The Dream Maker as Feminist: The Politics of Dreams

Jane White-Lewis

Although we hear about the 'poetics' of dreams, we do not hear much about the 'politics' of dreams. In the last thirty years two major political movements have marked and dramatically transformed the social fabric of the United States – the civil rights movement and the women's movement (feminism). The deplorable racism and sexism that have plagued our society for centuries are finally being dealt with more consciously, and the dominant privileged position of the white male of European descent is under attack. This major shift of awareness is being felt throughout the nation in courts of law, in academia, in the government, in the business and entertainment worlds, in art and literature, and in personal relationships. Women and people of colour are becoming more and more visible and vocal. Our world of the 90s is very different from the world of the 50s. We still have, of course, a long way to go.

Considering the enormous impact of feminism and the civil rights movement on our lives, and considering that our gendered, racial selves are central to our experience of ourselves, and our interactions with others and the world, and are implicit or explicit in every dream we have, it seems really remarkable that racism and sexism are so rarely mentioned or discussed in ASD conferences. In looking over all the programs of our eleven conferences, I could find very, very few papers dealing explicitly with the connection between dreams and racism or sexism. When I say very, very few, I should add that I am excluding those papers that speak of racial and gender differences but do not grapple with the underlying racist and sexist dynamics. For instance, it is quite possible to talk about womens' dreams without exploring the sexist dimension. I am, of course, aware that a heightened anti-racist and feminist consciousness has been reflected in the subjects we discuss at our conferences (incest and sexual abuse, for example) and, on occasion, the nature of our discourse. In addition, there have been newsletter (not yet the journal) articles discussing these topics, such as the recent newsletter focusing on 'Dreams and Social Responsibility'.

If race and gender are central to our experience of ourselves in both our waking and dreaming lives, why do we shy away from these topics? Do we think that these issues are not relevant to dream work? Are our attitudes so ingrained, so ego-syntonic, that we do not think to question them? Or are these issues too political, too hot and do we want to avoid

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conflict? There is some evidence that that may be the case. For example, in the July 1991 issue of the newsletter a letter to the editor commented on the anti-white racist remarks of a Native American invited speaker at the Charlottesville conference. This letter provoked some genuine, healthy interaction; the newsletter came to life – which is not surprising as there is a lot of energy in the shadow. Some members of the board were horrified that the original letter had been published and that someone might have been offended; an advisory board was established to review letters to the editor before publication. Any possibility of lively debate in the newsletter (the hope of the previous editor) was squelched. We backed away, and that was pretty much it for 'letters to the editor'.

Another example: following an invited address about dreams of incest at the 1993 Santa Cruz conference, a psychoanalyst raised the issue of the possible symbolic significance of a dream of incest; an outpouring of outrage and ridicule erupted from both the invited speaker and the audience. No discussion was possible.

It seems to me that we must find some way to talk about these important social and political issues as they emerge in our work, our relationships, our conferences, and our publications. We split off from what is political at our peril.

Also concerned about the dream movement's reluctance to address political and social realities, Johanna King raises two interesting and interrelated issues in a newsletter article entitled, 'Let's Stand Up, Regain Our Balance and Look Around Before We Fall (or Melt) into the Pool'. King argues against the narcissistic overemphasis on the intrapsychic meaning of dreams at the expense of the dreamer's interpersonal and external waking life experience and of the social realities of our times. That is, she criticises therapists for focusing too much on the personal meaning and growth potential of dreams and for neglecting the real life relationships and problems of the dreamer. (Her examples include survivors of childhood sexual abuse, Germans in the early days of Hitler's regime, a young Sandanista soldier, and torture victims.)

I really do not think that focusing too much on personal meaning is the problem. I think that King overstates the case that those of us that work deeply with the intrapsychic, inner face of dreams neglect the external realities and the interpersonal issues in our patients' lives. The life context and history are, of course, essential in understanding any dream – or in any psychotherapy. Staying close to the feelings and energy in the dream will inevitably lead to those important life issues, and may, in fact, be the only way to get to this sensitive material, the only way to get past the ego defences. I cannot even imagine what 'personal growth and deep inner meaning' would mean if divorced from life's past and present trauma and turmoil. And it is hard to imagine, as King suggests, that an analyst working with a survivor of childhood sexual abuse would focus on the inner abuser rather than the actual painful life experience. Such a response to trauma would not only be an empathic failure or (in King's words) 'counter therapeutic', it would be cruel.

It is not that King wants to throw out the intrapsychic meaning of dreams; rather she speaks of a 'balance' between

'intrapsychic' (subjective/inner world) and 'interpersonal' (objective/outer world) interpretations. There is a polarity or opposition here with which I am uncomfortable – intrapsychic versus interpersonal, inner versus outer – and I would like to shift the emphasis a bit, to hold both and to stress the interrelatedness, the interpenetrations, the interdependence of the two. We come to know ourselves through our interactions with the world without and the world within, and our inner and outer worlds are not so separate as we may think but are always infusing and informing each other. The outer world, for example, continuously insinuates itself into our imaginal life; our fantasy and dream worlds are fed by experiences of the outer world. Just try to imagine a dream or fantasy with no world referent. Hard to do. And our psyches are inextricably enmeshed in the world. Complicated memories and feelings will endlessly colour our experience of the world and will be projected onto our relationships in the world. If we do not know intimately and take responsibility for our inner figures (our racist and sexist figures, for example), this toxicity will contaminate our interactions with the other sex, other races, the world. I feel strongly that real social change is impossible without increased consciousness.

The problem, then, as I see it, is not the emphasis on inner work or search for meaning, but rather (King's other point) the preoccupation with personal concerns and 'growth' at the expense of social responsibility and political action. In King's words: 'I . . . worry that a consequence of overemphasis on the intrapsychic is the sapping of attention and assets from the arena of social action and reform, and that the energy, resourcefulness, creativity, and commitment of the populace that might be available to deal with critically important social issues are lost in the rush to focus on personal issues.'

Here I completely agree with King. It is not just the question of knowing, but of doing. I can't really see any great advantage in being more conscious if the world around us is crumbling. I find myself impatient with my Jungian colleagues who, I feel, know so much about projection and the seeds of prejudice that lie within the unconscious, who have so much to contribute – but who are reluctant to venture beyond their consulting rooms because they are 'apolitical' or claim to be introverted/intuitive/thinking types (which, it is not surprising, is how Jung saw himself). Fortunately there are a few exceptions – Robby Bosnak, for example, who in his work with AIDS patients and who through his intercultural conferences (Dreaming in Russia, Dreaming in Greece and Dreaming in India) is very much in the world. There are encouraging signs in ASD that we too are waking up to the world around us and to our responsibility to take a more proactive stance.

So how does all of this relate to my topic, dreams and feminism? Up to this point in my paper, I have been speaking of racism and feminism. Having taught a course on dreams to a multicultural group of 14-year-old girls in an inner city high school, I am very aware of the interconnections, the overlap of the two issues, racism and sexism, but because of time constraints I want to focus on sexism. I

would like to say a few words about feminism and a certain affinity I see between feminism and a symbolic way of working with dreams. Let me be clear: I am not looking for theories or answers. Rather I want to encourage a dialogue between dreamers and feminists and to consider briefly what feminists (of both sexes) can contribute to dream work and what dream workers (of both sexes) can contribute to feminism. I just want to circumambulate a bit around my topic.

Feminism is defined as 'a doctrine that advocates or demands for women the same rights granted men, as in political or economic status.' A basic tenet of feminism is, therefore, equality. In place of a patriarchal, white male domination in private and public worlds, feminism demands the 'same rights', an equality of individual, social, political and economic rights between men and women. A feminist consciousness, however, goes beyond the matter of rights between men and women and embraces a new way of apprehending and constructing reality. The language of a feminist consciousness is polyvocal and inclusive. Those marginalised or 'othered' by society are seen and given voice. Feminism speaks of inclusion and connection not exclusion, partnership not domination, dialogue not directives. Feminism is democratic and there is an awareness that all lose, men and women, rich and poor, black and white, when we are trapped in narrowly defined roles and stereotypes.

It is in this spirit of feminist consciousness, it seems to me, that the unconscious is by nature surely a feminist. Viewed symbolically, the unconscious is always pushing for the acknowledgement, inclusion and integration of our shadows, our 'minorities', or 'othered' selves. In striking dream imagery the unconscious reveals its abhorrence for injustice and the violation of rights, and its distaste for the domination and control by an impenetrable ego or a powerful complex. It is a question of inclusion, of hearing all the voices, of 'making whole', which is a very Jungian concept and which is fundamentally a moral issue. To quote Jung: 'Although every act of conscious realisation is at least a step forward on the road to individuation, to the 'making whole' of the individual, the integration of the personality is unthinkable without the responsible, and that means moral, relationship of the parts to one another, just as the constitution of a state is impossible without mutual relations between its members.'

So what can Feminism (or we as feminists) contribute to dream work? If we are mindful of the concerns of feminism, we will be sensitive to the uses and misuses of power in our imaginal life and can consider these power dynamics in relation to our personal lives as well as to larger social contexts. All of us have grown up, and live, in a sexist society and are deeply marked by it. Can we locate our own sexism in our dream images? How do these sexist figures appear in our dreams? As our sexist, misogynist neighbour who tells mother-in-law jokes, our sister who voted against ERA, or the desk clerk who shows the male guest preferential treatment? And who is 'othered' in our dreams? Who are the marginal figures and the intruders wanting to be seen and heard? Considering a feminist interpretation will open up new ways of thinking about our dreams.

In addition, with increased feminist consciousness, we can sniff out the sexism in some of our dream theories and research methods. We can begin to recognise sexist dynamics in our dream groups, publications and organisations.

As dreamers, I feel that our greatest contribution to feminism can be to introduce a more soulful, imaginal attitude to the political arena. Sometimes feminism can have a hard edge, a certain scratchiness that repels both men and women. Some, who are in fact feminists in their thinking, are reluctant to be identified as feminists. Over the years I have been struck by the lack of a psychological or imaginal dimension in most feminist discourse. The political without the mediating influence of the imaginal can become diatribe. Because they bypass the psychological defences, stories, images and dreams can often transform a sexist unconsciousness more effectively than a political tract.

Recently I heard that a feminist organisation, torn apart by conflict, was disbanded. I thought of Jeremy Taylor's account of the white liberals who, after having failed in their work in the black community, met as a group to examine their experience. When the group seemed mired in pessimism and hopelessness about racism and was about to be disbanded, Taylor suggested that the members of the group share their dreams. As the members of the group worked with their own dream images of internalised oppression and took responsibility for their own racism, the results were amazing both in the group itself and in the black community. Instead of being resented, the whites were now welcomed in the black neighbourhoods. I wonder what would have happened if the feminist group had shifted gears, as Taylor's group had done, and started sharing their dreams?

Before closing I would like to give an example of what a feminist perspective can bring to dream work and how dream work can stretch feminist consciousness in a dream group setting (one of Bosnak's intensive didactive dream workshops). After summarising the dream, I will focus on the group experience of working on the dream and on the discussion which followed the dream work.

Dream: The dreamer returns with her younger son to the New England coastal town where she had summered as a child. Having recently bought a house in the town, she has come for the 'closing' and is worrying about her purchase – did she make the right decision? The dream shifts and she is now in front of the 'cottage' on her grandparents' estate where she had spent her summers until she was fifteen. Hiding her own deep feelings, she is met by her cool, dispassionate male cousin and his 3-year-old son and 7-year-old daughter. Impressed with their beauty, the dreamer says, 'You are all so beautiful'. 'Fuck you!' says the 7-year-old princess-like daughter. Although uninvited, the dreamer and her son follow the others into the house which has been renovated and is now enormous like a castle with a large hall within.

Dream work: As the dreamer went back into the dream, a host of memories and feelings emerged. The dream seemed to reflect the dreamer's struggle to come to terms with her strong identification with her father and her father's family –

a patriarchy of wealth, privilege and literary prominence. In the process of working through the dream, the dreamer came into a new imaginal space, a hall of marble which was cold, hard, unyielding and yet strangely comforting. In contrast, deep, troubled, hurt, angry, tender feelings resonated throughout the dream.

The group process during this dream work was really interesting. The men in the room gathered around the dreamer; one male member of the group even moved so he could sit on the floor in front of the dreamer. Leaning toward the dreamer, listening intently, deeply engaged and enlivened by the dreamer's material, the men clearly monopolised the dream work. The women, on the other hand, were strangely silent. The dream had constellated in the room the power of this patriarchal dynasty.

When we began to process and discuss the dream work, the dreamer asked rather plaintively, 'Where were the women?' Each woman struggled to understand her silence and articulate her experience. One woman said she felt like an outsider – very ethnic, Jewish in comparison to the genteel WASP family in the dream; another woman felt confused and insecure; another, stupid; another spoke of wanting, longing to go and sit next to the dreamer but imagining that she would be rejected and ridiculed. Two of the eight women in the group had, in fact, spoken briefly, and it is interesting to note that neither had grown up in a traditional patriarchal home. One, the youngest woman in the group, had had two strong female role models – a grandmother who had been a psychoanalyst and a mother who is a practising therapist. Her parents had been divorced when she was a child. The other woman, also raised by her mother, worked in a traditionally male profession and said she identified more with men than with women.

Each of our individual responses reflected our own neurotic complexes as well as our picking up pieces of the dreamer's shadow through projective identification. It seems to me that this group experience is awesome evidence of the power of a dream to evoke and dramatise in a group the problem in the dream. Here was a dramatic illustration of the potency of the patriarchy and of the silencing of women which occurs (and has occurred millions and million of times) when this patriarchal energy is manifested. If the group discussion had focused exclusively on the intense personal experience of the dreamer, the sexist dimension might well have been lost. Considering a feminist perspective enabled us to recognise the political face of this dream and to feel the potential in the dream work for raising our feminist consciousness. Certainly, for me, the experience was instrumental in my choosing to write this paper, in my refusing to remain silent.

Group dream work can provide an excellent forum for doing soul work in a socially responsible way. Social and political issues are more likely to be constellated in a group setting than in individual therapy, and the group can provide a safe container for exploring these concerns. In individual therapy it would be impossible to experience the 'silencing' of women that occurred in the Bosnak group. In addition, the 'narcissism' of an intrapsychic focus falls away as the group becomes the vessel for examining the richness and

interrelatedness of our private intrapsychic and public interpersonal worlds.

In summary, 'politics' has to do with power and the distribution of power – and so do dreams. By focusing on our dreams and our imaginal life we come to know our own personal power; we are empowered. In our dreams we experience the personal face of political issues. Through the power of the dream image and dream work, we can effect social and political change in the world. In these ways dreams are political.

It is important to remember that the word political comes from the Latin 'polites' (citizen), from 'polis' (city). Only if we care for and take responsibility for our inner citizens, our ailing, marginalised, mistreated, oppressed soul figures, and only if we take responsibility for our inner cities, our neglected, troubled, beleaguered imaginal spaces, can we be full citizens, truly responsible citizens of the 'polis' and of the world community.

Posttraumatic Re-enactment in Dreams

Bas Schreuder

It is well-known that if you have been subject to a traumatic event, whether you are the victim of a rape or an assault or a second world war concentration camp survivor, chances are that you will live through the traumatic events again during the dreams you have. These bad dreams. which may cause very considerable distress, we usually call nightmares.

It is now argued that what are generally designated as 'nightmares' are, in fact, two very different phenomena. A distinction should be made between nightmares proper and, on the other hand, nocturnal re-enactments of psychotraumatic experiences.

What happens during such a posttraumatic re-enactment is illustrated by the Polish author Póltawska who has described the symptoms in Jewish children who survived Auschwitz where they were at ages six to twelve. According to this description, recollections come to the fore suddenly and violently 'which do not take the shape of thoughts, but of images, scenes, sometimes a sequence of scenes that these people went through. The memory then starts to reproduce the mental impressions felt earlier, such as the entire atmosphere of the scene which they

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