

# The Inner Journey in Dreams

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## **Abstract**

Research confirms that we dream every night about matters of current emotional significance. This means that a client's dreams will provide a continuing commentary on matters touched in therapy, potentially a rich resource to both client and therapist, yet far too often undervalued in practice. What happens to the dream ego is a metaphor about what happens in reality. This paper outlines the 'inside story' of a client's journey through the first year of therapy, as seen through a summary of her dreams.

## **Dreams in the therapy process**

Everyone dreams every night, more vividly during the series of REM-sleep periods. Our dreams are largely activated by the emotional issues on our minds (Hartmann: 1998), and provide a virtual running commentary on key issues, for those who pay attention. Clients who are working through difficult issues in their lives will be having dreams about these issues, usually expressed in metaphor.

The majority of dreams hold up a kind of symbolic mirror to the client's **waking ego** (the Jungian term for the 'I' of real waking life). The mirror shows the **dream ego**, the 'I' in the dream, in a set of parallel circumstances, but viewed from a **different perspective**. This new perspective may be quite surprising to the ego in waking life, even confrontative, challenging the ego's perception of itself or its path in life. It seems to come from a deeper or different part of the psyche. Carl Jung called it the Self, the centre of psychological balance, aware of both conscious and unconscious knowing (Jung: 1974). It seems to have a holistic or spiritual perspective, not limited by the narcissistic concerns of the waking ego. In my experience, the client's dreams add a spiritual dimension to therapy.

## **Dreamwork in ongoing therapy**

Let us now turn to the role of dreams in a year-long process of therapy, for which my client Judy (not her real name) graciously gave her consent. We read the initial draft of the article together and I made some corrections at her suggestion.

This is not the external story of the therapy but a simplified version of the inner story, her **personal myth or life-script seen through her dreams**. I have selected only the most relevant dreams for the purpose of illustration. You will notice that there are several kinds of dream in the story. One of their effects is that they often shift the focus from trauma and pathology to emphasise Judy's personal strength and resources. Too often in psychotherapy there is an overemphasis on the negative, or pathological, which I think is one of our 'underbelly' issues. Dreamwork, however, is not just another technique, but integral to a holistic process, actively assisting and balancing the client's healing, often in surprising ways. It is woven into the therapy like a pattern in the weft.

### **The client**

Judy was a thirty-year-old beginning professional in a creative field. She sought counselling to overcome recurrent depression, in order to be able to get on with her work, and 'to learn to love myself.' She was a healthy-looking young woman, living in a steady relationship, but depressed and unable to concentrate enough to get on with her work. In the first few sessions she revealed an extremely unhappy background as the middle child in an alcoholic family, where violence and daily emotional abuse were the norm. She felt unloved and unlovable. She had spent her teenage years on drugs and drinking in a series of abusive relationships with addicted men. But she had also held jobs that earned her enough to pay her own way to travel widely overseas, and she had learned a martial art to protect herself.

When she returned to NZ at the age of twenty-four she made her own decision to stop using drugs and alcohol, studied full-time for a degree, met a good man, and joined a serious meditation group. So she was already showing a lot of strength in getting her life together. But her emotions were still very unstable, and at times overwhelming. At the time of seeking therapy she had created a relatively stress-free lifestyle in the countryside with her partner, so she was for the first time in a stable position to confront her chaotic past.

In order to keep in touch with her inner process during therapy, I asked her to report her dreams, which she was happy to do, having already discovered the value of keeping a journal. I will tell the dreams here in summary form, so as not to get bogged down in the details.

## Life-script dreams

The first dream came in session 3, after she had started to tell her life story. A dream near the start of therapy, as Carl Jung says, is usually a significant indicator of work to be done. This one could be called a core script dream.

### Dream summary 1: Stairway chase

*She was running up and down a maze of stairs with a companion, pursued by three black-suited men, who seemed like “sort of sophisticated robots.” Her companion fell into a tank of acid, but she had to keep running.*

Reflecting on this, Judy could see how it matched the outline of her up and down life experience, running away from the drug addicts (‘robots’) she had been involved with, including one whom she had lived with for three years, but had left behind, drowning himself in his drugs. At a subjective level, she had also been running away from her own distressing memories, drowning them in drugs. In this example, you see how **the dream ego reflects the waking ego’s pattern of behaviour**, in succinct metaphors. The dream presents the ‘skeleton’ of Judy’s story of her teenage years. In the language of mythology, she has been like an orphan fleeing for her life in a hostile wilderness.

Since the dream presented an unfinished drama I asked her to create the next scene, to see how she used her personal survival power. This is also an opportunity for redecision work, by changing a predictable script-pattern. She did. She envisaged herself running harder and escaping out into an open field, where she was looking for help, but finding no one. Why not, I asked? “Because no one will believe me,” she said.

In the language of Transactional Analysis, this was a script message learnt in her family of origin (Berne: 1961). Her parents, like many others, had tried to preserve their façade of respectability by telling the children not to talk about the family to outsiders. In fact, some of Judy’s experiences were so appalling that many people probably would not have believed her if she had told them. But it meant that she felt very alone in the world, and her inner Child still felt anxious about speaking out. I therefore made sure of providing steady emotional support for her Child, as the memories began to come back.

So this dream presented her dominant script at the time: **running away from destructive people**. Eric Berne, in *What Do You Say After You Say Hello?* (1972), points out the significance of repetitive dreams that highlight the situation of the dream ego, giving clear examples in Chapter 9, for example a woman stuck in a tunnel, afraid to go forwards or backwards. Many further

dreams expressed Judy's sense of vulnerability in an untrustworthy world. One great value of dreams lies in how they express the 'inside feeling' of what her experience was like. Her running away was not a child's delight in freedom but a series of desperate escapes to save her life.

### **Post-trauma dream**

Then she remembered a vivid nightmare she had had sometime between the ages of eight and ten.

### **Dream summary 2: Child rape**

*She was a small child being dragged out of a car through the driver's door into the bush with big trees. There was dirt and dead leaves. She felt severe genital pain.*

Judy recalled strongly that she had been too scared to go to sleep for a week with this nightmare, and had feared she was going insane – which is a predictable result of sleep deprivation - but she did not now recall any concrete memories associated with the dream. She told me she had not had her first sexual experience till the age of sixteen. I noted, however, that the dream had the fragments of sensory detail, the terror, the physical pain and the consistent repetition of a **post-trauma memory** (Barrett: 1996). But no further memories came to her to clarify the source. She said she had not watched videos at home, nor did it remind her of anything she had read or heard at that age. Yet she had already described to me a number of behavioural indicators of early sexual abuse: she had always been afraid to be seen naked anywhere, had never enjoyed sex, and had been quite promiscuous as a teenager. She had learned in her twenties that her mother had been a child victim of severe chronic incest, so we wondered whether there might be an unconscious transfer of memory. Judy had also had childhood holidays on a relative's farm. I suspected repression but I did not press her to find a real memory. Maybe it was merciful not to remember.

The psychiatrist Lenore Terr, in her excellent book, *Unchained Memories* (1994), gives a detailed discussion of how to distinguish genuine childhood trauma memories. They are likely to have **precise, multi-sensory details** and be accompanied not only by **historical signs of disturbed behaviour**, but also **current body-language consistent with the remembering**. Judy and her siblings had been exposed to multiple experiences of terrifying violence all through their childhood. The children had also been conditioned by a Roman Catholic education to be 'very good,' thus setting up **internal dissonance** between their experience and what could be spoken about. These are exactly the conditions in which children's memories are affected by repression, dissociation and other defences. Recalling this dream, however, did bring back many memories of

terrifying violence at home, when Judy frequently used to hide in a cupboard, or flee onto the streets with her sister. Some of these memories she had checked out with her sister, asking each other, "Was it really that bad?" and agreeing that it was. Her sister had also abused drugs and was soon to start therapy herself.

### **Resourceful survivor**

There followed a whole series of script-dreams about escaping from prison-like places, which ran parallel to therapy like a counterpoint tune, seeming to emphasise a life-script of simply surviving. In the language of personal myth (McAdams: 1993), Judy seemed to have lived the myth of a street-kid, preferring the dangers of the streets to the unsafety at home. For example, when at the age of ten she was bitten by the dog at home, she walked alone to the hospital emergency department for treatment. She often went there for comfort when her tummy ached. I found this very sad, but this was her reality.

### **Dream summary 3: Escaping from prison**

*She would find herself alone or with a friend in an underground carpark or cage-like basement, where unpleasant or dangerous people were hanging around. She would create some kind of climbing structure or ingenious catapult to get herself out through a window, but then she would find herself alone on a long road heading into the hills.*

The central theme seemed to be a choice between abusive people or loneliness, and in fact this had been her objective reality until the age of twenty-four. Again and again she had escaped from dangerous people, but she still could not escape from her dark moods and frequent migraine headaches. Although she was now living with a kind and caring man she still felt separate from him and rejected by her parents. I affirmed her survival-power in getting out of her prison of abuse and seeking freedom. Now she could focus on calming her inner world, valuing herself, and learning to make deeper friendships. In coming to therapy Judy was seeking a deeper level of self-acceptance, as she communicated her real thoughts and feelings to someone outside the family.

She had been taking anti-depressant medication intermittently, prescribed by different doctors. Now after four months of therapy, while I was overseas for a week, she tried to cut it to half the recommended dose, believing that it 'masked her true self'. This precipitated a sudden dangerous depressive episode which shocked both of us. In the aftermath she agreed to commit herself to one doctor and also to see a psychiatrist for a formal assessment. He diagnosed clinical depression, and recommended she continue with both counselling and medication.

I had a vivid dream myself at this point, that I was a survivor escaping from a volcanic eruption, which rained mud onto the landscape. Without the control of medication, Judy's psyche **had** had an eruption. My own dream may well have been a form of projective identification, echoing her experience. But it also expressed my own shock at how much 'mud' there was to deal with – and of course I had been away at the time.

Her next dream portrayed the intensity of her inner conflict.

#### **Dream summary 4: Rooftop battle**

*She was involved in a desperate battle on the roof between giant robots. She kept knocking one of them down, but he kept getting up again. Then she was down in a toilet block, fighting a freakish man like a Goth, with black hair and white face, and the toilets were getting flattened in the fight, but she wasn't giving up.*

The imagery seemed to be drawn from some of the films she had seen, and there was no doubting the fury of the fight, both on the roof and in the toilet. We took it as symbolic of the head-aches and emotional pain she felt. Although she and they all seemed inhuman in their force, even super-natural, she was holding her ground against the robots. This time, we noted, she was not running away.

#### **Archetypal dream**

In Session 18 a dream seemed to emerge from a deeper, **archetypal level** (Jung: 1974) to encourage her. This is consistent with Jung's theory of compensation, that dreams strive for balance in the psyche, such as offering hope when the road is getting hard.

#### **Dream summary 5: Ancient squid**

*First she met a beautiful friendly Polynesian woman coming along the road, who linked arms and turned around to walk with her. Then she was in a group visiting a kind of stone tower with a well, in which was floating an orange-coloured creature like a squid, on display. A boy aged about eight was looking at it. He poked the orange crust of the creature, which broke open, and underneath it was a huge, transparent, bluish, ancient squid. It rose up in front of the child's face, looking at him as if to scare him, but not to harm him.*

The Polynesian woman seemed to be a very encouraging **shadow figure**, easily able to make friends and give support. This was a positive sign. She recognised the boy as her inner Child. But the squid was a bizarre image, ghost-like and

mysterious. It rose from the depths of an ancient well - surely an image of the Self in the unconscious - awesome but not actually a threat, confronting the child, as if to say, "I'm here, and I'm not to be played with." Judy's only association with the image was of seeing a preserved squid in a jar in a museum. But the dream squid was clearly alive and full of its own power - and came from her own inner world. In mythology the squid as a kind of octopus is a 'denizen of the deep', perhaps even an 'infernal creature', according to the *Penguin Dictionary of Symbols* (Chevalier and Gheerbrant: 1982). We took it as a voice from the depths that told her she need not be afraid if she was respectful and careful in dealing with these inner forces. In retrospect, it was warning her of the underlying trauma.

### **Post-trauma nightmares**

From here on Judy was facing into the reality of many painful memories in her past, which she had previously avoided by constantly getting drunk or stoned, and later by concentrating on study for exams. This was a period of delayed post-traumatic stress, as she realised the enormity of the chaos she had lived through. Her dreams at this stage were about miraculous escapes from events such as **car-crashes and knife-attacks**. At first I took them as metaphors, only to discover that they were in fact **fragments of real memory** incorporated into ongoing dream narratives of struggling for survival against the odds - classical nightmares, in fact.

Let us note here the difference between waking from a simple **post-traumatic memory dream**, where the fear or horror is still overwhelming; and waking from a **post-trauma nightmare**, where the focus has shifted towards a story of survival. This is why Harry Wilmer (in Barrett: 1996) referred to '**the healing nightmare**', because the dreamer awakens feeling relief that the dream could not have happened like that. Wilmer's research on the dreams of Vietnam War veterans showed that post-trauma memory-dreams tend to evolve over time into post-trauma nightmares, which begin to involve more fantasy and then more mundane elements as they lose their intensity. He also noted that the most common reason for a war veteran's nightmare to keep recurring was a sense of guilt about his own behaviour.

Judy's nightmares incorporated fragments of real trauma into surreal escape stories, thus reminding her that however terrible the past had been, somewhere ahead there was a better future to strive for. A dream that seemed to sum up this stage of her experience was this one:

### **Dream summary 7: Rocky passage**

*She and a boy aged about eight are climbing through a landscape of extremely steep, jagged, grey rocks to get to the sea. "If you fell, you'd be skewered," she said.*

Indeed, when she drew the dream scene on the whiteboard, the rocks looked very dangerous – yet she and the boy climbed on, sure-footed. The boy seemed to be an image of her confident inner Child, who had in reality been a very self-reliant youngster. It was encouraging for her to be reminded how resourceful her inner Child actually was – rather like the hobbits in *Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien: 1954/74). I find that this is frequently so in the dreams of abuse survivors, and their self-esteem rises as they discover their inner resources.

### **Confrontation of script**

Meanwhile, Judy had settled onto regular medication and was able to get on with her creative work. There was a deadline approaching but she felt anxious about public visibility.

### **Dream-summary 8: Missing the exam**

*She dreamed about getting side-tracked from sitting an exam by going to a party instead.*

Now this was not only a portrayal of her old pattern of escape, but also a direct confrontation from her inner Self by means of the dream. So I asked her to re-enter the dream in fantasy and create a new ending. She did so, deciding to leave the party and sit the exam after all. This strengthened her to face the real world with her work, and brought her some excellent feedback.

This public success proved to be a turning-point in her life. It set off the start of a change in Judy's self-identity, like a butterfly beginning to come out of its cocoon. I felt hopeful that she could rebuild her life around the central theme of developing her creative talent - reclaiming her 'personal myth' as a creative being to give meaning to her life (McAdams: 1993). She had already begun to comment that there must be some spiritual purpose in her surviving so many life-threatening situations. In Transactional Analysis terms she was changing towards a winner script for her life.

She was further heartened when her father showed some interest in her work. He had recently retired from his trade. Although her father had been a violent alcoholic he had shown her what little affection she remembered from childhood



and she longed to build a better relationship with him. She now dreamed the recurring escape dream with a new twist:

### **Dream summary 9: Prison rescue**

*She manages to escape from a dark brick cell through the window, then realises that the man in the neighbouring cell has got stuck on the wall, so she goes back to help him get out too. As they cross a field she sees a group of young hoods coming, who will beat them up. She looks at her watch – it's 6.30 – and zing! the hoods turn happy, and let them pass.*

Judy identified the man as her father, whom she perceived to have been trapped all his life in the narrow field of his work. 6.30 pm was closing time at his work each day, a symbolic release. The hoods could symbolise the abusive men she had lived among or, subjectively, the anti-social parts of herself, or both. The dream seemed to portray her deep longing for change rather than portraying the reality of her relationship with her father. Perhaps it was a classical Freudian wish-fulfilment dream. But it also showed herself in a stronger role with power to help someone else.

### **Crisis**

At this point I went away for a six-week holiday overseas, having arranged for Judy to see a colleague in my absence. Judy had also started reading self-help books again and seemed to be in a good-enough space. When I returned, however, there had been a dramatic change. Judy reported two significant nightmares, signalling trouble ahead. In the first nightmare she had lost her survival-power.

### **Dream summary 10: Beaten to death**

*She was chased into a swamp by a group of men in black uniforms. She hid underwater, breathing through a ducting tube. But they trapped her and beat her to death with lead pipes. She accepted death with resignation, as she looked down at her dead body.*

So her spirit survived, leaving the body behind. She had dreamed before this of hiding in the swamp, breathing through a reed while the King and Queen went by. We had interpreted them as Dad and Mum, the figures of power in her life. So this seemed to follow on. I thought it might be about realising the impact of all the emotional battering she had endured. Judy, however, interpreted that she was being punished for her sins and deserved to die – a sign of the guilt she had carried from childhood abuse. We explored this more fully, to release the guilt.

This dream had been followed by an even more **shocking post-trauma memory-dream** a couple of weeks later:

**Dream summary 11: Sexual abuse**

*It incorporated memories of sexual abuse by her father. It was 'too horrible' to tell me, she said.*

The dream scene was followed by a flood of specific memories of sexual molestation by her father during her pre-adolescent years. (They did not, however, include the violent rape scene she had dreamed between eight and ten years old.) She remembered the episodes in clarity and detail and had no doubt of their accuracy. She recalled her feelings of shame at allowing the experiences to continue. These memories must have been repressed because they so contradicted her need to believe that her father did love her in spite of everything. But now she was starting to see her story with clearer eyes. As a result she was feeling utterly betrayed and disoriented, weeping at the loss of her hopes and wanting nothing more to do with her father.

The realisation, however, did make a lot of sense to her in terms of her promiscuous teenage behaviour. My absence at this point had of course made things worse, as she had not felt able to talk to my colleague. But she had used her journal to good effect, finding the process of writing a way to release tension.

**Recovered memories**

Judy's memories of sexual abuse had returned to consciousness more than fifteen years after the events. Why should she, or I, believe them? Lenore Terr (1994) gives a careful summary on the subject as an expert witness in many Court cases. Repression is a common defence used by children in traumatic environments when unbearable conflict occurs between aspects of their reality. Judy's father was her only source of feeling loved. As a child aged between ten and thirteen, she had often allowed him to sexualise that love. When she realised that this was wrong she blamed herself and proceeded to bury the memories under alcohol, drugs and sex with her peers.

When do such memories return? Dr Terr says that two conditions are usually needed: a strong perceptual cue or context and a more relaxed emotional state of being, in which defences can be let down. Attention to her dreams, and the therapeutic context, provided both conditions.

## **Shadow dreams**

Judy's dreams now expressed her anger more freely. Not only was she fighting off attackers, but actually killing them, as in this one:

### **Dream report 12: Baseball bat**

She was pursued by a young blonde man with a baseball bat. She grabbed it off him and beat him with it till he was dead.

This is the **anger of her shadow side** expressing itself against the abusers in her life. It seemed to me to be a healthy sign of self-protective energy, since in real life she lacked overt expressions of anger. She also had a series of dreams expressing **revulsion** towards her father, which seemed to reflect accurately the feelings she could not put into words. The dreams gave her another channel of expression for her chaotic emotions.

## **Healing myth**

The mythological theme resumed in Session 31, with another encouraging dream:

### **Dream summary 13: Empty castle**

*She was on a sinking ship. She and a male companion swam to shore, climbed a steep hill, knowing they owned the land, and found a village and an old castle in the valley beyond. The people in the castle were shadowy, not real, and there were no possessions except for a large cup or goblet.*

Judy made no sense of this, but it sounded to me like the Holy Grail of mythology, a sacred symbol of wholeness, found here in the dream as she returns to her own land. Perhaps it is a symbol to emphasise the new home she has found with her partner and the new self she is creating, having left the sinking ship of her drug-addicted family. There are also new friends to meet in the nearby village, a new life beginning. Whatever the full interpretation, she has a companion, a standing-place, a castle to live in and a sacred gift to encourage her. This dream shifted the emphasis onto her positive personal myth for the future.

Furthermore, shortly after this – was it synchronicity? - Judy achieved her first successful income from her work. It was a considerable sum of money and she felt greatly heartened that a new future was opening up. She said she felt as if she was beginning to let go of her past.

It was now that I asked if she would be willing for me to summarise some of her dreams in this paper. She said yes and expressed a keen interest. At this point

we took a holiday break. After the break I read the initial short draft of the paper with her so that we could go over it together. She was amazed at the cumulative story, commenting on what a 'tragic' childhood and youth she had lived through, but also realising what strength she had shown to overcome it.

### **Conclusion**

Judy's therapy continues, accompanied by vivid dreams, in which the prevailing theme in this second year seems to be discovery of her personal power to protect herself against all abusers. As she gets on successfully with her creative work, she is finding new ways of expressing strong emotions. She is also enjoying much more of her life and her self-esteem is quietly rising.

There are many issues we could discuss from this case-work, but my primary purpose has been simply to show how dreams contribute actively to the client's healing process.

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