

# The Living Dream

Andy White

Awakening on a polka shirt  
to a different coloured sky,  
and a sun with root beer glasses  
sporting hair down to his eye.  
Anon.

I looked around me suspiciously. It was not that anything seemed out of place as such. Nor even that my environs seemed unreal in any way. That was the problem. Its normality unnerved me.

Usually dreams are simply something we wake up from and ponder after the fact. Or they are lucid and the shock of realising that you are dreaming wakes you up. On one occasion, and one only, I managed to contain the excitement and horror from catapulting me back into wakefulness. I had to hold my head in my hands mind you, and calm myself out loud; 'It's okay, this is fine, don't panic.' Like you might a crash victim.

I held my nerve for long enough to approach an African man in a monk's cowl with a Greek cross around his neck and asked him for a piece of advice. 'Walk absently in the trees', he said. I thanked him and wandered off, a little non-plussed. What was that again? I had to go back and check. He simply repeated himself, and I was none the wiser. I was far too busy asking myself what it all meant rather

than listening to what had actually been said or looking into his eye.

This situation, in any case, was quite different. It wasn't obviously a dream. More often than not the presence of some mystical monk, or seven-foot lizard men for that matter, are enough to convince beyond reasonable doubt that it is all a dream. But the garden I now found myself in seemed all too familiar and everyday. I couldn't say where I was but that didn't seem to matter. I knew the place.

It was a quiet day. No lizard men. No sense of any other malign entities about to amuse themselves at my expense nor any of those weird juxtapositions of fish and fowl that you can get with Dream seams in the fabric of reality all sowed up by some manic goblin let loose with cross stitch.

This was all quite acceptable. Tress of various kinds, flowers behaving themselves in benevolent borders. Birds tweeting appropriately. But still I wasn't convinced. There was a sublime something which wouldn't let go my doubt. I began to wonder just

how I was going to determine which realm it was that I was wandering about in. I started looking for dues. How does one do that exactly? What criteria do you use? Being bombarded by two-storey daffodil bulbs exploding in perfect time to the opening retains of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony pretty much decides the case, but does their absence?

I was at a loss, and so, for want of any better ideas I began to inspect the minutiae of my world. First up were the hairs on my arms. They were quite in place. Next, the whorls in my fingertips and all the lines in the palms of my hands, but they too were as good as gold. Then I went over to a garden

wall, scrutinising it as one might the face of a naughty child who's up to some indiscernible mischief. The bricks were red and browning, texture rough, cracked and pitted, weathered by a hundred winds and a thousand storms.

Then I noticed a sprig of three red leaves on the ground. I picked them up and held them to the light. The veins were infinitely intricate, just as the veins in leaves are. Then it occurred to me that these leaves were beautiful. They affected me. I was moved. And because they were affecting me they had value and were real. It did not matter if I were awake or asleep. What affects me is real irrespective of all this casting about for evidence.



As all this dawned on me I felt a strange and rather unpleasant tickling at the back of my throat. More than that, it was a scratching, something that had actually been there for a long time. I retched and coughed up about a kilo of broken glass.

Sometimes you notice a bell because it has stopped ringing. I noticed the glass in the same way. I was glad it was out of me. It looked sharp. Not the kind of thing you really want in your throat.

When I woke back into whatever this now was, I realised that the kilo of glass, a rather nasty affliction, was this strange and artificial fragmenting up of reality I had been involved in that really prevents the digestion of experience. This was not an interpretation. It was what occurred to me, something I simply understood.

Too much of the time we therapists are asking both ourselves and our clients what dreams mean. We are after the content rather than the experience. We want to know what it stands for, but we are not so interested in what it is in itself, or what our relationship might be with this thing we're desperately trying to figure out. We're far too busy teaching the savage to speak English, to ask his name.

Our attitudes underpin questions of interpretation and determine whether such interpretations are going to be of any use to us, or whether they will simply pass thorough the tracts of our inner world like the proverbial tomato seed, undigested.

It's fine to be able to interpret something accurately, but the question of meaning still remains. Even a good interpretation coming from the client,

which is always more sublime than it coming from the therapist, still begs the question of how it is received. I'm put in mind of two very different clients who came to see me with similar issues. They stayed for about the same length of time and at the same sort of frequency. The one was never particularly able to say what she felt her dreams to be about but held them in such awe and sifted through them with such wonder while the other was able to define her dreams to a tee, often with my own opinions corroborated, but would flit away to some other matter with a dismissive shrug once the deed was done, her symbols tumbling through her without touching the sides like Tom of *The Water Babies* gulping back the sweets of Mrs Do-as-you-would-be-done-by. No prizes for guessing who struggled furthest out of her narcissistic mire.

We forget that diagnostic labels are really describing streaks or tendencies rather than persons themselves, and in our consumer society we are not really asking who is narcissistic and who is not but to what degree it is present. It is this streak in us that undermines our attitudes to the otherness of Dream just as it undermines tolerance and wonder at the otherness of other people.

Such defendedness is not that any particular wound is being guarded against nor any event or memory that is under protection, but rather a feeling of distaste towards the 'not me' irrespective of its nature. It's the spirit behind 'Yes, but!' It's that uncanny knack of being able to change the subject at the turn of a hand without batting an eye. It's the inane and friendly smile that says it doesn't matter how smart or compassionate

you are I still won't let myself be touched or moved by the encounter.

This attitude can prevail just the same in respect of Dream which is also 'not me'. We may say that every part of a dream is an aspect of oneself and this may largely be true. But it is not true of Dream itself whose knowing of us better than we know ourselves makes it 'other', not to mentioned potentially intrusive and frightening.

The tendency of the unconscious to manifest itself as personality, like Faust his Mephistopheles, facilitates our readiness to defend against Dream. It's as though Dream were an intrusive if fascinating neighbour trying to tell us his life story, a tale with haunting similarities to our own, under the guise of borrowing a cup of sugar or a pair of secateurs. We assume that wooden, impenetrable attitude which one so often does with the other that we envy too much to admire, and pre-empt every attempt to gain our attention with a silent gear change into android mode which anticipates all corners with unwavering tedium.

There is something of this attitude in Freud's own diaries when he complained that his dreams were reaching new heights of imbecility, as though his inability to grasp their intention was because Dream was being obsequious or evasive. This stance is further exemplified by his notion of hidden meanings, which is not unlike an imperious and slightly paranoid colonial imputing the locals with trickery because he doesn't know what is going on.

People are often surprised in workshops or sessions when I ask them to draw their image for Dream itself, putting all the content to one side for a moment, only to discover their

enthusiasm for the symbol business waning. There is a sense of blandness, of apathy, or of being persecuted by Dream for not 'revealing' itself more clearly, which is all far more pressing a matter than the exploration of any one particular dream or another.

I was asleep on the side of the mountain. I had found a good ledge with moss and wind protection. A pink alien with the loveliest mottles on his skin came over to see me. I was able to give him the knives that I had found lying on the ground around me. They were sharp and heavy. He was grateful and gave me a straw hat in return. Then we looked at his photo album together. Mother, father, brothers and sisters. Our bare shoulders touched. His skin was smooth and warm.

Scratch, scratch. The sound of scratching. I'm asleep on the mountain. There's a rat in my pack. I have to chase it away. It might nibble something. Sorry Mr Alien, sir, you are very interesting but there's a rat in my pack on the ledge on the side of the mountain nibbling at something and I must shoo it away.

Shoo, shoo. Hmm, I had a dream about a pink alien. He had the loveliest mottles on his skin. Knives. Hat. Album. I wonder what it means?

Attitude is more fundamental than conceptualisation. It colours and informs it beyond our capacity to recognise what is happening. In my family the myth is that my mother is good and always right while my father is bad and always wrong. The meaning of their actions is perennially subject to this primary consideration. If mother behaves badly she's only human, must be stressed, and you have to forgive people their weaknesses. If father is magnanimous he's out to get

something, must have some ulterior motive and anyway it doesn't excuse what happened last week.

The primary attitude has already filtered and interpreted the occasion, determined its significance and decided what it is prior to our laying hands on it and enquiring after meaning. It's like a rigged election that everyone is pretending to be free and fair. But our own covert prejudices have decided the nature of the beast rather than open enquiry, which means that the symbols within Dream are all too often reduced to mere confirmations of what we knew already, and hover in our hands only momentarily before being consigned to a shed where they will gather and choke on an aeon's dust before being buried forever.

The light that filtered through the grove of trees was spectacular. The trees themselves were stumpy, dark, tangled and wild. The light that coursed through them at a steep angle, creating an impressive chiaroscuro of sun and shadow, was scalpel sharp, clean, intense. I woke and sat up in bed impressed by the image, plumped the pillows and smoothed the duvet. Then I awoke from that. I felt confused and went to my desk to write it all down. Then I woke up, bolt upright in bed. I couldn't sleep again and went through to the kitchen to make a cup of tea. I woke up before the water boiled. Disturbed now, I got dressed and walked down the road in the early morning light to the wood at the bottom of my road. The sunrise sliced through the ancient trees at a sharp angle creating a wonderful impression of contrasting light and shade. On the way back home I noticed that the road was covered with five-pence pieces. The kind of thing that can happen in a dream.

If consciousness can be regarded as a kind of dream from which we may awake at any moment then our attitude towards Dream itself will go through a change. In a nutshell we will find fresh respect for Dream. We will refrain from the intrusive, 'What does it mean?', the dismissive, 'What's being hidden?', A the foreclosure of definitive interpretation. If dream-work is an art it is a minimalist art.

We needn't go for the complex if the simple will do. We are trying too hard. We'd do well to adopt a prime directive of non-interference rather than all this trying to find out. We need to muse more, to wait for meaning to suggest itself like a badger tumbling out of the night or the sudden subtle presence of honeysuckle. If Dream is afforded its otherness, and respected as such by our leaving our tool kit at home and keeping still, then meaning will come to us. We will have dialogue rather than dissection and a comrade rather than a cadaver.

*Andy White is a psychotherapist in private practice in Mid-Devon where he lives with his partner and baby son. He is also a writer and author of Going Mad to stay Sane, published by Duckworth.*

