'm going to light this candle as a simple symbol of awareness and presence.

As the candle burns, we'll allow ourselves to move into a quieter way of paying attention.

During this time there is nothing you need to accomplish or figure out.

Simply allow your embodied psyche to enter this space, and to pay attention to what unfolds, noticing whatever arises with curiosity and kindness.

## CENTERING (5 MIN)

Settle into the place in which you're sitting, place both feet flat on the floor and feel your body's connection to the floor, to the seat, to where your arms are, and imagine your cells and muscle fibers are spreading out in a relaxed way. Let your attention move from thinking about the day or your dream... to simply experiencing it.

Begin to focus on your breath, taking some deep breaths in and out, in and out. Now imagine as you breathe in that light is coming up from the ground and into your feet. Imagine it coming in at the soles of your feet and slowly rising up into your ankles. At the same time, imagine that light is coming down from above and into the top of your head. See this golden-white light as it pours like honey into the top of your head, and begins to move down into your neck and body.

As you breathe in, see these two streams of light both coming into your body, moving toward your heart, and as you breathe out, imagine that all of your worries and stresses are leaving your body like air deflating from a balloon. Now bring the light all the way up and all the way down meeting at your heart, allowing each stream to continue in the direction it was travelling until you become a clear channel of light that is coming up from the earth and down from heaven and moving through you easily. Now allow the light to be absorbed into your body, knowing that you are relaxed and have been cleared of worries and negativity.

[Pause]

## LECTIO: “READING” THE DREAM (10 MIN)

Now that you are relaxed, imagine yourself as ready to begin a brief journey to review the dream that you brought, a dream that came to teach you something unknown to you before. If your dream is one that has any frightening elements, don't worry, because we'll approach the dream in a way that feels safe. So imagine now getting up from your chair, and walk to the doorway of this room, and when you open the door to step out, you notice that things look different outside. As you step out, you notice you are now in a beautiful town that feels familiar yet looks like it belongs in another era. It's almost like it's outside of time itself. You walk down this tree-lined street, and there on your right you see a beautiful old movie house. As you approach, you notice that the door is open, as if it's waiting for you to enter.

As you enter the movie theater, you see a figure approaching. This person looks wise and kind, and you realize that it is the projectionist. Notice now that you have been carrying a bag, and that it is a bag of your dreams, and so you know now that you can give one of your dreams to this Wisdom figure, either the dream you originally planned to work with or another. After you have given your dream to the projectionist, walk through the doors into the seating area. The theater is empty, and so you can choose your favorite seat. Once in your seat, notice how you feel: do you feel like a child, eager to see what's on the screen? Do you feel any anxiety? Or do you just feel calm and open?

As the curtains open, and the projector begins to shine the light on the screen, you have a sense that the screen is expanding and that it is surrounding you

like the best IMAX you've ever experienced. As your dream begins, your perspective is that you are intimately watching your dream from a place within it, but you are able to observe all aspects of the dream, and if you are one of the characters in the dream, you are able to observe yourself as well.

As you watch the dream, each image is three dimensional – you can hear all the sounds, see all the scenes, smell any smells, and if you reached out you think you might even be able to feel it. Each image in your dream is full of vibrant energy, meaning and purpose, and you watch now as the whole dream unfolds before you.

[pause for a few minutes]

As the dream ends, you know that your memory has recorded it in a way that you'll always be able to access everything that is there.

When the dream is finished, allow the screen to return to normal, and then go back out into the lobby. There the projectionist is waiting for you and as you bid each other farewell, the projectionist returns your dream to you and you return it to your bag.

Now imagine that you leave the movie house and return the way you came back to the door of our meeting room. Enter the room and return to where you were, ready to journal your dream. We will remain in silence during this time, but take a moment to re-acclimate yourself to your place in the room, and when you're ready, open your eyes and get your notepad and pen and then when everyone is ready to start writing we'll continue. [pause for notebooks]

## MEDITATIO: MEDITATING ON THE DREAM (15 MIN; MAY BE EXTENDED FOR LONGER EVENTS)

Now, on a clean sheet of paper, write down the most significant images, characters, or actions in your dream – leaving lines or space between images so that you can go back to write in your associations with these images. And then once you’ve recorded the images, sit with each image for a moment, allowing any associations to bubble up from your psyche. Here, we want to listen to our dream with the “ear of the heart” as if we are in conversation with God. I’ll give you some time to do this, and then, if you’re done before I ask everyone to move on, just sit quietly and look over what you’ve recorded.

[pause for 10-12 minutes] *When it looks as if everyone is done writing, the leader may want to suggest a silent “stand and stretch” break.*

## CONTEMPLATIO: RESTING IN THE DREAM (10 MIN)

Now, if you’re not quite finished, that’s okay, you’ll be able to add more to what you have later today or tomorrow if you’d like, but for now, we’ll move on.

Get back into a comfortable position, sitting in your chair or lying on the floor, and close your eyes and relax. Now imagine that the images from your dream are all floating in front of you and that you are able to gaze at each one. Take some time to just gaze with that contemplative “long loving look” at each image or character, as if it were an icon, a window to the Sacred and to your deepest Wisdom. Allow the images to “speak” to you with any further wisdom or guidance or meaning that they might be willing to share. If you feel

especially drawn to one image that “shimmers” for you, then sit with that image. [pause for 5 minutes or more]

### ORATIO: RESPONDING TO THE DREAM WITH GRATITUDE (3 MIN)

Now just pause here with your eyes closed for one more moment, seeing your dream again as a whole. See it as a kind of love letter to you from your psyche, from your deepest Self, and from God. If you feel a sense of gratitude, then just allow that gratitude to envelop you, or you may just want to feel the presence of that wise Self within you.

[pause]

### REFLECTIO: HONORING THE DREAM (3 MIN)

Before you open your eyes, see if there is some symbolic action you could perform that honors the dream or the dream giver and acknowledges what you have gained from contemplating this dream. [pause]

Now, when you are ready, begin to feel your body back in this room, and open your eyes.

## DISCUSSION

What we practiced today is one way of approaching dreams **not as problems to solve but as encounters to receive**. When we slow down and give dream images sustained attention, they often reveal layers of meaning we might otherwise miss.

In that sense, dream work becomes not only psychological exploration, but a **contemplative practice of listening to the deeper wisdom of the psyche—and perhaps to the deeper wisdom of reality itself**.

*Take this time to lead the group in a discussion of their experience. Use the following prompts or others that you may choose.*

- What did you notice about this experience as a whole?
- Did you gain any new insights, awareness, or perspectives? (*invite participants to share with the group if they feel comfortable in doing so*)
- Did new images or scenes arise in your dream that you hadn't noticed or recorded before?
- What other observations would you like to share?

## CLOSING

The beautiful thing about this kind of listening is that it's always available to us. Thank you for entering the silence together today.

## ABOUT THE CREATOR

Dr. Sheri Kling is an author, theologian, songwriter, and spiritual teacher who helps others move from disconnection and doubt into deeper purpose, passion, and spiritual vitality. She weaves together wisdom from theology, psychology, science, and the arts to spark real transformation. Dr. Sheri is the author of *A Process Spirituality: Christian and Transreligious Resources for Transformation*, and editor of *Renewing Faith: Reigniting Faith and Ministry through Process and Open & Relational Theologies*. As a public speaker, she delivers dynamic presentations to groups, and offers courses, concerts, and spiritual retreats. She can be found online at [sherikling.com](http://sherikling.com).

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