The FiveStar Method: Applying the Co-Creative Paradigm in Dream Analysis
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Given the number of books that have been written on dream interpretation, and the diversity of approaches that are currently available, one might conclude that dream analysis is a particularly difficult endeavor. But it is also possible that the apparent difficulty is due to an age-old assumption that prevents us from viewing dreams properly, and working with them effectively. To illustrate this problem, let's examine a dream that was shared by a friend of mine several years ago:

> *I was alone, outside my childhood home. I looked to the north, and saw UFOs approaching side by side, spewing fire from their undersides and setting fire to the ground below. I thought to myself that they had come to destroy the world. Terrified, I ran into the house, went into the bedroom, and hid under my bed.*

After telling me the dream, she asked, "What do you think the UFOs represent? And what do you think I'm being warned about?" These questions are typical of how many of us approach our dreams. That is, we tend to believe that the dream is prepared ahead of time as a fixed communication from the unconscious mind, and that the message is wholly expressed in the visual imagery, or so-called symbols. Freud certainly believed this, but it wasn't a new idea. Indeed, this approach has prevailed for centuries. But by believing that the dream is fixed from the outset, and by focusing so much on the visual images as the carriers of meaning, dream workers have overlooked the dreamer's impact on the dream imagery and outcome. Consequently, traditional dreamwork effectively freezes the dream in place, rather than viewing it as an interactive process that unfolds as a consequence of the dream ego's feelings, choices, and responses. The woman who shared this dream certainly did not ask me, "What would have happened if I had faced the UFOs, and not acted in fear?"

The reason we focus so intently on the dream images and situations, without questioning the dream ego's often-decisive role in the unfolding drama, is complicated. Suffice to say that we have inherited a largely unexamined assumption (Sontag, 1966), first espoused by the ancient Greeks, that dreams can be reduced to their visual content. If we hold this assumption to be true, then dream analysis is difficult; for it depends on being able to figure out what the unconscious mind is trying to say to us, and what the discrete dream images and situations represent in our lives. We all know that this interpretive approach can be useful, but it is also a hit-or-miss endeavor that can leave the dreamer feeling grateful, amused, or violated by the interpretive leaps of the dream worker(s). And further, since the dreamer's responses are considered fixed from the outset, we naturally overlook them in our consideration of the dream's meaning.

The Co-Creative Dream Paradigm

In contrast to the exclusively content-focused conventional approach to dream analysis, there is a different approach that has been gaining favor in the past decade, called the "co-creative paradigm," (Rossi, 1972; Sparrow, 2013; Sparrow and Thurston, 2010). This approach is based on the premise that the dream is not fixed from the outset, but unfolds as any relationship does in real time—moving from one moment to the next, and developing as a result of the interaction between dreamer and dream content. From this standpoint, the dream report

reflects the ongoing, reciprocal contributions of both dreamer and dream content. Not only do the dreamer's reactions impact the course of the dream, but the specific imagery itself may transform in response to the moment-to-moment encounter—adjusting to and mirroring the dreamer's feelings, choices, and actions—and impacting the dreamer, in turn, in a "circular causal" manner. Now obviously, this clearly happens during a lucid dream, or a dream in which the dreamer becomes aware that he or she is dreaming, and sets about to experiment with different responses to the dream characters and situations. But to a lesser extent, the dream ego can be observed asking questions, and experimenting with new responses in non-lucid dreams, as well.

To illustrate the impact of the dreamer's responses on the dream's outcome, consider a similar UFO dream shared with me by a different dreamer:

> *I was at my childhood home, and look out the window and see UFOS approaching, spewing fire out their undersides. My parents are hurriedly gathering us together so we can flee in the family station wagon. But I realize that if the UFOs have come to destroy the world, it won't do any good to hide. I then wonder if they would continue their destruction if they knew that humans were spiritual. So I sit in meditation, trying to connect with the extraterrestrials psychically. I open my eyes and look out the window, and see that the UFOs has stopped emitting fire, and are hovering in place. The next thing I know, I am walking with throngs of people who are singing together as we approach the UFOs which have landed on a beach. The doors open, and tall beings in orange-colored robes emerge to greet us.*

Notice that the dreamer stops and asks questions, and sets about to test hypotheses. When this dream is held up alongside the first UFO dream, one can see that while the presenting content was virtually identical, the dreams diverge dramatically in response to the dreamers' radically contrasting reactions to the perceived threat. Comparing these dreams allows us to see that what the dreamers felt, thought, and did in relation to the emergent content made the difference between a nightmare in the first dream, and an experience of ecstatic joy in the second dream. This comparison underscores the importance of considering how dreamers make a difference in their dreams—whether they initially realize it or not—and how they can aspire to co-create better dreams in the future.

Now obviously, most dreamers are not aware of having an impact on their normal dreams. That is, if they aren't actually conscious, or lucid, during a dream, they might tend to view their responses as "scripted" by the unconscious mind, and to accept their reactions without question, because they are presumably beyond of their control. Conventional dream work can thus represent an exercise in analyzing what happened *to* the dreamer, rather than what the dreamer *did* to precipitate the outcome.

There is good reason to supplement the conventional content-focus with an analysis of the *interactive relationship* between the dream ego and the dream content. Indeed, in the past half century, the conventional view that dreams are "fixed," and dreamers are "passive recipients" has been largely overturned by *clinical observations* that dreamers exercise considerable freedom of choice in ordinary dreams (Rossi, 1972; Sparrow, 2013; Sparrow and Thurston, 2010), and *empirical research* that indicates that we engage in similar thinking processes, or "metacognition" in waking and dreams, alike (Kahan, 2001; Kahan and LaBerge, 1996, 2010; Kozmova, and Wolman, 2006.

If you think about it, the co-creative paradigm mirrors the way we look at "real life" experiences. We don't interpret our waking experiences, as a rule: Instead, we examine what happens when people and situations interact. For instance, if a friend told you than he had gone out for dinner the night before with a woman he'd just met at work, and it hadn't gone well, you certainly wouldn't ask, "What does 'having dinner' mean to you?" Or "What was the experience telling you?" Instead, you would probably ask questions about what *happened* between your friend and the woman. You would want to know what your friend *did* during the date, and how the other person *reacted*, in turn, in order to assist your friend in understanding why the evening had been such a disappointment. Perhaps he said or did something that inadvertently offended the woman. That would be a good thing for your friend to know, because it might help him do better next time. Or perhaps in analyzing what he did, your friend might conclude that the woman simply seemed moody and uninterested, leaving your friend justified in saying that he'd done his best. Indeed, understanding a relational event requires that we observe how the interactive process gives way to a particular outcome based on the respective contributions of everyone involved. This may seem more difficult than looking at only the visual symbols, but it aligns dream analysis with waking relationship dynamics, and thus naturally promotes strategies for improving one's responses to real-life scenarios.

Most unpleasant or threatening dreams, such as the above-mentioned UFO dream, do not end well. We usually wake up in fear, without considering how our responses may have contributed to our distress, or how alternative responses could have turned the experience from negative to positive. If you work with dreams every day, it can be very useful to have an approach that gives your friends or clients hope that their dreams can improve as a result of their own attitudes and actions, and that the efforts they make in rethinking and practicing new responses to their dreams can prepare them to deal with parallel life issues more creatively and courageously, as well. That is where the FiveStar Method can make a significant difference in your dream work.

Applying the FiveStar Method

The FiveStar Method was developed as a way to systematically apply the tenets of the co-creative paradigm. In order to show you how to implement this method, let us consider the first UFO dream. The dreamer's questions were typical of anyone facing such an obvious threat. Consequently, she focused on the meaning of the UFOs, and tacitly accepted her own reactions as justifiable. But you can bring an altogether refreshing and empowering approach to the analysis of this dream. Instead of answering their limiting questions about the meaning of the imagery, you can guide the dreamer through the five steps of the FiveStar Method. Here's how you would do it.

Step One: Retell the Dream and Share Feelings
The first step is to ask the dreamer to retell the dream in the first-person, present tense if she hasn't done so already. This is a tactic introduced by Fritz Perls, the founder of Gestalt Therapy (Perls, 1969, 1973). It is designed to bring the dream into the here and now in order to reawaken dreamer's feelings and to underscore the fact that the dream is still alive and "unfinished." Note the verb tense changes in this new version of the dream.

> I **am** alone, outside my childhood home. I **look** to the north, and **see** UFOs approaching side by side, spewing fire from their underside, setting fire to the ground below. I **think** to

*myself that they **have** come to destroy the world. Terrified, I **run** into the house, went into the bedroom, and **hide** under my bed.*

During this initial sharing, you would ask the dreamer about her feelings during and/or after the retelling, as well as to share with her whatever feelings that the dream may have awakened in you. She might say, "I feel vulnerable and scared."

Step Two: Formulate the Dream's Theme or Process Narrative

Mark Thurston and I developed this technique back in the 70s in order to summarize and make sense of lengthy and confusing dreams (Sparrow, 1978; Thurston, 1978). We initially referred to it as the "dream theme," and then Thurston adopted the phrase, "simple story line" as a substitute. The author has since used the term "process narrative" since it corresponds to concepts used in psychotherapy. But regardless of what one calls it, the technique that Thurston and I have used is exactly same.

To summarize the dream theme, you simply reduce the dream to a succinct summary of the dream's generic process or story line without mentioning any of the specific people, places, etc., in the dream. Thus the dream worker usually starts the summary by saying, "Someone is…" and uses similarly generic pronouns such as someplace, something, etc. to complete the statement.

One could summarize the first UFO dream as "Someone becomes aware of something approaching that threatens her, and then seeks safety in a familiar place." Notice that all the specific features of the dream have been removed. A theme or process narrative is brief and generic, but most people find it tempting to include specific content features of the dream—such as names, numbers, colors, etc.— or to make interpretive statements about the dream content. It initially takes considerable discipline to do this step correctly, and the dream worker needs to gently remind the dreamer and anyone else who might be involved to refrain from getting ahead of the FiveStar process.

While this step may seem overly simplistic, it is quite powerful in practice. Indeed, if you can reduce the dream to its generic story line, you will help to free the dreamer from the dream's often-distracting literal features. This will assist the dreamer in identifying places in her life where this basic pattern may be expressing itself. For example, by converting the UFOs into "something threatening," the dreamer may be able to see that the UFOs scorching the eath is an apt metaphor for anything powerful having its ways with us. By seeing the broad metaphor encompassed by the theme, the dreamer is better able to identify scenarios in her waking life that may be intimidating or threatening, but which are totally unrelated to the literal dream content.

Step Three: Analyze and Troubleshoot the Dreamer's Responses and Assess Their Impact on the Dream's Imagery

On the surface, the dreamer's response can be reduced to a single act of flight from the perceived threat. But there's more to the dreamer's response than the mere act of running for cover. The dreamer also *assumed* certain things about the UFOs which were not necessarily true. Perhaps the fire was a cleansing fire, designed to eliminate a contagious disease. Or perhaps the fire was merely the way the UFOs remained aloft. The dreamer could have arrived at these alternative conclusions. Would they have been "true?" Regardless, they would have resulted in a different response, and perhaps a completely different outcome. Consequently, at this stage of the dream work, we would question the dreamer about her assumptions concerning the intention of the UFOs, and the necessity of what she did. We might inquire into whether this flight

response is commonplace, or chronic (Sparrow, 2014) in her overall life, or whether it might represent something new and desirable for her (e.g. being able to get away from threatening situations). Even though we might assume the response was counterproductive, we would need to leave that assessment up to the dreamer, who should always be to one to determine if a given response is desirable or not. This is in keeping with the best practices of modern dream work, which depend on a non-invasive, dreamer-govered approach to dream work (IASD, 2017).

We might also ask her to consider what she could have done differently, and what might have happened. Initially, most of us do not take well to the idea that what we did in such a frightening dream was anything other than necessary, but the central tenet of co-creative dream analysis—that the dreamer is ultimately free to respond differently—requires us to ask if the dreamer imposed an assumption on the dream that wasn't necessary. This inquiry gently challenges the dreamer to consider other ways of viewing the content, and supports alternative responses to it, as well.

Step Four: Analyzing the Dream Imagery
In this step, we finally focus on the meaning of the dream content to the dreamer. Instead of imposing our own views, we ask the dreamer about her associations to UFOs, fire, and her childhood home. This is called *amplification,* and is based on the work of Carl Jung, who believed that the personal dimension of dream content could only be discerned through open-ended inquiry into the dreamer's own unique associations.

During this step, we might also ask the dreamer to dialogue with one or more of the dream images. For example, we might ask the dreamer, "What would you like to say to the UFOs?" And then, in turn, we can ask her to pretend that she is one of the UFOs, and respond to the dreamer. This kind of exchange was pioneered by Fritz Perls (Perls, 1969, 1973), who considered all of the dream images as parts of ourselves to which we have become alienated. Thus, by encouraging dreamers to dialogue, and to identify with the images, we support them in becoming aware of the value of what the images bring them, and thus forging a deeper connection with, and respect for what they offer us.

Step Five: Developing a Plan for Responding in New Ways to Future Dreams and Waking Life Parallels.
In this step, we engage the dreamer in formulating alternative ways of responding to the original dream encounter if it should happen again in future dreams. These new responses should always be formulated in collaboration with the dreamer, based on what she sees as creative alternatives to what she did during the original dream. We would also ask her to identify areas of the waking life where parallel relationship dynamics might be evident, and to formulate new, appropriate responses to those scenarios based on the dream work. In the case of the woman who shared the UFO dream, she realized later that she had been afraid of entering the ministry for fear that she would lose control of her life. While she did not initially make the connection between the UFOs and God, she later realized that the power and transformative potential of the UFOs dramatized the daunting implications of a direct relationship with her higher power. She subsequently decided to embrace her spiritual calling, and she is a minister today.

Summary

In summary, conventional dreamwork focuses on interpreting the meaning of a dream's visual content without acknowledging or considering the impact of the dreamer's attitudes and responses on the dream. In contrast, the co-creative paradigm views the dream as an interaction between a responsive dreamer and the emergent dream content, and treats the dream as a relational event that unfolds in real time—much like any real relationship progresses as a product of exchanges between somewhat autonomous persons. By placing more emphasis on the dreamer's feelings, choices, and responses to the original dream content, we can assist the dreamer in troubleshooting the impact of their responses upon the dream, and considering alternatives going forward. By retrospectively endowing the dreamer with greater agency and freedom during the original dream, we assist the dreamer in overcoming a sense of passive participation, even victimization, and developing more willingness to confront whatever one faces in life, as well as supporting alternative responses to similar dreams and parallel waking encounters. Once our eyes have been opened, and we can shift our dream work focus to encompass both dreamer and dream content in an interactive dance, we can better support an active, competency–based approach that fosters a greater sense of personal responsibility and creative problem solving. As an outgrowth of the co-creative paradigm, the FiveStar Method is a non-invasive, dreamer-focused intervention that naturally facilitates constructive changes in one's dreaming and waking life.

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