

**Carol Jeffrey**

## **USING DREAMS IN THERAPY**

Our problems are for the most part rooted below the conscious level, the ordinary experiences of everyday, and *"things are not always what they seem."* As an analyst I have come to regard dreams rather like photographs of areas in the unconscious part of the psyche, just as we might see an aerial shot of a piece of terrain which we would then examine and gradually interpret and assess. Much therapeutic reward can come from *"dream work"* of this kind. Some of the most dramatic results I have seen have been from work on dreams of which the dreamer said *"I had a dream but I can't remember it at all."*

One such dream was that of a 16 year old boy who remembered only that he had dreamed but no memory remained. Encouraged to *"draw the dream"*, he drew two lines across the paper, and during subsequent sessions lasting nine months he added about 50 drawings to that original and their development and our discussions gradually revealed his problem. As he said one day after many months *"That was a very long dream!"*

Another very useful type of dream is the short and at first cryptic one, sometimes with puns or sly jokes. For example, a musician with a severe fear of heights - even going up stairs in his own house - dreamed a sentence:

*"Shall Joan, or shall she not - keep twenty white rabbits in the garden?"*  
(Joan was his wife.)

There was nothing else to the dream he said. It was a sentence he *"woke up with"*, - - *"going on in my mind"*.

The work on this dream was very short:

Therapist    *Does the figure 20 ring a bell?*

Dreamer     *We have been married 20 years.*

*And the colour 'white'?*

Oh, I always think of white things as being easily seen, you know, having a light thrown on things.

*What about 'in the garden'?*

Well, that's rather the same, out in the open everybody can see it.

*Now, what do you associate to 'rabbits'?*

(Getting flustered and anxious) Well, er - rabbits are such terrible breeders, I'm rather disgusted with anything to do with them.

*Does Joan feel the same?*

Oh, no. Not at all. She wouldn't mind having rabbits in the garden, or in the house. Ugh!

*So, how would you describe the 'rabbitty part' of your married life with Joan?*

Oh! I suppose that means the sex part! Well, that's a problem I don't like to talk about. Should I?

*The dream is asking you - Will you bring out into the open your sexual problems with Joan, and throw a light on the 20 years of your anxieties over the 'rabbitty part' of your relationship?*

After this the patient was able to embark on the study of his problems which underlay the phobia.

### **Interpretation of dreams**

The simple and more superficial kind of interpretation is to take the dream events and actors at their "face value". For example, a girl dreams that she is back at school and has been put down in a lower class because there was a piece of work appropriate to an earlier age group which she has failed to do. This makes her so angry that she runs away from school planning revenge. She finds herself lost in a desert and wakes up in terror. She told me that she knew what the dream meant. At her secretarial work she had been taken off a somewhat responsible job because her boss said she was treating the work too superficially. I said "What about the desert?/ Her reply

was "Oh, I thought at first I would jolly well leave the job if they couldn't treat me better, but I got a bit scared I wouldn't get another job and that would be like a desert."

We could have left the dream there as she seemed satisfied with the "first level" interpretation. In this case, however, it bore much fruit to explore on a deeper level. I asked her how she had been told of the down- grading in the school dream, and she became uneasy and embarrassed to reveal that the Headmistress had invited her to tea and explained very patiently why it was necessary and would be an advantage to her in the end. I said "So you do understand and agree that you need to travel back into your childhood years with me and get that piece of work done on your development without running away from therapy." She became very agitated here and said "Well, I was coming today to tell you that I was going to stop therapy because I hate going into all this dream stuff." It was a helpful revelation to her to recognise that the wisdom of the Headmistress was HER OWN, and the school situation in the dream was much more than a reference to her job, and the desert would be an area within her own psyche.

Therapeutic work on dreams is most useful when the actors and events in the dream can be seen to be parts and functions of the dreamer's psyche. He then becomes responsible for everything which happens in the dream. The question arises here *If this is so, then what or who is the dreamer himself in his own dream?* Most often "he" refers to the ego, how he sees himself consciously.

An example of this was a man's dream that he was a prisoner in a room with three boys aged 3, 5, and 14. They seemed to be his children although he had none in reality. There were two prison warders, a man and a woman. The man was obviously subservient to the woman who held the keys and kept control. The children were hungry and frustrated and kept appealing to the dreamer to free them. He asked the woman warder but she refused saying "Sit down and keep quiet!"

Suddenly the dreamer got up, went over to the male warder and said firmly (surprising himself) "**There is no reason to keep these children here. You are a man. Why don't you assert your authority and free them?**" At this the man warder got up, took the keys from the woman, who did not resist, opened the door and the prisoners went out. The dreamer woke up feeling as if a great weight had been lifted from him, a weight which he had felt first at age 3, repeated and reinforced at age 5, and falling on him "like a mountain" at 14.

Working on this dream was valuable to him because he learned from it that the feminine part of his own psyche had assumed control and kept his masculine potential imprisoned from infancy onwards. The key point in the dream was when he (the surprised ego) took the children to the male warder (the masculine potential function) and said "**You are a man!**"

Conscious acceptance that all the people and actions in the dream were his own began the journey towards his own maturity whose delay had been his pressing problem. Up to that time "*the enemy*" and "*the warders*" had all been seen as outside him in his view, and so he was helpless to do anything about it.

The vital conversation was as follows:

*Therapist*    *When you said in the dream "You are a man", who were you speaking to?"*

*Dreamer*      *The male warder.*

*Who was he?*

*Someone unknown to me. I had never seen him before.*

*There was no one there. You were lying in your bed asleep. So, who were you speaking to and why wouldn't you let the children out?*

*(Becoming tearful and very moved) "Oh God! Does it mean that the warders and the prison are something in myself? - - - Oh God! - - all this time I've been doing it?*

*Yes, but don't just blame yourself. There was at first a very good reason why you began this restriction in your life. We must deal with that before you will feel it safe to open the prison door.*

### **A long dream with much detail**

A woman suffering from lifelong depression and ill health recounted this dream, whose telling lasted about 20 minutes.

*"I contracted a fatal illness and was in hospital. I seemed to be about three years old. The bed was a cage like cot, and I was surrounded by doctors and nurses. My parents were there and my mother was crying. I was never left alone. Sometimes teachers seemed to be there teaching me and I felt very unhappy and frightened. - - -"*

More description followed until 20 minutes later she finished, exhausted.

Listening to this, I had a strange reaction. Although I heard all she said, I remained (emotionally) **stuck** after the first two words - "**I contracted.**"

*Therapist*    *Tell me what happened to you when you were three years old."*

*Dreamer*    (exploding into agonising crying which lasted nearly as long as the telling of the dream).  
When she could speak and had been comforted and reassured, she said "When I was three, my little sister aged 18 months, died and I thought I had killed her.

*Do you know why you thought that?*

I think it was because when she was born, I was 18 months old and I said 'Take that away, I don't like it' and I had tried to get her out of the cot. For this I was punished and made to feel very "wicked". Then I began to get ill and felt I had to guard my every action. I got all shut up inside myself and wasn't very active. I didn't grow much either and I've always been small and thin..

*That was when you **contracted** and shut up your energies inside a cage, and you have never yet been able to "un-contract" or expand and move freely into life.*

Before that dream, nothing had ever related her problems to that early traumatic event in her life. It happened while she was largely 'unconscious' at age three, and so the whole damaging complex had become encapsulated until the dream rang the bell and she recovered the memory. The work on this "contraction" (the contracting process of her illness and also the contract which she then made with herself to curtail her energies and imprison her vitality) led her eventually to greater freedom and a more healthy life.

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