

THE NIGHT GARDEN



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DREAMS, GRIEF AND THE RETURNING PERSON

When Lost People Come Back in Sleep and Play

Oliver Riddett | The Archetype Approach

When someone who has died or gone away returns in a child's dream or play, the adult does not need to settle what the encounter was. We need to make room for the relationship that remains.

"Grandad came back last night."

The child says it while taking off her coat, as if she is reporting the weather.

"He sat on the end of my bed. He had his green jumper on. He said the dog was with him."

The adult pauses.

Grandad died six months ago.

There are several tempting responses.

"That was only a dream."

"Grandad really came to visit you."

"You must miss him very much."

Each response tries to settle the event.

The first closes the door.

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The second decides what lies behind it.

The third may be true, but still places the adult's meaning over the child's experience.

Perhaps the gentler response is simply:

"What was it like when he came?"

The child may say it was lovely.

She may say it was frightening.

She may shrug, find a red crayon and begin drawing the dog.

The dream may be over.

Or the relationship may have walked into the room with her.

THE PERSON IS GONE. THE RELATIONSHIP IS NOT.

Death ends a life in the shared physical world.

It does not instantly end the relationship carried by those who remain.

The voice is remembered.

The favourite chair still seems occupied for a second.

A phrase appears in the mind at exactly the right moment.

A child reaches for the person in play, dreams, drawings, jokes, questions and sudden flashes of anger.

Older grief theories were often described as a process of detaching from the person who had died.

More recent bereavement thinking has paid greater attention to continuing bonds: the ways a relationship changes rather than simply disappearing.

The child may still talk to the person.

Carry an object connected with them.

Repeat their sayings.

Imagine what they would think.

Dream of them returning.

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Become them in play.

None of this automatically means the child is stuck.

It may be one of the ways love learns a new shape.

The relationship can continue without pretending the death did not happen.

A child can know that Grandad is dead and still set a place for him in a story.

Children are often better at holding this apparent contradiction than adults.

We get terribly busy deciding which world is real.

The child gets on with drawing the dog.

*Grief is not the end of relationship. It is the work of learning
a new way to have one.*

GRIEF DOES NOT ARRIVE IN A STRAIGHT LINE

Adults often expect grief to look consistent.

Sad child. Serious face. Thoughtful conversation. Gradual improvement.

Childhood rarely obliges.

A child may cry for three minutes, ask where the person has gone, then demand toast and become furious because it has been cut into squares.

They may appear untouched for weeks and suddenly collapse when somebody uses the wrong mug.

They may repeat the facts of the death without visible emotion.

They may ask the same question after it has been answered many times.

They may play funerals, hospitals, accidents, ghosts, rescues and miraculous returns.

Young children revisit loss as their understanding develops.

What a three-year-old can grasp about absence is not what the same child will understand at five, seven or twelve.

The event stays where it happened.

The child keeps growing around it.

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This means grief may return in new forms as new capacities emerge.

A child who once asked when Mummy was coming home may later ask whether she knew she was dying.

A child who played cheerful funerals may later become frightened that everyone else will die too.

A dream may be part of this return.

It can gather memory, fear, longing, guilt, ordinary imagination and the day's loose ends into one encounter.

We do not need to force these elements apart before breakfast.

We need to notice what the child brings back with them.

WHEN THE LOST PERSON RETURNS

The returning person does not always arrive as a comforting visitor.

Sometimes they say nothing.

Sometimes they leave again.

Sometimes the child cannot reach them.

Sometimes they are angry, ill, younger, enormous, tiny or strangely changed.

Sometimes the person is alive but absent.

A parent has left.

A sibling lives elsewhere.

A practitioner has moved settings.

A friend has disappeared from the group without a goodbye the child could understand.

Dreams do not respect the neat administrative categories adults place around loss.

Death, separation, migration, family breakdown, care arrangements and ordinary departures can all leave a relationship looking for somewhere to continue.

The dream may restore the person.

Or repeat the loss.

The child finds them, only to watch them vanish.

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The child brings them home, but nobody else can see them.

The child becomes the one who leaves.

The emotional truth may not sit in the image alone.

It may sit in the movement.

Approach and disappearance.

Finding and losing.

Calling and receiving no answer.

Being held and waking up.

Rather than asking immediately, "What does the returning person symbolise?" we might ask:

What happened between them?

What did the child feel able to do?

Did the meeting bring relief, fear, anger or unfinishedness?

What part of the encounter continues in waking play?

THE ADULT RUSHES TO EXPLAIN

A child's dream of somebody who has died can make the adult profoundly uncomfortable.

It touches belief.

It touches our own grief.

It raises questions we may have spent years avoiding.

Was it a memory?

A wish?

A visitation?

The brain reorganising experience?

A symbolic presentation of the relationship?

Perhaps.

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But the early-years practitioner does not need to become a sleep detective, theologian and grief counsellor before registration.

The adult's task is not to win the metaphysical argument.

It is to remain present to the child.

Two forms of certainty can close the experience.

THE CERTAINTY OF DISMISSAL

"It was only your imagination."

This may leave the child feeling that the encounter was silly, false or not worth sharing.

THE CERTAINTY OF BELIEF

"That was definitely Nan coming to see you."

This may place an adult spiritual interpretation onto an experience the child understood differently.

There is a middle position.

The dream mattered because it mattered to the child.

We can honour the experience without claiming knowledge we do not have.

We might say:

"You saw Nan in your dream."

"You looked happy when you told me."

"She was wearing the coat you remember."

"Would you like to tell me what happened next?"

Describe, do not decide.

The child owns the encounter. The adult does not need to prove or disprove it.

MEMORY, DREAM OR VISIT?

Some families understand dreams of the dead as genuine visits.

Others understand them psychologically.

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Some hold both possibilities.

Some do not know and are content not to know.

Early-years practice must be able to meet families across these differences without smirking at one side or preaching at the other.

The practitioner can ask what language the family uses.

"How do you talk about Grandad at home?"

"What does your family believe happens after somebody dies?"

"Is there anything you would like us to say, or avoid saying, if she brings the dream back here?"

This does not mean agreeing with every claim as professional fact.

It means recognising that grief lives inside culture, faith, family story and relationship.

The same image may be held differently in different homes.

A dream bird may be a memory to one family, an ancestor to another and simply a beautiful bird to the child.

The setting can remain hospitable without flattening these differences.

There is no need to put "spiritual or neurological" on the planning board and make the children vote.

Mystery is allowed.

THE CHILD MAY BECOME THE PERSON

Sometimes the returning person does not appear as a character standing opposite the child.

The child becomes them.

They wear Grandad's hat.

Use his voice.

Tell everybody where to sit.

Pretend to drive his car.

Repeat the joke adults thought they had forgotten.

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A child may take the role of the person who died, then stage their death, funeral and return several times before lunch.

Adults can find this shocking.

But play often works by crossing the boundary between self and other.

The child tries the person from the inside.

They borrow the posture, power, warmth, weakness or authority that belonged to them.

This may preserve connection.

It may help the child explore what happened.

It may simply be a cracking role.

Again, we do not need one grand explanation.

We can notice what becomes possible when the child wears the person.

Does the quiet child suddenly speak with authority?

Does the anxious child become the protector?

Does the child control the moment of departure and decide when the person returns?

Does the role bring laughter into a story that has been painfully serious?

The person may be returning through identification rather than appearance.

A trait has found a new body.

WHAT THE RETURNING PERSON CARRIES

The Archetype Approach does not assign a fixed archetype to the dead person or decode the dream through a chart.

But it can help us notice what powers become available in the encounter.

A returning grandparent may carry the Friend's belonging.

The Helper's care.

The Builder's competence.

The Joker's mischief.

The Rebel's refusal to disappear politely.

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The Watcher's quiet presence.

The person may also carry shadow.

Fear.

Unfinished conflict.

A promise that could not be kept.

Anger at being left.

Guilt about the last thing said.

A child may love and fear the same returning person.

They may want the dream and dread going to sleep.

The adult does not need to tidy this into a pleasant memory activity.

Grief is allowed teeth.

The six axes can guide provision without deciding meaning.

MOVEMENT AND STILLNESS

Does the child need to search, chase, run or travel? Can the story also pause, rest or arrive?

CARE AND PLAYFUL DISRUPTION

Is the returning person always ill, fragile or being rescued? Is there room for humour, annoyance and ordinary life?

TRUTH AND HARMONY

Can the child say they are angry with the person who left, even when everyone else wants only loving memories?

IMAGINATION AND ORDER

Can the encounter remain mysterious while the child is also given clear, honest information about death and absence?

INTENSITY AND INTELLECT

Can strong feeling be held alongside questions, facts, sequence and thought?

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EXPLORATION AND CONSTRUCTION

Can the child search for the person and also build somewhere for the relationship to live now?

Balance does not end the bond.

It gives it more than one form.

GIVE THE RELATIONSHIP SOMEWHERE TO GO

A child cannot visit the person in ordinary waking life.

But the relationship can still move.

It can move into a drawing.

A story.

A den.

A song.

A box of objects.

A recipe.

A map of places remembered together.

A clay figure that is made, broken and remade.

A letter that is written without requiring a reply.

A game in which the person returns, stays for tea and then leaves through a door the child controls.

The aim is not to keep the child permanently occupied with grief.

Nor is it to turn every ordinary activity into remembrance.

It is to let the child continue what they choose to continue.

If the dream returns as play, the setting can offer materials.

If the child moves on, the adult moves on too.

The child should not have to perform sadness because the adults have made a beautiful memory table.

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Symbolic hospitality includes the right to play dinosaurs and never mention Grandad all week.

The Night Garden gives love somewhere to go when the person it loves is no longer in the room.

THE NIGHT GARDEN RECEIVES THE RETURNING PERSON

A Night Garden provision can make room for loss without becoming a shrine or a therapy room.

Its materials remain open-ended.

Figures and animals.

Clay and charcoal.

Fabric, doors, bridges, beds, boats and small houses.

Paper for maps, messages and invented books.

Simple musical instruments.

Boxes that can hold something and be opened again.

Photographs or personal objects only where families have chosen to share them and the child wants them present.

The returning person may enter through any of these forms.

The child may build the bedroom from the dream.

Make a road to the person.

Create two homes.

Invent a telephone.

Give the dead person a job in the nursery.

Build a boat that travels between worlds.

Or make nothing related to grief at all.

The provision waits without fishing.

It does not ask every child whether anybody dead visited them last night.

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That would be less Night Garden, more extremely strange breakfast club.

The invitation remains quiet.

Inner images are welcome here.

No explanation required.

WHAT ADULTS CAN SAY

The most useful responses are often simple.

WHEN THE CHILD REPORTS THE DREAM

"You saw Dad in your dream."

"What happened when you met him?"

"How did it feel when you woke up?"

"Would you like to tell me more, draw it or leave it there?"

WHEN THE CHILD ASKS IF IT WAS REAL

"It felt real to you."

"People understand dreams in different ways."

"What do you think happened?"

"We can ask your family how they talk about this at home."

WHEN THE CHILD WANTS THE PERSON BACK

"You really want her here."

"I cannot make her come back, but I can stay with you while you miss her."

"Shall we think of something you remember about her?"

WHEN THE CHILD IS ANGRY

"You are angry that he left."

"You can love somebody and be angry with them."

"I will not let you hurt anyone, but I will help you find somewhere for that anger to go."

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WHEN THERE ARE NO WORDS

Sit nearby.

Offer the clay.

Follow the play.

Silence can be company when it is not abandonment.

WHEN THE DREAM FRIGHTENS

A returning-person dream may be comforting.

It may also unsettle the child badly.

The person may appear injured, angry or unreachable.

The child may fear sleeping because they do not want the dream to return.

They may become preoccupied with death, separation or the safety of other loved people.

The adult can first restore ordinary containment.

Clear information.

Predictable routines.

A trusted person at bedtime.

Permission to use a light, comfort object, drawing or simple plan for waking.

The dream can be given a boundary.

Draw where it began and where it ended.

Build a doorway the returning person cannot cross without permission.

Invent a signal that stops the scene.

Let the child decide whether the person stays, leaves, speaks or rests.

These are not techniques for forcing a happy ending.

They offer agency where the child felt none.

If the child does not want to revisit the dream, do not keep bringing it back because the activity looked promising.

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Leave the door alone.

SAFEGUARDING AND SUPPORT

Dreams of dead or absent people are not, by themselves, evidence of abuse, trauma, supernatural contact or mental disorder.

They must not be decoded into allegations.

They must not be used to dismiss a waking disclosure either.

If a child describes something that happened while awake, ordinary safeguarding procedures apply.

Record the child's words accurately.

Do not lead.

Do not investigate through play.

Do not promise secrecy.

Follow the setting's safeguarding process.

Bereavement support may be helpful when distress remains intense, daily functioning changes significantly, sleep becomes persistently disrupted, the child is overwhelmed by guilt or fear, or the family asks for more help.

The practitioner does not diagnose complicated grief from a dream about a train.

We observe patterns over time, speak with families and seek appropriate support when needed.

The child's culture, faith, neurodevelopment, language and previous experiences will shape how grief appears.

There is no single correct performance of mourning.

THE ADULT'S OWN RETURNING PEOPLE

A child's dream may open an adult's grief without warning.

The green jumper resembles Dad's.

The dead dog has the same name as the practitioner's childhood pet.

The child's question lands in a place the adult has kept carefully sealed.

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This does not make the adult unsuitable.

It makes them human.

But the child should not have to carry the adult's response.

Reflective teams need room to ask:

What did this story awaken in me?

Am I trying to shut it down because I cannot bear it?

Am I making the child's dream more mystical because I need reassurance?

Am I pushing a memory activity because I want the loss to become meaningful?

Can another practitioner hold this conversation today?

What support do I need outside the child's hearing?

Adults are part of the symbolic ecology.

Our grief enters the room too.

The work is not to have no reaction.

It is to know whose reaction is whose.

A CONTINUING BOND HYPOTHESIS

The Night Garden proposes a careful hypothesis.

When a child dreams of somebody who has died or gone away, and the encounter continues into waking emotion or play, adults may help by receiving the experience without fixing its meaning.

Child-led drawing, storytelling, movement, construction, role play and simple family-consistent acts of remembrance may give the continuing relationship a form that can change over time.

This does not prove that the dream was a visitation.

It does not reduce the dream to wish fulfilment either.

It treats the encounter as psychologically and relationally real because the child has lived it.

Useful questions might include:

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Does the child gain more choice in how the meeting unfolds?

Can the person be remembered in more than one emotional register: loved, funny, irritating, missed and real?

Does repeated play allow arrival and departure to become more bearable?

Can the child hold factual understanding of death alongside an ongoing inner relationship?

Do family beliefs and practices help the child feel held rather than corrected?

Can practitioners support symbolic expression without turning it into therapy or theology?

What happens when the child is allowed to stop?

The next morning, the child draws Grandad in the green jumper.

The dog is beside him.

There is a small door in the corner of the page.

"That is where they went," she says.

Then she turns the paper over and draws a purple dinosaur eating the nursery.

The adult does not pull her back.

The relationship has somewhere to live.

The child is free to keep living too.

Perhaps the people we lose do not always return to be explained. Sometimes they return because love is still learning where to put them.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Oliver Riddett is the founder of the Archetype Approach, a developmental and relational model of childhood built around twelve universal archetypes. Developed through practice at Children of Towan in Porthtowan, Cornwall, the approach helps parents and practitioners look beneath behaviour and respond through balance rather than correction.