

Tending Your Dreams

by

Stephen Aizenstat, Ph.D.

During each night of sleep, we experience an average of four or five cycles of dreaming. For many years I have been curious about dreams, paying attention to my own, and attending to the dreams of other persons, in my clinical practice and in ongoing dream councils. Not only am I curious about the dreams, I am also interested in how we choose to relate to dreams.

My work with dreams has led me to develop a way of relating to dreams that I call "DreamTending." To "tend," says the Oxford English Dictionary, is to "turn the mind, attention, or energies; to apply oneself to the care and service of" a dream. Methods of DreamTending which I present in this article are based upon certain assumptions, certain beliefs about the very nature of dreams.

I believe that dreams are alive. The images in dreams have lives and bodies of their own; they are not merely projections of the dreamer. The dreamer is not necessarily the center of the dream. Autonomous images may appear in the dream to interact with the dreamer, but the totality of the dream should not be reduced, only, to "a story about me." I imagine a dream as a community event, a town meeting of images—each image having a life of its own, yet also relating to other images (including the dreamer). These images often have something to say about their own lives, their own plights in the world. Part of the value of dreams is that we have access to these voices of other beings in the world, and we have the opportunity to relate to them in a deeper way than we often do in our waking life.

My second belief in DreamTending is that the human psyche is inherently multi-dimensional. In conceptualizing the psyche, I delineate four levels. These levels are the Ego (consciousness), the Personal Unconscious, the Collective Unconscious and the World Unconscious. Although each of these levels of psyche is distinct, they also are deeply interrelated. A given dream may emphasize one particular level more than others, say the Personal Unconscious, yet the other levels are also likely to be present in the dream. The art of DreamTending includes exploration of these levels and a consideration of "what" and "who" live between them.

So! How do you "tend" a dream? Here is a sequence of methods for DreamTending, which I think will help you understand this approach. The DreamTending methods are presented in four phases. Phase I involves "Listening To The Dream Present Itself." Phase II focuses on "Associating To The Dream." In Phase III, the dreamer will be "Interacting With The Images." And finally, Phase IV brings the process together in the practice of "Tending The Living Images."

As you tend your dreams, remember to combine these methods with your personal intuitions about your dream images.

Methods for DreamTending

Phase I: Listening to the Dream Present Itself

In Phase I, the goal is to pay attention to what is actually presented in the dream itself. You want to hear psyche as she speaks in the dream. It takes some effort to forestall the temptation to associate the dream with other life events or the urge to say how you feel about the dream. However, to most fully harvest the wisdom of the dream, it is important to hear the dream just as psyche originally presented it, saving personal feelings and associations for later consideration.

1. Write down your dream in the present tense.

The first step is to write down your dream in the present tense, and in as much detail as you can remember. Using present tense invites the dream images to live again in the immediacy of the moment, as they did when you originally experienced the dream. For example, rather than writing the dream in the past tense, "I was flying through the sky," express it in the present tense and include more details, "I am flying in a cool, hazy sky at sunset."

2. Bring attention to the particularity of the dreamscape.

What is this dream landscape? Where are you located? Notice the setting in a detailed way. Look around. Is this dream taking place in the forest or the city, the desert, the mountains, or the ocean? Look closely at the colors and the textures of the dream—for example, the warm, aqua-blue ocean water or the hard, reddish-brown ground. Pay attention to how you and other dream characters and objects are "placed" in the dreamscape. Location in dreams is frequently very specific, offering the dreamer connection to the psychic ground on which the activity of the dream is taking place.

3. Follow the dramatic presentation of the dream.

What is the "plot" of your dream drama? Most dreams present themselves in a dramatic story line, enacted in three segments: (1) setting the stage, (2) enacting the drama, and (3) resolving or failing to resolve the drama. When listening to a dream, notice how the dream-as-drama opens, moves toward the dramatic moment, and closes. Dreams are alive and often reveal themselves as living psychic events in the theater of the dream.

4. Notice the characters and creatures of the dream.

Identify the various figures in the dream. Examine one figure at a time. See each figure as an actual, though imaginal, person. Notice details. Is the figure familiar or unfamiliar in your waking life? If familiar, is there some way it seems different to you—not the way you experience it in awake life? Or, how is it the same? Look and listen. Are some figures "louder" than others? Get to know the outer and the inner natures of these imaginal characters. Within the life of the dream, watch the activity of each and how they interact with each other.

5. Look for repetitions, contrasts, and/or similarities.

Do any characters remind you of other characters within this dream, or characters from other dreams? Are the repetitions exact? If not, how do they differ? Repetitions call attention to particular dream figures or motifs and to their repeated visitation. Contrasts and/or similarities are also important to notice. Contrasts bring focus to the dynamic interaction, often polarity, between dream figures. Contrasts might appear as water and land, night and day, open and closed, etc. Similarities bring emphasis. Similarities might manifest as all dream figures being of the same gender or all dream action moving in a particular direction, and so on.

6. Listen poetically and become curious about the dream.

The activity of the psyche is alive and poetic. The psyche likes to speak as muse or fool and sometimes speaks in riddle and rhyme. Watch for puns and metaphors. For example, the dream image of "an angry man in a hat" may be a poetic way of suggesting the "mad hatter." A dream figure called Herman might also be "her-man." A character who carries a stiff board might be "bored stiff." Listening poetically to the dreaming psyche opens the dream to its lyrical possibilities.

Becoming curious about the dream also keeps the dreamer interested in the living quality of the dream (rather than moving so quickly into the meaning of the dream). Referring

back to the dream image just mentioned: Who is this "angry man running after me?" A chase dream is often frightening. Don't run away from it. Stay curious about what is awe-full or difficult (sometimes repugnant). Consider these questions: What is this angry man wanting right now? Or, more particularly, What is he doing and to whom or to what is he doing it? Let the action itself evoke in you various possibilities or echoes of familiar themes or patterns. Notice the activity of the dream as if you were a participant in the dream (which you are!).

Phase II: Associating to the Dream

Now it is time to allow yourself to associate to the multi-dimensionality of dream life. Certain images or feelings in the dream may remind you of events in your personal history reflecting the Personal Unconscious. That same image or other images may remind you of stories told by people throughout time suggesting the universal themes of the Collective Unconscious. The image may resonate with the sounds of psychic life that are orchestrated in the wider ecology of the World Unconscious. On occasion, the same image may reveal, in different moments, aspects of all three of these realms of unconscious life. In associating to a dream, muse about how images interact within the multiple dimensions of life as well as how dream images act on each other.

1. Explore associations and connections with your personal history.

Think about the events which occurred within the 48 hours preceding the dream.

Imagine those events as images to be considered along with the dream. Place daytime events and nighttime images side by side—noticing what likes to go with what. For example, "the angry man in a hat" in the dream just mentioned could correlate with your arrogant daytime boss. Often dreams are continuations of awake-life experience, offering an inner life presentations of outer life circumstances. DreamTending shows us that at the Personal Unconscious level of the dream images are often associated to recently experienced awake-life phenomena.

In addition to the last 48 hours, notice details which may situate the dream in your personal history. Is this dream taking place in a particular era of your life? How old are you in the dream? Here are some clues: are the other persons in the dream from your grade school or your college years? Is the dream action taking place in the apartment where you lived when you first moved away from your family home? Are there any parallels between the issues in your life then and the issues in your life now?

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Amplify dream themes in relationship to mythological and/or cultural stories.

See if any of the events or themes in your dream are similar to myths, fairy tales, or legends that you know. For example, a dream in which you wander from place to place trying to return home might evoke the image of Odysseus on his meandering, adventure-filled journey from Troy to Ithaca. Or, a dream story in which you are lured downstairs to meet a dark, mysterious lover may suggest Persephone's visit to Hades in the Underworld, or—a more contemporary version—Christine's involvement with the Phantom of the Opera. Exploration of these themes as they appear in myths and literature connect dream images to the stories of the Collective Unconscious.

3. Listen to the dream image as a voice of psyche in the world.

From the perspective of the World Unconscious, dream images are aspects of a world psyche, each image a part of a wider ecology of psychic life. Dream images of creatures, places, and things are listened to as being sourced in the world psyche rather than being attributed to a personal or collective human experience. For example, when the dream image of an eagle presents itself, listen to the eagle speak of its plight in the world rather than so quickly connecting the dream image to your personal complexes or to a them from a cultural myth.

4. Pause and listen.

Step back from the imagery. Allow time for spontaneous associations and connections to occur betwixt and between the various levels of the dream. Be open to the unexpected. Make room for "Hermes," messenger of the Greek gods, or "Coyote," legendary trickster of the Native American psyche, or your own intuitions. Often these kinds of connections—those which are made and live out of awareness—are the most helpful in realizing the multiple possibilities of psychic life.

Phase III: Interacting with the Images

This phase involves an awareness that images have body. Embodied images have presence and pulse. Interacting with dream images as image-bodies deepens your relationship with them and allows you to get to know them more intimately.

1. Honor the dream image as a living participant of the dreamtime.

Tell the dream again, reliving the experience slowly, thoughtfully—inviting the dreamscape and dream characters to enter and fill the room. Remember, using the present tense helps you to get back into the experience of the dream and allows the dream the immediacy of its experience. On second telling, become aware of what now strikes you most about the dream? Begin exploring that. Notice what has been added or left out in the second telling. Select an image and examine it for its particularity. Look closely at each detail. In doing so, you invite the image to come to life, to become a living participant in the room with you.

You will be utilizing a way of seeing that originates from the inside out. This kind of looking requires a bit of magic—the kind of magic that we all are familiar with, or at least were at one time. It is rather simple really. You are recovering a way of seeing that you used often as a child, and still sometimes use in playful and reflective moments as an adult—a way of seeing that honors the ability of the image to show itself. That is the trick: to see in a manner that invites the inside of the image to present itself outside. The secret is to see without focused intention. This kind of perceiving allows the living reality of the image to come to life, to present itself from deep inside itself.

2. Use your physical senses to interact with the embodied image.

Experiment with using your physical senses to experience the figures and settings of the dream more deeply and immediately. For example, an image of a zebra appears in your dream. Can you imagine touching the zebra? What does it feel like? Does it have texture? Look closely. Are you able to see its striped markings? Look at details. What distinguishes this particular zebra from others? Can you imagine smelling this dream animal? What is its scent or odor? Listen closely. Are there sounds being made, either by the creature or in the surrounding dream setting? Describe those sounds: are they musical or raucous, loud or soft? Listen again, are you able to experience the zebra as an embodied dream image now in the room with you?

3. Discover the essential rhythms of embodied images.

You may find that an essential rhythm exists between yourself and the embodied dream image dream by experimenting with sound and movement. Find suitable music and dance your dream. Become each of the figures—the animals, the people, and the objects. Move as they move or, hold still as they do. This is an inner art; let go of wanting to be beautiful and graceful, and do things "right." Just move with the feelings of the figures.

Dance the mood of your dreams. Let the rhythm generate from inside the images. Allow them to invite you to their dance.

4. Give artistic expression to your dream images.

To better see and touch your dream imagery, choose a significant figure or feeling from your dream. Draw or paint the figure or feeling. Or, sculpt it in clay. Again, let go of the demand for this to be "art." You are giving physical expression to your dream, freeing it from the verbal or mental realm, and inviting it to live at another level. Remember, all of the figures in your dreams have life—the animals, the plants, even the buildings and the stones.

In particular, however, be alert for visitations of your ancestor spirits and the soul-bodies of those people who are, or have been, close to you. Dreams give setting and voice to the interior realm of the muses and the ancestors, providing a place for the appearance of these animating forces. You will want to develop an on-going relationship with these beings. Giving physical, as well as contemplative, expression to these figures is of special importance to forming and nurturing this connection.

Phase IV: Tending the Living Image

As you interact with your dreams, they come to life and fill the room with their presence. An integral phase of DreamTending is cultivating and sustaining an on-going relationship to the living quality of the dream—its being and its becoming. It is as if we are asked, in an "ethical" way, to maintain contact with these living images who, at first, made contact with us. There are many creative ways to tend the living images of your dreams in an ongoing way.

1. Designate an area in your home for the objects you create from your dreams.

You may wish to arrange a special place in your home for the physical "products" of your DreamTending. Giving your dream paintings or dream sculptures their own sacred place provides a setting and offers an invitation for continued contact with your dream life. Spend a few minutes each day with your "dream objects"—reflecting in silence, talking with the figures, or in other ways developing relationship with the inner life of your dreams. Be patient. Let the images in your dreams come out and present themselves. Once you have become actively engaged with your dreams, it becomes possible to reflect more deeply on their many potentialities. With additional attention your dreams will continue to reveal themselves, unfolding from the inside out.

2. Assemble your own personal dream council consisting of figures from your dreams.

Identify important dream figures and imagine them sitting in a circular council with you. You (dream-ego) and the other "councilors" sit quietly in an attitude of respectful listening. In time, one or more of the figures will come forward to speak, sometimes to you, more often to another member of the council. Bringing intention into the council meeting provides a focus. For example, when pondering a life transition, it is useful to "call" a council meeting, present the issue at hand, and then listen to the many viewpoints offered by the gathering of dream figures.

3. Interact with other dreams and dreamers in an ongoing dream group.

You will find that the safe container—the sacred *temenos*—of regular dream group sessions will help you broaden and deepen your relationship to your dream life. Each dream group member (a group of 6-8 participants is best) will have access to, and the ability to offer, a different perspective. Group members join together to develop and protect a sacred (and confidential) place of dreamwork. Care is taken to tend and respect your dream figures and those which come to (and with) other dream group members. When you are invited to share your feelings and intuitions about another group member's dream, remember not to impose.

Your group may also choose to develop some rituals in order to be sure that everyone who wants to share a dream is able to do so in the time you have available. Many dream groups begin their meetings with a focusing exercise and some sort of check-in ritual. It is important to the dreaming psyche to know that she will be heard, and a check-in ritual is one way to provide this assurance. Simply going around the group at the beginning of the session and checking in with each member provides opportunity both to follow-up on the dreamwork from last week and to identify those who wish to share a dream this session.

4. Make an offering to a dream figure or dream location.

To tend an image of a dream figure in an ongoing way is much like maintaining a meaningful friendship. Both ask for continued attention. It helps, of course, to know something about the nature of the person or dream figure that you are befriending. Does she like to be active in the morning hours or at dusk? What foods does she particularly like? Where are her favorite places? Knowing the tendencies and desires of dream figures will help you choose appropriate offerings to support your ongoing relationship

with them. For example, you may discover that one of your dream figures, an ancestral spirit, loves eating potatoes for dinner. An offering you might make is to set aside a small portion of potato on your plate when dining. This activity acknowledges the living presence of this imaginal being in your life and maintains relationship with her or him. Knowing something about the dream figure's activity pattern will also alert you to when he or she is most available for interaction.

When tending a particular location presented in the dream, try actually visiting the place that is pictured. If the place itself is unfamiliar, search for a site that holds the essence of the dream location. Once you are at the actual place in the physical world, align with the site in order to rejuvenate your connection with the "spirit" of place. During your visit, wait and listen to what is being asked of you there. Also, in turn, ask for guidance and listen to the teachings of the location.

IN CONCLUSION

As you work with your dreams more and more, they will become your friends, your guides, your mentors. You will become a caring witness to their activities, listening to what they have to say, watching what they do.

In tending your dreams, wait for and trust your own experience of insight. Other persons with whom you share your dream may have interesting and useful intuitions or suggestions, but the dream is your experience. You are the "final authority" on what your dream is for you. Don't be intimidated by fears of being off-base or of going down blind alleys. Enjoy the "detours." They may lead you through new and significant territory. Stay curious. Attend to the images. Tend them.

DreamTending is an art in which there are no "wrongs"—only possibilities. The object is to discover and find relationship with those possibilities which seem to fit best. Enjoy your involvement with this work, with these relationships. When DreamTending, be prepared: the figures of the dream often come to life, speak for themselves, and, in turn, may tend you. To tend a dream is to invite the dream to come out and live, to be known. In so doing, you, too, will come alive.

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Dr. Stephen Aizenstat is the founding president of Pacifica Graduate Institute, a core faculty member of the institute, and a clinical psychologist. His original research centers on a psychodynamic process of "tending the living image," particularly in the context of dreamwork. He has conducted dreamwork seminars for over 20 years throughout the United States, Europe and Asia.

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