

Understanding Our Dreams - Idle Visions or Pearls of Great Price? - Deirdre Haslam

***If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended,
That you have but slumbered here,
While these visions did appear.
And this weak and idle theme,
No more yielding but a dream.***

(Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night's Dream, V.i.411-416)

Thus speaks Puck at the end of what I consider to be one of Shakespeare's most intriguing and in our times most wildly misunderstood plays (Haslam 1991). It brings us to the heart of the matter: are dreams idle visions or do they express truths of which we are barely conscious in our daylight lives; truths that at other times and in other places and cultures are accessible to consciousness, because of different attitudes towards the importance of dreaming?

We in the West, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, appear to struggle between wanting to get back to a more creative and more instinctual approach to our dreams and being caught in the straight-jacket of needing to interpret everything from a logical perspective. This is the struggle: the right brain versus the left, intuition versus rational thinking, night versus day, the wild wood, ruled over by Oberon and Titania, versus the classical city of Athens, ruled over by Theseus and Hippolyta.

And yet at other times dream interpretation was a serious business indeed; witness Joseph's advancement

at the Egyptian court once he had correctly interpreted Pharaoh's two dreams of the cows and the ears of corn (Genesis, 41). And in other places, mainly amongst native peoples around the globe, dreams are seen as central to their spiritual beliefs and practices and to their material well-being. To the Aborigines of Australia the Dreamtime is their reality. The hunter gatherers of the Kalahari Desert believe that there is a dream dreaming us. Native Americans go on a Vision Quest to discover their path in life.

Although Freud, at the beginning of the last century, maintained that dreams were the royal road to the unconscious,

as that century proceeded, the growing intrusions into our lives of industrialisation and of social control and conflict in whatever form, seem to have taken their toll on our capacity to view ourselves as whole human beings, with bodies, minds and souls. This in turn

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has led, I suggest, to an increasing sense of alienation and of anomie. I believe that is now changing and that we hunger for truths that cannot be found in the sterile world of so-called objective reality. The findings of the new physics, of chaos and complexity theory remind us once again that, as Hamlet says to Horatio:

There are more things in heaven
and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your
philosophy.
(*Shakespeare, Hamlet, I,v,14-15*)

I have long been interested in dreams but it was only on reading *The Multicultural Imagination*, 'Race', *Color*, and *the Unconscious* (Vannoy Adams, 1996) that I found the tool I needed to work creatively, initially with my own and then, later with the dreams of others during training workshops, using a Jungian approach.

Vannoy Adams describes five stages of dream analysis and uses Jung's interpretation of one of Jung's own dreams (Vannoy Adams, pp 77-84) to illustrate his analysis. It is an interesting dream on its own account because it brings to the surface Jung's avoidance of exploring his unconscious attitudes towards race, which clearly surface in the dream. In fact Vannoy Adams suggests that Jung can only interpret the dream as he does, because he does not use his own methodology to examine the complexities and contradictions manifest in the dream. As a result the interpretation that he makes is, according to Vannoy Adams, completely contradictory to the one that would probably emerge, were he to be true to his own methodology.

Whilst I do not want to examine this dream any further here, I would highly recommend the book, which explores the meanings of race in the white person's unconscious in a thought-provoking and stimulating way. What I want to do is to take the five stages of dream analysis and illustrate them with a dream of my own. The dream is as follows:

I am in a small group of four at a seminar. We are talking about relationships and conflict. A person is talking, whom I had taken for a woman. She is telling us about a conflict in her family and ends, as if it were self-evident: 'and I was a father,' as if this were the point of amazement about the conflict, for him/her. I was taken aback and felt embarrassed at having assumed he was a woman. But then I listened further to his/her voice and although it was low it sounded definitely like a woman's voice. Then we moved from the table which we were sitting around and I saw that 'she'

was wearing a dress, quite a quiet but elegant black dress. I woke confused.

1) phenomenological- metaphorical interpretation

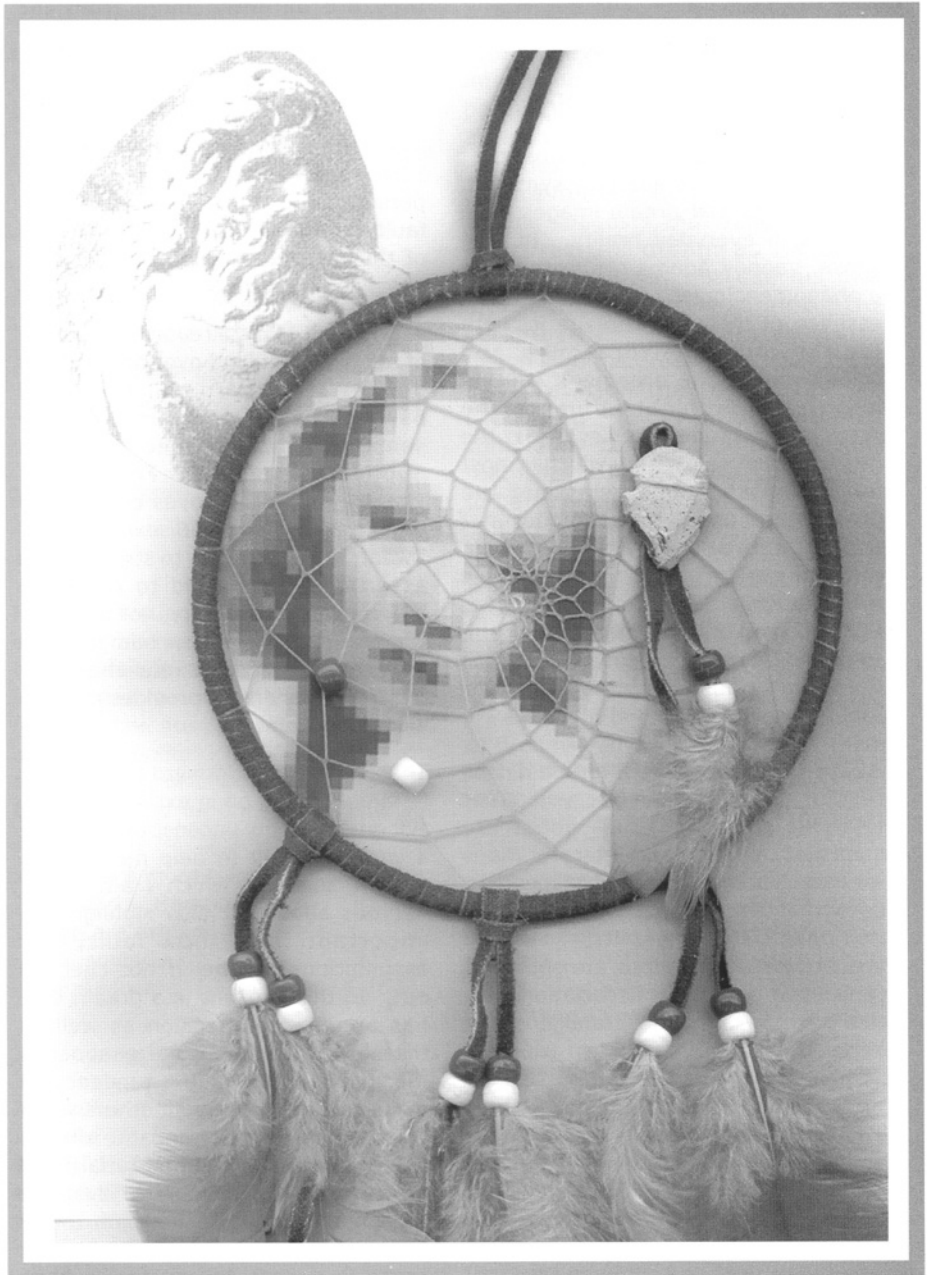
Unlike Freud, who maintains that dreams are always and only symbolic, Jung asserts that dream images have a basis in everyday reality. In that sense, Vannoy Adams suggests, he is a phenomenologist. He asks what the essence of the dream image is, both for the individual dreaming and collectively in the dreamer's cultural milieu, which might influence the dreamer's attitudes. However it is the dreamer's psychic reality which is most important when understanding the dream, their use of the metaphor that counts, rather than some intrinsic meaning that might be ascribed to the symbolic object, although, of course, the dreamer will be affected by the social and cultural attitudes that such dream symbols embody in outer reality.

At the time I had this dream I was reading *Getting the Love you Want* (Harville Hendrix, 1993) about the snapshot decisions and interpretations we make about people on first meeting, to see if they fit our unconscious demands as a mate. In my dream snapshot interpretations are shown to be faulty. I have other associations: we had been talking about transgendered people in one of the lesbian groups I belong to. I had also heard a piece on the radio about Miss Gay South Africa. The first interviewee sounded like a woman. She describes herself as dressed in a tight mini-skirt. As I listen my inner image shifts to take into account a mini-skirted, lipstick lesbian - there are some even here in England!

Then the next two people come to the microphone to be interviewed, and they are patently male, from the sound of their voices, so I shift my perspective once again and realise that Miss Gay South Africa is a competition for gay men. Each of these shifts is dictated by the fact that I had made an assumption about the person being interviewed, based on faulty and inadequate understanding of the reality, which turns out to be more complex than I had imagined.

At the time I was already, in the back of my mind, mulling over how I would do my seminar on analytical psychology for the Pink Therapy seminar series, connected to the publication of *Pink Therapy 2, Therapeutic Perspectives on Working with Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Clients*. I want, in the seminar, to stress Jung's assertion of the need to celebrate difference and diversity, not to go for conformity to norms, but I am not sure how exactly I will use the time available. My dream provides me with a starting point.

These are straightforward connections to events going on in external reality. Not only does my unconscious give me a wonderful gift to help me prepare for the seminar, which I am rather nervous about. It also highlights in important ways, how faulty our assumptions can be, if not checked out. In this sense it is a dream that has a cultural dimension as well as the individual dimension personal to me. Most of us have a tendency to make assumptions about others when we first meet them and the dream makes use of residual material from my everyday experiences to illustrate the particular ways in which many people, gay as well as straight, are prone to classify those of us, whose



sexuality does not fit the norm. Unconscious internalised homophobia is a well-known phenomenon, which most gay people have to deal with in themselves on their path to self-acceptance, as well as being an all too frequent reality in our dealings with the heterosexual majority. The present arguments about Clause 28 demonstrate this only too clearly.

2) amplificatory interpretation

Jung recommends the dream images be amplified, compared to and contrasted with images in story, myth, legend, etc. In this way other meanings might emerge from the dreamer's unconscious, which have a bearing on the dream. This level of dream interpretation makes use of the collective unconscious, in which imagery common to the collective may extend the dreamer's personal experience and give deeper meaning to the dream's interpretation.

The man/woman: Ganymede the beloved of Zeus is a young boy. That is the name taken by Rosalind, when she goes into the forest with Celia (Shakespeare, *As You Like It*). A boy actor, takes the role of a woman, dressed as a man to disguise her identity. Shakespeare's women (played by young men) often masquerade as men, who are not as they seem, a double masquerade. They are shape-changers of all sorts, tricksters, challenging us to question our perceptions and attitudes towards gender and sexuality. Is this person in my dream a representation of the Trickster in me, not sure whether she is a man or he is a woman, challenging me to question my assumptions around sexuality and gender? Is this

the role the gay community plays in relation to the straight community?

A woman in an elegant black dress: *femme fatale*, Greta Garbo or Marlene Dietrich, somebody whose voice I love and whose sexuality is also ambiguous. Odile, the black swan, who entices the prince away from Odette and leads him to his doom in Swan Lake. Am I being enticed into new learnings about myself? Does this figure in a quiet, yet elegant black dress represent the epitome of desirable and desired sexuality within me as an individual and as an icon in both gay and straight society?

The figure 4 is a sacred number in most belief systems. It represents wholeness: the four functions of Jung's typology: thinking, feeling, sensation and intuition; the four directions of the Native American Medicine Wheel; the four evangelists, the four suits of the minor arcana of the Tarot pack.

Do the four people in the dream represent Jung's four functions, and does the wo/man in a black dress represent the inferior function? Jung believed that one of the aims of therapy is to bring into consciousness the inferior function in order to enable the individual to achieve wholeness, or Individuation, as Jung defines it. Is the dream thus inviting me to connect with my inferior function? Is it also at a collective level expressing the way in which gay people represent for straight society the 'Other', the one who is different and seen as inferior?

In the dream we are sitting round a table: the round table of Arthurian legend springs to my mind, representing equality and the cyclic nature of time and reality. We are talking about relationships and conflict, the focus of much therapy as well as the mainstay

of story, myth and legend: relationships between individuals, between groups, between competing theories, in which conflict can lead either to complete breakdown in communication or a new breakthrough.

This is an issue for me as, I would suggest, it is for all of us at a personal level. It is also an issue between the dominant community, in this case the straight community, and the minority gay community, as well as for any minority community which finds itself in conflict with the dominant world of white, mainly male, mainly heterosexual, mainly able-bodied privilege. It is an issue between nations, where competing ideologies lead to appalling destruction in many areas of the world today.

In my dream we sit down together and discuss these issues as equals. In the dream it is the person who represents the Other, who speaks and says: 'and I was a father.'

What might it mean that the Other brings in the figure of the Father, another archetypal symbol? Am I dreaming of Jung, the father of archetypal psychology? Of God the Father, of the Christianity of my childhood? It certainly seems to be a father, who is connected to the past in some way. I am also reminded of Andrew Samuels' term 'the father of whatever sex' to describe the role of fathering, which deliberately refrains from automatically assuming that this role should inevitably be taken by a man (Samuels, 1993, pp133-135).

No doubt there are further associations that might be made with these archetypal elements, but this indicates how the amplificatory method can expand one's understanding of the

dream in new and potentially limitless and fruitful ways.

3) compensatory interpretation

The dream includes the repressed, ignored, neglected aspects of our psyche, which have been excluded from consciousness. Thus the dream compensates for the partial, prejudiced understandings of the conscious ego. It offers alternative perspectives on the defensive attitudes of the dreamer.

The dream suggests a need to hold back from judging others, until you know more. Don't make assumptions. Others are different, with their own meanings and their own experiences, particularly if they come from other cultures, with other belief systems and ways of being in the world. It also suggests that the Other may have something mysterious and of value to offer.

4) subjective interpretation

The elements in the dream represent intrapsychic relationships within the dreamer, different aspects of the self, which may well be in conflict with each other, or contradict each other. Thus the dream reflects the internal reality of the dreamer.

Is this dream illuminating my own confusions around my professional identity as a teacher and psychotherapist on the one hand and my sexual identity as a lesbian woman on the other? It highlights the learner, who explores issues of relationship and conflict with others as we sit round a table, all equal, sharing our knowledge with each other. It also brings in the

sexually ambivalent cross-dressing Garbo-esque figure of my fantasies, of whom I am rather afraid. She challenges me and yet is patently an

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aspect of my inner world. In Jungian language she represents my anima - my soul. On the other hand he also represents my animus - my spirit. S/he is truly an ambiguous aspect of my psyche, containing both the feminine and masculine principles.

5) prospective interpretation

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In my journal entry on this function I asked the question: is this a gift from my unconscious for the seminar, a looking forward to this event in the near future? Now that the seminar is behind me I can also see in the dream something more long-lasting, an image of how things might be when I can incorporate the Other, my fourth

inferior function into my psyche, value what it brings to me in terms of learning and wholeness. From the perspective of the dream as my wish for clear communication and the resolution of conflict, it demonstrates a situation where people can sit round together, sharing thoughts and ideas about the nature of relationship and conflict with no preconceived ideas as to what is normal or customary.

I have used a dream of my own to illustrate the five ways of dream interpretation, but I have also found it a fascinating way of working with dreams with individuals and in groups.

With individuals I tend to let the dreamer set the pace and use my understandings of the five stages in a looser, less structured way. If the dreamer wants to focus on the dream in an in-depth way then this is of course entirely possible. However if they do not, then I will not push it, although I might bring in my thoughts connecting the dream with any other material that the dreamer is working with.

When I have run dream workshops the person who has chosen to share their dream has on each occasion provided a dream which not only turned out to be deeply significant in terms of their own journey but has also been a dream which has resonated with the other members of the group. I have worked with the dreamer on their own understandings and interpretations, using the five stages. I have then invited the other members of the group to bring in their perceptions to check whether these speak to the dreamer. It can often be the case that the group sees aspects that are not noticed by the dreamer and can be extremely illuminating for that person, as well as

bringing something to the discussion that is of relevance to individuals in the group as a whole.

This has been particularly the case when we explored the dream in the amplificatory dimension, making connections with myth, legend and story, in other words with the collective unconscious. It was as if the dream became the gift given to the group as a whole, in which we could all find meanings in our own lives. In this way I had the sense that the experience of exploring the dream took on a

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transpersonal quality, which brought members of the group into much closer communion. The dreamer felt that they had been given great insight into their own lives and the other group members were made aware of aspects of their reality, which before had been closed to them. Thus the process became one of mutual enhancement in which we were all involved in the teaching and the learning.

So is it worth our while to reflect on our dreams? Are they idle visions or

do they contain an inner wisdom that can enlighten and empower us? I hope I have demonstrated that working with one's dreams can be an enriching experience. When done in a group, and particularly when more than one dream can be shared, this process opens up possibilities for deeper communication, which extend beyond the rational realm and provide participants with the opportunity for experiencing communion. It can be a healing process for all who are brought together in this way.

Further Reading

Dominic Davies & Charles Neal (eds.) (2000) *Pink Therapy 2, Therapeutic Perspectives on working with lesbian, gay and bisexual clients*, Open University Press

Deirdre Haslam (1991) *Myth, Masque & Alchemy; the Moon in 'The Dream'*, unpublished paper Harville Hendrix (1993)

Getting the love you want, London, Pocket Books, Simon & Schuster Ltd

Karl Gustav Jung (1963) *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, London, Collins and Routledge & Kegan Paul

Andrew Samuels (1993) *The Political Psyche*, London & New York, Routledge

Michael Vannoy Adams (1996) *The Multicultural Imagination, 'Race', Color, and the Unconscious*, London & New York, Routledge

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