



## *Social Dreaming for a Queer Culture*

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*In October 2004, at a Pink Therapy conference called Queer Analysis, I offered a social dreaming matrix. This is an account of that event.*

### **Preparation**

The evening before, I gave a brief introduction. I explained that social dreaming was developed by Gordon Lawrence and others at the Tavistock Institute, in the 1980s. The origins of the concept are described by Lawrence in *Social Dreaming @ Work*. The main hypothesis is that dreams can have social, as well as personal, meanings, and can illuminate the connection between the two.

Social dreaming is a way of exploring this hypothesis experientially. We meet in what is called a *matrix* - to distinguish the gathering from other kinds of group. Participants have a specific task to share and associate to dreams, making connections where possible. There is no right or wrong interpretation. We accept that responses we make are our own. Common themes or patterns may emerge, but we don't need to agree on them.

Having talked about the background, I outlined practical arrangements for the next day to ensure that participants knew what to expect. I also wanted to suggest that sharing dreams in a social setting can be common-place - as it is in many other cultures.

I ended my introduction by considering the relevance of social dreaming to our conference theme: the therapeutic concerns of sexual minorities. I suggested:

- Social dreaming enables us to share our dreams, while accepting that we may each respond differently. There's a parallel

in the way we might wish to relate to each other, as members of a sexual minority. Social dreaming enables us to talk meaningfully about the nature of queer desire, while reminding us that the experience of desire is unique.

- The professional literature, our experience as therapists, and our personal histories, all bear witness to difficulties which we encounter, living in ways which don't conform to heterosexual norms. Can a queer couple walk down the street, holding hands, in the same unthinking way a heterosexual couple might? It depends on the street. Perhaps members of any marginal group, whether identified sexually, racially, economically, or by faith, will always have to disguise their desires to some extent, and live in their dreams. All the more reason, therefore, for us to make a space in which we can share our dreams openly, and safely.

- Finally, there is the question of what we may dream of, not just in terms of our desire as individuals, but our desire for a queer culture to identify with. Jack Drescher, in *Psychoanalytic Therapy and The Gay Man*, quotes Robin Metcalfe:

'The road that leads to a gay identity is often a slow and difficult one, but

it is not for any lack of gay desire, or even necessarily of gay experience. It is because, growing up in this culture, we are not exposed to stories or images that reflect that experience; we have no words with which to name it. We must learn – or invent – a vocabulary with which to call our gay selves into being.' (p.11)

This applies, of course, not just to gays, but to all sexual minorities. Social dreaming can provide us with shared imagery, shared vocabulary, shared stories, to help us meet the challenge we face, and which our clients face in *Queer Analysis* – that of calling our queer selves and our queer culture into being, in ways we have still to imagine.

### **Incubation**

'Hope you sleep well tonight,' laughed one of the organisers, as I left the conference venue. 'It would be awful if you found you couldn't sleep at all.'

I woke around 2.30. I was restless, troubled by thoughts and images I couldn't quite apprehend. The playful suggestion that I might find I couldn't sleep felt like a curse.

I guessed my anxiety related partly to the conference, and what it had meant for me the previous evening, to make a public presentation at a sexual

minority event. It also related to the matrix I was due to hold in a few hours.

Around 5.30, images crystallised – dream-like, though I was not asleep. I saw myself participating in a parachute drop of soldiers during World War II. The aim of the operation was to capture a bridge, like Arnhem – ‘a bridge too far’. My parachute got caught in a tree. I dangled there helplessly, while others fell to the ground. I wondered whether I would be left for the Nazis to find. They would use me for target practice. Or would my mate try to rescue me, at danger to himself? Would he climb the tree, and cut me down? Could I avoid injury in the fall?

Disturbing though these images were, they gave me something to relate to. There were associations I could make, with my experience of the previous evening, and the matrix to come. A thought emerged: holding the matrix, I must not feel suspended above it. I would be on the level with other participants. I also knew I would not be alone. My friend and colleague, Laurence Roberts, was holding the matrix with me. He would be my mate.

I began to feel better, conscious that engaging meaningfully with the disparate thoughts and sensations which had previously troubled me is the essence of dream-work. I felt in touch with my dream-life, and ready for the matrix.

Back at the venue, I was alone for a moment with Laurence. ‘I need to know you’re there’, I said. ‘I’m here’, he said, and gave me a hug. I felt earthed at last.

### **Matrix**

Around twenty people joined. Laurence was time-keeper. We had fifty minutes.

With the agreement of participants, I made notes. What follows reflects the life and language of the matrix. Allowance must be made for the selective line I have taken, grossly simplifying rich material, and my need to paraphrase.

The first dream is prefaced by a request:

1. ‘I have a dream, please... Someone dead in a group. Someone said, ‘Exchange the body for the dead queen’ ...’

Three more follow, in quick succession, as if there is a sudden release of energy. The last of these:

4. ‘My dream was about a gentle man – in a white robe... He’s holding a hollowed candle – like a church candle. I think it’s connected with anal penetration. I think, ‘It won’t fit’ ... The dream shifts, to me in bed with my husband. We’re contemplating intercourse... We’re too tired. Our sex-life is dormant. I think of a dormouse... Conservation... Conversation... Yesterday, during drinks, I was asked,

am I homosexual. I went blank. Where do I fit?’

Among the associations which follow:

‘The dormouse. Alice in Wonderland – the Mad Hatter’s Tea-Party. These dreams are about ritual... we have a task, a sacred task.’

This prompts my first intervention:

LS (1): ‘I’m wondering whether the task of the matrix, sharing and associating to dreams, feels like a sacred task, or a Mad Hatter’s Tea-Party.’

A complex narrative follows:

‘5. I had several dreams – they felt sacred, profane, mad...’

It culminates in a compelling image:

‘There was a man I was attracted to, standing in a

stream. Behind him I saw a crocodile. I watched the crocodile drag him under, and swim away.’

Others provide associations, expressing doubts and anxieties, then the dreamer adds:

‘The young male in the river is standing against the flow. I hoped my dream would overcome the sense of risk...’

I make a second intervention:

LS (2): ‘I wonder whether there is some concern – can a dream survive in the matrix?’

This prompts the comment:

‘I can’t escape the idea – we’re in a ritual space for me. Gay people traditionally play a role as shaman, mediating between one world and another... Wrestling with death, impermanence, constantly consumes me. In the dream



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about the youth – is the crocodile death? Part of me feels youthful, the other a wise old man...'

Two more dreams (Nos. 6 and 7). Further associations. Then the following exchange:

'I'm not sure whether coming here is comforting or dangerous. The word *queer* is on the map again. When I was young, it was a term of opprobrium. I don't like *gay/lesbian* – *queer* opens things out. But it exposes me – do I have to take a position or not...'

'Years ago, I would have reacted strongly to the word.'

'Which word?'

'*Queer*. Like *fairy*. I have strong feelings about these words. Being an outsider is a universal condition. A lot of life involves putting labels on. Perhaps we should put them on. Do we accept being different? Perhaps the shaman is different.'

I make a third intervention:

LS (3): 'I'm thinking about our dreams as the shaman, connecting worlds.'

Further exchanges begin:

'You have to go down in the dark – that's how fairy stories start...'

Two more dreams, (Nos. 8 and 9), of which the second relates back to dream No. 4:

9. 'This dream isn't a story – flashes of imagery. There's a lot of talk about angels these days – it feels weak, new age. My images were of angels... sexless. I'm thinking, 'I'd love to share them, but I'm damned if I'll tell them I saw angels.' '

This prompts the comment:

'I'm resisting this merging of the sexual and the spiritual – God and anal penetration...'

Then comes a remarkable exchange, in which dreams and associations, what is imagined and what is experienced, the metaphorical and the literal, interweave.

10. 'I had a dream about working as a liaison person, between two organisations. I had to arrange something, at the Angel end of City Road...'

'Angels as messengers. Anyone, at any time, can have a message and be an angel. Perhaps psychotherapists are angels.'

'They also have to make a living – the Angel end of City Road.'

'I'm thinking of the matrix as a place of safety, belonging... The gay community is ideally placed to give a sense of belonging, but sometimes it's the opposite.'

'I didn't think I would be saying anything. I had a long journey here today. I was

unfamiliar with the train stops. I got off at Angel, instead of Kings Cross. Had to wait three minutes for a train. I felt I needed those three minutes on Angel platform. I wondered if it was resistance about coming. Now it seems to have another dimension.'

'Jung would call it synchronicity – the collective links we have, which we don't know about...'

Another dream (No.11) reflects the dichotomy between the spiritual and the sensual. The associations continue:

'Years ago, at the Angel end of City Road, there was a well known cottage, a particular focus of police action against gay men. I don't know if it's still there...

Decomposition. The crocodile takes the body of its prey under water and waits until it decomposes...'

'Death, decomposition, digestion – that's brought me back into this room. The bodies here – creative potential. The sense of loss, when I gave up on the idea of being procreative. What happens when people come together – they fertilise across boundaries. The child I hope for and grieve for.'

'Matrix as womb – you said it means womb. Groups as a womb...'

We return to the crocodile:

'I wasn't scared. I watched freely, as the crocodile sank the man. Perhaps it was more like incubation.'

'There's been a lot in the news about children in incubators – should they live or die?'

'There's an incubator here – the child of this group. The sense of queer as cross-sex and cross-gender. We're producing massive evidence that we're more connected than we think.'

'I agree with the sense of connections. It's impressive. Maybe we minimize the differences. Some of the images are violent. What if the differences are allowed to emerge?'

'Your concern about queer. Yours about acceptance in the gay community. Yours about procreation. These feel like barbs coming at me. I came out when I was 17 or 18. I was never entirely happy in the gay community. I got married. After 10 years, I got divorced. Now I have a same-sex partner. My son lives with us. I've always felt very queer. It's taken time for me to celebrate it. I am queer, thank you very much. With a lot of time and thought, I got there. All these dream thoughts are penetrating.'

I intervene again:

LS (4): 'How it is, to feel penetrated by dreams.'

Which gets the response:

'An internal experience in me. Changes – thoughts decompose – new experiences.'

The message seems to be: allowing dreams to penetrate and affect us, individually or culturally, may be disturbing - but if we can let it happen, we may experience a transformation in our thinking.

A final thought:

'I'm worried about the emphasis on synchronicity. Are we losing the sense of difference when we push to synchronicity?'

At this point, Laurence closes the matrix. He has made no other interventions – a personal choice.

We have ten minutes for reflection. A theoretical argument begins, about the nature of synchronicity and the use of the term *queer*. I suggest that the abstract quality of this dialogue is a response to closure of the matrix. There's a shift. The remaining time is mainly filled with personal observations. Participants feel exhausted, depressed, celebratory:

'It's been so short and so profound...'

'The whole has been more than the parts...'

'I'm part of something bigger than me. It's comforting.'

A participant sums up:

'Social dreaming seems to be a comment on society – the emphasis on connectedness. We carry the disconnectedness of society.'

The session ends. Time to re-connect with the rest of the conference.

### Themes

Various themes emerged for me, from the matrix:

- **Sharing dreams.**

Initial anxiety is expressed in images of exposure, ritual, death, and madness. This is not just a response to the novelty of the matrix. As I was reminded the previous night, anxiety is around when any creative process gets underway. The anxiety abates. There's a sense of excitement, discovery, birth. By the time we reach the post-matrix reflection, it's as if we have participated in an intense and demanding communal event, with considerable personal satisfaction.

- **Angels and crocodiles.**

We move through a spectrum of images, from angels to crocodiles, from heights to depths. The image of the shaman as mediator provides a reference point. Our journey is reminiscent of

shamanic 'soul flight' (Winkelman - Shamanism, pp. 60-3).

The liaison person in dream No.10 - another mediator - lands us at the Angel end of City Road. Associations to this dream provide an expanding perspective of self and sexuality, in relation to the spiritual and the instinctual, the exotic and the mundane - as if transcendent, surface and underground networks are intersecting.

The reference to a public toilet (cottage) near the Angel - the goings-on there once a target for police action - anticipates a point made later in the conference. Andrew Samuels was talking about 'hot prejudices' we currently have to contend with (Queer Therapy - A New Standard of Excellence). He urged us to challenge heterosexist assumptions that promiscuous sex in public toilets defines what being gay is about.

In the matrix, it's not clear whether this particular toilet is still there. It might be history. A link is made, between the participant underground, waiting on the Angel platform, and the attractive young man dragged underwater, in the crocodile dream (No. 5) - an image of incubation. Submersion and disintegration become a prelude to re-integration and emergence - enabling us to surface, perhaps, in a

different place, in relation to our conflicts at ground level.

- **Intimacy.** I was touched by the surprise and delight of participants, when they found that making associative links in the matrix facilitated a sense of inter-personal connection, meeting a deeply felt need for this. At the same time, there were anxieties that greater intimacy, or fantasies of it, might involve denial or loss of difference.

- **Queer.** Despite its historic connotations as a term of abuse, the term *queer* acquired particular value in the matrix. There was a sense that terms such as *gay*, *lesbian* and *transgender* can be restrictive labels, which we need to move beyond if we are to experience more fully the uniqueness of our sexuality, and the relationships through which we express it.

### **A bridge too far?**

The anthropologist Ken BurrIDGE observed:

'There is no culture from whose activities and categories of understanding it is not possible to infer an instruction to break free of moral constraints and soar, like a hawk, beyond and above the laocoon coils of given social relations.'(Encountering Aborigines, p.159)

Our experience in the matrix reflects an imperative of this



nature – an anarchic imperative, which we might call *queer*.

In a culture where 'given social relations' involve the domination of heterosexual norms, those of us who identify with - or sympathise with - a sexual minority may seek to affirm the positive value of such an identification. *Queer* is the rallying cry of such a movement. But in the environment of a conference like *Queer Analysis*, an identification of this kind itself becomes the 'given'. The same may apply in the containing space of psychotherapy.

Then the dreams and associations of the matrix show that we may still aspire to go further, to break free of constraints which such identifications place upon us – to soar above, like hawks or angels, and to plumb the depths, like the crocodile. *Queer* transcends and subverts conventional distinctions, celebrating our singularity in relation to the objects of our desire - our fears and longings for intimate connection. It also ceases to be an exclusive preserve of sexual minorities.

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### Further Reading

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