
The Process of Dreamwork

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Abstract

Dreams can present the current central issues in a client's world, beautifully encapsulated in metaphor and story. If therapists are alert to their significance, and include them in the therapeutic process, new insights emerge and opportunities are presented for personal change. This article demonstrates a step-by-step process of working with a dream, using drawing, associations, simple action methods, redecision work and self-reflection, to facilitate personal growth in a dreamer.

Introduction

Since 1986 I have been working with clients' dreams, and running dream workshops in the public arena. Over this time, I have gradually synthesised a particular way of working which draws elements from a number of different modalities. I have found no single approach sufficient in itself, but a combination of methods most effective in revealing the meanings of the dream to the dreamer, and facilitating growth. I use drawing, verbal association and theory of the psyche from Jungian therapy (e.g. Hall, 1983), simple action methods from Psychodrama, script analysis and redecision work from Transactional Analysis (Thomson, 1987), and the perspective of the soul's journey from the ancient Christian art of spiritual direction (e.g. Sanford, 1984)—not necessarily all of them with every dream.

I regard the dreamer as the owner of the dream, and the ultimate interpreter of its meaning. My role is to facilitate the interpretation process, in much the same way as a bilingual interpreter might assist someone to read a letter in an unfamiliar language. The author in this case is the inner Self or Spirit of the dreamer, who is far better acquainted with his or her life-experience than I am. Therefore, if I offer any insights or interpretations, I do so tentatively, in a joint process of exploration. If I am close to the mark, the dreamer will work with it; if I am wrong, we let it go; if I have made a connection that is possibly accurate but the dreamer is not ready to accept it yet, we also let it go, but it will probably hover in the background, waiting for other confirmation,

perhaps in another dream. Always the process is respectful of the dreamer's being. The deeper the dream, the more sacred is the territory in which we are working.

Levels of Interpretation

I find Ann Faraday's concept of levels helpful (Faraday, 1972) when I am hearing a dream for the first time. First is the **literal level**, in which things are taken at face value, just as they are presented. This may apply to elements based on direct memory, as in repeating dreams of trauma, or warnings of danger perceived at a subliminal level. I check this level first. Thus, for example, fear of a fierce dog may refer literally to fear of the neighbour's dog. There is also the whole group of telepathic and clairvoyant dreams, which I have described in my book, *Dreams and Visions – Language of the Spirit* (Bowater, 1997). Often, literal and symbolic elements are both present in a dream, in which case we proceed as if it is symbolic, and discover which is which as we go. Often a dream figure literally identified carries another level of symbolic meaning as well. A dream, like a poem, may have multiple levels of meaning.

Ann Faraday refers to her second level as "through the looking glass" – the dreamer's perceptions of reality out there, filtered through his or her own unconscious processes. I simply refer to this as **outward metaphor**, in which the dream figures, or some of them, symbolise external realities which the dreamer has to deal with. Thus, the fierce dog may symbolise Dad in a bad temper. Recent research suggests that this level has been greatly underestimated in analytical work with dreams. I normally do the initial work with a dream at this level, in order to draw out as much language as possible about the dreamer's experience. I listen for echoes and patterns in the dream which reflect some aspect of the dreamer's life or personality. I call this "thinking double."

Faraday's third level is the Jungians' subjective level, in which elements of the dream symbolise elements of the dreamer's psychic structure or internal world. I refer to this as Level 3, **inward metaphor**. This level often enables major insights to come through, but it is also susceptible to abuse by the therapist (or group), according to his or her theory of the psyche. For example, if it is assumed from the start, without first checking out the other levels, that the fierce dog represents the dreamer's own aggression—which is a possibility, not a given—the dreamer may feel coerced into accepting a self-picture which does not intuitively fit. I have strong concerns about this kind of assumption with clients who have been abused. They have not necessarily introjected the abuser

at all; the dream may be focusing on the issue of how to relate to the abuser in a healthy way.

I also distinguish a fourth level, **archetypal**, in which the imagery, or some of it, makes little sense in terms of the dreamer's experience of the world, but seems to connect with mythology or religion. Now the fierce dog may be huge, with red eyes, guarding a castle gateway; or it transforms into a dragon as you get closer. The dreamer finds that s/he is among very powerful energies, or a strange landscape, with a sense of awe, fear or amazement. Such dreams usually come at times of sharp transition or spiritual growth in a dreamer's life, and require even more sensitivity from the interpreter. At this level, acquaintance with mythology is useful, although archetypal figures are well able to speak for themselves, even if we don't know their background. They are often powerful symbols of confrontation, encouragement, or transformation (Clift & Clift, 1989).

As the dreamer tells the dream, I am also making a clinical assessment of his or her emotional state, and how much protection may need to be established as we proceed. I check whether s/he is ready for each new step. In group situations with inexperienced people, I may not ask the dreamer to do more than "talk about" scary figures in the dream, if I assess that the dreamer is in a fragile state.

Applying the Process

I teach beginners a systematic step-by-step process which is time-consuming but reliable. An experienced dream facilitator may select and rearrange, to move more swiftly. Let me take for my example the work done with Marion, a sensitive woman of 50, in a dream group. She has just told us her dream, as follows:

Dream report: Open Heart Surgery

I am out in the garden with my father, in a sort of half-light, picking berries from a tree. They are hard to pick and it's scratchy on my hands. Everything is strange and grey around me, the garden plants and bushes quite still and close. I know that my father needs open-heart surgery.

I ask Marion to **sketch** the dream onto a whiteboard or flip-sheet, so that I get as clear an impression as possible of what she is seeing, hearing, feeling, sensing in the dream, including the relativity of each element to the rest. Otherwise, I will imagine my own scene, and miss crucial aspects of hers. I keep in mind

that this is not actually the original dream experience she had, but a report of it, and that it may be evolving even as we work with it, which is a normal part of dreamwork (but a problem for academic research). She now sketches up a vague impression of a garden, with two figures separately gathering produce. I notice that she is puzzled about the dream, and I notice my own responses, including a sense of the mysterious.

I ask Marion when she had this dream, and what was on her mind at the time. This is because every dream springs from its own context, which contributes elements that have then been connected with other elements in the unconscious. She tells me that she recently visited her elderly parents, and picked grapefruit in the garden at dusk, while her father gathered vegetables. She realised how much more frail her father was getting since he'd had a second heart attack. So we recognise a recent memory as providing the setting, except that the quality of light is different in the dream, and her father is not actually in need of surgery. Such differences are significant.

Next, I **track the dream ego**. That is, I identify what she (as the dream ego) is feeling and doing in the dream, e.g. being active or passive. From here on, we work in present tense. Marion tells me she is feeling okay, a bit uncomfortable, and a bit separate from him—which is accurate, as they live in very different worlds of experience. Her action-line is simply picking fruit, and getting a bit scratched in the process. As I listen to her, I think “picking berries” is a form of gathering resources, in her father's garden—what might this mean? But I keep this to myself, while I continue to open out the dream.

Fourthly, I ask her what other relevant memories and **associations** come to mind.

The setting is a garden, a place of peaceful natural growth. She recalls fantasy stories in which the half-light has this quality of strangeness, of something other-worldly, even eerie. She sometimes has this feeling about nature, that it's communicating something she can't quite catch. Open-heart surgery seems to have a double meaning, about being open-hearted. I ask, “Why berries instead of grapefruit?” She recalls picking raspberries for her first job away from home in her student years, a time of becoming more independent in her life.

By now, she is thinking about her relationship with her father. “I've been thinking about how little time we may have left before he dies,” she says, with a catch in her throat. “I wish he would talk more about his feelings – so we could share more.” Ah, I think – sharing resources.

Action Methods

I ask if Marion is willing to do **role-work** with some of the roles, and explain that I will simply interview her as one of the roles in the dream, to discover what it's thinking and feeling. This allows material to rise directly from the unconscious, and is often surprising or enlightening to the dreamer. I suggest she takes her father's role, just as he is in the dream. She agrees. (If she had not agreed, I would simply have asked her to observe him closely and describe him in detail, so as to guess what he is thinking. I contract with the dreamer separately for each role, and explain that she is free to come out of role at any time by returning to her chair as "observer of the dream.")

I ask her to move out of her observer chair, and take a position in the space on the floor. She moves out and crouches down. I move out too, adopting the role of action-director: "Tell us what you're thinking, Dad, as you're picking the vegetables." As Dad, she says, "I'm getting old – my knees are a bit creaky, but I can still grow good carrots for dinner." I ask, "How do you feel about getting old, Dad?" "Oh, I know I've got to go soon. I'm not afraid to go, but I don't want to upset anyone before it's time." "Do you think it would upset your daughter there?" "Oh no, she's got her own life. I've had a good innings." I notice that she's coming out of role now, so I direct her back into her observer chair, and she says, "That's how he is, kind of practical and stoical. He doesn't want to talk about his feelings to anyone." There is a pause as she takes this in at a more conscious level.

I ask if she's willing to be the light, since it seems to have a particular quality here, setting the tone. She looks surprised, but agrees to have a go, standing with outstretched arms in the middle of the space. "Describe how you are, Light," I suggest. "I'm still and peaceful. The balance is shifting. I'm fading out. Things look different. I'm in transition towards darkness." Pause. I thank the Light, and she goes back to her seat thoughtfully. "That's like him too," she says, "in transition. Our relationship is changing."

"Are you willing to be the tree?" I ask. "Okay." She stands at the side, with her arms bent sideways, conveying roundness. "Tell us about yourself, Tree." "I'm a berry-fruit tree, heavy-laden. I'm glad she's picking my fruit, or it would go to waste." "Why are you so scratchy, Tree?" "That's just my protection. And all my sap's in the fruit, so my leaves are dry." "Is there anything you'd like to say to her, Tree?" Pause. "Yes. This is the time to pick my fruit. Don't mind the scratches." "Thank you, Tree." And she goes back to her seat, smiling, saying, "Of course! This is the time to share what Dad is willing to share with

me – not what I think he should. He’s never talked about feelings, anyway. Grapefruit and berries – they’re both good food.”

This is a good time to invite any speculations from the group. I offer my thought about gathering resources from Dad, maybe wisdom. Marion nods, but redefines it. “Not so much wisdom, as recognition – love – a deeper sort of contact between us. An open heart.” Others contribute: “Perhaps your Dad gets scratchy when you want too much of him?” She nods. Another: “I wonder about the eerie light – is there another presence in the garden?” She considers this, and replies, “No – not directly – it’s in the light itself, neither day nor night.”

I decide to test Level 3. “Are you willing to be the heart that needs open-heart surgery?” “Okay.” She chooses to sit on the floor with her arms around her legs and head resting on her knees. I move in and sit beside her, speaking gently: “Tell us about yourself, Heart.” “I’m all closed in, and only half as powerful as I could be if my arteries were less blocked up.” “What do you want to happen, Heart?” “I want to clear the way through.” I echo the words, to make sure she hears them, and pause.

Extending the Dream

We are now at what I call the edge of the dream, where the dreamer woke up. There are now several possibilities. One is to take her back to the observer chair, to reflect on what she has discovered, and recognise that she is now talking about herself, or to be more precise, the emotional pattern of restraint she has learned from her parents. Another is to move into dialogue between herself and her Heart, or herself and her father. A third is to visualise or enact an extension of the dream-story, coaching her if necessary towards a healthy redecision.

In this case, I intuit that the decision has already been made unconsciously, by referring to the need for surgery, so I say, “Heart, how can you make this happen?” and wait. Instead of speaking, however, Marion sits tight, then begins to unfold her arms and legs, and rises from the floor in a kind of slow dance, which is very moving to watch, and glides slowly around the whole space with a smile. “I can let go!” she says quietly, and goes to her observer seat. We all smile back at her. Someone says, “Wow!”

Her solution has arisen out of her own spontaneity in physically feeling the role of the closed heart. There is also a mysterious sense of spiritual growth made visible in her actions. Here we see the power of action methods to express far more than words.

Integration

The final step, relating the dream experience to real life, requires sensitive reflection by the dreamer and the facilitator. Group members may also contribute any further observations. In this case, Marion listened, then summarised for herself: "When I started the dreamwork, I was thinking that the problem was Dad, his unwillingness to talk about what life is like for him now. That may be true, but I've found a lot more in the dream. I can open my *own* heart to him, how *I* feel about him. And time's running out. I'll do it next weekend." She smiled through wet eyes as she said it, and the group responded warmly.

This is called "honouring the dream," (Savary, Berne and Williams, 1984), making a practical decision to follow through on an insight from a dream. This can range all the way from a slight shift in perception through to making a major life-change – though the latter is more likely to be from a final dream in a series. In my experience, any dream with clear imagery or sensations has something relevant to tell the dreamer; and even if immediate dreamwork does not arrive at a new insight, the meaning is often much clearer a week later, after further reflection.

Redecision Work

What has happened here, in clinical terms? Marion's dream-maker (inner Self or Spirit) has selected a recent memory and collated it with some further associations. Why? I do not regard this as a haphazard coincidence. The scene portrays her in the garden with her father at dusk, with a knowing that all is not well. This is borne out by her own comments about their difficulty of communication. In psychodrama terms, she seems to have an underdeveloped role as an open sharer of herself. In terms of transactional analysis, she has been living with an injunction: Don't express your feelings. She now faces a life-situation, encapsulated in the dream, where she is ready to break the injunction and develop the new role. The dream extension work enables her to make a spontaneous rededecision for change in symbolic terms. The practical decision afterwards will test the new role.

If this had taken place in a therapy sequence, I would have followed the dreamwork with a piece of 2-chair work in which she practised the new role in a dialogue with her father, anticipating his probable responses. In fact, I heard from her later on, to say that she had managed to have two satisfying conversations with her father before he died, and was very grateful for her

“breakthrough” in the dream group. This kind of outcome from dreamwork is not uncommon.

Different Processes

Psychotherapy is often accused of being too full of talk, assuming that words are the only or primary vehicle of meaning. But many of the major difficulties in our lives began as survival decisions or learned habits from childhood, before we had many words to express ourselves at all. Dreams are multi-modal expressions of our being, usually involving images, sounds, actions, feelings and other physical sensations, often based on collated memories; so they offer our clients unique opportunities to express their inner world.

I regard drawing as an essential step, to give us a joint “map” of the territory to be dealt with. No artistic skill is needed; sometimes a few impressionistic lines convey the essentials with great clarity, and coloured pens or pastels may help to convey emotions. Words are valuable in bringing up associations, buried thoughts and finer shades of meaning. But physical actions, miming those in the dream, add a fuller dimension of experience, often bringing out strong unconscious connections. You do not have to be an expert in psychodrama to use simple action methods with dreamers, one to one in your office. They will not be embarrassed as long as you are willing to stand up or sit on the floor alongside them while they take the roles. And you may share some of your client’s discoveries too in being a tree, a mouse or a tidal wave!

Conclusion

By describing this piece of dreamwork in detail, I hope I have demonstrated some of the effectiveness and excitement of working with dreams in a multi-modal way, whether in a group or one-to-one. Readers who want to know more are welcome to come to a workshop, or buy a copy of my book – or both! I believe that dreams are everybody’s spiritual heritage, and therapists can greatly enrich their work with clients by including dreams in the process.

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