

Dream Work in Therapy: A Thing of the Past?

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I'd like to begin this essay by introducing a typical sentiment that is expressed today in the field of dreams and dream work and thus needs no citation:

The rich world of dreams and the unconscious, while often immensely healing and a great source of individual creativity, can at times for some be both overwhelming and terrifying. Seventy-three years on from the death of Sigmund Freud and half a century after the death of Carl Jung, how has our thinking evolved around the use and importance of dreams in the therapeutic context? How does a therapist best harness the wealth of insight offered by a client's dream world and impart skills to the client to encourage greater self-awareness, healing and understanding?

When a client presents a dream to me in the normal course of our therapeutic relationship, she is usually presenting me with a "dead letter," phenomenologically no different from handing over an item she bought in a store, or a museum piece, or a report of some episode in her life. The *content* of course may be wild, extreme, or even bizarre, but again, the telling is, at first, no different from, say, reading a gothic tale to me. I may have my reactions: "thrilled," "disgusted," "bored," etc. but they subside soon enough. At this stage of "dream work" therapy cannot privilege a dream as being immensely healing, or a source of individual creativity. Nor can we hope to harness the wealth of the dream, imparting skills, self-awareness etc. to our client. An analogy I can think of here is that of my gazing at a piece of contemporary art. I see a pile of peanuts carefully shaped like a cone on a wooden floor. That's it! I go away the same as I was before, except for a possible caution against paying to see such things in the future.

A dead letter indeed!

Sometimes such moments in therapy are accompanied by a panic reaction in which I sense the expectation that I "do something" with the incomprehensible dream, while knowing that any possible meaning totally escapes me. There usually is no corresponding expectation that my client do anything with it. She simply hands it over to me with a gesture of, "Well, *you* do something with it!" Sometimes there is even a challenge in that gesture, or a kind of passivity. Most often the dream is handed over to me as one would release a strange or foreign symptom into the doctor's care: "Here is my symptom. It has nothing to do with me. How are you going to interpret this symptom and tell me what is wrong with me, and even make me feel better?"

I rather suspect that one reason that fewer therapists today want to include dream work in their therapeutic repertoire is that the above typical experience of working with a client's dreams does not lend itself to any discernible therapeutic response. The ordinary experience of working with dreams today seems a far cry from the claims presented above (source of creativity etc.)

Where do such claims originate, if not in the ordinary course of events in most therapy today?

As the "quote" above suggests, they originate in the works of the two pioneers mentioned above: Sigmund Freud and C. G. Jung. In the 19th century, before Freud and Jung, dreams were immensely popular. Dream dictionaries and keys were part of a game in which dreams were shared playfully, but with no serious consequences to the dreamer. In a further development, dreams became associated to the unconscious prior to Freud and Jung, but both men gave dreams a *central* place in their therapeutic practice and theory (Shamdasani 2003). It is in *their* work that we can see the origin of the high valuation given to dreams, repeated here in the editor's invitation above.

It seems to me then that the *rhetoric* of the value of dreams carries on as witnessed in the plethora of dream books and dream interpretations, dream workshops, etc., that have emerged since Jung and Freud, while at the same time, in actual practice in the healing arts, their importance (as the rhetoric would have it) has diminished to nearly zero. In my view there is a clear dissociation between rhetoric and practice today in the healing arts, concerning therapeutic approaches to dreams. I give this sombre diagnosis of the state of dream work in therapy today from having lived a life devoted to my own dreams and practising as a dream therapist for thirty years! During my own life I have discovered the *truth* of the claims cited above as they apply to my own life, but over the decades I have seen a diminution, to the point of disappearance, of their applicability to clients I personally see, or those of therapists I supervise or otherwise hear about.

This dissociation is worth exploring for the sake of coming to grips with the reality of the place of dreams in therapy today. In so doing, I hope to show that something much more fundamental about the time we live in today can be revealed—something that can actually guide us in our daily work as therapists.

I spoke earlier of the dream as a *dead letter*. A literal dead letter is one that has no address or cannot be delivered as promised and so ends up in the Dead Letter Office. Its message is no longer considered. It no longer holds meaning (e.g. the desires, longing, news, of the sender etc.). In this sense we live in a world that is a dead letter. Compare our modern world for example with that in the Middle Ages when the world was seen as a living book i.e., nature could be read as a way of coming to know God the Creator. For us, the book is closed and, perhaps, no longer is even a book. We consequently live our lives on the surface of things. This is what we mean by being literal. My symptoms are only that—symptoms, no longer symbols (visitations of an angel or demon etc.) My depression is *only* depression, no longer an immersion in Saturnine time, and thus can only be treated with medications. My dreams are literally about real people in my life, no longer self-presentation of figurations with their own reality. I can only learn from dreams about how I treat people or how they treat me etc., or maybe with some clever interpretation I can learn about my childhood dynamics, or my shadow etc. All literalisms! All external interpretations!

Dream as a dead letter!

I am not saying this development is wrong or mistaken. On the contrary it is *just so* (paraphrasing Jung from another context). This *is* our modern reality—the reality of the dead letter. I am saying that we as therapists should give some attention to the discrepancy between rhetoric and reality when approaching dream work with clients today. The rhetoric which began and possibly ended with Jung and Freud has not come into accord with the reality of our modern lives and so we run the risk of setting up false and unreachable expectations in those people who come to us for therapeutic help. Modern people (i.e. apart from anomalies such as me) mostly have no relationship to dreams at all, and no interest in developing any such relationship. We need to understand this fact for the sake of any modern healing practices that may invoke dreams and dream work.

We can begin to understand by appeal to philosophy, which describes our modern condition, springing from the 19th century, as Positivism (Comte 1988). Psychologically this points to a reality in which a self-aware, self-enclosed monad (the empirical person) looks out upon a world of surfaces in which *imaginal depth* has disappeared altogether. We can once again compare this reality with that of the Middle Ages in which nature still was experienced as having imaginal depth, disclosing within its goings on, the workings of God the Creator. We

may consider Cervantes' *Don Quixote* as a form of literature disclosing to us that psychological turning point in which nature loses its imaginal depth leaving us faced with a world of surface only. Don Quixote could still experience imaginal depth (the windmill was a dangerous dragon; his donkey was a knight's steed etc.) but his companions could only see a windmill or a peasant or a washer-woman etc. For Don Quixote, the imaginal dimension is a *given* but for his companions it is irrevocably lost. We can see this imaginal reality at work in the aboriginal *Dreamtime*, beginning millennia before Cervantes. For them too, the sacred dimension of ordinary reality is a *given*. They simply perceived it that way. Some still do.

This is not so for us modern Europeans and, increasingly, for the whole world. Imaginal reality has withdrawn, and in its place we have won through to an unheard-of freedom from nature—freedom that so far, we seem not to be handling all that well, as alarming global warnings of our effect on nature remind us daily.

For our ancestors, dreams were transparent to spiritual reality and thus *intrinsic bearers of meaning*. They were *ipso facto* meaningful, no dream dictionary, or interpretation being needed. They were *given* as such. And so, ancient therapeutics such as Asklepian incubation or Parmenidian iatromantic methods *could* be practised (Kingsley 2001). Today, dreams are, on first presentation, meaningless and completely occluded, i.e., no longer transparent to spirit or soul reality—dead letters! So they are taken literally, as referring to something outside themselves (to real people or real conflicts within the empirical person). All this makes sense and is completely in accord with our modern reality of positivism. This fact is why the rhetoric of dreams, as cited above, is out of touch with reality—our modern reality.

Any therapeutic dream work that aspires to the ideals expressed in the rhetoric of “individual creativity,” “wealth of insight,” “healing,” etc. must realize that it (the dream work) does not address the reality of our times and is in fact psychologically obsolete (out of date). Our modern psychology has moved on, with the consequence that dreams present themselves as meaningless (i.e. *not* as intrinsic bearers of meaning in the sense described above). So, dream theory which asserts that our dreams are merely the way our neurons deal with the day's workload, intrinsically holding no meaning, is very modern, psychologically “up with the times” (Crick, F., Mitchison, G. 1983):

We propose that the function of dream sleep (more properly rapid-eye movement or REM sleep) is to remove certain undesirable modes of interaction in networks of cells in the cerebral cortex. We postulate that this is done in REM sleep... so that the trace in the brain of the unconscious dreamer is weakened, rather than strengthened, by the dream.

Therapeutic practices that interpret the dream in terms of externalities are also “up with the times” in the sense that the therapist and client remain firmly external to the dream at all times, any meaning deriving from the therapist's repertoire of interpretive skills, *not* as belonging to the dream itself. The dream as bearer of intrinsic meaning is simply not relevant to these modern methods.

The only kind of therapeutic practice that is in difficulty when approaching dream material is that practice which aspires to comprehending dreams in the sense of the rhetoric I spoke of above. This kind of therapy is as I said, psychologically obsolete (not up with the times), and any practitioner of this kind of therapy (such as myself) must bring this into consciousness or run the risk psychologically of separating clients from the reality we must *all* come into accord with (which surely is what therapy is all about anyway!).

For example, I encourage a client to open up to her creativity through engagement with the wealth of her inner life of dreams, holding them to be intrinsically meaningful. Through our work she comes to value symbology and the dignity of her soul life. She learns of an *inner other*, who may guide her through dreams, inviting choices in her empirical life that then put her completely at odds with family and the economy. How is she then to *account for her subsequent choices* to others who, being thoroughly modern, have not the slightest idea what she or I are going on about? “I am leaving my job (marriage, children, church, etc.) because my dreams are showing that my creative path lies elsewhere.” Really?!

There is a profound ethical issue embedded in doing the kind of dream work that I do daily, one in which I hold *true* the rhetoric of dreams that originated with Freud and Jung and which has become psychologically obsolete in our times. Unconsciously carrying out this work leads to, and even causes, major disruption to clients’ lives as they try to come to terms with adopting a methodology (way of living) that no longer addresses *reality*—the reality of positivism and literalism. What can such dream work offer clients in return for all this conflict and/or confusion? This question is at the forefront of my mind on a daily basis since I still practice this way and live my own life accordingly.

To answer this question of how to work today with dreams in accord with Jung and Freud’s (logically obsolete) evaluation of dreams, I will start with what our modern emancipation from imaginal reality brings along as its “baggage.” Our newly found psychological freedom in the ego is exercised principally in our unparalleled exploitation of natural resources, along with our apparent total disregard for the limitations of our empirical bodies (which after all belong to or are determined by nature). This freedom is also accompanied by a profound sense of dislocation from the wisdom of the past, as a psychological reality. The modern ego has its freedom, yes, but also is plagued by a sense of meaninglessness brought on by this dislocation from “the ancestors.” We can see evidence for the anxieties produced by this dislocation in the global obsession with genealogy, as popularized by the book and movie, *The da Vinci Code*. The core (mistaken) theory of the book is that a *literal* ancestral blood line (Jesus, in this case) can at the same time transmit something of Jesus’ *spiritual stature* (Sophie as the next Christ figure). Where we lack knowledge of our soul/spiritual origin, we seek it in a literal exploration of our blood line.

We no longer know where we come from, *as bearers of consciousness*. We know where we come from as natural beings—our ancestral tree or further back in time, as the theory of evolution tells us—but not as *psychological* beings, or *spirit/soul* beings. On this question modern science falls silent. The deficit in understanding this aspect of our origin leaves our modern minds in a state of constant anxiety with a deep sense of meaninglessness pervading our lives (Tarnas 1991).

Dream work that starts with an *a priori* of dreams being *intrinsic bearers of meaning* (soul phenomena) can achieve this understanding of our psychological origin. By approaching a dream, that dead letter, as a soul phenomenon, we can begin to get close to what Kandinsky claims (Kandinsky 2012):

Everything that is dead quivers. Not only the things of poetry, stars, moon, wood, flowers, but even a white trouser button glittering out of a puddle in the street... Everything has a secret soul, which is silent more often than it speaks.

With the appropriate methodology, the dead letter that we call a dream can begin to release its meaning, its “secret soul.” This meaning is not based in our biology, personal history, or any subjective intrapsychic dynamic (all of which require therapeutic interpretations that

originate *externally* to the dream). The “secret soul” of the dream is the *essential* or innermost meaning which presents itself as the dream in the first place.

I dream that I intend to get somewhere, driving in my car. I lose my way. I cannot find my map. My GPS locator fails; my attempts to call my friends on my mobile end miserably. They are not available or the phone does not work properly. People on the side of the road are deaf to my calls for help, or even smiling and waving. My car breaks down and I must walk, But where to? I am completely lost.

In our modern outer lives, this experience could be accounted for entirely in terms of mechanical breakdown, co-incidence, or by the fact that I was in an electro-magnetic “shadow” (no signal), driving past people who did not understand my calls for help etc. This account is completely in accord with our modern existence in a positivistic universe. But as a dream, there is no *literal* mechanical breakdown, etc., nor is there any literal time sequence. The whole dream is an *image*, bearing meaning that is “dressed” as that image. As such we can say that the dreamer’s stance (intending to get somewhere, getting lost) is only one facet of that meaning. Another facet suggests a lack of concern or alarm over the dreamer’s plight. Yet another angle suggests a thwarting of the dreamer’s intention to “get somewhere.” And, apparently, walking and the discovery of being completely lost belong together in the one image of this dream.

Already we can see a plurality or multiplicity that together constitute *meaning* in the dream. In our waking lives we know that our self-consciousness is the only consciousness available, the world we face being devoid of its own consciousness. This is why we can successfully account for such a sequence of events, if they had occurred in our waking lives, in the manner I describe above.

In the dream, however, the dreamer is faced with the unnerving “dream fact” that her own intentions are not the only ones available. Within the one dream, there are intentions that run counter to hers, or ignore hers altogether. As our historical knowledge informs us, such a situation once determined our existence. Our ancestors lived in a world that had intentions often running counter to human ones. They took this into account when intending to act in the world, through prayer, propitiation or other ritual forms that brought them into accord with the determinative intentions of the *other*. This *other* had a variety of names throughout history, a more familiar one perhaps being *Fortuna*!

In this way, dreams can open us to past forms of consciousness, as appearing within, i.e., *historical presences*! We can thus get a taste of those forms of consciousness emerging psychologically prior to our own modern form of consciousness. The way we once *lived*, as conscious beings, now lies psychologically within us.

As I have said, such meaningfulness is psychologically obsolete today, i.e., for today’s modern (positivistic) consciousness, but by working with a dream this way, we are opening ourselves to our own past, gaining access to the *consciousness* of the past—past forms of consciousness that gave rise to our present positivistic consciousness. We can thus begin to comprehend our *psychological* origin. It is only this reconnection with our origin that grants *dignity* and *truth* to our present lives as psychological beings, in our present state of freedom, disconnected as we are now from nature. We learn that positivism is not a reality that *has been* for all times (as our current theory of evolution would have it) but is a reality that has emerged over time and as such is still the work of soul, the soul of our times. We can further understand that forms of consciousness and the form of the world are correlative, the one arising simultaneously with the other. One immediate consequence of this conclusion is that

our modern form of consciousness and the world of surfaces that confronts that consciousness belong together and that when one transforms so then does the other. This has startling and far-reaching consequences for our culture and its therapeutic value cannot be overestimated at this time in our history when there seems to be so much agreement that we are in a moment of global transformation.

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