Dreamwork
Weaving the Ego, Shadow and Spirit

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Abstract

Using two vivid examples of nightmares from a 13-year-old boy and a 38-year-old woman, a process of interpretation by which the dreamers gained significant insight and healing of major life-issues is demonstrated. In each case, it becomes clear that there is a holistic process at work in the dream, referred to as the inner spirit, seeking to highlight a conflict between different elements of the psyche, referred to as ego and shadow, and offering a potential resolution through re-integration. Thus, healing is shown to emerge from within the psyche by means of a dream.

Introduction

I will begin by defining the terms I am using, and then demonstrate a piece of work I did with a young boy and his nightmare. In this dream, the boy's ego is portrayed in conflict with a shadow monster. It is as if his spirit is seeking to integrate both sides of his personality. Finally, I will discuss the power of a "healing nightmare" which released a woman from a complex trauma.

Ego and shadow

Let me begin with Carl Jung's famous dream about the shadow:

> About this time I had a dream which both frightened and encouraged me. It was night in some unknown place, and I was making slow and painful headway against a mighty wind. Dense fog was flying along everywhere. I had my hands cupped around a tiny light which threatened to go out at any moment. Everything depended on my keeping this light alive. Suddenly I had the feeling that something was coming up behind me. I looked back and saw a gigantic black figure following me. But at the same time I was conscious, in spite of my terror, that I must keep my little light going through night and wind, regardless of all dangers. When I awoke I realised

> at once that the figure was a "spectre of the Brocken," my own shadow on the swirling mists, brought into being by the little light I was carrying. I knew too that this little light was my consciousness, the only light I have (Jung: 1961/1987: 107).

This dream of Jung's revealed to him quite clearly that he had not only a conscious personality–of which the ego is the centre–but also, unavoidably, its shadow, which followed him on the edge of the unconscious forces that swirled behind him. You cannot have light without a shadow. As your ego presses forward with the tasks of living in reality, your total presence includes the shadow that goes with you, much more visible to others than to yourself.

Robert Bly (1991) describes it as "the long bag we drag behind us", into which we stuff all the forms of energy we are taught to reject as we grow up. In Western society, that includes most of our anger, pride, greed, cruelty and spontaneity—in fact everything that does not fit with our family context and the ego ideal we seek to live up to—and always includes a lot of energy that would be very useful to us if we sifted it through more carefully.

Jung talked about making friends with your shadow, "eating it", overcoming your fear, discovering the gold within it. In practical dreamwork, this means holding a dialogue with the shadow figure to find out what it wants. You may be quite surprised at what it has to tell you. Your ego may then have to change its attitude. Shadow nightmares are most easily recognisable when they show you in conflict with an unknown figure, usually of the same gender, sometimes an animal, or perhaps a past acquaintance who is no longer significant in your life.

The Self or inner spirit

One of the basic principles Jung defined in dreamwork was that our dreams tend to be compensatory. They tend to bring into awareness aspects of a situation, or your feelings about it, that you had not seen before. They arise from the deep Self or inner spirit at the centre of your being (called the Inner Core in transactional analysis), analogous to the nucleus of a cell, which has the task of regulating your psychological balance and development. This inner Self knows both your ego and your shadow, and sometimes confronts your ego very forcefully about its inadequate view of life. In the metaphors and stories of your dreams, your inner Self may pull or prod you into a step of personal growth—acknowledging an unacceptable part of yourself—weaving dark and light threads together to create the richer patterns of wholeness.

For my first example, I will choose a piece of work I did with a 13-year-old boy whom I will call Donald. His mother, Carol, and younger brother were also present, and contributed to the session in useful ways. I will use the sequence of steps described in my book, *Dreams and Visions - Language of the Spirit.*

Step 1: Telling

I asked him first to read me the story of his dream. I listened, noticing his responses, and my own feelings as I heard it. It was quite a long story-dream, but I will quote just the first part, containing the essentials.

> **Dream report: Fern Monster**
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> I'm showing my friend Patrick around my grandmother's house. There's a washing-machine in the laundry, and it's shaking because there's a monster inside it. It's making a sort of nest with fern leaves. You can smell them. I feel scared, and I warn Patrick not to go near it. Then we're all sitting in the dining-room next door, discussing how to deal with the monster. You can hear it howling, as it circles the house in the dark, chanting "Me got ferns! Me got ferns!" Dad can't hear it at all. My Grandpa is there, although he died three years ago. I want to kill the monster.

I then asked Donald to draw the scenes for us on the whiteboard, which he did quite confidently, dividing the board into the different scenes. The monster's shape was not clear—its message seemed more important to him than what it looked like. That suggests a shadow figure.

Step 2: Context

Every dream emerges from a context, so I clarified a bit about his life. He had had the dream a week before this session, three weeks after his thirteenth birthday. He had recently started as a third-former in a top class at a prestigious academic high school, where he was facing his first formal exams, with some anxiety. He had been studying hard to pass them.

Step 3: Tracking the dream ego

I noticed what was happening to Donald's ego in the dream. His feelings showed that he was scared of the monster, worried about it, but also determined to kill it. His actions showed him initially keeping away from it, and seeking advice from his family on what to do. In the third scene, which I

have not reported, he and his friend trapped the monster and apparently killed it. In the fourth scene, it resurrected in a child-like form, and they tried to kill it again. Then he woke up.

Step 4: Associations

I enquired more about his associations with the images in the dream.

The setting was his grandparents' house, apparently before his grandfather died, at which point he would have been under nine years old and quite a little boy. The laundry was notable for its shaking washing-machine; perhaps he was once afraid of it, wondering what made it shake. The dining-room seemed to be symbolic of family consultation, although it was notable that Dad did not hear the monster howling. I wondered if he was not sympathetic to his son's feelings.

What about relevant memories? I was mystified about the significance of the ferns, which gave off a strong smell, and were obviously of great importance to the monster, so I asked Donald what he associated with ferns. He shrugged. But his mother and brother remembered that as a child he used to build tree-huts in a neighbouring piece of bush with ferns in it, which had recently been sold off. This gave me the clue that ferns were associated with adventurous play, which he was no longer doing. The language of the monster also sounded child-like.

What about his associations with monsters? Donald told me he had enjoyed a fantasy story over the summer holidays about children fighting with monsters who lived in caves. He obviously identified with the children against the monsters.

The dream monster had a folk-tale quality about it in the way it haunted the house, and refused to die. Archetypes tend to appear at transitions—in Donald's case, he had suddenly left his childhood behind. In the back of my mind I began making a connection with Robert Bly's myth of Iron John, the Wild Man, who lives in the shadow of civilised men's minds.

Donald's mother added further information here. As a mark of reaching 13, Donald had been given his own bedroom downstairs—adjacent to the laundry—and he was the only one of the family living downstairs. At first he had found this a bit scary.

Step 5: Interviewing roles

By now I judged that we were ready for interviewing roles, to hear a different point of view from that of the ego. Obviously the role which had most to tell us was the monster itself. I had assessed that Donald was in a stable and healthy state of mind, so I asked if he'd like to enact the role of the monster, and let it speak for itself. (If he had declined, I would have accepted that, and simply asked him to describe it more fully, and "listen to its thoughts".) In fact, however, Donald's face lit up, and he moved into a corner of the room to be the monster, chanting energetically, "Me got ferns! Me got ferns!" I interviewed the monster respectfully, asking what it wanted. The answer was immediate and clear: "I want to scare everyone away! I want the place for me!"

I thanked the monster, and directed Donald back to his chair, as we were now running out of time in the session. It sounded as if the monster felt dispossessed, and wanted to attract Donald's interest. How could we create a new ending to the story?

Step 6: Dialogue

The next step, given time, would have been for Donald to have a dialogue with the monster, to see if they could co-exist more happily. In Donald's extended dream-story, he and his friend had gone on trying to kill the monster, with uncertain success. It wouldn't die. An alternative could be to make friends with it. A shadow-role cannot be simply got rid of, because it is part of your humanity, as Carl Jung emphasised. (If I had found Donald too scared of the monster to deal with it any further, I would have invited him to summon a powerful wise friend or ally to support him—such as *Star Wars'* Obi Ben Kenobi—according to his inner world of heroes. He did not need this, however.)

Reflection

By now, the pieces of the puzzle had fallen into a coherent pattern for me, which I briefly discussed with Donald and his mother. The monster seemed to be a "wild" part of Donald himself, crying out for space in his life. In real life, Donald was barely 13, but had been thrown suddenly into an intensely competitive school environment, where he felt as if there was no room left for childish activities. He used to love building tree-huts, being a "wild man", a "nature-boy" with the other boys, but he wasn't doing it any more, under the

demands of beginning a professional career. A part of his healthy natural energy had been pushed out of sight, into the shadow, and it called to him to make space in his life again for adventure and imagination. But Donald was afraid to let it back, for fear of jeopardising his academic success.

Carol confirmed this picture, and Donald and his brother were nodding. They left, feeling pleased with the new insights, and agreeing to think about a better balance in Donald's life.

Postscript

A fortnight later, I received a grateful letter from Carol, saying that Donald had been a lot happier since the session. He had resumed making Lego constructions, which he had given up before as "a bit childish", and was now engaged in a major construction project in the garden. I felt delighted that he had reclaimed his natural creativity.

The inner spirit

If we pause to think a bit more about Donald's nightmare, we are struck by its perfect fit to his circumstances. His ego is portrayed bravely trying to deal with the threatening shadow-monster, just like the children in the book he had been reading. But this is a child-monster, a projection of the "nature-boy" he used to be in the tree-hut games, and now believes he must reject in order to succeed in the academic world. The monster calls to him from the shadows outside the house, and in the extended story he tries to kill it—but it will not die. It simply transmutes into other forms, and his battle goes on, true to the archetypal pattern of the hero.

From what part of Donald's mind does such a dream come? Not from his ego, which feels threatened by the story—Donald entitled it, "My Bad Dream." Nor from his shadow, which is having such trouble to get its message across, though it is true to say that there is motivating energy in the shadow. The dream has to come from a larger perspective, one that sees both sides of the problem, and seeks to bring them into balance. It also knows this boy's experience very thoroughly, having access to memory, thoughts and feelings, but seems to have an independent viewpoint about the way he is developing. Carl Jung called it the Self, the central organising principle of the psyche, the regulator of balance, analogous to the nucleus of a cell. He also called it the archetype of the divine.

If we switch to a Transactional Analysis framework, the dream presents a conflict between, on the one side, Parent and Adult ego-states, and on the other, the Child. The dream-source then must be the Inner Core, housing the spiritual energy of *physis*, the innate drive towards wholeness and health. Eric Berne referred to physis as "the fourth force of personality", in the first book he wrote, *The Mind in Action*, later re-published as *A Layman's Guide to Psychiatry and Psychoanalysis*. Berne was still a Freudian at the time, and meant that the other three forces were the id, ego and superego. Freud himself denied that the human mind held anything so unscientific as a spiritual Self.

But when we look at a dream like Donald's, I think we must acknowledge an inner Self at work, whether we consider it human, divine, or both. It is the unconscious creative artist within us, the weaver of the dream. It called Donald to stay in touch with his inner "fern monster", which knows about the fun of building tree-huts. Donald wants to be an architect when he grows up.

His dilemma is significant for us all, however: how to live in the modern city but not lose touch with Nature. And the message was carried by a nightmare. How fortunate that his mother knew enough about dreams to take it seriously.

Re-integration

Now I will discuss a remarkable nightmare brought to me by a woman of 38, after a dream workshop. She had been attending counselling to deal with memories of an abusive childhood, the most painful part of which was witnessing scenes of violence by her father against her mother. As the eldest child, she had learned from an early age to shut off her own feelings and do her best to protect her mother and sister. And since they lived above a shop in a city street, the family's reputation had to be protected by not telling other people.

She recalled several recurring dreams from that time. From about 7 years, she had a dream of the house falling apart behind its façade—an accurate metaphor for her family situation.

> **Dream report: Rotten House**
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> If I tried to get away from the house, it would start to crumble around me. The staircase would collapse so I couldn't get down to escape. I was trapped in a rotten house.

She was full of feelings, but she knew of no place where it was safe to let them go.

Dream report: Exposed Toilet

I would look for a toilet because I really had to go. But when I got there the doors would fall off, and people could see me as they walked past.

She had many dreams of flying away.

Dream report: Learning to Fly

At first I could barely get off the ground, struggling to get higher, but I got better at it. I would run to the back steps and take off, moving my arms like swimming breaststroke. There was enough light to see, because I had to get above the oak tree, and watch out for the power lines, not to hit them going up or down. It was so wonderful to escape.

But she didn't always get away.

Dream report: Black Monster

I would be running away from a big black monster-man. As I flew up past the eaves of the house, his arm would reach out and grab me by the ankle, and I would wake up terrified.[1]

When Rita was 14 her father finally left home, and the family got on with their lives. Rita married, raised a family, separated, became a successful professional, and began to consider a career-change into counselling.

At 37, Rita went to a workshop in which participants did a visualisation exercise. To her surprise, three bizarre images came vividly into her mind. In the first, she saw a big butcher-knife stuck into the top of her head, hidden under her hair, and she thought, "How come I never noticed that before?" The second was an image of a volcano in her chest, with a red flow rushing underneath, feeling as if it was about to erupt. And the third was a sensation of a block below her chest, "like a magician's blade", cutting off feeling in the rest of her body. She felt startled and disturbed, especially about the knife in her head, which she intuitively knew had been there for a long time. A night or two later, she had a shocking nightmare.

Dream report: Brain Operation

I'm in a room, feeling unsafe. I have to get out. I walk down a long hospital corridor. My younger sister appears beside me in a black dress and white top with long hair. I take her into a room. There's a mattress

1. I think it is potentially harmful to assert that all dream-figures represent a part of the dreamer's personality, even as a shadow. In this case, it is clear that the monster represents her real-life abuser, whom she does not identify with, either in childhood or in maturity.

on the floor, like a storeroom. Then she's lying face down on the bed, while a doctor is setting up the gear for an operation. I know she has to have an operation on her head for a tumour. I walk out, but I turn back at the door. The doctor is straddled over her, with his hands on her head, cutting her head open with a butcher knife. She is screaming and convulsing. I run to her, telling him to stop. He stops, and says he had to get the tumour out, and she couldn't wait for the anaesthetic. I'm very shocked, and in pain myself. I hold her hand and tell her I'll never leave her. Then I woke up, with a terrible feeling in my gut.

Rita speaks: The dream set off flashbacks and memories of what had happened at 14. I told my counsellor, feeling safe enough for the first time to let myself feel the feelings of pain and anger that I had cut off since childhood. The dream scene was like the moment when I had walked into my sister's bedroom and found my father lying on top of her. I was so angry I told him to stop and he left the house. When Mum got home from work, I told her, and she never let him come back. At the time, I survived by dissociating from the pain of it, but this time I felt the feelings that were there in my body for all those years. Because he had sexually abused me too.

Reflecting on her childhood in the safety of a confidential relationship with her counsellor, Rita had recalled a lot of fearful memories. But it was the free-roaming visualisation experience that brought into awareness the symbolic images of the butcher-knife, the volcano and the magician's blade. Initially they were detached from feelings, but sufficiently startling to set her wondering what they connected with. The volcano is an archetypal symbol for anger, and the magician's blade allows the illusion of cutting the body in half while it remains physically intact—a clever symbol for dissociated feelings. Both images signalled that she was about to re-connect with powerful emotions. But why was there a knife buried in her head?

Rita's post-trauma nightmare brought back the unbearable memory, followed by further flashbacks of her experience. The scene is set in a hospital, a place where surgery takes place. The sister, who also symbolises Rita's dissociated self, must urgently have a "tumour" removed from her head, a destructive growth that interferes with her mind. Rita takes her shadow sister, the one who has suffered in silence, to the operating room.

Then the historical bedroom scene of sexual abuse takes over. Rita's horror is conveyed by the metaphor of "butchery". Rita herself had been sexually abused by her father, before seeing him with her sister, whom she had always tried to

protect. She feels as if her head is split by this knowledge, a terrible knife in her brain. This time there is no anaesthetic to cut off her feelings. In a poignant moment of the dream, at the point of greatest pain, she also makes a commitment to her sister-self that she will never leave her again. Henceforth she will stay connected to herself, whole, not dissociated any more.

Rita had poured out her buried feelings to her counsellor in a volcanic eruption of pain and anger. At last, through the "healing nightmare", the trauma was released.

As Rita talked about the nightmare a year later she was still deeply moved, and still finding more meaning in it. Other associations came to mind. She had undergone surgery three years before the dream. When she had been to hospital to have her appendix removed, an undiagnosed tumour was also found in her abdomen and excised—a knife at work in the middle of her body. She had also suffered whiplash pain in the back of her neck from a medical accident in hospital. No wonder she felt unsafe in the hospital room.

The three symbols that appeared in her visualisation were the forerunners of the dream that brought the traumatic memory back into conscious awareness. Each one was a dream image in itself—the knife in her head, the volcano and the magician's blade—but still dissociated from emotion or meaning. It took the dream, with its embedded memory, to bring it all into consciousness in one sweeping movement, re-uniting Rita with her buried emotions.

That alone was powerful healing. But what about her promise to her sister in the midst of the pain? "I hold her hand and tell her I will never leave her." Rita's shocked ego made a commitment to her wounded shadow-self to stay connected, to be whole again in spite of the butcher-knife in her head, to acknowledge the harsh truth of her experience. Surely this is the inner spirit at work, marvellously weaving the new design out of all the fragments!

Rita had valued the dream when it came, as a revelation of her buried trauma. Now when she processed it further with me, a year later, she was amazed at its spiritual power and artistry. And all this came out of her own unconscious!

So in these two examples of dreams—the Fern Monster, and the Brain Operation—I have shown how creatively the inner spirit works to confront the ego when it is choosing too narrow a path in life. The academic boy is reminded to stay in touch with his playful self. The woman who had pushed her feelings into a disowned shadow-self is reintegrated through recovering a traumatic memory, woven into a dream.

To use the metaphor of weaving, it is as if the dreamers had been trying to limit themselves to working in black and white, when the inner spirit rose up and insisted that they bring in green and gold and red! Our soul is meant to wear a coat of many colours.

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