The Serious Business of Playing with Dreams

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"Dreams are the royal road to the unconscious." These are the words of Sigmund Freud, from his classic **The Interpretation of Dreams**, published in 1900. Dreams are the night-time hallucinations that intrigue, delight and terrify us with images and dramas that typically make no rational sense but move us and inspire us. Dreams have played roles in art, religion and literature for millennia. Their lack of rational sense combined with deep emotions has made them objects of interpretation. They can't just be what they are as they don't make rational sense. Religions and spiritual traditions have interpreted dreams throughout the ages and do so by seeing the dream as metaphorical and referring to a figurative reality and underlying meaning, not to a concrete and literal reality.

Among indigenous peoples, in ancient Egypt and ancient Greece, throughout the Bible, and beyond, priests, prophets and shamans have interpreted dreams and often done so in accordance with dream-book formulas. If you dream of a fish, it means this and if you dream of a cat, it means that. These catalogues of symbols paired with their culturally predetermined metaphoric and symbolic meanings have limited utility but the value of the interpretations was probably increased by the intuition of the dream interpreters and by the receptivity of the people consulting these interpreters. Dream book interpretations are based on the clear understanding that dreams are metaphoric but also on the misconception that such metaphors have universal meaning.

What Sigmund Freud did was to demonstrate that the dream has meaning but it is a personal meaning and cannot be interpreted without the dreamer free-associating to the images within the dream. In other words, the dream images are indeed metaphorical but their meanings are primarily to be found in the dreamer's associations to them—what comes to mind when the dreamer reflects on the dream images. Thus the dream belongs to the dreamer and has a unique meaning conditioned by the dreaming psyche.

While the ancients made the error of assigning universal meaning to dreams some of the most modern dream scientists make the error of assigning total meaninglessness to the dream. For them the dream means nothing. It is just random electrical activity in the brain's neurons producing nonsense.

While the Freudians do not deny the bio-electrical activity of the brain during dream states, they do not reduce the experience of the dream to this bio-electrical activity. There is a difference between a brain and a mind. The brain exists objectively while the mind exists subjectively. The Freudians will ask, "Why did this person dream that dream last week and this dream last night?" "Why does this person have recurring dreams?" "What is the relationship between a person's dreams and his/her personality?"

The way a person expresses him/herself says something about the person and the structure of the personality. The personality is expressed in special interests, hobbies, favorite books and movies, outlook on life, a way of speaking and, of course, in the content of his/her fantasies. This is what I call the autobiographical nature of human expression. What we say, do, believe and imagine has something to do with who we are and how we got to be the way we are.

And what is a dream? A dream is the work of our imagination unfettered by the demands of reality. It is a constellation of metaphors narrating our current state of affairs. It is like a personal myth or a foreign film, coming to us from the unconscious. To interpret the dream is to place subtitles under the action to find meaning in the metaphors of the drama. But how can we interpret our dreams?

To begin with it could be said that the content of our dreams is influenced by experiences of the previous day, somatic stimuli, psychic stimuli and unconscious desires and conflicts. But it is not enough to say, "I dreamed I was on a hill with my family eating strawberries and it's because when I went to sleep I was hungry." No, that just won't do, as we'll need to ask, Why strawberries? Why on a hill? Why with your family? What was the feeling tone? What are the free associations?

It was Sigmund Freud who recognized that the psyche, in early childhood, separated into consciousness and unconsciousness on the threshold of bodily needs and social pressures. This is why early childhood experiences are so important in the development of the adult personality and why the demands and management of bodily needs figure so prominently in psychological development. Freud noted that in the dialectic between physical development and cognitive development, the symbolic function came into play and used the early experiences of the body as metaphors to understand the ever-widening experience of the world. Thus, while Freud recognized recurring symbols in dreams upon which previous dream books were based, he also recognized that the dreamer's free associations give the interpretation depth and personal context. It is in the free associations, or playful thoughts, about the dream images and themes that the metaphors of the dream are unraveled and meaning is made.

Freud noted that all aspects of the dream were aspects of the dreamer, that the dream images were often condensed from one or more images and displaced from one person, place or thing to another. Furthermore, these distortions served to keep the threatening, sometimes primitive and socially inappropriate contents of the dreams out of consciousness. Freud emphasized the retrospective aspect of the dream stating that it pertained, for the most part, to experiences and conflicts rooted in the past but very much alive in the present circumstances.

Dreams are made of metaphors and the logic of dreams is different than logic of waking life. Freud said dreams employ the mechanisms of displacement and condensation. Displacement allows one thing to stand in for another. The role of this odd logic is for the psyche to address the unconscious conflicts and relieve them a bit by presenting them as dreams, disguising unpleasant realities. It may be easier for the person to dream of anger directed toward his boss than to dream of his deeper conflict with his father. Condensation combines two or more characters or situations to create a uniquely disguised situation. A mother and wife are seen as one or a

present-day problem takes place in a childhood home. Condensations bring together incongruous figures or situations to disguise the nature of the problem and at the same time elaborate the theme.

Underlying all of this was Freud's notion that all dreams have a wish-fulfilling function. This insight helped Freud to recognize the aggressive, erotic and basically antisocial wishes expressed in dreams. The dreams express prohibited erotic desires, violent wishes and other interests that are unacceptable to social demands.

Freud was emphatic about the wish-fulfilling purpose of the dream but in time came to discover that some dreams, unpleasant ones, challenged this view. He later expanded his understanding to include wish-fulfilling dreams, punishment dreams and anxiety dreams. The wish-fulfilling dreams were straight forward expressions of the fulfillment of erotic and/or aggressive impulses—the demands of the id. The punishment dreams were found to also be wish-fulfilling but instead of satisfying the demands of the instinctual impulses, they satisfy the wishes of the "critical, censoring and punishing agency of the mind" (Freud, vol. 22, p. 27), that is, the demands of the superego. The anxiety dreams are those in which there is considerable frightening or unpleasant affect, which often awakens the dreamer from sleep. These are the dreams commonly associated with traumatic stress disorders. In these circumstances Freud says the goal of the dream was wish-fulfillment but the dream failed and the dreamer awakens in fright.

Freud's exploration of the rules of dream construction led him to articulate the difference between primary process thinking and secondary process thinking. Primary process thinking is the language of dreams, psychosis, and the unconscious. It is a symbolic, emotionally tinged, and yet concrete mode of thinking organized on the basis of displacement and condensation. It is aimed at the gratification of instinctual impulses—the pleasure principle. Secondary process thinking, on the other hand, is rational, logical thinking and aimed at dealing with the reality principle and a shared understanding of reality. Secondary process thinking enables us to communicate rationally, plan, evaluate, and think logically, critically, and scientifically. Primary process thinking informs love and poetry, poignancy and symptomology, creativity and vision, humor and play, hallucination and madness, technology and literature, religious inspiration and scientific creativity. Our clear and unobscured secondary process thinking affords us an apprehension of reality devoid of illusion. But that apprehension is like a little cabin surrounded by a wilderness og primary process thinking.

Freud was interested in the primary process thinking associated with dreaming, early childhood, and psychopathology; and the secondary process thinking associated with waking consciousness, adulthood, and rational thought. Phillis and Bob Tyson's (1990) summary statement on this subject reads as follows:

> Primary process thought is characterized by concretism, condensation, displacement, visual imagery, and symbolism. Primary process thinking is manifest through conscious and unconscious fantasy, fantasy play, day and night dreams, magical thinking, slips of

> the tongue, jokes, and artistic and creative activity. . . . Thinking governed by secondary process can be conscious or unconscious. It is characterized by rationality, order and logic. It relies heavily on verbal symbolism and functions chiefly in adaptation to reality (p. 164).

Freud found that in sleep the mind is immersed in primary process thinking and the function of the dream is to offer wish-fulfilling relief to psychic conflicts. The dream draws on people and subject matter from day-to-day life. Freud calls this the "day residue". This material is what people refer to when they say, "I just had a dream about so-and-so because he called yesterday." But the dream does not represent a rational reality. It represents an emotional reality in the language of metaphor, embedded with meaning. And even if one is content to say, "I just had a dream about so-and-so because he called yesterday" we have to recognize that yesterday was full of many thoughts and encounters but the dream has picked up on this one or that one, as day residues, from which to begin to construct a dream.

Freud described the 'content' of the dream, as it is recalled, as the 'manifest dream content' and the 'meaning' of the dream derived through interpretation as the 'latent dream content'. The manifest dream content and/or its latent meaning often contain material that is socially inappropriate, immoral, confused, magical, fantastic, absurd, contradictory and fragmentary. But when we recognize that dreams are not plans to be acted on or statements of literal fact, we clear the way for a playful approach to the metaphors of the dream. Dreams are not literal messages about objective reality but are figurative statements about our subjective experiences, our desires and our fears. From this vantage point, we discover that dreams typically pertain to matters of love, sex, aggression, competition, conflict, emotional injury, body image, as well as the desires and fears of sexual relations, of being grown up, of seeing and being seen, of independence, of power, of powerlessness, of abandonment and so much more.

Dreams are typically fragmentary and make no logical sense. When we tell a dream, our conscious mind will often fill in gaps, elaborate assumptions and try to create a more flowing narrative. Freud called this "secondary revision". If the dream narrative, as presented in analysis, is particularly long, uses causal logic and forms a coherent narrative the conscious control of secondary revision is actively further disguising the latent content. It is often helpful to remind patients that dreams don't make a lot of rational sense so we want to encourage them to relate only what they saw, heard and felt without artificially filling in details or gaps.

When I invite a patient to bring dreams into therapy as a way to get closer to what is going on under the surface, patients often tell me, "I don't dream or don't really remember my dreams." I then make the suggestion to try to remember dreams so we can look at them together. I suggest putting a journal, a diary or simply a pad of paper and pencil next to their bed. And in the morning if there is a vague sense of a dream write it down, even if it is only an impression or a single image. Stay with it every night and typically after a week or two the dreams start coming. I know it sounds silly but the dreams seem to come when "they know" someone is listening and interested.

Sometimes we'll have a dream and it will be so vivid we are sure we could never forget it and yet it often seems to simply evaporate as soon as we get out of bed. The notes anchor the dreams to waking reality and allow us to begin to work with them. Some people write them down and write their associations to the dream in their personal journal. When a patient presents a dream in therapy I sometimes say, "Imagine I am a movie producer and I want to make a movie of your dream. To do so I want you to tell me in great detail everything I need to include in the film." Sometimes after the dream has been told and associations offered, I will ask for the dream to be told again and it is striking to see how forgotten aspects get introduced into the dream. I want to listen for symbols and metaphors, recurring themes, emotional tone, the patient's free-associations, and my own associations based on my knowledge of the patient. In addition to engaging in this interpretive play with the dream, I am at the same time inducting the patient into an analytic dialogue based on thinking in metaphor. Sometimes it is interesting to focus for a time on a powerful image in the dream but it is also interesting to ask what is the least significant aspect of the dream as there is often much to be found there.

For Freud the dream is self-serving. It speaks to erotic wish-fulfillment, aggressive discharge, forbidden love, revenge, death wishes, removal of guilt and so on. Freud's **The Interpretation of Dreams** draws on the dreams of many of his patients but includes many of Freud's dreams, as well.

One of those dreams is Freud's "'Non vixit' dream." To understand the dream we need to know that Joseph Paneth was a friend of Freud's, who worked as Freud's successor in Ernst Brücke's physiology laboratory in Vienna but he died young in 1890. Another friend was Ernst von Fleischl-Marxow, and he also died young. In Freud's dream, Paneth doesn't understand what Freud's friend, Wilhelm Fliess, is saying, and Freud intends to say that it is because Paneth is "Non *vivit*"—that is, "he is not alive," but instead he says Paneth is "Non *vixit*"—"He did not live." At this point in the dream, Freud watches as Paneth disappears, as does another friend, Ernst von Fleischl-Marxow. Their images are wished away, and Freud finds this thought delightful. On reflection, Freud recalled an incident in which he felt destroyed by Brücke's critical gaze. Freud regretted the death of his friend but was also aware of feeling triumphant for surviving this rival. He also associated the dream to his early childhood rivalry with his one-year older playmate, John (S. Freud, 1900/1953b, *SE* 5, pp. 421–425, 480–487). The dream also reminds us of the death of Freud's younger brother, Julius, when Freud was just one and a half years old and pleased to be rid of this other rival.

There are many examples we could use but the point is that the dream gives us a disguised peek into our unconscious wishes and thereby helps us to better understand ourselves if we can read the metaphors of our dreams.

Carl Gustav Jung was an early disciple of Freud who was interested in dream symbolism and its relation to myth, religion and mysticism. After seven years of close association with Freud Jung moved away from Freud's theory of infantile sexuality and the concept of libido as sexual energy. In place of the latter, Jung proposed libido as a generalized psychic energy.

While Freud focused on free association and the sexual origins of dream symbolism, Jung gave less attention to personal associations and more to the collective meanings of dream symbols, the eternal truths they conveyed and their roots in mythology and religion. Without completely denying the sexual origins of dream symbolism, Jung's interpretations drifted away from them. For Freud, infantile sexuality gave rise to the symbolism of mythology but for Jung the origin of universal symbolism was derived from the archetypes, about which he spent the second half of his life exploring. The archetypes are the recurring emotionally laden dream images that orient to the most basic human experiences: images such as the great mother, great father, the hero, the shadow representing impulses and attitudes opposite to one's waking consciousness, the anima—a man's feminine side, and the animus—a woman's masculine side.

While Freud attended to psychosexual development throughout childhood and adolescence, Jung was more interested in "individuation" and "the second half of life," beginning at age forty when the inevitability of death stirs in many people a quest for meaning and spirituality. While Freud placed the emphasis on intrapsychic conflict, Jung was interested in the integrative functions of the psyche. In Jung's understanding, the unconscious was not simply a cauldron of repressed uncivilized impulses; it was also a wellspring of creativity.

Jung is particularly keen on recognizing the compensatory nature of the dream, which registers unconscious reactions to one-sided or limited attitudes of the conscious mind. The self-important business man might dream of a street bum.

Jung, like Freud, described two kinds of dream images—those that clearly had a personal origin and those that are collective in nature. Freud said those collective or universal symbols are derived from our archaic inheritance and Jung would call them archetypes. Jung went to great lengths to describe the autonomous nature of these archetypes and the way they have no apparent relation to the personal life experience of the dreamer. Freud wrote in a similar way but Jung went further speaking of the dream world as a place where one might meet independent spirits separate from the dreamer and might dream of things that actually predict future events. A more Freudian interpretation would see all aspects of the dream as parts (aspects, introjects, identifications, etc.) of the dreamer. Freud would have nothing to do with dreams predicting future happenings. Freud's interpretation of dreams was retrospective, aimed at the motivations and origins of the dream and the wish-fulfilling character of the dream. At most a Freudian might find the dream alluding to future potentials based on experiences of the past and present situation but certainly not predicting the future. Jung also recognized the existence of God and an afterlife, both of which Freud called illusions.

Freud introduced the topographic tripartite model of the mind with the conscious, preconscious and unconscious. Jung divided the unconscious into a personal unconscious containing the dreamer's memories, repressed material, traumas and conflicts, and a collective unconscious containing the shared universal archetypes belonging to all humanity.

Jung's student Joseph L. Henderson later suggested a third theoretical distinction between the personal and collective unconscious. It is the cultural unconscious—all the dream material that is not just personal nor completely universal but that which is held in common with one's

immediate local culture. Jung and Henderson both worked with what Henderson called "the picture method" in which the patient was invited to draw scenes from the dream and in the process often became aware of various aspects of the dream that come to light only in the process of drawing it. This conscious, active reworking of the dream is an example of what Jung referred to as "active imagination". Later Dora Kalff introduced the sandtray method in which small toys in a sand tray were played with at the direction of the waking imagination and sometimes with the recreation of a dream scene. While the ego has an opportunity of injecting some secondary elaborations, or defensive distortions, the fact of the matter is that writing down the dream, drawing it, or representing it in play are in some ways very similar to free-associating to the dream.

Herbert Silberer (1917), another early colleague of Freud's, was interested in the interpretation of myth and mysticism and suggested that they could be interpreted psychoanalytically, in terms of repressed sexuality, and also anagogically—that is, in terms of the moral or idealistic strivings of the unconscious. He asserted that myths are concerned with a "nucleus of natural philosophy" (p. 328). There was already, historically, a psychoanalytic basis for the anagogic interpretations, but Silberer was presenting his ideas and emphasizing them in 1914 right after Freud and Jung had split over this very issue. Without denying the infantile sexual roots of the dream symbol, Jung minimized them and emphasized the philosophical and spiritual implications. Freud saw more of the same repression in Silberer's ideas concerning the anagogic interpretations, which could be applied to myths, fairy tales, alchemy, and dreams, as well. Rather than minimizing the interpretation of repressed sexuality, Silberer, in hermeneutic fashion, was intrigued by the way multiple interpretations could coexist. But Freud would have none of it.

Erik H. Erikson (1902-1994) coined the term identity crisis, elaborated the stages of psychosocial development, studied children's play configurations, and wrote several important psychobiographies in which he elaborated his subjects' relationship to society at various stages in their life cycle. In his paper, **The Dream Specimen of Psychoanalysis** Erikson reinterpreted the first dream that Freud ever interpreted—the famous 'Irma dream'. Erikson's approach explores in detail the manifest content of the dream in relation to the dreamer's past and current life situation and the dreamer's psychosocial stage in the life cycle.

Freud's psychoanalytic interpretation and Silberer's anagogic interpretations together, can sometimes unlock a stream of associations where only one or the other cannot. Erik Erikson (1954/1987a) described one such situation:

> Toward the end of the analysis of a young professional man who stood before an important change in status, a kind of graduation, a dream occurred in which he experienced himself lying on the analytic couch, while I was sawing a round hole in the top of his head. The patient, at first, was willing to accept almost any other interpretation, such as castration, homosexual attack (from behind), continued analysis (opening a skull flap), and insanity (lobotomy), all of which were indeed relevant, rather than to recognize

> this dream as an over-all graduation dream with a reference to the tonsure administered by bishops to young Catholic priests at the time of their admission to clerical standing. . . . Thus infantile wishes to belong to and to believe in organizations providing for collective reassurance against individual anxiety, in our intellectuals, easily join other repressed childhood temptations—and force their way into dreams. (p. 265)

Fritz Perls was the founder of Gestalt Therapy. He had a formal psychoanalytic training in Berlin but his temperament and allegiances to Wilhelm Reich marginalized him from the International Psychoanalytical Association. His clinical technique emphasized the here and now, the body language of the patient, the patient's tone of voice and use of language. He was a careful observer of his patients' behavior and commented directly in a rude, or, at best, brutally honest manner. He might even imitate the patient's tone of voice or posture to bring the behavior to consciousness. He might invite the patient to speak in the voice of one hand holding the other or even speak in the name of a shaking foot.

In his work with dreams Fritz Perls would invite his patient to recognize—that because the dream is a production of the psyche every aspect of the dream is actually a part of the person. That means all the men, women, animals and objects in the dream are aspects the dreamer's own psyche. The dreamer may be associated with one figure in the dream but is inherently identified with all aspects of the dream. When the patient speaks in the voice of the other characters in the dream, extraordinary insights often come to light.

With the exception of some of Jung's mystical ideas, I don't find any of these different approaches to dream interpretation incompatible with the others, as I take a very playful approach to dream interpretation and feel quite comfortable playing with the dream without any plan to arrive at some sort of ultimate interpretation. The dream is a night time hallucination expressive of the psyche in a manner similar to the expressiveness of waking fantasies, personal interests, favorite films and books, hobbies and so on. But unlike these other fields of psychic expression the dream is in some ways less defended, and under less influence from the ego. To play with the dream is to recognize that the dream does not pertain to a literal reality but rather a figurative reality. To understand the meaning of the dream we need to interpret the manifest content figuratively not literally. We need to get beyond the concrete to the metaphorical and symbolic. We need to look for patterns and recurring images, themes and scenarios.

The process of dream interpretation may at first be led by the therapist who demonstrates a playful attitude toward thinking in metaphor. In doing so the patient is inducted into an increasingly analytic attitude. The patient is encouraged to free-associate to the dream elements and begin to think metaphorically about the dreams. The correct interpretation has nothing to do with the professional qualifications of the therapist. The interpretation is often a co-construction or entirely the construction of the patient.

Finding the correct interpretation is like finding a good jacket. You try several until you find one that fits. A good fit in dream interpretation will often unlock emotions in unexpected ways, bring to mind other associations, remind the dreamer of other dreams, and illuminate a

logic linking different aspects of early childhood experience, present day concerns and components of the transference.

Dreams can be interpreted from many different angles. They can address repressed wishes and conflicts of the past and/or present, illuminate the moral or idealistic strivings of the unconscious, speak to prospective potentials of the psyche, and so much more. But perhaps the two most common levels of interpretation that I use are the interpretations at the interpersonal and intrapsychic levels. An interpersonal interpretation might view a dream involving a friend of the dreamer as a commentary on the dreamer's relationship to that friend or others with whom that friend may be associated. An intrapsychic interpretation, on the other hand, might view that friend as an aspect of the dreamer.

One person used to have dreams about being a passenger in a car going out of control. In his therapy, however, he discovered this had little to do with actual automobiles. His free associations, or playful thoughts, about the dream drew him again and again back to his own lack of 'drive'; a sense of being out of control in terms of his career and love life and memories of the chaos and danger he felt in his family as a young boy. As therapy progressed his dreams increasingly represented him as being more and more in control and eventually situated in the driver's seat of the dream car.

An attractive, and intelligent young woman from a wealthy family had a dream that a rather plain looking woman was moving into her bedroom. This new roommate didn't force her way in but just said that the people in charge had decided she would move in and the dreamer had no say in the matter. The dreamer was outraged that this plain looking average woman was moving into her room. The outrage turned to bitter anguish and she woke up feeling overwhelming sadness and had a frown impressed upon on her face that lingered into the morning. As we played with the dream we saw how this very average woman moving into the dreamer's room could say something about the dreamer's interpersonal relations with friends and acquaintances but the intrapsychic interpretation fit even better. The new roommate was a metaphor of something new coming into her consciousness—coming into her room. And the something new was her own "averageness". Meeting averageness was a confrontation with her narcissism. Instead of being adored for her endlessly special qualities, she was confronting her basic humanness. She was meeting that aspect of her self that was a woman like any other—a woman with a body, emotions, desires, and an awareness of her mortality. Though the average woman in her dream was her age, she represented all women and perhaps most specifically her menapausal mother who reminded her that all things must change. To live with and make peace with her averageness and her mother was to accept her basic womanly condition—a condition she shares with all women.

A 28 year old man struggling with his tenuous commitment to reality and society and his ambivalent relation to his father dreamed he was walking up a path going into a house with a group of friends and colleagues for a party. Before entering the house he wandered off into the garden and found himself enjoying the plants and little animals all by himself. Suddenly he became aware that the party was ending and the people were leaving. He hurried back to the

front of the house and jumped a small hedge to join the rest of the group as they walked the front path out to the street. As we explored the dream we both immediately recognized that his pleasure in nature was deep and long standing but it also illuminated his Oedipal love for his mother—mother earth—and his ambivalent relation to his father, reality, society - the party. By avoiding the party he isolated himself from his peers and delayed progess on his adult development. Joining the others on their way out illuminated his feelings of being an imposter. The dream provided the wish fulfillment of remaining with mother in the pleasure principle and avoiding father and the reality principle. It also illuminated his persistent and lingering adolescent rebellion. Face to face with the message of the dream he became depressed but also recommitted himself to taking his life more seriously, entering society and pursuing with more vigor his chosen career.

In closing I would like to suggest that if you want to explore the subatomic structure of atoms you'll need to gain access to something like the Large Hadron Collider in Cern, Switzerland. If you want to explore the structure of the universe you'll need to gain access to something like the Hubble telescope. And if you want to explore the structure of your own psyche, you'll need to gain access to your dreams.

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