

References:

- 1.- Dreaming and Waking - The Functional Approach to Dreams. Corriere Karle, Wolderburg Hart. Peace Press 1980
- 2.- Experiment in Depth. P.W. Martin. Routledge & Kegen Paul 1955
- 3.- The Dream Game. Ann Faraday. Máurice Temple Smith 1975 (also in paperback)

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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

images, to find out what meaning they have for the dreamer and through developing our intuition and the meeting of inner worlds, to know the dreamer (and ourselves) in a way that we may not have otherwise.

Why a group?

In his book *"Experiment in Depth"* P.W. Martin gives four reasons for setting up a group to explore the unconscious. We need others as we cannot see ourselves clearly; the group reinforces one's own experience and creativity; through it we learn from others, and finally the group provides fellowship and support in depth. From my experience simply telling a receptive person a dream often brings out something for the dreamer. For me, also, the element of ritual incorporated into a dream group is very powerful and bonding. The sharing of images, fantasies and dreams also has a powerful effect, seen sometimes in the way members will build on each other's dreams in their own dreams; thus we are not only learning from our own but others' dreams (compare the one-to-one analytic transaction in which only one person, the patient, shares). The sharing can be a worthwhile experience even for two people. Over the summer holidays, for example, when members were away, two of us from our group would still meet because it was important to us. Finally in a group you are not limited to one approach as everyone brings their own experiences, knowledge, skills intuitions and there is less likelihood of an interpretation being forced on the dreamer.

Getting Started

Let's assume you want to be a member of, or start, a peer group. If the former, I'm sure there are many around - simply mentioning my interest I found out about six. (Also see resources at end of this edition.) The disadvantages are that they are often groups of people who have known each other previously or the groups are closed. If you want to start your own, mention the idea to friends and if there is enough response, arrange a meeting. I know people who have had lunch time groups at work/college. If for some reason you cannot get a group who know each other in some way, personally I would not advertise. It may be worth waiting and in the meantime go to a led group to pick up ideas (and maybe dreamers). A useful book for starting work on dreams on your own is Ann Faraday's *"The Dream Game"* with a chapter on keeping a dream diary. Sheila Ernst and Lucy Goodison's *"In Our Own Hands"* has some excellent guidelines for starting and maintaining peer groups with a section on the dream group. As for size I have mentioned that two of us would meet but

we were already part of a group. Most peer groups I know of have a membership of between five and seven.

First Meeting (Practicalities)

If the group has come together because of your interests, be prepared to facilitate the mechanics for the first meeting. The single most important factor I have found is commitment - if that is there, the practical arrangements will fall into place. There are two possibilities. People can either come to the first meeting having committed themselves beforehand to say six Tuesday evenings and then work out ways of sharing approaches etc. or people share their assumptions, expectations or whatever and then they opt in or out. Obviously the former is less messy. Either way, at the beginning it is a good idea for people to commit themselves to a certain number of sessions and for the group and membership to review itself at the end of that period.

So a useful way of starting might be

- (a) People sharing why they have come, their previous experiences and expectations, preferred ways of working, skills they have to offer, special interests.
- (b) People committing themselves initially to a certain number of meetings.
- (c) Agreeing a venue. If people are willing, it is often a good idea to have one place as it builds up associations.
- (d) Agreeing frequency and duration. Groups vary - weekly or fortnightly seem best. 1½-2 hours if weekly. Maybe slightly longer if fortnightly. Our group enjoyed meeting early morning but that would not be possible for many people. A word of warning here about having a regular time rather than deciding at the end of each meeting. Two groups I know of started after attending the same series of lectures - one has been going for one and a half years, the other lasted two months. There may have been other factors but the second group never had a set time.
- (e) Being clear about boundaries i.e. starting and finishing on time. Persistent late starting can be a source of resentment and prompt finishing encourages people to take responsibility for their work/sharing.
- (f) Deciding on a policy about note taking. Although we never kept notes I have met groups who have and I would strongly advise this. Notes provide an opportunity to watch how the group progresses and enables you to watch the development of group images. Again we did not manage this but a person who wants to present a dream writes it up first for the group file.

Ritual

As many possibilities as there are groups. One group shares a meal before the group, another a meditation before and after. Sometimes simply a round of how people have been over the week.

Beginning a Group (after practicalities)

In groups where I am designated leader I ask people to keep dream diaries for the length of the course and spend a few minutes talking about them. If someone were willing, this could be a good place to start. I also ask people to write a letter to their dreams and sharing of these can be very moving. Otherwise begin with a dream.

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.

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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:

- 1.- Dreaming and Waking - The Functional Approach to Dreams. Corriere Karle, Wolderburg Hart. Peace Press 1980
- 2.- Experiment in Depth. P.W. Martin. Routledge & Kegen Paul 1955
- 3.- The Dream Game. Ann Faraday. Maurice Temple Smith 1975 (also in paperback)
- 4.- In our own Hands. A book of Self-Help Therapy. Sheila Ernst and Lucy Goodison. The Women's Press Ltd 1981

