

An Invitation to Soulful Living:

3 Reasons to Work with Dreams

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In the morning, the alarm goes off. Without fully waking, I reach over, turn it off, and stumble out of bed. As I struggle to wake up, I have a vague feeling that a moment ago I was somewhere else, involved in some activity. My first inclination is to ignore it as one of those odd passing thoughts that doesn't amount to anything. Then, while I'm shaving, a strange series of recollections come to me. There had been an incident with the police. My parent's house was surrounded. The police thought I was being held hostage inside, but I was just hiding there by choice. When did this happen? Of course, it was a dream that happened while I was asleep. Just a weird little dream, and with that, my mind moves on to contemplating my plans for the day.

For many people, the experience I've described is familiar. It's common in our conscious state to ignore or dismiss those shadowy dream memories or to have no recall at all. But this is a missed opportunity to answer an invitation from the depths. Dreams offer a unique path to connect with the energy and intelligence of the unconscious. They extend an invitation to look beneath the surface of our lives and have an experience in the underworld, the realm of the soul. In the words of James Hillman (1979), "Dreaming is the psyche itself doing it's soul-work" (p. 201). The process of this work is of particular value in three areas I'd like to discuss here: the mind-body connection, the resolution of psychological conflict, and the pursuit of existential wisdom.

Healing Through the Mind-Body Connection

It appears that dreams have a profound connection to both our physical and mental health. A number of studies have found that when the rhythm of sleep is disrupted, and the human mind is deprived of REM sleep (that portion of the sleep cycle

when dreaming occurs), a number of serious physical problems develop, which include diminished immune system functioning, disturbance to metabolic processes and even an increased risk for some types of cancer (Greene & Siegel, 2004; Koban & Swinson, 2005; Ozturk et al., 1999; Rosbash & Takahashi, 2002). It appears we need our sleep and our dreams in order to regulate the mind and body.

When our minds and our bodies are not functioning normally, when we are in some state of imbalance, dreams offer a resource for healing. A number of care professions believe that working with patients' dreams and visualizations can benefit the treatment of physical illnesses (Epstein, 1989; Garfield, 1991; LaBerge, 1993). When patients work with their imagination to experience and interact with images, it has been found to alleviate muscle tension and improve organ functioning (Travis, 2001). Many of you probably have firsthand experiences with the power of the mind to affect physical illness.

Dr. Steven Aizenstat (personal communication, May 25, 2005) from the Pacifica Graduate Institute has a story about a man he encountered during a public speech he was giving on dreams. The man was clearly hoping to stump Dr. Aizenstat as he presented a dream about a broken piano leg. As they got into a more detailed description of what the piano leg looked like, Dr. Aizenstat had the gentleman draw a picture of the image, and he was struck by how much the drawing resembled an illustration of a vertebral column. At Dr. Aizenstat's urging, the man paid a visit to his physician and learned that he had injured one of his thoracic vertebrae, which if untreated, placed him at risk for significant neurological deterioration. As in this example, the unconscious appears to be in conversation with the body on a regular basis, unperceived by the conscious mind.

Sometimes intuition or suspicion tells us that things are off balance or not working right

in our physical being, and sometimes these unconscious ways of knowing find us through our dreams. Valuable information is there, if we will pay attention to it.

The Resolution of Psychological Conflict

Since the late 1800's, every major school of Psychology has maintained that dreams are psychologically valuable and significant (Aizenstat, personal communication, August 13, 2004). The traditional view was that dreams emerge from the unconscious while the conscious mind sleeps. This is apparent in the many ways that dreams defy the expectations of our conscious thoughts: situations are strange or confused, events and characters are illogical, laws of physics and reason are often subverted. When we awake, the conscious mind struggles to make sense of what it just experienced, fails ultimately, and then goes on the offensive to minimize the dream as useless and insignificant. It is the work of Psychology to challenge the dominance of the conscious mind and dive into the unconscious in order to understand who we truly are in a deeper way. Both Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung believed there was a connection between dreams and waking life through the unconscious (Freud, 1900/1950; Jung, 1961/1974).

Just as the unconscious is active in our dreams, it also makes an impression in our waking lives by thwarting our conscious will. Sometimes it's as if we're living in a dream: our life situation seems strange or confused, our actions defy logic ("why did I do that?" we ask, "that's not like me!"), and our reason cannot stop the soul from hungering. Why should it be so? This question lies at the root of why we go to therapists and it led Freud, Jung and others to propose that our suffering has to do with the activity of the unconscious (Freud, 1900/1950; Jung, 1961/1989). Dreams are important because they

are a reflection of that activity.

The field of psychotherapy has evolved considerably since the late 1800's, but a basic premise endures: psychological distress is the result of conflict between conscious and unconscious mental activity. By working with dreams in therapy, the activity of the unconscious can be illuminated and the insights gained there can reduce or resolve the conflict that is causing distress in our waking lives. Therapy accomplishes this through techniques that deepen our relationship with the images of the dream. At this point, an example might be useful.

Let's consider the dream I mentioned at the start of this discussion. The setting is the home of my childhood, which is surrounded by police. The officers believe I'm being held hostage, but I'm hiding there by choice. A therapeutic approach to this dream asks what associations I have with each of its elements. I reflect on my childhood in that house, and recall the number of times I felt alone there, even in the midst of my family. I consider the police, and the feeling of being surrounded by authority figures who don't understand my situation. I sit for a moment with the feelings that come up for me in this scene, and think about times in my waking life when I've felt this way. I wonder about times when I've acted or felt like a policeman, concerned with rules and order, and failed to understand my own situation from the inside out. I start to move deeper into the poetic qualities of symbol and metaphor in the dream and question in what ways I've felt like a hostage, both in my childhood and because of it. In what ways do my own ideas about rules and responsibility unwittingly hold me captive? And I wonder about another perspective, that sometimes I hide from my adult responsibilities by choice.

These are just a few examples of how to begin working with the dream image. In this

way, themes appear through the dream, which are relevant to conflicts in the dreamer's waking life. Further work involves re-experiencing the dream in greater detail and allowing the images to speak for themselves. Active imagination is used to create shifts in perspective and attitude through the deepening relationship with the images. Therapy becomes extremely rich and exciting when conflicts in waking life are cared for through the animation of dream images.

The Pursuit of Existential Wisdom

Often the process of therapy leads to deeper questions about how and why we live – fundamental questions about the nature and meaning in our existence. Seeking answers to these big questions is what I refer to as the pursuit of existential wisdom. Just like the iceberg carrying most of its mass underwater, the issues which bring people into treatment can be just the tip of more profound matters. When therapy works at this deeper level, people feel it strengthens the purpose and meaning in their lives. Through the unconscious, dreams have a wonderful way of drawing us into our depths, into our soul, where the pursuit of this kind of existential wisdom is rewarded. In order to work with dreams on this deeper level, three conditions are necessary: a willingness to view dreams as holding deeper significance, a respect for different forms of intelligence, and an opening of the heart to engage the emotions in the process.

The first condition necessary to pursue existential wisdom through dreams is the willingness to view them as holding deeper significance. This willingness to view into the depths appears to be a straightforward idea, but it can be elusive as an experience. As I mentioned at the beginning of this discussion, there is a powerful collective energy at

work in our society, which encourages us to ignore or minimize the significance of our dreams. Why should this be so? Why do so many of us completely forget our dreams upon waking? Why is it such a familiar figure of speech to say, “It was only a dream”? Perhaps the answer lies in the very depths which we collectively avoid. Ironically, media and print ads encourage us to “dream” with astonishing frequency, but it’s a facile commercialization of the word. Rather than pointing us in the direction of the treasures buried down in the soul, the word is used to stimulate our hunger for greater profit and happiness in our waking lives. It encourages a movement outward toward the external, where our inner longings and fantasies get projected on one elusive target after another, and always with a dollar sign attached. Dreaming is of far greater value when we allow it to move us in the opposite direction, inward and downward into the currents of the unconscious, where those beautifully strange images ebb and flow. Why do we collectively avoid this realm? We avoid it because often it’s nonsensical, its messages are puzzling and complex, and it seldom flatters the ego and its heroic struggles. It provokes, disturbs, agitates. Yet this is where inner work begins. The first step toward working with the soul is to believe that dreams are the soul’s messengers.

The second condition for this kind of work to be effective is an attitude of respect for different forms of intelligence. Most of us think of intelligence as our ability to acquire and use knowledge in negotiating our way through the world. Yet this is only one form of intelligence. Nature demonstrates a certain kind of intelligence when a plant knows to turn toward the light for sustenance. The emerging field of Ecopsychology theorizes that the planet possesses an unconscious knowledge of how to sustain itself, and that the activity of the human psyche functions as a subset of that knowledge (Roszak, 1995).

Dreams take on a very different set of properties when viewed in this way. Consider the notion that dreams present us with a different form of intelligence, a type of mental activity neither rational nor logical, but rather instinctual, linking us to the rhythms of the natural world. Dream images rise through the unconscious as if on a tide, greet us, interact with us, and then recede back out to sea. When we consider dreaming as a natural phenomenon, it leads us once again in the direction of a deeper understanding of the meaning and purpose in our lives, of our relationship with the world, gained through intuitive and unconscious ways of knowing.

Finally, in order for dreams to assist the pursuit of existential wisdom, there needs to be an opening of the heart and an emotional engagement. The intellect can find amusement and stimulation in dreams, but there is minimal psychological benefit unless the emotions become involved. Dream images usually have a close association with our emotions, even when the dream itself appears to be unemotional. There are several ways to reach the emotional dimension of this work. First, it's important to feel comfortable and safe experiencing feelings, including unexpected feelings. Sometimes it helps to actually ask the conscious mind for permission to experience deeper feelings as you reflect on your personal associations with the dream images. Opening the heart also involves a lowering of defenses and a willingness to take risks. These are the types of risks that come with trying something new, letting go of the familiar to try out different ways of thinking, feeling and acting. This is the kind of risk-taking children demonstrate. Children have an astonishing capacity for psychological flexibility and for learning. The young mind develops those capacities with an attitude of openhearted playfulness, and it delights in silliness and creative imagination as an aspect of play. At a certain point in the

developmental process, we teach children that it's immature to act silly and to indulge the imagination. Over time, this emphasis on rules and order can imbalance the psyche, by repressing spontaneity and imagination. As adults, we grow ambivalent toward that capacity to be openhearted and emotionally engaged. We feel nostalgic when we observe it in children, yet we demean it in adults as naïve and sentimental. Dreams can help restore balance to the psyche. We develop a richer and more layered understanding of who we are and how we exist if we can greet the images with an open heart and allow our emotions to join in the play.

Conclusion

Researchers believe that we dream several times every night (Ince, 1995), yet there appears to be a trend toward devaluing and ignoring this phenomenon. There is evidence to suggest that we can be psychologically healthier and more whole both as individuals and as a society if we allow the dreaming mind to interact more freely with our waking lives. A closer relationship with dream images can benefit the mind-body connection, resolve psychological conflict, and aid our efforts to answer deeper existential questions. It's important to note that dreamwork may not be for everyone, and many people benefit from therapy without ever working on their dreams. In addition, for people who are drawn toward dreamwork, there are many more methods and techniques available than the few I've outlined here, especially methods for building community through dream groups.

As we sleep, the unconscious mind roams through the underworld from place to place,

from figure to figure, introducing us to a world of images and subtle bodies which we scarcely recall upon waking. This happens every night, whether we remember it or not, and as the alarm goes off in each bedroom, there's a brief moment of twilight consciousness where we hover between two worlds. In that moment, we can extend a hand toward the dreaming world and invite an image or two to accompany us into our waking lives. When we allow the conscious mind to move in this way, the psyche moves downward and inward, in the direction of soul. Moving in the direction of soul leads us to uncover hidden dimensions of our being, both the wounds of the psyche and the medicine to heal them.

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