

Dreams are Alive

by
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Part I: Introduction

Dreams are alive. Four or five times each night, living images play inside our brains, weaving together ingenious stories. This theater of the night affects our daily experience, shapes our decisions, largely determines who we are and who we become.

Curiously, a person awakes in the morning claiming: "I had a dream." Who had a dream? Conscious ego, the one who calls himself "I"? "I" made up that story because I was scared yesterday when my daughter went too deep into the ocean? Or, because my boss criticized me, or whatever the residues of yesterday's events? Because of these past events, "I" created that dream?

The ego wants, and perhaps needs, to believe that it is in charge, that the conscious "I" is in control. As Swiss psychologist Carl Jung observed, this is particularly true during the first several decades of a human life. In order to sustain the fantasy that the ego is in control, ego has to pretend everything else is static, nonexistent, or at least, less powerful. Each night the unconscious speaks in the language of dreams; each morning ego scrambles for control, announcing: "I had a dream."

But, if "I" didn't create my dream, who did? Most psychologists believe that a dream is a product of the human unconscious. But what is the human unconscious that it can construct these ingenious literary productions five times nightly?

Over billions of years life evolved into a variety of forms that we know today, one of which is the human being. We are born out of the essential, organic life process—made of the same stuff as is all life. Human beings are but one expression of nature. The psyche is an evolution of life energy within the natural world, and thus participates in the ever-changing patterns of evolving and dissolving life form.

The unconscious isn't created by "me." The unconscious is born out of the rhythms of life. The dream—one expression of the psyche—is located in these essential life rhythms. Dreams are expressions of a psyche that is grounded in nature. Dreams are alive.

How shocking it is to break through to the awareness that the world is alive, that each organism within the world has a life of its own, interacting with other life forms (like you and I). Perhaps you are lying on a thick green lawn, enjoying the warmth of the sun on your skin. You turn your

head. Suddenly, you're eyeball to eyeball with a fly. You brush the fly away only to notice an ant is crawling up your neck. Then, you see a worm emerging from the ground onto your hand. It hits you: *this* is not outdoor carpeting! You are lying in the midst of a living, breathing, changing ecology with millions of creatures crawling around and in and out and getting born and dying, right along with you.

We are not isolated living beings on a static and dead landscape; we are participants, constituent members of a living ecology. Our very existence is dependent upon our interacting intimately with other life forms.

The ego lying on the grass with all the other creatures is confronted with the realization that a human being is just one of the many players in this game of life. This holds true in the psychological realm as well as the physical realm. The person who calls himself "I" is one constituent member of the psyche. Imaginal figures are meandering around day and night, within him and without him, each with lives of their own. The ego is but one of many members of a living ecology of imaginal figures that compose a psyche.

A dream is an event in which some of the many imaginal figures of psyche reveal themselves. In the dream, the ego is relativized, often pictured as one of a cast of characters. Other dream figures (human or not) interact with dream ego, and, in the dream, they have lives of their own, physical bodies of their own, feelings and desires of their own. These images are constituent members of life itself.

A dream is one manifestation of nature revealing herself through image. This revelation can reflect one's personal nature, our collective human nature, and/or the nature of the *anima mundi*—soul in the world.

Part II: The Multidimensional Psyche

In order to conceptualize the different functions of the psyche, psychologists delineate several levels. Most psychologists agree that these levels include the Ego (consciousness), the Personal Unconscious, and the Collective Unconscious. I add a fourth level, the World Unconscious, which will be discussed later in this article.

Because dreams emerge from the psyche, they are shaped by all four of these levels of psyche, in what the alchemists called "a gentle mingling between levels." Although a particular dream may reflect one level more than another, it is important to listen to what the dream may say on each of these four levels.

The children's song tells us: "Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream, merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream." By the time a child sings this wise song, he or she will have some awareness of being the rower in the boat. "I," ego, am sitting in my life vehicle, holding the oars, rowing from one attraction to the next.

The rower of the boat, may be aware that the current of the river to no small degree determines where the boat goes. We are born into this life in a stream, a particular stream of forces in our individual life circumstance. This stream can be said to constitute the Personal Unconscious. Freud defined the Personal Unconscious as the repository of the dreamer's unconscious daily perceptions and personal experiences. The Personal Unconscious is structured as to gender, profession, family and other relationships, and personal life history. Most psychologists tend to understand a dream as the voice of the Personal Unconscious, speaking of personal unfulfilled wishes, repressed feelings and experiences.

It is the destiny of a stream to join with other individual streams into a river. In this metaphor, the river, composed of the many streams, represents the Collective Unconscious, a concept postulated by Carl Jung. Jung observed that individuals throughout time and across cultures seem to share universal psychological forms, which he called "archetypes." The Collective Unconscious can be said to be the psyche of the human species, in which we each experience the nature of our species and its shared patterns of perception. The Collective Unconscious is thought to be universal and transpersonal. The same archetypal imagery that appears in a dream can be seen in the motifs of age-old myths, legends and fairy tales manifest in every culture throughout the history of the human race. Jungian psychologists tend to focus on the dream in terms of the relationship between ego and the Collective Unconscious, hearing the particular archetypes presented and exploring how ego is in relationship to them. From the viewpoint of the Collective Unconscious, psyche is heard in the context of archetypal patterns.

Continuing in this lyrical metaphor, the river eventually joins with the deeper waters of the ocean—the source of life itself. The ocean locates us in yet another dimension of the psyche, one not often assumed by psychologists, but commonly perceived by poets and mystics throughout history as well as in contemporary findings of theoretical physics. In this oceanic place, which I call the World Unconscious, the unconscious is imagined as connected to an implicit order underlying all of reality. The World Unconscious consists of the "subjective inner natures" residing in all the phenomena of the world. Therefore, it is not limited to the personal or collective human condition. At the level of the World Unconscious all the phenomena of the world are interrelated and interconnected. These "inner natures" of the world's organic and inorganic phenomena make up the contents of the World Unconscious and they are reflected as dream images in the human psyche.

A dream heard from the psychological perspective of the World Unconscious gives voice to the phenomena of the world, speaking through the dream on their own behalf. For example, the image of "house" that appeared in last night's dream may be talking about its experience in the world, its plight. Walls may indeed talk, and the tale they tell may be of their own making, located in the World Unconscious—not necessarily a mere projection of the human psyche.

Lest this image of rowing a boat down a particular stream, which joins a river, which joins the oceans, seems too linear a metaphor for the holistic nature of life, it is helpful to remember that at each and every point water evaporates, becomes clouds and fog and eventually rain which falls everywhere. These ever-repeating cycles of nature are the essential rhythms of all phenomena and of our lives. They are the stuff of the World Unconscious and the backdrop of the dream.

The assumption of a World Unconscious is of particular importance to me since I feel that each of us, particularly those of us in the professional disciplines, must be aware of the relationship between our work and our world. As a Clinical Psychologist and dream therapist, I feel obligated to ask myself how my work interfaces with the world.

First, it must be remembered that we, as persons, are shaped by the events and things of the world which, in turn, display themselves in the imagery of dreams. We live in continuous participation with world phenomena. From the glow of an electric light to the dark of an overcast winter day, world phenomena echo within us at a sensate as well as a feeling level. To imagine the dream as an occurrence of the inner life only, separate from the world, is a denial of our interdependence with the world. As much as the world is in immediate need of our active re-engagement, we, too, are in urgent need of acknowledging our interdependence with the world. We are always living in intricate relationship with the world. The dreamscape is the worldscape and all the while we are living in it...as if life is but a dream.

Second, I think it important to stay aware of how the dreamwork that I am doing with my client may, in turn, affect the phenomena of the world. For example, as a therapist working with the dream image of an ancient forest that has been mowed down, it can be imagined that the image, being a manifestation of actual phenomena in the world speaking on behalf of itself, is influenced by the dreamwork taking place between the dreamer and the therapist. By recognizing that the dream image of the defoliated landscape is an expression of the "subjective inner nature" of that landscape in the world (not necessarily tied to the personal psychology of the dreamer), the dreamer and the therapist hear the call of the landscape in its grief, experience its pain. Hearing the psyche of the landscape speak through the dreamwork can engender a sympathetic response to the condition of that physical place in the world. The dreamwork provides dreamer and dream therapist a medium for empathetic relationship between individual psyche and world soul.

The Personal, Collective, and World Unconscious inform one another and are in continuing dialogue. Becoming connected to the inner life of our personal experience connects us to a larger sense of self than we knew before. This larger sense of personal self finds participation in the shared stories of the collective psyche, bringing an enhanced sense of belonging to a tribe. In turn, this sense of being part of the shared human experience allows us to experience our species relationship to an even more fundamental process—that of the natural rhythm of life itself.

It seems to me that these various levels of the psyche co-exist in the complex nature of reality, and that psychotherapy and dream therapy can and should include all the dimensions of the human psyche. This living ecology of psyche exists at all times, and is always available to us when we learn to be present to it.

Part III: Tending the Living Image

The various levels of psyche all express themselves in the form of images. It is through understanding the nature of an image, and learning how to "tend" an image that we can experience the living psyche.

"I" am not in charge of "my" images. Images have lives of their own, and walk around as they choose, not as "I" choose. They inhabit the landscape of the dream, walking its ground, flying its skies, and swimming its seas. Images present themselves in the dream as living entities in an evolving landscape.

Nor do "I" create these images. They are not rooted in my personal psyche. Elaborating on this idea, archetypal psychologist James Hillman says, "Images come and go at their own will, with their own rhythm, within their own field of relations, undetermined by personal psychodynamics. . . . The mind is in the imagination rather than the imagination in the mind." Each image has presence, substance, and imaginal body. To experience an image in written description only, as part of a narrative lifted from last week's journal entry, is to miss the living, active, embodied creature that is the image. In "my" dream last week the elephant looking at me had wide flared ears, and its left tusk was broken off at the tip. With respectful distance and caution, I walked around to its rear side, seeing dirt and tiny rocks scattered over its thin-haired rump. Its tail was busy swatting flies from either side of its sagging hind quarters. The dream elephant, like all images, has body and exists in three-dimensional space.

Dreaming is not merely a human production; it is an ongoing activity in which we participate. It is as if the dream is a social event which "I" experience, yet which each of the other figures also experiences from its own point of view. As they interact in the realm of the dream, images affect and change each other. When the elephant, as an embodied image runs into another embodied image, say that of a hunter, it is a certainty that each figure is affected by the presence of the other. To understand the dream is to realize that each image is a participant in a living network of interacting images.

An image that meanders through one's dreamscape does not ask to be captured, tranquilized, dissected, labeled in Latin, and reduced to a statement about one's childhood or present trauma. Nevertheless, this is an all-too-common psychological approach to images, and it creates several problems: 1) In the move to events of the dreamer's Personal Unconscious, the image itself is often lost; 2) Reducing the image to a meaning renders the image dead; and, most problematic, 3) When one affixes meanings or interpretations to an image, one has not addressed the image for what it is. The image is an alive, embodied expression of psyche—present to be experienced, seen, felt, heard.

How can we approach an image to hear it on its own terms?

To experience the living nature of the dream is not, as I have said, a return to the cause and effect methods of making meaning, but rather, requires a certain attitude, an approach I call "DreamTending." To tend a dream is to attend to the dream images in the immediacy of their presentation, as if each dream figure were a guest visiting you for the first time. As host to these guests, you want to get to know them, tend to them. You listen to what they have to say. When you enter the territory of the living image, there are no established trails, no familiar landmarks. The topological maps of ego no longer apply, for one is in a place much larger than ego. The navigational skills so useful and familiar in traditional interpretive approaches to dreamwork

must give way to a new, more interactive craft. The causal logic of determinism gives way to the poetic language of metaphor.

To illustrate these two different approaches to dreamwork, let us think about different styles of walking in the wilderness. A person can walk through nature involved in a purposeful activity. There is a destination to move towards, a goal or intention to be actualized as a consequence of taking this nature walk. Nature walk activities might include: exercise; identifying bird species; or, walking in the wilderness with the notion of meditating on a particular life problem. In each of these instances, a person is using the landscape to facilitate a mental activity or a physical process that is located in the person, not in the landscape.

When one walks with such intention, a sense of alert goes through the wilderness. The animals sense the alien intrusion and discontinue their normal motion: freeze, get quiet, go underground. The landscape goes into a state of frozen arrest when a person uses it for his/her own person-centered intention.

In a different approach, a person can walk in the natural landscape with the hope of participating in nature's psyche. When walking for awhile, then stopping and listening, one notices the sounds of the birds, the skittering of lizards, the water gurgling in the brook.

And it's in that waiting—in the ability to be patient, to be quiet, to allow time, that one experiences the landscape returning to its normal activity. The wilderness then relaxes into its presence, its life, its beauty. The poetry that is indigenous to the natural movement of the landscape returns.

As Ezra Pound reminds: "The leaves are full of voices." In the quiet of deep listening, the landscape reveals itself to the receptive participant. The sense of the poetic that lives between the participant and landscape comes into awareness, into life—each affecting the other, each dependent on the other. The landscape and the hiker are part of an aesthetic realm of experience which informs them both.

These same approaches are also at play in dreamwork. When we dutifully write down the dream, go into the analyst's office, repeat it in its linear, narrative form with the intention of interpreting its meaning, the dreamscape has stopped or become frozen—just like the shutdown of wilderness activity at the arrival of the intruder. However, like the hiker who pauses to be present to the possibilities of the wilderness, a therapist working with a dream can pause, wait, listen, allowing for the natural rhythm, the indigenous nature of the psyche, to again resume activity. Then the dreamer and the dream therapist can be in correspondence with the natural activity of the dreamscape.

DreamTending is an approach to dreamwork that respects the living reality of the dream. The dream therapist literally shifts his chair from the familiar face to face configuration to a somewhat more open side by side positioning, as if therapist and dreamer were sitting together to watch a theatrical presentation. Seated beside the client, the therapist is not so immediately locked into the personal responses of the dreamer which—when one is looking straight across at the other—are so tempting to explore at each and every turn. In tending a dream, the therapist is

concerned first with evoking the dreamscape, inviting the actuality of the dream into the room to be experienced. The therapist asks the dreamer to tell the dream in descriptive detail in the present tense. In the telling, the dreamer sees, hears, expresses the images as alive and active in present time/space.

To evoke even greater detail, the therapist asks the dreamer to look with increased focus at specific aspects of the image and to describe with particularity the texture, coloration, movement or shape of the dream figure. For example, in the dream image of a giraffe, the dreamer may be asked to mindfully observe this particular giraffe, noticing its unique characteristics. The therapist can encourage the dreamer to look into the giraffe's eyes, into the inner world of this particular dream animal, thus bringing its alive presence even more fully into dynamic relationship with the dreamer. The dreamer is encouraged to physically move his body to interact with the giraffe and to use his sensate functions of smell, touch, and even taste, to more fully experience the living reality of the image. Questions like: "How coarse is the giraffe's coat?" or "Can you smell the giraffe?" not only provide specific detail but also allow the image to reveal itself in the here and now presence of the dreamwork.

The therapist empathetically enters the dreamtime with the dreamer, as well as keeping therapeutic perspective. The dreamer and the dream therapist become located in the dreamscape, surrounded by it. The dreamer and the therapist enter the living experience of the dream.

The craft of tending a dream differs significantly from the traditional practice of dream analysis in its initial orientation to the dream. Most dream therapists have been trained to ask: "What does this dream mean?" This question tends to freeze the dream within pre-conceived developmental schema, or within one of a multitude of intricately contrived psychological explanatory systems—however imaginative and erudite they might be. How different this is from *tending* a dream, where the primary question is, "What is happening here?"

The simple question "What is happening here?" locates the dreamwork in the immediacy of the present experience of the dream, looking to the image bodies themselves to reveal their purposefulness, their stories. The dreamer looks neither back to whence s/he came, nor forward to some dire or luminous future consequence, but rather down and around, noting what is just so at that particular moment in time in that particular place. To tend a dream is to recognize that in the telling of the dream the dream is already in the room—existing right now as an alive imaginal process.

When a dream image evokes a memory of a childhood event, for instance, I believe a dream therapist must ask why psyche presents this historical image in a dream now. The point is not the historic event itself or how the dreamer felt about it in the past. Something about this past event matters now. Something constellated the dynamics of that past event in the first place. What root image in psyche, what essential life rhythm within that particular dreamer, constellated that past experience? How has that image evolved in its life to the present time? That "root image" is being felt again, in its relevance to present as well as future experience. The dream therapist can listen to the "root image" of the historic experience, particularly listening to the current living expression of the image in present time. In this way of working, the dream

therapist is able to stay with the living image, traversing time in the context of the image, rather than using an image only as a vehicle to access, or work through, personal history. Thus understood, the image itself is the primary referent, not the historical incident constellated by the image.

Part IV: Case Illustration: “At the Water’s Edge”

A dreamer, a woman who has considerable experience in working with her dreams, tells me that she has already spent time considering this dream on her own but feels somehow that she is missing something. She has a sense there is something more. Here is the dream as she first related it to me:

I am walking along the edge of a seaside cliff. I walk until I get to the end of the path, and I become stranded. There is no place to go.

After listening carefully to the dream several times, I ask the dreamer to "associate" to the images or the predicament in the dream. Associations are useful in the beginning. They provide personal context as well as give the dreamer the opportunity to tell what she knows about the circumstance pictured in the dream. For the most part, associations are made to current or historic awake-life circumstances and are therefore limited to the contents of the Personal Unconscious. Methods of Association are reductive in that all images are reduced back to personal circumstances. The dreamer reports the following associations:

Well, it reminds me of a place we visited on a family vacation once when I was ten. I used to walk along the edge of the cliff when I needed time to think. That was the summer my parents were fighting so much. I was afraid they would hurt each other. I guessed they would be getting a divorce, and I didn't know what would happen to me. You know, I'm feeling kind of the same way now. With all the turmoil and budget cutbacks at the agency I work in, I'm wondering if I have reached the end of the line as a staff counselor. I am experiencing a great deal of chaos and fear of possible separation.

In addition to asking about the dreamer's personal associations to the dream, I further invite her to consider how certain dream images may reflect relevant material from mythology and/or literature. Amplification relates the dream imagery to the archetypal patterns of the Collective Unconscious and is a prospective approach in that the dream imagery is listened to as it pertains to the emerging process of the dreamers individuation. Extending the dreamwork beyond personal associations, a process of "amplifying" the images, evoked the following from the dreamer:

I've felt many times that I was on the edge of something which I could glimpse but not see or experience clearly. It's as if I were on a path leading to somewhere important, like a pilgrimage or journey to some important place or "calling." I keep thinking of Penelope being stuck at water's edge at Ithaca—waiting. As a woman, I often feel as if I have been stranded, waiting at the end of a path, waiting for my man to come home, waiting for that which is out of my control.

Both Association and Amplification reveal important insights for the dreamer. Through Association, in working with the material of the Personal Unconscious, the dreamer had the opportunity to honor childhood fears in the presence of a caring therapist and to explore those fears in relation to her current work situation. Through Amplification, in exploring material of the Collective Unconscious, the dreamer became aware of archetypal themes relevant to her life. The universal images of "water's edge" and "waiting" were suggested as representing potentially important inner life struggles, both part of an individuation process now coming into increased awareness.

In both instances, however, the dream images themselves remained frozen, not given the opportunity to reveal themselves as they currently exist and move. In both the reductive (associative) and prospective (amplificative) approaches to the dream, the dream was used as a fixed justification to either summon memories of the past or to forecast a vision of the future. These kind of analytic investigations, however useful, are limited and invariably leave out the here and now reality of the dream experience. Not surprisingly, the dreamer in this instance felt that somehow the dream held something more, something yet to come alive.

On third telling I asked the dreamer to pause and listen, to become aware how the images of the dream fill the room.

The mud of the seaside cliff, the smell of the water—all of the images—came alive. They became embodied. They had substance. They were visible. And the dreamer was really at that moment in the dream work. She was being moved and touched and informed by the images of the dream. As a result she felt a sense of ground, a sense of immediate connection to this natural landscape, and she experienced the pulse of the dreamscape move through her and work through her. She was now located in the dream, and, in turn, the dream had now located her in its activity.

By remaining stationary on the path (as actually pictured in the dream) and by experiencing the physicality of the mud and the marbled rock (as they made their presence known in the dream), the dreamer felt neither the regressive need to retreat backward on the path, nor the fear of what the future held. Both past and future are favored by traditional approaches to dreamwork—regressing into one's past or progressing into the next phase of individuation. Rather, as we *tended* her dream, she felt the immediacy of her present experience, stranded at the end of the path, accompanied by depth of ocean on one side and breadth of the rock face on the other. She felt situated, able to be in the present reality of her dreamscape.

Conclusion

To tend a dream is to allow its activity, its rhythm, to return to its own landscape. To hear a dream deeply allows the dream its presence, its being, and its becoming. And as that rhythm returns and the dream again becomes alive, is it not true that we, at that moment, re-experience our natural place as constituent members in nature's psyche, reconnected to a deeply resonant ecology. Are we not in this experience, re-connected to our essential rhythm—sourced by the very pulse of life itself?

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