

ASKING A DIFFERENT KIND OF QUESTION: Transforming nightmare into narrative of empowerment

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Over a century ago, Sigmund Freud pioneered the idea that dreams had a logic to them that made them worthy of scientific inquiry. Since then, many have elaborated on his work and/or opened new paths. Of these probably the most notable are Carl Jung and Fritz Perls. In this paper I will be sharing insights and open questions about an old romance with dreams that became cross-fertilized by flings with solution-oriented and cognitive-emotive theory and then terminally complicated by an infatuation with social constructionism.

A couple of years ago I accepted an invitation to give a workshop on dreamwork, a topic that had been dormant in my work for almost a decade. I liked the idea, even though more hard-nosed stuff had taken the brunt of my attention for a long time. Something however went badly wrong. People were not going into the deep cathartic processes of personal history that they were supposed to. I had learned dreamwork in the framework of Gestalt therapy, that is of finishing unfinished business, bringing incomplete processes to closure. My clients however persisted in building visions of the good life, solving practical problems and tapping into energy for *future* processes! I started to realise that I as a practitioner was doing something different. Yes the techniques seemed to be the same, but I was asking different questions.

"AMY"

I am standing on the curb and I watch as my two older brothers take my dog Nick into the back seat of a car. I start to panic because now my deceased brothers want to take Nick with them. Helpless, I look on as they let him into the back seat and drive off. I will never see him again, I will lose him forever just as I lost my brothers. I wake crying hysterically, endlessly.

Amy was anxiety-ridden. "It's been three years since Nick died, what is wrong with me? I'm an emotional mess! Will I never get over this? Does this mean that somebody is going to die on me again?" Her presenting questions are typical, almost universal. I invite her to go back into the dream and change places with Nick, identifying with Nick physically, looking at the scene through Nick's eyes.

I am Nick. I love to play and chase things and I love doing things with people. The car looks a bit small but I'll get in anyway. The car starts moving. I notice there's water here for me and some playthings for the trip. The car seems somehow bigger now. Maybe this is going to be a fun trip. I wonder where we are going?

The ancient Egyptians considered dreams a proof of the existence of the Afterworld and a source of precious knowledge about future events. Freud saw dreams as veiled expressions of the unconscious, a new concept at the time. The obvious thing to do was to ask what unconscious drive or conflict is being disguised. Jung considered the dream an active message from the unconscious to the conscious, an attempt at reintegration of separate(d) realms. Perls asked what unfinished business can we deal with here. A solution-oriented perspective might generate questions about the goals, values and energy to be gleaned from the richness of the dream's narrative. A constructionist perspective, by implying the dream and reality itself being co-construction, might generate questions that would facilitate a sharing of realities across the subcultures of the self. It seems to be human nature to turn to dreams and search for significance beyond the so-called obvious and rational.

The dream and the self

All of this brings us to what it is to dream. Is it self-deception, self-disclosure, self-understanding? After working with the imagery and sensations of her dream Amy's own spontaneous associations were to her immediate present. She was faced with a decision to continue in a dead-end job or endure financial hardship while trying to upgrade her education for a future she could not yet foresee. Her dream now told her that her natural curiosity and sociability would carry her through the process and she would be able to adjust reasonably well to the interim financial arrangements. Her own experience, brought on by the new perspective in the dream, took her beyond interpretation, through the role-playing, to an empowerment undeniably physical, to new decisions and action, to a new future. Previously there had been two nightmares: the one in the dream and the one predicted by her understanding of the dream. The solution-oriented framework had in itself created second-order benefits by building self-esteem rather than undermining it as her first attempts at understanding the dream had done.

Looking at the dream as a value-driven, future-oriented problem-solving process also re-opens the case on the nature of the self, of personality and other such constructs. If the dream is more than wish-fulfillment and flight from reality, what does that tell us about our very nature as humans?

Long ago the Jungian concept of the shadow awakened me to the understanding that the unconscious might be the repository of necessary and useful things, not just biological drives and toxins. The unconscious presented itself as being comprised of repressed memories but also of underdeveloped or unrecognised roles and capabilities. The segregation of conscious from unconscious was not a universal, eternal structure. Defence mechanisms could be seen as the very process of structuring the Ego itself (or

the illusion thereof) as a separate reality. The unconscious is troublesome only when the issues that have been relegated to it are denied recognition. Traditionally this was seen as implying long and difficult negotiations, mediated by the therapist, between the disparate inhabitants of the psyche.

When I turned my attention to dreams after neglecting the topic for a decade, I found that somewhere in the back of my mind the cognitive therapies of Albert Ellis, Aaron T. Beck and Maxie Maultsby had deconstructed my belief in the existence of anything "irrational". All manner of things seem to have meaning, intentionality, sense to them. Even what I earlier might have called "wish fulfillment" or "flight from reality". It was no longer tenable for me, for example, to approach repetitive dreams exclusively as signs of past trauma when so much seemed to point to needs in the present or frustrated aspirations and visions for the future, all nagging for recognition.

Narrative theory further complicated things by throwing out modernist logic of identity, replacing it with understandings in flux, particular organisations of memory. After all, in what way can we speak of identity in the case of a person with amnesia? Is there a self separate from memories and interpretations of past events?

Dreaming has traditionally been associated with regression. A modernistic perspective might see dreaming as regression in the service of the ego. A post-modern extension of that would have dreaming as regression in the service of *dissolution* of the ego, not a relapse into primordial chaos but a progression, a dissolution of conventional rational structures in favor of a more pluralistic, and thus more realistic self-identity. Gergen writes of the saturated self, peopled not only by the ego and a few archetypes but by a myriad of voices and commitments all clamoring for attention. Here the work of the therapist begins to be more reminiscent of crowd control than auto mechanics.

Working with dreams

Dreamwork, perhaps more than any other approach to psychotherapy captures the imagination of therapist and client alike. Every system of dreamwork revolves around a particular theory of the mind, bringing some things into focus and downplaying others. Each theory will generate a particular range of questions with varying applicability to diagnostics, financial planning, treating phobias or writing novels. A narrative and solution-oriented approach would have one asking the client about present needs and future aspirations. Emotions would be flags for core values in play. Finishing an unfinished dream would be energy given direction, not energy simply released from old hangups. The therapist is there to reconstruct and co-construct the client's dream and with it a part of the client's potential, present and future, there as a guide for the client to model his own potential self, there to co-construct an enriched narrative.

I will glance briefly at Amy's dream from three different viewpoints. A Gestalt perspective would focus on sorrow and other unfinished business from the past. This implies the need for a "deep process" to release energy bound up in the internal conflict of not coming to terms with the sorrow and loss related to Nick's death. There is probably also a parallel issue of Amy's loss of her own playfulness at an earlier time in her life. The result of resolving these issues is release (freedom-from), for Amy to be able to get on with her life in general. A solution oriented perspective might focus on the prospective function of the dream, to integrate displaced energy in order to ask what one could do with this specific energy (freedom-to). What possibilities would open up for Amy "if she were totally imbued with Nick's energy and sociability"?

A constructionist perspective reshuffles the whole deck by placing the source of dream content squarely in the social realm. Instead of archetypes and drives from within, we find an ongoing social process of saturation of the self. Perhaps we should rather speak of many selves, coming and going, hardly noticing the "ego" that attempts in vain to assert a modernist hegemony of truth and consistency or a romanticist hegemony of morality. We find a plurality of potentials competing for investment, becoming demands, dreams to be nurtured, some to be laid to rest. This opens up seemingly intractable problems for rational choice. We find a world where inadequacy is normal! If it ever has been possible in the past, the current complexity of life makes a rational, coherent ego an impossibility.

If there is anything at all holding all of this together it is certainly not the ego of ego psychology, but rather a seething balancing act, a background process sorting out priorities and psychosocial capabilities. This process actually seems to be both unconscious and successful most of the time. Only occasionally do we get a glimpse of it in a flash of intuition or when a nocturnal piece of work gets sent to the breakfast table for more conscious processing. Prioritising, optimising, selection, deselection, desaturation... Jung's house as a symbol of the self has turned into a rooming house on a busy intersection. We do find a relatively stable occupancy with turnover marked by occasional births and deaths but also innumerable roomers, visitors and Bed-and-Breakfast guests coming and going, bringing news from afar.

The future of dreamwork

All of this presents a challenge to our understandings and our ways of working with the dream. Historically, the focal point in dreamwork seems to have been drifting from the past, on towards the present and ultimately the future, from inner to social realms. Interpretation of symbols gives way to co-construction of narrative. Centrality of emotion gives way to centrality of negotiation, analysis gives way to enrichment of the dominant narrative, of life itself.

The traditional Gestalt tools of enrichment, completion, identification and reworking acquire new meaning when immersed in these new understandings. The role of expertise is likewise transformed. A conscious choice of preferred understandings and questions, ie. techniques, continues to be a necessary tool, essential for progressing beyond the generalisations of common wisdom. The therapist continues to bear the brunt of the responsibility for the working process. It is the client however that is responsible for the substance of the work. As with Jung's technique of active imagination, more important than the medium itself may be the message, the conveyed attitude toward the client and toward the unconscious. In that vein, the dream and dreamwork can also be seen as a useful placebo, a projective test activating and bringing into play the tacit knowledge of the therapist and the client.

The dream seems to be rich enough to accomodate almost any working hypothesis. For example many dreams will surrender in minutes a vivid description of the perceived power relations in the immediate family that might otherwise take several sessions to unravel. What might a family therapeutic dream theory be like? How might that theory inform our practical endeavours with our clients? If we choose, as our working hypothesis, to approach the dream as a value-driven, future-oriented problem-solving process how productive is that as a starting point? What useful questions does it generate? In any case the choice of framework is not a matter of "truth" but an intervention in itself, defining the limits of what is possible for the client to discover. Freud called the dream the royal road to the unconscious. The dream is turning out to be the royal road to Anyland.

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