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Your dream cow is not how I imagined it to be!

Dreamwork in dream groups and palliative care

Interest in dreams and their interpretation has a long and fascinating history, too long, though, for it to be included here [1]. It can also be said that this interest can be found in just about every culture and, in some cases, concern with dreams and their meaning is more advanced, especially in some indigenous peoples, than here in the West (there are historical reasons for why we are so far behind, but that would also take us too far afield).¹

Dream «languages»

In classical dream interpretation, attempts were made to arrive at dream meanings with all sorts of means for this a plethora of dream books are available (just have a look at the appropriate shelf in your local bookstore) and almost just as many approaches and methods. And they have met with a certain amount of success: there are dreams, for example, that are clearly Freudian and there are also those where the Jungian «amplification approach» is just the right thing (e.g., so-called «big» dreams from the collective unconscious with their impressive and often unforgettable symbols and situations).

There are, though, problems:

- Most dreams are not especially or obviously symbolic.
- Each dreamer has his or her very own dream «language». A cow for me has a very different meaning than it does for someone making cheese on an alp!
- Dreams often have several meanings/interpretations: depending on the point of view, one discovers or sees something else.² This means that if one assigns a dream a particular meaning, it is then finished and «dead», so to speak, and this sort of dream «murder» should be avoided.

What, then, can be done?

Discovering a dream's meanings carefully

Over the years, a fairly simple means of working with dreams has evolved (and is being taught and used in the dreamwork seminar at the C. G. Jung Institute each semester). This approach (which can also be used with friends and family members) utilizes four main «tools» (which should always be used) and a few auxiliary ones (to be used when appropriate). Among the auxiliary tools are methods such as painting and/or modeling dream scenes and/or characters, acting dream scenes (as in «psychodrama» or «gestalt» therapy), Jung's techniques of amplification and active imagination, and so on.

Here I would like to concentrate on the four main tools:

- Clarify
- Ask for information
- Inquire about feelings and emotions
- Learn the life situation in which the dream arose



Cow Parade: San Jose 2008; R. Picado and A. Enciso

Clarifying the dream story

When someone has told his or her dream one should make sure that everything said has been clearly understood. This is what is meant by *clarification*. In many cases, it isn't necessary but it is always good to take time to reflect on what was said and thereby make sure the dream is clear.

Asking meticulously about each particular information

One should also ask all sorts of questions in order to obtain the greatest amount of *information* about the dream figures (persons, animals), places, objects, colors, weather, time of year and day, etc. When one hears a dream, one automatically makes pictures/images of what has been said. These, though, are not identical with what the dreamer saw and experienced. Thus, one reason for this step is in order to correct the own inner image using these questions. Here it is very important that the questions are open, honest ones (i.e., not attempts to lead the dreamer to some truth that the listener has arrived at). It is also important to ask very concrete questions and stay as close to the dream as possible. For instance, should the dream contain a ring, one asks what was the ring made of, did it have a stone, how big was it, and so on. The hope is that the dreamer will answer the questions from his or her memory of the dream and not from some theoretical ideas and notions.

One of the advantages of working with dreams in this way is that it often happens that more of the dream is remembered while it is being worked on. It also often happens that the dreamer discovers new aspects of the dream that he or she didn't pay attention to on their own. Telling a dream and working on it in this way also

¹ Those wishing to learn more are invited to have a look at <http://silenroc.com/funkhouser> (User ID: Jung, Password: dreamwork).

² It is said that a rabbi once took his dream to 26 different dream interpreters and he received 26 different interpretations. It is said that, with time, he realized that all 26 interpretations were correct.

helps the dreamer get some distance from it and see it more objectively.

Asking about the emotions and feelings experienced within the dream

Another very important line of questioning has to do with the *feelings* and *emotions* that the dreamer felt as he or she was experiencing the dream. Here, it is not the reaction to the dream that is being asked for, but rather the feelings that were experienced as the dream unfolded, at each step along the way, so to speak. In my experience, it is often the case that the main message of the dream has to do with the feelings and not so much with the outer, physical level of meaning.

Asking about the life context at the time when the dream occurred

Dreams arise and are related to *life situations or contexts*. Very often, they seem to function as a sort of «digestion» process in which the issues of the previous day are worked through. As the dream is reflected on and worked on, the dreamer may see that it points out issues, especially emotional ones, which the dreamer hadn't noticed or was not consciously aware of in the previous day's activities and events.³

On the other hand, dreams can also serve to prepare us for what lies up ahead. I think we've all encountered such dreams, possibly the most famous one being that of coming to the train station and seeing the train one wished to catch pulling away. The anguish of missing the train in a dream is usually enough to insure that we get to the train station on time or even with time to spare the next time we have to travel somewhere. In the same way, dreams often help prepare us for life tasks and upcoming encounters.⁴

A dream diary should include the life events before and after the dreams

For these reasons and for better dream understanding, when keeping a dream diary (something highly recommended), it is a good idea to note down what was happening during the preceding day and possibly what was coming up the following day in addition to the text of the dream. That way, one can return to the dream months or years later and have a much better chance of seeing what the dream was getting at and trying to say.⁵

When working on a dream in this way, these lines of questioning are not necessarily «applied» in any particular order. The order I've presented them in is not a bad one but there is no reason for them to be pursued sequentially.

Dream groups giving a client-centered feedback to the dreamer

At the end of this dreamwork, the final step is the one of offering the dreamer the ideas and impressions that you have had while lis-

tening to the dream and all the answers. This is done, though, in a special way [2, 3]. The person giving feedback prefaces his or her remarks by saying «If I were you and this were my dream, it might mean ...» or «My fantasy about what your dream might be saying is ...». The reason for this is very simple: it gives the dreamer the space in which he or she is free to disagree with what is said and it also helps avoid «killing» the dream (for the reason given above). I often refer to this approach as «client-centered, non-violent dreamwork» and I have been teaching it at the C. G. Jung Institute in Küsnacht since 1989. I have never encountered a bad session or situation with it. It also forms the basis for the dream work I do in my practice as a psychotherapist and the work I do in a dream group I lead here in Bern. And this is not the only one. There is a growing number of such groups, most of them in the US but many also in Sweden and other parts of Europe.

Dreamwork in palliative care

My hope is that, one day, this way of working with dreams can be taught to nurses and orderlies, especially those working with long-term patients and/or those in palliative wards. While washing patients, for example, they can ask about dreams, thereby giving the patients the feeling that someone is interested in them and that they still have something to contribute in this world. It seems just the mere fact that someone has listened to a dream and taken it seriously is already therapeutic for many people. At the 2013 conference of the International Association for the Study of Dreams (www.asdreams.org), Canadian nurses Nicole Gratton and Monique Séguin [4] both presented papers about their work with hospice patients and told how their work with the dreams of dying patients has been so beneficial. In this connection, the books by von Franz [5] and Bulkeley and Bulkeley [6] may also be helpful. There is (or was) a small exhibit about dreams in the Bern Museum of Natural History. There it is (or was) said that «Träume sind Schäume» (dreams are fluff), but I beg to differ. I am often asked if there are not dreams that one can ignore as irrelevant or meaningless.⁶ I reply that there may well be such dreams, but I have yet to meet up with one when, if worked on, doesn't yield some new insight or impulse.

References

- 1 Van de Castle R. *Our Dreaming Mind*. New York: Ballantine Books; 1994.
- 2 Ullman M, Zimmerman N. *Working with Dreams*. Los Angeles: Jeremy Tarcher; 1985.
- 3 Taylor J. *Dream Work*. New York: Paulist Press; 1983.
- 4 Gratton N. *Dreams and Death*; 2013. (<http://www.artderever.com/publication/dreams-and-death/?lang=en>).
- 5 Von Franz M-L. *On Dreams & Death: A Jungian Interpretation*. Peru, Ill: Carus Publishing; 1998.
- 6 Bulkeley K, Bulkeley P. *Dreaming Beyond Death: A Guide to Pre-Death Dreams and Visions*. Boston: Beacon Press; 2005.
- 7 Funkhouser A, Hirsbrunner H-P, Cornu C, Bahro M. *Dreams and dreaming among the elderly: an overview*. *Aging and Mental Health*. 1999;3(1):10-20.

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³ That dreams often depend on the dreamer's life situation became clear in a review we made of the literature concerning dreams of the elderly [7].

⁴ Dreams of missing a train can also have symbolic meanings and this might well be the case if one was not planning to catch a train the following day.

⁵ Dreams can have meaning both in terms of objective, outer reality and also in our subjective, inner world. A person we meet in a dream, for example, may represent the real, actual person, but can just as well represent an inner attitude, tendency or way of life. For most people, the latter possibility is often the more likely one.

⁶ In the Talmud it is said that an unexamined dream is like an unopened letter.