

A decorative border surrounds the text, featuring stylized snakes with their heads raised, intertwined with roses and rosebuds. The snakes are rendered in a light blue/white color with black outlines, set against a dark blue background.

Chris Grosso and
Preston Fassel

NECESSARY Death

What Horror Movies
Teach Us About Navigating
the Human Experience

SAMPLER

NECESSARY
Death

A decorative border surrounds the text, featuring roses and snakes. The snakes are intricately woven into the floral patterns, with their heads and tails visible at various points. The roses are detailed with leaves and thorns, interspersed with the snake motifs.

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Chapter 1



Becoming Your Best Self isn't Just a Dream

Freddy Krueger

“Every town has an Elm Street.”

—Freddy Krueger, *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare*

Preston: Oh, the Horror!

Coming at the tail end of the slasher wave of the late 70s and early 80s, the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series managed to accomplish something none of the other franchises had: it became a legitimate American institution. Yes, *Friday the 13th's* Jason Voorhees was a pop icon throughout the Reagan era, showing up on Arsenio Hall and inspiring myriad knockoff Halloween costumes, but Freddy was the movie monster your parents might actually welcome into the living room. Jason and Freddy might both have inspired tons

of merch, but Freddy got his own television show. (Though the writers long promised it, Jason, recall, never popped up on the ill-conceived *Friday the 13th* series.) Freddy got his own attraction at Six Flags. Freddy got *positive* critical reviews; was named one of the greatest villains of all time by the American Film Institute, *Wizard magazine*, and Sky2; and, as portrayed by Robert Englund, has appeared on more covers of *FANGORIA* magazine than any other actor/character combination. Even if *Friday the 13th* ruled the box office, Freddy himself arguably ruled the hearts and minds of 1980s and early 90s horror fans as a charismatic, articulate, and genuinely frightening villain.

For all the attention that Krueger himself garners, though, it's easy to forget how little actual screentime the character receives, and the unique focus given to the protagonists in the *Nightmare* films. While other horror franchises may focus on the efforts of their characters to survive and ultimately defeat the monster, the *Nightmare* films set themselves apart from the other slashers in the 70s and 80s in that their heroes had to grow, evolve, and become their best selves to defeat Freddy.

For the uninitiated, the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series follows the 1980s' most inexplicably beloved undead serial killer, Freddy Krueger, a child murderer burned to death by his victims' parents in an act of vigilante justice after he was released from jail on a technicality. Having returned from the dead as a disfigured wraith, Krueger now stalks the surviving "children" (in reality a revolving door of sexually attractive, racially, and ethnically diverse twenty-somethings playing "teens") of his killers in their dreams, turning their worst fears against them and slaughtering them in

elaborate, special effects driven set pieces that are the hallmark of the films.

While the initial film in the series treats Krueger as a figure of nearly satanic menace and subtly implies a pedophilic motivation for his killings, the movie's fantastic box office success softens this notable character in subsequent entries to a universal monster-style broad-appeal villain who delivers James Bond-esque one liners before delivering the coup de grace, with the films themselves taking on a lighter, more action/fantasy undertone. Each film finds Krueger targeting an ever-broadening circle of "Elm Street Children" (while, in the first movie, Krueger only seeks to kill the kids of the people who burned him alive, later entries find him going after *every* teen in the fictional town of Springwood, Ohio). After realizing what they're up against, the heroes of each film must both band together to form a unified front against Freddy and determine a way to defeat him, which more often than not involves one-upping their tormentor in a psychological battle of wits.

Unique for an 80s horror franchise, surviving characters from earlier films often return to help subsequent heroes: Nancy Thompson, who defeats Freddy in the first film by relinquishing her fear of him and rendering him powerless over her, returns as a therapist at a sleep clinic in Part 3, aiding a cadre of teens who've been placed in psychiatric care in the belief that their dreams of Krueger are delusions born of suicidal mental illness. With Nancy's help, the teens learn to take control of their own dreams, granting themselves mystical powers that allow them to fight back against Krueger; some survivors from Part 3 crop up in Part 4 as classmates of shy, retiring Alice, herself a Krueger victim. As Krueger begins picking

them off, Alice absorbs the powers they gained in the previous film, until she herself is a one-woman army who takes down Freddy at the film's climax before returning as the heroine of Part 5.

A look at the “final girl sequence” of other slasher franchises demonstrates a consistent pattern. After the bulk of the cast has been killed, one or, in a few cases, a small number of survivors engage in a climactic battle with the monster. During this sequence, which finds the protagonist(s) in a sort of run-and-gun fight, they either improvise weapons from their surroundings to save themselves and survive long enough that a more well-armed outsider arrives to save the day, or some combination of the two. The shared trait here among most slasher films is that the protagonists find themselves ambushed, unprepared, and forced to react in the moment to the threat facing them; their survival is wholly dependent on their physical adeptness, speed, strength, and ability to quickly and efficiently exploit their surroundings.

This, however, is rarely—if ever—the case in the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* films. As opposed to most other slasher films, the narrative structure of the *Nightmare* series permits their characters to know from a relatively early point the exact nature of the threat against them: the kids in *F13th* and *Halloween* may have heard *stories* about Jason and Michael, but the respective antagonists whittle down their prey in such a manner as to keep them in the dark until the 11th hour. In the *Nightmare* films, conversely, Freddy makes his explicit presence known from the start, terrorizing multiple potential victims in such a way that they have the opportunity to band together and fight back against him; as a result, the offense against Freddy is not one of mere physical combat, but

of psychological warfare bolstered by the protagonists actively working to defeat him.

As a result, the *Nightmare* protagonists must develop themselves mentally and spiritually in order to reach a point at which they are capable of defeating Freddy. In the first film, Nancy learns to let go of fear and confront Freddy face-to-face for the sniveling, predatory creep he is. In *Part 2: Freddy's Revenge*, depending on the viewer's interpretation of whether or not the film is a metaphor for coming out, Jesse must come to grips with his own sexual identity. *Part 3: Dream Warriors* presents an evolution of the theme, making it into an actual plot point. While the previous two films featured characters developing defensive tactics against Freddy, this time, it's the titular characters—Kristen, Joey, Kincaid, Taryn, and Will—who form a plan of attack and take the fight to *him*. Providing the crew with a “coach” in the form of the returning Nancy (who, in her role at the dream clinic, might as well be a proxy for a psychiatrist), they must learn to recognize, embrace, and develop their own abilities and learn how to employ them against Freddy. It's a fantastic metaphor for recognizing one's own talent, embracing it, and then learning how to develop that talent and employ it to better one's own life.

The theme of self-actualization and both realizing and rising to one's own best potential again becomes a plot point in *Part 4: The Dream Master*, which personalizes the concept of growth and development by focalizing it through a single individual rather than a team. The viewer follows Alice on what could be described as a textbook journey of self-actualization, during which she must learn to survive and thrive without the support of her friends

while simultaneously incorporating their best traits into her own person. When we first meet Alice, she's shy and unsure of herself; when faced with trauma, she must steadily learn to adapt to the threat, especially as her support system is stripped away from her person by person, until she is the only person on whom she can rely. It's a powerful metaphor not only for personal growth and development, but for learning self-efficacy and positive coping mechanisms—Alice rises to face the challenge of Freddy, rather than retreat or sink into self-destructive behavior. Later, in *Part 5: The Dream Child*, she must go on a similar journey of self-growth and discovery, this time learning what it means to be a positive mother, in the process confronting and conquering fears about whether she herself can be a good mother—or the sort of woman who would give birth to a man like Freddy Krueger, who both literally and symbolically attempts to take the place of her own unborn child.

The role of the protagonists in the *Nightmare* films, then, is active rather than passive. Rather than live in ignorance of the threat until they have no choice but to face it, they acknowledge it, and then take proactive steps to combat it. In this way, it's perhaps the most empowering of the various horror franchises in that it presents not an unstoppable threat who can only be delayed in the heat of a life-or-death battle, like a wild animal stalking the suburbs, but something more closely approximating real-world fears that can be acknowledged and confronted head-on—and gives us protagonists to serve as models who rise to the occasion.

Although Freddy comes to represent the individual fears of each character in the *Nightmare* series, he is something of a

metaphor for broad, adult fears in general. None of us will ever be transformed into human cockroaches or living puppets by an undead dream ghost, but we will face self-doubt; addiction; we'll fear for our job security, the safety of our children, the state of the world. Every day, a new tragedy crops up on the six o'clock news—the latest mass shooting, the latest hate rally, car attacks at crowded pedestrian locations, global pandemics that seem to act as harbingers of the end of the world. Indeed, for Gen-Xers and Millennials who came of age during the relative domestic peace of the 80s and 90s, the world of the 2020s seems like something of a waking nightmare. Like Freddy, these fears may seem all-consuming and insurmountable, but by recognizing them and our ability to cope with them, we can avoid giving in to fear, and rather take proactive steps toward addressing those fears by becoming our best selves.

Chris: Oh, the Humanity!

On the topic of “best selves,” let's segue away from the realm of fictional horrors and examine some advice from someone who survived a real-life atrocity. In the book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Austrian psychologist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl wrote: “We must never forget that we may also find meaning in life, even when confronted with a hopeless situation, when facing a fate that cannot be changed. For what then matters is to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph. To turn predicament into a human achievement. When we are no longer able to change a situation, that is when we are challenged to change ourselves.” The

tragically inhumane experience Frankl and millions of others is virtually unimaginable and a nightmare on an entirely different level. There can be a connection made, however, between the sentiment found in Frankl's words and the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series. In the *Nightmare* films, Freddy's victims also died tragically and inhumanely (again, honoring that the film is fiction whereas Frankl's experience was, of course, horrifically real).

Of all the films explored in this book, the victims in *The Nightmare on Elm Street* films can be counted as semi-lucky (at least in the short term) in that they usually have a chance to learn about Freddy, why he's appeared in their dreams, and potential weaknesses he may have. This provides his victims with an opportunity to look within themselves and cultivate inner strengths they didn't know they had, resulting in an actual fighting chance when facing off against Freddy and his infamously bladed, blood-stained work glove.

The characters' development of inner wherewithal is most clearly expressed in *Nightmare's* third installment, *Dream Warriors*. Largely regarded by fans of the series as equal in quality to, if not better than, the original film (a unique occurrence for any sequel in general but especially horror, a genre known more for soulless cash-ins than quality follow ups), this entry in the franchise focuses on a group of teenagers—Kristen, Joey, Kincaid, Taryn, and Will—locked up in a mental institution, where, coincidentally, Nancy Thompson just so happens to be working as an intern therapist. Unbeknownst to Freddy, Nancy—having mastered control of her own dreams following her defeat of Krueger in the first movie—begins training the teens to not only control their own

dreams but also to develop their own Freddy-style dream powers by harnessing their own skills or turning weaknesses into strengths. Hothead Roland learns to channel his waking rage issues into superhuman strength; D&D fan Will becomes a sorcerer; mute Joey possesses a deafening voice capable of temporarily immobilizing Krueger; insecure, Taryn becomes a punk-rock beauty who's a master knife fighter; and suicidal Kristen is able to pull other people into her own dreams to act as allies against Krueger, transforming her desire for death into a will to fight back that makes her the ultimate leader of the titular *Dream Warriors* after Freddy kills Nancy. It's only by tapping into these inner warriors that they stand a chance at surviving an encounter with Freddy; and, sure, while most of them die heinously, they all put up a pretty decent fight, and Freddy is ultimately defeated in the end.

The setting of the mental institution in *Dream Warriors* is frighteningly relatable, not only because I've been in several of them myself, but also because I've lived with depression, anxiety, suicidal ideations, suicide attempts, self-harm, substance abuse, and of course, all the self-loathing that comes along with that. The lack of feeling any semblance of inner strength, let alone self-love, or self-respect, as clearly expressed in *Dream Warriors*, is rampant amongst so many of us. However, instead of taking it upon ourselves to acknowledge and work with these senses of lack, many people often bury their feelings in pills and booze, empty sex, overspending, excessive consumption of unhealthy food, and more. My hand is sheepishly raised.

As an example, I played guitar and sang for a band called Mouthfulofshotgun (the name alone pretty much says it all) circa

2005. This was during one of the darkest periods of my life. We recorded a three-song demo called *Spirit Crusher* at Austin Enterprise, which belonged to Steve Austin of the band Today Is The Day. (You can find the recording on Youtube if interested.) The third song on the demo is called “Ghosts, Flowers, and Graveyards.” The lyrics came from unbearable pain and despair. A time when I was also obsessively revisiting the NOES films, especially *Dream Warriors*. The lyrics begin:

Pills in mouth. Fifth in hand. Cocaine eyes can't see through the haze. Compassion through addiction is all I have left to give. Can't even lift this gun, this gun in my hand. Ghosts. Flowers. Graveyards.

Having had experiences with sobriety and healing from a few of the rehabs and mental institutions I'd been in prior to writing this song, I knew there was still some semblance of strength within myself. Meditating upon that, the lyrics took a slightly more hopeful turn.

And through this haze, I see a mother's face, I see a father's eyes, I see a brother's smile. And through this pain, I don't know why. So, I'm left only with the possibility that maybe today, maybe today I don't want to die. And here's my prayer. A prayer for the dead. All the ugliness of yesterday laid to rest. But I won't forget.

I share these lyrics here in the hopes that they show how deep despair and lack of inner strength can be experienced, yet, this doesn't mean all is lost. No matter how awful your mental and emotional states may feel... from the experience of a once degenerate,

scumbag, loser—things truly can, and do, get better. But we have to be willing to do the work, just like Kristen, Joey, Kincaid, Taryn, and Will did in *Dream Warriors*.

There's so many means and methods of developing inner strength. And while there are a number of them shared throughout this book, there's so many others that may be helpful for you. Google and Youtube are your friends.

To start, something that's helpful is realizing that when we find ourselves in difficult life situations, expanding our view of the experience can be very beneficial. It's so easy to become completely consumed by the adversities we face, and this often results in feeling like failures in how we deal (or perhaps, more apropos, don't deal), with them. A pivotal moment of each of the *Nightmare* films finds the characters either initially learning about Freddy Krueger or, in those films featuring returning characters realizing that he's come back and his last defeat was only temporary. In each case, it requires a paradigm shift on the part of our heroes in which they come to understand and then accept that they're up against a supernatural threat and no longer dealing with the world as they have known it. Perhaps the most memorable example occurs in the first film, when Nancy manages to pull Freddy Krueger's signature fedora with her into the real world while waking up from a dream and subsequently confronts her mother, Marge, with it. This leads to the now iconic scene in which a drunken, sorrowful Marge explains to Nancy (and therefore the viewer) Krueger's backstory. It's this acceptance of Freddy's presence and nature and a willingness to expand their worldview beyond what they've accepted up until this point in their lives that allows the teens to fight back.

So, too, must we be willing to broaden our horizons and learn new strategies and skills in order to confront our own adversities.

There's a saying—one that's obviously not applicable to the majority of characters in the *Nightmare* films—but, it goes something like, "So far you've survived 100% of your worst days. This too shall pass." Sitting in contemplation of the profound perspective that saying offers can be very helpful in broadening our scope of shitty situations we find ourselves in. Yes, whatever we're dealing with at the time may suck, but we've been through suck-tastic situations before, right? We may not have handled them gracefully or with much composure, but we did make it through. That takes strength and resolve. Nice work, you.

Practice: Taking the Fight to Your Own Personal Monsters

Take a moment (or several) and reflect on the difficult experiences you've made it through. Honor the inner strength it took to make it through them. Perhaps it was the loss of a pet, family member, or friend. Maybe it was going through withdrawals or surviving a near-death experience. Whatever the case, you've made it this far, and there's a fucking lot to be said for that. You (yes, YOU) have survived 100% of your worst days. Please don't ever forget that.

We all have a unique set of strengths. Find yours. When we face the demons of our past (and present)—the hurt, scars, blood, tears, and all of the other messiness life has dragged us through—it's not easy, but it is, doable.

We all have inner strength. The fact that you're alive and reading these words is proof positive of that. We just need to recognize, and develop, our relationship with it. This doesn't happen overnight. It's an ongoing relationship with ourselves that's nurtured for the rest of our lives. As we do this, it helps us to follow our dreams with greater confidence, knowing that we have what it takes to face any adversity that may stand in our way of reaching them. Unless, of course, it's Freddy Krueger, in which case, you can pretty much kiss your ass goodbye.

Here's a couple of quick and easy practices to get you started.

Mindfulness Meditations

Mindfulness is a grounding exercise to focus on the precise moment in which you exist, focusing neither on past nor future but centering yourself in the here and now. It's essentially pressing "pause on your own life for a few minutes, taking a deep breath, clearing your mind of concerns, anticipations, and worries, and asking yourself, "how and what am I feeling right now?" This practice is great because it helps us become more aware of our mental and emotional states, amongst countless other benefits, which helps us catch ourselves when slipping into old, self-defeating thought and behavior patterns. How do you practice? Simple. As my beloved teacher Ram Dass often said, "Be here now." Become aware of your thoughts, physical sensations, surroundings. That's it. Just become aware of your experience in this moment. You don't need incense burning, or Enya playing. Hell, you can throw on *Dream Warriors* (or whatever your personal favorite entry into the *Nightmare* franchise is) and just be present with your joy, shrieks,

laughter, frustration, fear. Pay attention to what your body does throughout the movie. Feel the tension as Freddy slashes someone up. Become aware of the sensation you have when Freddy says, “Welcome to prime time, bitch.” That’s all there is to it. Welcome to mindfulness. And of course, this is applicable to literally every other moment of your life. For some, it may just be a bit more enjoyable to practice while watching some good old-fashioned horror. Either way, simply “be here now” and you’re good to go.

Identify Negative Thoughts

We are our own worst critics. Nothing new there, but by becoming mindful of how often we’re negatively shitting on ourselves helps us to stop that cycle. Get in the habit of replacing those thoughts with something positive. Not in some Pollyannaish, everything is love and light, sense. Instead, identify something positive about yourself that you know for a fact is true—maybe you’re a good musician or an excellent mechanic, or you can honestly say you’re always there for your friends when you need them; perhaps some professional achievement you’ve made, or some good did you performed that had appreciable positive impact on the world. Make it something positive that you can, without question, completely own about yourself—and focus on that. Just like anything else in life, it takes practice, but boy, is this one definitely worth it.



Based on very real and practical commentary, life experience, and occasionally, tongue-in-cheek-misfortunes of horror legends, *Necessary Death* explores how the horror genre, its motifs and characters, offers individuals a unique opportunity for insight and understanding of their own lives.

Necessary Death looks back on several iconic horror films and finds that maybe the genre wasn't ever really just about men in hockey masks chasing good looking coeds through old dark houses. Even a cursory examination of the horror convention will reveal a plethora of stories from recovering addicts, survivors of trauma and sexual abuse, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and minorities. So what, then, can this genre so concerned with death teach us about being alive—and how can we apply those lessons in our day-to-day existence?

Using some of the most quintessential movies in the genre, Chris Grosso and Preston Fassel invite readers to an in-depth examination of the human condition—its fears, anxieties, hopes, joys, sorrows, and everything in-between—and how it's all grist for our personal and collective evolutionary mill. A hallmark of the genre is how horror films force their characters to find some semblance of inner strength and wherewithal in order to stand up to the monster, ghost, or villain that is trying to take their lives. Through fascinating discussion of this and other elements, Fassel and Grosso relate these films' dark subject matter and characters to real world issues people face every day, showing that there's something deep within us that, if even just metaphorically, can relate to the pain in these stories. This sharp analysis is complimented by exercises that prompt readers to consider gratitude, forgiveness, determination, and bravery in the face of adversity.

An unusual mix of film study and self-help, *Necessary Death* might surprise or even shock readers, but it will also enlighten, educate, and most importantly hearten those looking for an unexpected source of inspiration.

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