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A PSYCHOSYNTHETIC VIEW OF DREAMS: LEVELS OF THE UNCONSCIOUS

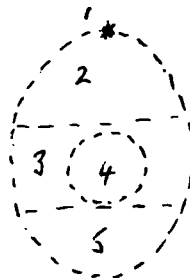
This article is not meant to be the definitive 'truth' about dreams. My purpose is to give an overview of the psychosynthetic view of dreams, some dangers of excessive focus on dreams and some techniques for working with them.

Many approaches look at the unconscious in an unconditional way, as if what the unconscious says is the ultimate truth. This attitude is based on the idea that the unconscious is a part of the organismic process, the most spontaneous part of our being and consequently the most truthful. Roberto Assagioli, the father of psychosynthesis, preferred to qualify that in the following way. Since we are not yet totally integrated and whole, some of the messages of the unconscious might be right, true and to the point; while others may be useless, meaningless or deceiving. He reckoned that dreams are not necessarily oracles telling the essential truth but are something (as all other aspects of the psyche) to be worked with with caution and discrimination.

Model of the Unconscious

His idea can be elaborated using Assagioli's model of the unconscious, although, by its one dimensional nature, it gives a more static view of the psyche than intended. Assagioli discriminated levels of the unconscious, the lower, middle and higher (superconscious) unconscious.

1. The Self
2. The higher unconscious
3. The middle unconscious
4. Field of Consciousness
5. The lower unconscious



The lower unconscious contains or is the origin of: the elementary psychological activities which direct the life of the body, the intelligent coordination of bodily functions; the fundamental drives and primitive urges; many complexes charged with intense emotions; dreams or

imagination from the past or of a regressive kind; lower uncontrolled parapsychological processes; various pathological manifestations such as phobias, obsessions, compulsive urges and paranoid delusions.

The middle unconscious is formed of psychological elements similar to those of our waking consciousness and easily accessible to it. In this inner region our various experiences are assimilated, our ordinary mental and imaginative activities are elaborated and developed in a sort of psychological gestation before their birth into the light of consciousness.

The higher unconscious or superconscious is the region from which we receive our higher intuitions and aspirations - artistic, philosophical or scientific "*imperatives*" and urges to humanitarian action. It is the source of more refined feelings such as altruistic love; or genius and of the states of contemplation, illumination and ecstasy. In this realm are the higher psychic functions and spiritual energies; as well as the Transpersonal dream.

Levels of Dreams

Extrapolating further from this model of the unconscious we can say that a dream could come from any of these levels and the level determines the interpretation, meaning and value of a dream. There are dreams that have a prophetic, meaningful and inspirational quality; dreams that may be meaningless; dreams that may be illusory. This is not a new idea. Virgil, the Latin poet, used a metaphor for dreams which said dreams may come either through a golden horn or through a horn of ivory. If they come through a horn of gold, they are 'true' dreams, but if through a horn of ivory, they are deceiving and illusory.

Let us look for a moment at the horn of gold dreams which psychosynthesis would define as Transpersonal or spiritual dreams, dreams coming from the higher unconscious. This category would be experienced as dreams that are very high, very beautiful and meaningful containing messages beyond our ordinary conscious awareness. Some Eastern teachings suggest that we begin our sleep by starting at the most superficial, biological level of our psyche and gradually we travel through deeper layers towards the spiritual Source of our being which psychosynthesis calls the Self. We interact with the Self during the night. However as we return towards waking consciousness we lose touch with our reconnection and forget the contact. It is said to be possible to remember our interaction with these higher levels of our consciousness using a certain technique which I will give later in this article.

On the other hand, dreams may come from the middle unconscious. Dreams of this order usually are merely a clearing up of the psychic smog of the day. They have primarily a sanitation function and nothing more needs to be done with them. Jung and Assagioli agreed on this cleansing function of some dreams.

Alternately, there are dreams from the lower unconscious, which unfortunately is a realm too vast to explore in any depth in this article. Some dreams for example, are a repetition of past unfinished experiences recurring again and asking for completion. Others may have to do with childhood experiences which are affecting our behaviour today. Our complexes present themselves to us through dreams, while regressive energies ask to be brought into consciousness and understood. Thus our dreams may be the laboratory for much of our unintegrated psychological disturbances and useful tools for integration.

A few words of caution about both the importance and problems of the dream world seem necessary. There is the possibility of illusion, compensation and deception occurring through some dreams. This is especially true when there is a blind trust of the unconscious, a lack of discrimination and perhaps an excessive focus leading to one being absorbed by the vortex of the unconscious. The principle behind this caution is based on the previously stated idea that the unconscious too, is a function of our psychological state of health. So we should not just go along with whatever comes from the unconscious assuming it is "right". I have seen 'wish fulfillment' clearly operating through clients' dreams. I remember a client who felt very small and insecure in life having compensatory dreams of great power and success. She interpreted the dream to mean that her insecurity was gone and dealt with, causing her considerable pain when she discovered it was not so.

There can be two potential levels for misunderstanding. One may be at the level of the dream itself - unresolved parts of our personality crying for attention and needing to be worked with - which might be mistaken for a message of truth. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, the attitude we take towards the dream and the way we interpret it can be deceiving. We may interpret it according to our wishes, according to our fears, according to our illusions. It is a question of through what glasses we interpret a dream. If we interpret it through our unconscious fears, it will have a different meaning than if we interpret it from a more 'centered' unbiased place. It is also essential to ask ourselves from what level does the dream come? Is it a higher perspective dream that tells us something about our life and future or is it a dream from the past?

Finally I must add a caution about the phenomena of 'doctrinal compliance'. A Freudian client will tend to have Freudian dreams, a Jungian client Jungian dreams, a psychosynthesis client dreams of wise old beings . . . I have noticed that clients' dreams seem to comply with the therapies in which they have worked most extensively. For example, an ex-Freudian client consistently dreamt dreams of cannons, swords and caves and an ex-Jungian client had dreams filled with archetypical and archaic images. The unconscious will comply with our expectations by producing appropriate dreams and this needs to be taken into consideration when attempting to make interpretations.

Working with Dreams

In spite of all these considerations the usefulness and value of working with one's dreams cannot be undermined. I would like to share a few techniques for working with dreams that are used within psychosynthesis. A powerful technique to evoke 'high dreams' or Transpersonal dreams is a simple visualisation. Just before sleep imagine a thread of light, like a consciousness thread that may be followed in sleep. Imagine travelling along that thread of light to the spiritual realms, and coming back again but keeping the thread, holding onto it when falling asleep. People who have tried this technique report remembering more meaningful dreams than usual but this could of course merely be doctrinal compliance. Many reported waking up with an insight or intuition which was experienced as particularly beautiful and rich, often giving creative inspiration about something important in their life. Another similar technique to be used before sleep is to invite the Self to guide and illumine one on a particular life issue during sleep. This is especially useful with major areas like the meaning and purpose of life.

A valuable but rather tedious technique for working with dreams, devised by Calvin Hall, a dream expert, is to write down absolutely **every** dream. Hall says you cannot really understand one dream in itself; but must look at a whole series of dreams. He suggests writing down at least one hundred dreams, not only the most important ones, but any and all, even fragments of dreams. Doing this should lead to a clear experience of the whole picture of our psyche and there would be no need for interpretation. He says that patterns emerge lucidly from the overall impact or totality of the one hundred dreams and that it is particularly useful for people who are repressed and out of touch with their unconscious. It seems to be a very honest method but it requires a lot of patience.

Another method, an active one, is to directly focus your dreams by asking your dreams for help or asking questions of your dreams before going to sleep. You may invite your unconscious to present you with a dream about a specific thing, problem or relationship in your life. This would tend to present you with an underlying feeling regarding the issue in a pictorial form needing interpretation and elaboration as to its relevance to past, present or future. Along these lines too, if you receive a dream that you do not understand, you can ask again for another dream to explain the first dream, to help you to understand and clarify it.

Psychosynthesis frequently uses guided imagery to work with dreams by recreating the dream in the imagination and reliving it "*here and now*". I often guide clients to re-dream a dream focusing on the emotional experience of the dream which facilitates experiential interpretation. With this process the meaning of the dream may become clear without much intellectual interpretation.

I sometimes also ask clients to continue and finish a dream using guided imagery to work through whatever was pathological in the dream. This can have a transformative effect giving a liberation of energy. A client may face their shadow and make friends with it, learn to relate to a problem in a new way or experience a behavioural change on a symbolic level. These transformations must of course be followed up to ground them in the individuals 'real' life. The operating principle here is that anything is possible in the world of the imagination and here we can create new possibilities and alternatives which our conscious mind would otherwise successfully inhibit.

Another similar method of dream work is to take the motif - the scene, the situation, the atmosphere, the feeling of the dream and to explore how that motif relates to one's current life and what is meant by it. Finally painting or drawing a dream often provides more understanding and experience of its meaning.

Consistently recurring dreams provide perhaps the richest dream material to be worked with, as they contain a message from the unconscious important enough to be persistent. Here the theme will be the same although the content may change. For example, perhaps in one dream your mother rejects you, in another your colleagues, another an undefinable group of people, where the common theme is rejection. Such dreams communicate more generalised patterns needing attention in our unconscious ; like security issues, authoritarian problems and self expression needs.

The gestalt model of working with dreams using each item or object in the dream as a disowned part of oneself as a projective device always brings fruitful results. To relate to each item or object in the dream as a part of yourself, to identify with that object, to project yourself into that object can be quite illuminating. I'm not convinced that this is the true meaning of our dreams but it certainly can be revealing.

In conclusion, I would like to say that people in the helping professions particularly need to know and be familiar with their unconscious and their dreams may be a helpful way of achieving this. It serves as a precaution against the therapist/counsellor's projection of their own material onto their clients and enables them to more honestly deal with transference and countertransference problems. It is very difficult to guide another to a healthy relationship with their unconscious and its mysterious realms if we have not travelled that journey ourselves. Our dreams are an excellent place to begin . . .

Ways of sharing

Ours and all peer groups I have talked to prefer to work with a dream as long as feels appropriate rather than everyone share a dream each week. It is often useful at the beginning of the group for those who would like to share a dream to say so to gauge allocation of time.

It is important that the dreamer feels in charge of what she/he wants to share and of the whole process and should say if some thing does not feel right. One way of working is for the dream sharer to pick out some one whom they would like to facilitate their work.(It is important that the chosen person feels able to say no.) This has some advantages in pursuing one approach but should not rule out other members being able to follow a strong hunch. After a group has been together a while the group tends to tune in together to the dreamer.

A very useful point to watch out for is the **way** a dream is shared. Many many times I have seen exploration of dreams fizzle out and the group become stuck because of a way a dream is presented or how the dreamer responds after presenting a dream. The interface between the dreamer and the way of relating it will often give clues to the mood/feeling of the dream, a paralleling process often occurring. For example, if the presentation of the dream is rambling or confused, this may give a clue to how the dreamer felt in the dream or his attitude to his dream i.e. "I don't want to get to the bottom of this". Related to this, as a group member trust your reactions to what is

going on (e.g. if you are bored, feel sexual etc.). It may not be appropriate to share it but it is surprising how often it relates to the dream.

I have avoided going into specific techniques for working with dreams such as Gestalt, Psychodrama, free association as much will depend on the skills and interests of the group. I will however mention two. One is to continue the dream; this is especially useful if the dream feels unfinished and the dreamer uses this structure to allow the images to come rather than trying to force them. This opens up the area that Jung called Active Imagination. The second technique I have found valuable in sensitising the group and myself to images and feelings is where the dream is shared and afterwards members of the group say "*If this were my dream . . .*" or "*listening to this dream I felt . . .*" This generally avoids interpretation (although it is not foolproof) as people are owning that their comments are their own personal response/projection. The dreamer listens and takes what feels appropriate.

Finally, especially in groups where people have begun to know each other well, there is a temptation to fit the images of the dream into what is known about the dreamer (that bear that came towards you - you have been having a difficult time with your husband haven't you? - knowing look). These semi interpretations are sometimes very difficult to refute as the connections are very plausible and not based on theory but on knowing people well. This process can be avoided if people listen with as few preconceptions as possible and try and find out what the parts of the dream mean to the dreamer.

Stuckness/Flexibility

From time to time a group may feel stuck or you as an individual notice you are holding back. If this is so, it can be useful to share your feeling as it could well be a group issue. There may be a felt lack of skills or trust which will probably be better for being aired. It is important not to be impatient or expect instant insights/interpretations. Allow the process of working on the dream to continue in other dreams which an ongoing group can pick up. I mentioned earlier that I would not advertise - working with dreams is often on quite a deep intimate level and I have found it easier with people I know: sometimes part of us are revealed in unexpected ways, sexuality particularly. I recall vividly a group in which the dreamer related a dream with no obvious sexual meaning to the dreamer and the rest of the group found themselves giggling or laughing nervously without in any way wishing to offend. I strongly recommend getting to know about some of the issues that affect groups (e.g. leadership; inclusion/

exclusion; pairing between members). Having the common task of sharing dreams does not make the group immune from group dynamics which an inexperienced group (and even an experienced one) may not realise. There are good sections on this in "*In Our Own Hands*" which I would recommend. (especially chapter 9).

Dream groups provide a rich opportunity to try out different approaches to the dream and the group may welcome this especially if people are going through a phase of not recording/remembering dreams which sometimes happens. Dream incubation, guided imagery, hypnosis, painting a dream individually or collectively, story telling as a group from dream imagery, someone presenting on a relevant book are some of the possibilities. Although the primary focus is dreams it may be important to spend some time supporting someone who has had a recent trauma or is going through a difficult time.

Leadership

Often in peer groups this is a taboo subject. It may be an issue if one person seems to be doing most of the facilitating. However I have found that if we can listen and respond with empathy, we all have a great deal of understanding and 'feel' for dreams. I am often surprised by the depth of people's insights given an atmosphere where this can develop.

Re-reading what I have written - words like guidelines, ways of sharing, structures, flexibility - all seem quite dry. At our first meeting at my flat over a year ago most of us were both nervous and excited in spite of all being experienced in groups. We made a commitment for eight weeks. I suggested we never referred to the group outside our meeting even though we were all friends - the idea being to increase our dreams about the group. That was abandoned as we did not need any devices - the group experience itself was very powerful. We were close anyway and somehow working with dreams gave space to the listening, intuiting part of us - no products, no therapy, just sharing impressions, feelings images of images. One of our group left in a way that when I think about it upsets me (just in case it sounds all sweetness and light), but four from the original six are still meeting over a year later. From the way it has developed now even in groups where I am the designated leader I am allowing myself to do less and less, increasingly able to trust the group and dream sharing process, a process which I believe is both enjoyable and very accessible to anyone who has sufficient interest in sharing their dreams.

References:

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- 2.- Experiment in Depth. P.W. Martin. Routledge & Kegen Paul 1955
- 3.- The Dream Game. Ann Faraday. Máurice Temple Smith 1975 (also in paperback)

Robin Shohet

THE PEER DREAM GROUP

For many years, long before I had heard of the Senoi, I had a fantasy of living in a community where we would start the day by sharing our dreams. Sheepishly I must confess there was more to it than that. In the fantasy I saw myself as the "elder" of the community, living slightly separate (say the gatehouse) and people coming to my house to share their dreams and have breakfast. Being in a peer dream group and writing about them isn't quite the same thing but it's the nearest I have come.

For some time I devoured the literature on different theories and approaches to dreams, Freudian, Jungian, Gestalt, Phenomenological etc. My own attitude to my dreams would vary enormously from neglecting them, to looking for "answers" and psychic experiences. Recently, however, I have come to agree with Corriere et al (Dreams and Waking, Peace Press) *"The different ways of exchanging dreams are neglected . . . If the way of exchanging is neglected . . . the focus will be on content. In place of dream communities we have dream theories and research about dreams."*

This article is an attempt to look at one way of sharing dreams - the peer group - and will include suggestions that may be useful for starting your own. Implicit is my belief that sharing dreams is a worthwhile experience in itself, i.e. there doesn't have to be a practical outcome (what message is this telling you for your daily life), nor does the sharing demand change (goal setting) nor focus on teaching skills or on "doing therapy", although all of these may and do happen. For me dream groups provide a forum to listen and respond to the