

**Shrink Rap Radio #94, May 27, 2007 – Dream Wisdom**  
**David Van Nuys, Ph.D, aka “Dr. Dave” interviews Alan Siegel, Ph.D**  
(transcribed from [www.ShrinkRapRadio.com](http://www.ShrinkRapRadio.com) by Susan Argyelan)

**Excerpt:** There’s a sense of working through and reassurance, and you can see these stages – the stages of grief or the stages of coping with becoming a parent through the dreams, and it really helps people feel a hope and a reassurance when they’re going through a stressful event. By (inaudible) the dream, you can get a map of where you are and a kind of reassurance that things are evolving and changing, *or* you see the block and you know what you have to work on. You have to work through what you’re not dealing with.

**Introduction:** That was the voice of my guest, Dr. Alan Siegel. Alan Siegel, Ph.D, is an adult and child psychologist with over 30 years of teaching and publishing on dream-related topics. He’s the author of *Dream Wisdom: Uncovering Life’s Answers in Your Dreams*. Dr. Siegel is a former president of the International Association for the Study of Dreams and editor emeritus of the IASD magazine, *Dream Time*. He stars in, and is featured as a regular commentator on the new Discovery Health Channel program, *Dream Decoders*. His commentaries on post-9-11 nightmares, children’s dreams, and dream interpretation have been featured on NBC’s *Today Show* as well as CNN News, PBS, NPR, the Discovery Channel’s *The Power of Dreams* series, and NBC’s prime-time special, *The Secret World of Dreams*. Dr. Siegel is a licensed psychologist practicing psychotherapy and psychological assessment of children and adults in Berkeley and San Francisco. He’s Assistant Clinical Professor at the University of California, Berkeley, Department of Psychology. Now, here’s the interview.

**Dr. Dave:** Dr. Alan Siegel, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

**Alan Siegel:** Thank you very much!

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah. You know, I think I recall that you were a student at Sonoma State University at one time. Is that where your interest in dreams began?

**Siegel:** Well, it began before that, but that certainly helped me develop my interest more, because I was able to really focus on dreams and use those both for professional development and training, but also for personal development. But, I really started getting interested when I took my first course in psychology in college and found that Freud and Jung came up with a lot of their theories by keeping their own dream journals and learning from interpreting, and working with, and exploring their own dreams.

**Dr. Dave:** Right. And then were you at Sonoma then for a Master’s program, or did you finish...

**Siegel:** Yeah, I was there for a Master’s in about 1975. So, it dates me back a little bit.

**Dr. Dave:** Okay. And, where did you go from there?

**Siegel:** I got my Ph.D at the California School of Professional Psychology and have been practicing as a psychologist for 25 years, doing both therapy and assessment, writing. I got my book Dream Wisdom – which also has a website, dreamwisdom.info – and have done research as well on dreams, particularly on post-traumatic nightmares, on expectant fathers’ dreams, and on children’s dreams. Those have been some of my research areas, in addition to my clinical work and teaching (inaudible).

**Dr. Dave:** Okay, great. Well, I will definitely want to make sure that we check into each of those research areas. But, I thought initially, we’d focus on your book, Dream Wisdom: Uncovering Life’s Answers in Your Dreams. Now, how did you come to write that book?

**Siegel:** Well, in part, it was inspired from my early undergraduate days. When I began writing my dreams down, I noticed that there was a pattern in my dreams – or numerous patterns, particularly when I would go through stressful or traumatic kinds of times in my life. I’d have certain characteristic dreams.

**Dr. Dave:** Uh-huh...

**Siegel:** For example, a snake or a serpent – threatened by that, would come out...one time, I was mugged, going to a concert when I was in undergraduate school. Other times, like when my grandfather died, I would have these snake dreams and certain other dreams. Even from my own dreams, I saw that crises appeared to generate a characteristic set of dreams, which were very helpful in guiding me.

**Dr. Dave:** Now, would these crises then trigger the snake dreams? ‘Cause I’ve had lots of snake dreams myself. That’s a set of dreams that have been (laughs) very interesting to me in my own life. Did those crises in your life trigger the snake dreams? I’m interested in the snake dreams because I’ve had quite a few of those myself.

**Siegel:** Yes, they did. Which isn’t to say that snake dreams are only crisis-related, but for me, they had deep roots because the very first dream I remembered, circa age 4, was a dream of being threatened by a snake. And so...a dream that I’d had even in childhood that would recur at later times. So, all over the world, people interpret snake dreams in different ways. For me, one of the dimensions of the meaning of the snake dream was a sense of mortal threat, which was more related to emotional threat.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Siegel:** But when I would feel that something was throwing me off balance, upsetting me, the snakes would appear as a symbol of kind of anxiety or feelings of insecurity.

**Dr. Dave:** Right. I can really relate to that in my own version of snake dreams; often it's been a situation where I was surrounded by snakes, and I was paralyzed by fear. I felt I couldn't move, or they would get me. I couldn't jump over them, and so certainly, at a metaphorical level, that seems to me to talk about maybe being stuck somewhere or emotionally fearful – something like that.

**Siegel:** Yeah. My very... Well, often, people remember just one or two dreams from childhood, even though you may have 15,000 or 20,000 dreams in childhood. And, that was one of three or four dreams I remembered. And, what was interesting is, in the dream, I had a reaction similar to yours – a sense of terror, mortal threat...but I tried to negotiate with the snake to get it not to bite me...

**Dr. Dave:** Oh, good for you! (laughs)

**Siegel:** And, you know, you can interpret that in many different ways. I mean, it's sort of shows that there was a bit of a problem-solving...I was trying to cope, and you see this a lot in trauma survivors – that when there's no effort to cope when the adversary, whether it be the snake or the terrorist in the dream, overwhelms you, and you don't even have a way to fight back, you're probably more stuck and overwhelmed. But when you can see efforts to fight back, there's probably some stress that you're having some success, or at least some ability, to begin to cope with. I find it interesting in terms of becoming a psychologist later in life, too – because you work with people verbally – to help them work out of crisis situations and to figure things out. So, I think it was both a personal overcoming of challenge or showing those efforts, but also, words were something that I used even at that age, or thought I could use, to help myself or help other people. And, in psychology, that's a lot of what we do...

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Siegel:** ...with dreams or with general therapy techniques.

**Dr. Dave:** Fascinating. Now, we're talking about snake dreams, which I guess are pretty common. In your book, you talk about 20 universal dreams, and I don't know if snake dreams are among the 20 universal. Give us some examples of what you mean by "universal dreams."

**Siegel:** Well, first of all, dream symbols are often interpreted specific to a culture. So, if someone is dressed in white in one culture that may represent birth. In another culture, that may represent death.

**Dr. Dave:** Uh-huh.

**Siegel:** You have to know about a person's cultural beliefs. In therapy, you actually have to *ask* them, "How would your family interpret this?" or "What would your version of this symbol be?" particularly if you're working with someone who's of a culturally different background.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Siegel:** But, on to the universal dreams. There appear to be – apart from the cultural trappings, that may differ – certain themes, like falling, flying...

**Dr. Dave:** Mm-hmm...

**Siegel:** ...appearing naked in public, being back in high school or college and being unprepared for an exam, losing your wallet, missing the bus or the plane, getting chased or attacked...

**Dr. Dave:** How about losing your teeth...(laughs) Is that one?

**Siegel:** (laughs) I was going to get there. I was going to use that as a special example.

**Dr. Dave:** Okay, good.

**Siegel:** So, that's an example... If I give a lecture to a large public group – you know, say, if there's 100 people there, and I'm giving a lecture – and if you say, "Raise your hand if you've had a flying dream," you know, 90% - 95%...

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Siegel:** ...will have a flying dream, or a paralysis dream, or a falling dream. Those are *really* universal themes. But, if you say, "Who here has had a teeth-falling-out dream?" half the people will look quizzical – "I've never heard of that." And, the other half will say, "Oh, yeah!" And, typically, the teeth-falling-out dream comes out in the form – not always, but very frequently – where the teeth crumble and fall out.

**Dr. Dave:** Hmm...

**Siegel:** I don't know how you've heard it, but people say, "Well, should I go to the dentist? Am I having a dental problem?" Well, that gets into the issue of the objective and subjective meanings of dreams.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Siegel:** It *may* mean you have a dental problem. But more often, dream symbols are metaphors for emotional states of mind, or inner conflicts, and things like that. So,

typically, teeth symbolize power, potency – the ability to eat, to cut... And, losing your teeth has to do with some sense of powerlessness or impotence. It's more often people have this dream when they're either experiencing a physical challenge – like the diagnosis of cancer, or being on crutches due to a leg injury – or an emotional blow to one's self-esteem: getting fired, getting rejected by a friend, feeling left out in some way. So, losing your teeth is that loss of power.

**Dr. Dave:** Mm-hmm...

**Siegel:** That loss of emotional power and potency.

**Dr. Dave:** Kind of losing your “bite.” (laughs)

**Siegel:** Yeah, losing your bite. Now, okay... I want to use this as an example of how you don't want to rely on me telling you what a teeth dream or a flying dream means. You have to use your own life experience and memory, and your own imagination, to make sure that the interpretation is in the right direction. And so, the teeth-falling-out dream might certainly be different if you were a dentist, or if you just had a root canal.

**Dr. Dave:** Right.

**Siegel:** It could maybe more have to do with that, and I had... One of the examples in Dream Wisdom that I talk about is a woman who had a dream where she was losing her teeth. Now, if I jumped in and said, “Oh! Powerlessness! I know what that means...”

**Dr. Dave:** Mm-hmm...

**Siegel:** ...I would have missed the twist that the dream took.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Siegel:** She was a woman who was considering going back to grad school and going to work. Her kids had reached elementary age, and she wanted to get back and do something on her own. And, she was deciding whether to go back to grad school and go back to work. And, after she lost her teeth in the dream, she looked inside her mouth and felt, and there was a new set of teeth coming up. So, it was a fear of loss of power, like, “I'm not good enough to work or go back to school.” But, the dream was actually reassuring her, “You *do* have the power. You've got a new set of teeth coming in. You've got a power that you haven't even known about that's emerging.”

**Dr. Dave:** Hmm...

**Siegel:** So, it's in a sense, ultimately the twist in the dream – if you look at the whole image, not just the symbol of teeth falling out – that this is the *renewal* of power (inaudible) the fear of loss of power, but a renewal of power. So, the opposite of what you would have found if you looked it up in a dream dictionary and it said, “Teeth falling out means loss of power.”

**Dr. Dave:** Right, right. Well, given that dreams are so personal and specific, mostly, and mostly need to be interpreted and understood in the context of the person's life, why do you think there *are* universal dreams? Do you have any ideas about why there should be a class of dreams that tend to be universal?

**Siegel:** Well, it's somewhat like (?), in a general way, Jung's idea of the archetypes – or sort of how he came up with that – which is that there's certain universal human experiences which we cope with in waking life which then get reflected into very common dreams. And so, for example, dreams of being chased or threatened, those dreams don't always have to do with walking through a neighborhood that's high-crime, although they might. But, they often have to do with some emotional threats. And so, as a child, you may fear certain things, and that fear then goes into your dreams and might represent some insecurity about being fired from a job, or being rejected by a friend. So, general insecurity as an adult may configure back into a fear of being chased or hurt that might date back to a childhood fear. So, kind of our childhood fears and traumatic events in life are similar. Loss of power, rejection, abandonment – these are the fears and the wounds that humans are vulnerable to, and some of these seem to be common universal experiences that can configure, in certain ways, in dreams.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, in other words, we...as human beings, we share certain existential realities and commonalities.

**Siegel:** Yes.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah. Now...

**Siegel:** I would definitely say that's true, but different cultures would interpret the dreams differently.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Siegel:** Jung's idea was that there are certain archetypes like the shadow, or the great mother... And, the dreams, depending on the culture, it may take different clothing (?), the theme. But, the underlying structure of the theme would have been shaped through evolution of common experiences, like, say, being dependent when you're born and cared for by a mother would shape our psyche so powerfully that we would have dreams about being cared for or rejected or nurtured or taken care of... would come out in abandonment dreams or threat dreams even as an adult. But, it's shaped by your personal experience of being cared for by a mother, and over

evolution, human experience of going through that first few years of dependency on parents.

**Dr. Dave:** Wow. You've just given me an idea for a research hypothesis that I don't know if anybody's done. But, you know how there's been this big swing in general, you know, in terms of the nature/nurture controversy, and how much is learned, and how much we're born with...

**Siegel:** Yes.

**Dr. Dave:** ...and we've sort of come out of a period where everything was pretty much on the nurture side, that everything was based on learning due to the influence of the behaviorists and so on. And then, in more recent years, the pendulum has swung back to where we now understand that so much more about our personalities is given to us genetically than we ever believed – you know, that comes from twin studies, and so on. So, it's making me wonder about the possibility of doing genetic research to see if certain dream themes or motifs, or some quality of the dreams, is shared between mother and child.

**Siegel:** I've seen...actually, it's an interesting research topic. And, I've seen a little bit of literature – not an overwhelming, convincing body of literature – but some things that suggest that your idea has some real importance to it. One is Jung, in some of his writings, when his adult patients couldn't remember their dreams and work on them in therapy...

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Siegel:** ...he told them to tell their children's dreams. So essentially, what he's saying is that some of the dreams that a family member would have would be representing some shared threats or crisis that other family members are having. This may also have to do with the parenting relationship, too, that he asked that. Another thing is, I have seen some tendency towards – in families – with kids and adults having somewhat similar themes in their dreams – even recurring nightmares that might be similar between parents and children that they've both had. There's been some – you know, depending on where you, what you believe in terms of validity of telepathic or precognitive dreams. Whether you believe it or not, you see more examples among close family members...of shared dreaming.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Siegel:** And also, if there were precognitive dreams... were proven to be valid, or whatever, it would kind of make some sense in terms of (inaudible) that a mother or close family member would have heightened intuition, so as to protect their child or close family members from harm or threat. I don't know if I'm going afield from (inaudible)...

**Dr. Dave:** No, no – that’s fine. Yeah, I think that the thing that intrigued me about that was that it might be a way to kind of test out Jung’s idea that some of this is actually genetic memory; that these archetypes are in some way encoded in our genes. I think in some places he seems to imply that. And so, I was thinking, well, gee – maybe there’s a way to test that out, particularly if he were to test mothers and children...test children who were reared apart from their mothers so that you could rule out the “nurture” part of it. But, let’s move on. You mentioned Jung working with people who were having poor dream recall, and I know that’s a topic you discuss in your book. What are the issues, as far as you’re concerned, around dream recall?

**Siegel:** Well, it’s therapeutic...and personally and creatively rewarding to remember your dreams. And usually, what happens is, in this culture we’re not encouraged to take dreams as valuable...

**Dr. Dave:** Mm-hmm...

**Siegel:** ...and if you teach your children that dreams are valuable – they can give you insights; they can also give you great creative inspirations for drawing or stories or things – then people tend, when encouraged, they tend to remember dreams and share them and make them important in just conversations during the day. So, you can be taught to improve dream recall, and the techniques are pretty simple – keeping a journal by the side of your bed, telling someone you trust about – family member, relative, friends – your dreams on some kind of regular basis, and they’re, in turn, sharing them.

**Dr. Dave:** Okay.

**Siegel:** If you spent a little bit of time (inaudible) right when you wake up, and you give yourself a suggestion before you go to sleep that “I will remember my dreams,” it will tend to enhance recall. And, if you keep a journal, even if irregularly, you begin to see patterns, which then inspires you to say, “Wow, this is really interesting. I’m really learning about myself and even getting creative ideas.” And, then that encourages dream recall. It’s somewhat that we’re culturally...you don’t emphasize dreams, and the more you make them important – (inaudible) and emotional value – then you start to remember them more.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes. And, I’ve found that if I’m reading a book on dreams, I tend to remember them more.

**Siegel:** Yeah, yeah.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Siegel:** Now, one point I wanted to take up on, I didn’t really finish about, the thesis of Dream Wisdom, my book, which is that I later found that there were patterns in

dreams when people were undergoing important life transitions, like getting married, having a child, experiencing grief or loss; that certain characteristic dreams would occur...like those universal dreams of falling and flying. In the general population, expectant parents tend to dream about giving birth to furry mammals, especially women. And, those furry mammals are usually symbols of the developing relationship with the fetus, even before it's born. And there's a series of maybe 10 or 15 common dreams that expectant parents have. And, there's certain common dreams that people undergoing divorce have. There's a whole set and a sequence of dreams that people undergoing grief or loss seem to have. All of these dreams tell us something about the inner changes we go through when we have a child or experience grief, but they also give you guideposts, emotionally, to help you navigate stressful changes. So, dreams can guide us to help us navigate through life's passages and come out the other end in a more balanced kind of way.

**Dr. Dave:** Do they serve as signposts that tell us how far we have progressed in terms of dealing with the crisis that we're going through?

**Siegel:** Yeah. And, I think in some ways, a good example is grief dreams.

**Dr. Dave:** Okay.

**Siegel:** And typically, shortly after someone dies, the dreams are very upsetting. There's a sense of loss; you can see the person with cancer all haggard, or whatever. But then, as you gradually work through the grief, you see a whole other set of dreams – like the person coming back and saying, "I'm okay. Don't worry about me..." maybe looking like an angel up in heaven, or maybe interacting with you in a way like you used to years ago, when they were healthy. So, there's this sense of working through and reassurance, and you can see these stages – the stages of grief or the stages of coping with becoming a parent – through the dreams. And, it really helps people feel a hope and a reassurance when they're going through a stressful event. By using the dreams, you can get a map of where you are and a kind of reassurance that things are evolving and changing, or you see the blocks, and you know what you have to work on - have to work through – what you're not dealing with.

**Dr. Dave:** Boy, that certainly refutes the argument from some people who would maintain that dreams are an entirely random phenomenon.

**Siegel:** Well, that gets back into the whole nature/nurture or psychological-versus-physiological base for personality. And I think that anybody who keeps a journal will see incredible connections between the content of their dreams and current and past life events.

**Dr. Dave:** Definitely.

**Siegel:** And, it's funny that... There's a psychiatrist, Alan Hobson, who's often quoted as the kind of skeptic who...

**Dr. Dave:** Right.

**Siegel:** ...you know, to some extent says that dreams aren't that meaningful, that they're more shaped by physiological events in the brain. And, he was on, there was this Discovery show program called The Power of Dreams, that I was in a couple of segments on. He was on, and while stating that he was attempting to refute that dreams are meaningful, they had him tell a dream that just seemed so dripping with meaning...

**Dr. Dave:** (laughs)

**Siegel:** ...that he seemed to contradict his very own point. So, I think that the most sophisticated ideas these days – even for the people that say that dreams are more, you know, physiologically based, like they're triggered by events in the brain while we sleep and dream – that even some of those folks take a model which blends (?) that there's probably some psychological basis combined with some physiological basis.

**Dr. Dave:** Interesting.

**Siegel:** I think the meaning is more shaped by emotional challenges – things that threaten us or that we have that are new, that we have to cope with and overcome, changes in our identity, threats to our sense of security and stability. These are the things that our dreams help us with, and sometimes they help us by exaggerating the problems, unfortunately, and we get nightmares. But, dreams really are on the cutting edge of what's most new and challenging, and often difficult for us emotionally in our lives.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes. And, I –

**Siegel:** They take our temperature and give us a kind of X-ray...

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Siegel:** ...of our unconscious, which then allows us to identify issues that we need help with, or to work on.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, and then as therapy goes along, or as time passes, these dreams come along that seem to suggest progress, just as you were suggesting in the case of grief.

**Siegel:** Yeah, and you can sometimes even see this on the short... I mean, you can see this over the course of therapy, or when someone's going through grief... I teach at the graduate level dreams (inaudible) use of dreams, or a course about

understanding your dreams, and I have people keep a two-week journal so they can interpret their own set of dreams within a two-week period, just as sort of an exercise...

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Siegel:** ...and sometimes people even see an evolution even within a short period of, let's say, coping with an issue that you're feeling challenged by, and they might see that issue evolve even over a short period of time by looking carefully at a series of dreams.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes, and that really underscores the value of keeping a journal, because if you don't keep a journal, you don't tend to notice those patterns that the dreams... They just seem to stand alone, but when you can look back over a series, you can see patterns that you might have otherwise missed.

**Siegel:** Right, and especially – and this is kind of a theme of Dream Wisdom – when you undergo a huge epic life event, like divorce, or marriage, or having a child, or you know, a serious illness, the dreams seem to gravitate towards helping you by exaggerating, or helping you work through, those issues. And, there's these themes. You know, the people who are divorcing dream that they're alone or naked, like they've lost their roles or their identities. That the people who are about to be married, they often have what I call the "Bride of Frankenstein" dream...

**Dr. Dave:** (laughs)

**Siegel:** Their fiancé appears in clothes in bad taste, or behaves in ways that are sort of embarrassing. And so, you're working through your fear, "Am I marrying the right person?"

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Siegel:** "Am I going to be emotionally damaged by making this commitment?" And, it comes out in these funny – upsettingly funny – kind of ways, like the fiancé turning into something that would, you know, not be something you'd want to live with – someone you'd want to live with. And, it's sort of exaggerating your worst fears as then a way of helping you work through it. I mean, a good example of one of the characteristic pregnancy dreams, expectant parents dream that they're taking care of their baby, and then they somehow forget and go off and do something fun. And, they say, "Oh, my God! When I wake up, I'm going to be a terrible parent; I shouldn't be having a child." But in reality, that nightmare is a positive sign that they're internally preparing for the tremendous responsibility of parenting.

**Dr. Dave:** Interesting, interesting. You know, as you were talking, I just realized that there's another kind of dream that I've had very occasionally – and I wonder if

you've heard of this – which are funny dreams, in which I've woken up laughing; my laughter woke me up. Have you ever heard of that? (laughs)

**Siegel:** Yeah. I mean, less often than the scary dreams...

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Siegel:** I have a kind of joking phrase about that. In the seventies, people were interested in the “primal scream”, and that’s kind of a “primal giggle.”

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah. (laughs)

**Siegel:** So, often... You know, you have to really look at what you're laughing at or what the situation was...if there's something... Finding amusement is somewhat unusual in a dream, but it may suggest that something is making you happy, or something is tickling your funny bone in some way. It could be denial, like people laughing when they're upset – you really just have to look at what laughter means to you and look at whether there's something that you're finding either amusing or startling, or the kinds of things that would provoke laughter...

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Siegel:** How does that click with something that's going on in your life? And, are you a person that laughs easily or not so easily? You know, things like that, to help you come up with what the laughter might mean. But it is... I mean, if it leaves you with a positive residue, emotionally...

**Dr. Dave:** Mm-hmm...

**Siegel:** ...when you wake up, it's likely that you've resolved something, because unresolved dreams tend to leave you with an emotionally negative residue: you feel kind of weighted down with a dark cloud over your head during the first part of the day, or during the day, after having an unresolved nightmare.

**Dr. Dave:** Well, I always felt good after that kind of laughter dream.

**Siegel:** So, it kind of suggests that something was either worked through in the dream, or it's symbolizing something is feeling positive or working through in your life.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, I like your expression of the “primal giggle.” I'm going to try to remember that. Now, you mentioned nightmares, and so what's your take on nightmares?

**Siegel:** Well, one idea that I like to pose, and I was touching on this with talking about expectant parents' dreams of forgetting the baby when they should've been taking care of it...

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Siegel:** ...is that moderate nightmares during a period of stress are probably a healthy sign, rather than an unhealthy sign. And, the metaphor that I like to use is nightmares, to a moderate level, may be more like a vaccine than a poison.

**Dr. Dave:** Hmmm...

**Siegel:** A poison emotionally would be something that leaves you unresolved and really goes into a dead end, in terms of emotional resolution, but a vaccine helps to stimulate the antibodies so that you don't get smallpox, or whatever it is. And, nightmares, the way that I was discussing the parenting dream of forgetting the baby, help you prepare by making you anxious, and you want to develop ways to be a better parent. Go to prenatal classes; get better prenatal care. So, nightmares may actually help us by allowing us to work through both at night and be left with important issues that you have to ponder and work through, based on the nightmares. So, they actually may be a positive sign. There was an amazing study back in the seventies which some studies have replicated a little bit. Pregnant women during the middle of pregnancy who had more dreams with threat and hostility had shorter labors and fewer complications.

**Dr. Dave:** Interesting.

**Siegel:** That seems counterintuitive, or the opposite of what you'd expect, but it seems like those women who could tolerate thinking about the normal conflict of having a child – the anxiety – were more able to work it through and let go when it actually came time to give birth. And, it had a physical correlate as well as an emotional correlate. So, interesting stuff, and nightmares may help us. Now, that being said, extreme nightmares with graphic violence – death, destruction – a high degree of lack of resolution with no attempt at coping, and if the content repeats and doesn't change, that's sort of the description of post-traumatic nightmares. Those dreams may – particularly when there's no signs of coping or overcoming the stress –

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Siegel:** ...could well be a sign that you may need some mental-health help or some support, that you're stuck and that the immunization or the vaccine kind of thing has gone awry, and the nightmares are actually causing you problems unto themselves and not necessarily... They've gone beyond the point of most dreams which help you solve problems by pointing them out to where the dream itself is rubbing salt on the wound, causing more of a problem than (inaudible). This would be more extreme, repetitive, unchanging nightmares with very graphic content and with little degree of fighting back or resolving.

**Dr. Dave:** As a therapist, then, how would you work with those?

**Siegel:** Well, for people who suffered trauma, after...those who were near the 9/11 attack, people who've been in car accidents or who've had sexual abuse or physical violence inflicted upon them, they tend to have some of these repetitive, unchanging, graphically violent dreams. Often, very simple techniques – like just retelling the dream and imagining a different ending, or making a picture of the dream...

**Dr. Dave:** Mm-hmm...

**Siegel:** ...or creating either a verbal dialogue – you know, à la Gestalt therapy – an internal dialogue, like writing out characters' lines, like a play, dramatically change the course of the dream. I mean, it may alter the nightmare drastically, to the point where you may still have nightmares, but they begin to have “outs” - of resolutions, of problem solving. And then, the nightmare becomes less of a problem unto itself, and you can begin to access the underlying issues that were causing the nightmare. So, nightmares can be a symptom unto themselves, and it can be very effective to actually use creative self-expression – drawing, creating a new ending, (inaudible) to bring an upsetting, repetitive nightmare to some kind of sanity (?) conclusion. That seems to help people quite a bit.

**Dr. Dave:** Okay, that's very interesting. I attended a presentation at an earlier IASD conference – I'm blocking on his last name, and I've actually interviewed him here on the show. David...something, you may know his name, who speaks about nightmares in terms of Joseph Campbell's journey of the hero; that the nightmare can be a call to adventure, bringing something to our awareness that we're trying to avoid, but if we're willing to engage it, that this can open up a whole new journey for us.

**Siegel:** I like that metaphor of the hero's journey, but also the idea that the nightmare has something to teach us.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Siegel:** And, that sometimes, the bad news is the nightmare is upsetting, but the good news is that sometimes the nightmares, by jarring our awareness and upsetting us a little bit, have more to teach us, and we have more to learn about what we're less aware of. So, I like that idea.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah. So, in a sense, the nightmare can be a blessing if we, if instead of running away from it, we engage with it somehow. (laughs) If it's moderate –

**Siegel:** Very much. I think that if we engage our nightmares, there may be great wisdom that we can extract from them, and that's the other... The other thing is that we talked earlier about the value of keeping a journal and looking at a series of dreams. Sometimes, you may have a nightmare that's not, that doesn't end with any kind of

resolution. But you may have other nightmares or (inaudible) of nightmares that may have partial resolutions or ways of... Creative solutions can come in dreams as well. So, you have to look at the nightmare and see whether there's any sense of resolution. Also, on a more therapeutic note, in my book on children's dreams, *Dream Catching*, I have what I call "the four r's of nightmare relief." It sounds almost like an aspirin commercial or something from the sixties... (laughs)

**Dr. Dave:** (laughs)

**Siegel:** But, it's like, the first step is reassurance – that if you don't feel emotionally reassured, be it a child or an adult, it's hard to even (inaudible) the dream to anyone else. It feels like it's going to draw you into its web of pain. The next step is re-scripting, which is giving the dream a different ending or expressing it in some creative form, which seems to take the sting out of a dream and allows you to begin to play with what the images may mean. And, the next "r" is rehearsal, which is doing that in a few different ways, finding different kinds of resolutions. And finally, resolution, which is connecting the symbols and the imagery of the dream to something upsetting in your life.

**Dr. Dave:** Mm-hmm...

**Siegel:** And then, taking some steps to fix that problem that the awareness was stimulated by the dream.

**Dr. Dave:** Okay, well, I'm glad you called listeners' attention to that book about children's dreams because listeners with children may well want to pick up a copy of that.

**Siegel:** Yeah. And, *Dream Wisdom* also has a bunch of information and a chapter with a bunch of references about children's dreams as well.

**Dr. Dave:** Okay. Now you, you know, we've talked about journal keeping, and I'm intrigued by the fact that in your book, you referred to keeping a "dream wisdom" journal. Now, I've heard of keeping a dream journal, but I'm interested in your use of the word "wisdom" there. What is it that's implied by that?

**Siegel:** Well, I think in general, there is an inner wisdom that's contained within our dreams. And, you know, I guess when you look for a different spiritual pathway, or whatever, or different religious approaches or psychological theories, there's something about dreams that is unique in that within the dream is a kind of unique personal exaggeration of our problems, but also access to solutions, to different issues that we're having a hard time dealing with. So, there's a kind of X-ray of our conscious or inner wisdom that's accessible through dreams that sometimes is less accessible through conscious problem solving or thinking about something. Now, that wisdom seems to come to the surface even more when we're under great stress or are going through epic or important life passages – you know, like getting

married, or going through a midlife crisis – things like that. And, in those cases, it seems that the wisdom – the inner wisdom – is more accessible, often through nightmares or upsetting dreams, but sometimes through vivid dreams that are very creative or even very positive dreams, where you have great insights or ideas that seem to just come right out, almost without interpretation of the dream.

**Dr. Dave:** Okay. I wanted maybe to ground all of this discussion that we've been having. I wonder if you could share a pivotal dream from your own life – how you worked with it, where it led you. Is there a dream that comes to mind that you'd feel comfortable sharing?

**Siegel:** I'm going to go back to a formative time, and it's actually when I was at Sonoma State and I was 23, 24 years old, around there...

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah?

**Siegel:** ...and was having some self-doubts and looking at career options, as to what I wanted. Did I want to be a psychologist, or go in some other direction?

**Dr. Dave:** Mm-hmm...

**Siegel:** And, I did what's called "dream incubation," where... This is a procedure, it's a kind of variation on the ancient Greek temple in ancient Greece, where hundreds of temples to the god, Aesclepios, the god of woundedness. And, people would go to these temples to have a dream that would bring them either spiritual or physical healing. The modern form of this is what's called dream incubation, where you pose an important life issue or question to your dream and attempt to generate or incubate a dream that might give you deeper insight. And, that's what I did, actually, under the guidance of a Sonoma State professor, Gordon Tappan...

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Siegel:** ...who you probably knew...

**Dr. Dave:** Definitely.

**Siegel:** And, I had a dream that... I actually did this out in nature and was trying to have a dream, and I woke up and had this amazing dream, but then forgot it. (inaudible) was kind of upset, because I thought that was going to be the answer to all my questions. And then, once I kind of gave up, thinking I wouldn't have a powerful dream, or a dream that would guide me, I had a dream that I was in a redwood fairy (?) ring, which is a set of redwood trees that grows up around a huge old-growth tree that either gets cut down or burned down. And, all of the trees turned into totem poles that stretched up to the sky, and it was an amazing and inspiring dream that, at the time, for me, it didn't say, "Be a psychologist" or "Don't be a psychologist..."

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Siegel:** It wasn't that specific, but it gave me a sense of my own inspiration and creativity, and (inaudible) I'm interested in Native American art, so it's kind of incorporated in that. And, it left me with a positive and inspired feeling to help me complete my Master's thesis and you know, get some other things done. And, eventually, so more...through a lot of other events, I'd go back and finish my Ph.D. in psychology. So, it was something that, at a crucial moment of questioning identity and career path, it really helped me see and be reassured by my creativity and sense of internal power at that time.

**Dr. Dave:** If that had been my dream, I think I would have experienced it as myself being surrounded by strong support and power, with all these mighty redwoods in a circle. Is that sort of how it touched you?

**Siegel:** Yeah, that's somewhat how it was for me, but it's interesting what you said, too, is that a lot of people, through the International Association for the Study of Dreams, use a technique developed by Montague Ullman, where you...in a group, people share dreams. You preface your statements about a person's dream with, "If this were my dream..." I noticed you did that...

**Dr. Dave:** Sure.

**Siegel:** ...and that's a great way to have a group free-associate to a dream. And, each person in the group will almost get into the dream as if it were their dream, and then the person who had the dream can kind of pick and choose what they gain the most benefit from.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Siegel:** You get a kind of collage or pastiche of all these possible levels of meaning, and then the person who had the dream can then pick and choose what is most meaningful to them.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes. Now, you're going to be presenting at this upcoming IASD conference in Rohnert Park. What are you presenting on?

**Siegel:** Well, first of all, I chair the Continuing Ed committee, so I put together a series of programs that are helping to train therapists. And, it's somewhat of a lost art; people aren't getting as much training in the mental-health field as they used to on dreams. I'm trying to reverse that trend by providing and organizing an advanced training on clinical use of dreams. I'm going to be looking at teaching dreams to therapists – a course on dreams with clinical supervision – and also a course on Ethics in Dreams, looking at how to deal with post-traumatic nightmares and really upsetting dreams and proper kinds of techniques that will help empower people,

rather than taking their power away, when they work with experts on dreams. But, the conference itself is amazing. We're having 200 separate events on everything from clinical use of dreams, to lucid dreams, dreams and expressive art, ways of understanding themes in dreams, research on the biology and psychology of dreams – researchers from all over the world are going to be there. There's going to be special events. I'm even doing, there's going to be a wine tasting. I'm doing a hike where we talk about recurring dreams on a hike through a state park near Sonoma State. There's just an amazing array of events and incredible people – famous authors and people who you can meet and study with. And, it's kind of an instant community of dream aficionados...

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Siegel:** ...who love dreams. We're all gathered together to share research, to share dreams, to learn about different theories, and it's just really an amazing event.

**Dr. Dave:** Well, I'm looking forward to seeing you there again. And, this is probably where we should wind it up, so I'm going to say, Dr. Alan Siegel, thanks so much for being my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio.

**Siegel:** Thank you.