The Co-Creative Paradigm in Practice:

Applying the Concept of Reciprocity to Dream Analysis

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I like to begin every presentation on dreams with a dream that may serve to illustrate the concepts that we will be discussing in the next few minutes, as well as to keep our feet no so much on the ground but the waters of the soul.  This dream is one of my favorite examples to use to illustrate the importance of the co-creative paradiwm. It was shared with me over 20 years ago by a client, who was attending one of my therapeutic groups. The woman was 42 years old, and had been a victim of extensive sexual abuse by her stepfather. The dream is as follows, and I will read it in the present tense in order to evoke a vicarious appropriation of the dreamer's experience.

I am in a bed in a messy room. The walls are dirty and there are holes in the ceiling. Suddenly, I notice rats emerging from the holes and dropping onto the bedcovers. I scream, and tear the covers off of me. I jump up and run out of the room into a foyer where there is a flight of stairs. I run up the stairs, and reach the landing, and turn around to see if the rats are chasing me. I see one large grey rat climbing the stairs, only a couple of steps below me. I am terrified that I won't be able to get away. But as I stand there looking down, I notice the rat's fur, and how it looks soft and lustrous. I am suddenly intrigued by its texture, and in spite of my fear, I reach down and to touch the rat's fur. As soon as I do, the rat changes into a Himalayan snow leopard. I am not afraid of it, and I am amazed at its beauty. Then I wake up.

Let us consider a hypothesis and proceed to test it against our experience and with the help of this dream example. The hypothesis is as follows: that there are three prevalent models in dream theory and analysis, each of which has prodigious strengths but fails to incorporate the contributions of the others. Further, that there is an emerging paradigm that synthesizes the strengths of these prevailing models. The first model is the theory of *mimesis* or representation, which originated in the thinking of the ancient Greeks, and which accounts for traditional content-oriented interpretation. The second is the lucid dream paradigm of recent vintage, which focuses on exploiting the dreamer's capabilities and awareness rather than on analyzing the visual content. The third is the theory that dreams facilitate the integration of new experiences, which grows principally out of laboratory research regarding the function of REM sleep.

The paradigm that incorporates the strengths of these three models I have referred to elsewhere as the co-creative paradigm. It is based on the premise that the dreamer and the dream imagery are somewhat autonomous aspects of the dream experience, and interact to co-determine the dream's outcome.  In relation to the analysis dream imagery, the co-creative model involves the application of the concept of reciprocity, or circular causality, which in family therapy is considered "the governing principle of relationships." Reciprocity, or cybernetics as it has also been called, is the principle that living systems are constantly adjusting to feedback in their relationship to the environment and to other systems. Reciprocity, as it refers to the dream process, takes into account the impact of the dreamer's moment to moment responses on the dream imagery, and the impact of the moment-to-moment changes in the dream imagery on the dreamer. By analyzing the *ongoing interplay* between the dreamer and the dream imagery, we can assist the dreamer in evaluating his or her responses to the dream, and by implication to other dreams and

parallel scenarios in the waking state. Before considering more practically how reciprocity can be applied in the analysis of dream imagery, let's review the three prevalent models of dream theory and analysis to see how they might approach the dream I've just shared.

*The Theory of Mimesis*

It has been said that the traditional dream interpretation is governed by underlying assumptions that reach back to the time of the ancient Greeks. Plato, in particular, is credited with the theory of *mimesis*—that dreams and art are representations of the real world, which itself is a representation of the transcendent realm. Thus, according to Plato, dreams are twice removed from ultimate truth. This paradigm has become so deeply ingrained in the Western mind that there is the tendency to approach dreams with the unexamined assumption that they are communicating something to us—that they are *saying something* to us about our lives. In her famous essay *Against Interpretation,* Sontag says:

> The fact is, all Western consciousness of and reflection upon art, have remained within the confines staked out by the Greek theory of art as mimesis or representation ... it is still assumed that a work of art is its content. Or, as it's usually put today, that a work of art by definition *says* something" (Sontag, 1966, p. 4).

According to Thomas Kuhn, author of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,* a paradigm such as *mimesis* defines and constrains the range of inquiry by delineating the acceptable questions that can be asked, and the worthwhile problems that can be solved. Questions such as "What is the dream saying?" and "What does the dream mean?" proceed from the mimesis paradigm and serve the singular objective of *translating* the dream into some message or statement

about our waking lives. Such an approach can be reductionistic to the extent that dreams are thought to tell us only about what we already know or have experienced. Freud's theory fits this description, because he believed that dreams refer only to the past, that is to what we have experienced and forgotten.

How would this approach distill the meaning of the dream that I just shared with you? The theory of mimesis would support a focus on the compelling images of the dream and explore their relationship to the dreamer's past and present life experiences—that is, it would support what most dream analysts usually do.  Knowing that the dreamer was sexually abused by her stepfather until she was an adolescent would certainly influence the direction of our interpretation of the imagery. The bed is a place where we sleep, but it's also the traditional setting for sexual activity. The rats coming through the ceiling convey the sense of an unwelcome intrusion through compromised boundaries, alluding to the stepfather's violation of her, do they not? The dreamer tries to flee fruitlessly, conveying the powerlessness of the young girl. The fur may represent the dreamer's own sexuality, or sexuality in general, which even in the context of her historical violation, holds the dreamer's fascination. And the snow leopard? Beneath the disgust over her own violated sexuality, it may be seen as the beauty and power of her undefiled instinctual nature.

Jung might take this analysis further. He certainly disputed Plato's idea that dreams merely refer to, or represent the real world. Dreams, especially those that Jung referred to as "big dreams," are potentially closer to ultimate truth than physical reality, not further away, and point to what is possible, but as yet unmanifest. This does not rule out the retrospective function of

dreams that Freud espoused, but simply expands dreaming to encompass our unacknowledged future, as well as our nebulous past. Because the dream imagery embodies what we can not yet fully understand, the dream's message, while enriching our lives with a more complete understanding of what we do know, is ultimately mysterious. While this approach differs significantly from the implicit reductionism of *mimesis,* its aim is similar; that is, to discern what the dream content is saying or communicating, while allowing ourselves to be stretched by what cannot be reduced to the familiar. Interpreting the dream's content is still the primary goal, but dream images are not merely representative of our waking lives. They are also symbolic of what awaits us along the path of individuation. And so, a Jungian might approach the riveting image of the snow leopard as an intimation of future wholeness—a reconciliation of opposites that may have no parallel in the dreamer's conscious experience. Jung might even have referred to the leopard as a symbol of the self with all of its instinctual power at home in the highest reaches of consciousness. As Jung once said, if you reach to the depths of our instinctual natures, there you will find Brahma, divinity itself, the creator of all things.

Since the theory of mimesis focuses on interpreting what the the dream's visual content means, or is saying, the dreamer's moment-to-moment awareness, feelings, and responses are largely overlooked in the analysis. Overlooking the dreamer is easy to do, because in most dreams the dreamer's awareness and response capability are so negligible that the dreamer seems entirely "scripted" or determined in his or her role. Some dream theorists, such as Freud and Kramer, even assert that the manifest dream is "strictly determined," implying that the dreamer's feelings and reactions are determined, as well. This convenient treatment of the manifest dream permits an analysis of the dream as a static, determined text, and produces interpretations accord-

ingly as messages that are produced by some other source and delivered prepackaged via the dreamer's imperfect recollection. But such a fixed view overlooks the possibility—no, the easily observable fact— of the dreamer's moment-to-moment responsiveness and impact on the dream experience..

*The Lucid Dreaming Paradigm*

The phenomenon of lucid dreaming challenges the traditional view of the dreamer as necessarily a passive and unaware participant who is part of a determined narrative. Suddenly, with the mighty accomplishment of lucidity, the dream revolves around the dreamer rather than the visual content. The dreamer has choices, and can set about to accomplish whatever he or she wishes. The lucid dream pioneers have emphasized the self-created nature of the dream imagery and have cited Tibetan Buddhist texts in which the aspirant is encouraged to destroy and to create dream imagery at will. By implication, the interpretation of the dream's content ceases to have as much value if the dreamer can create, modify, or destroy the dream imagery at will. By empha-sizing the dreamer's capabilities without incorporating the traditional view that the spontaneously generated dream imagery has value and meaning, lucid dreamers have, intentionally or other-wise, effectively downplayed the importance of dream imagery and its analysis, as well as the relationship between the dreamer and the particular imagery that arises.

If dreams are only representative of the physical world, as Plato asserted, then manipulat-ing or destroying the imagery can have no drastic consequences. However, if as Jung believed, the dream imagery also alludes retrospectively to unresolved "autonomous complexes" and prospectively to unrealized potentials that allude to the emergence of the Self, then dismissing

the specific symbolic content is tantamount to suppressing an awareness of one's internal conflicts and unrevealed wholeness. From this perspective, we are not sufficiently healed of our past, nor complete in our evolution to justify disregarding the spontaneous utterances of the dream. Jungians, in particular, have tended to be critical of those who have extolled the freedom conferred by lucidity, believing that such apparent hubris could have untold consequences. For instance, as a young man, I shared the fact that I was having frequent lucid dreams with a Jungian analyst from the Northeast. Instead of praising me for my accomplishment, she said, with concern, "I hope you are surrounded by a circle of fire." Years later, I could look back and appreciate the warning that her statement implied. While I, too, extolled the benefits of lucidity in my early writing, and went on to complete a master's thesis and a doctoral dissertation on the subject, I also encountered along the way the power of my own autonomous complexes and archetypal forces in the lucid state. While the dream imagery itself may be self created, the energy and the agenda which drive them have not, at least in my experience, presented itself as illusory or unimportant. At that time, I wrote:

LaBerge, who has done more to pioneer lucid dream induction than anyone else, is known for unreserved enthusiasm for lucid dream induction, and his criticism for those who have urged caution. Indeed, he analyzed a lucid dream of mine in one of his works, and criticized me for not being able to overcome my fear of a powerful black panther, which would not go away when asked. In extolling the possibilities of lucidity, he has said:

"If fully lucid, you would realize that the entire dream world was your own creation, and with this realization might come the exhilarating feeling of freedom. Nothing external, no laws

of society or physics, you could do anything your mind could conceive" (LaBerge and Rhein-gold, 1990).

To be fair, LaBerge espouses the importance of changing one's responses to the dream imagery rather than manipulating the imagery itself. However, in light of his many statements supporting the dreamer's freedom to do whatever he or she wishes, the lucid dream model as it has been popularly perceived emphasizes exploiting the powers inherent in lucid dreaming, rather than fostering a closer relationship with the spontaneous imagery of the dream, or exploring the interactive process leading to integration and synthesis.

So, what would the lucid dream paradigm contribute to the dream of the rats and snow leopard. Well, first of all, the model might contrast the consciousness of the dreamer with that of a fully lucid dreamer. The dreamer's belief that the rats are real give rise to understandable revulsion and fear, but if she had been able to become lucid, the dreamer would have realized that the rats were not real at all, but part of the dreamer's self created dream. Overcoming the illusion that the dream images were real would have conferred a fearless capacity to deal with the imagery in any way the dream so desired. She could have immediately dismissed the rats, stomped on them, or merely turned away and pursued other objectives. Or she could have done exactly what she did—engage the imagery rather than avoid it. Regardless of what the dreamer does or doesn't do, from the lucid dream paradigm, the locus of power and change resides fully within the dreamer's free choices.

While LaBerge acknowledges that the interpretation of content in the lucid dream can still be useful, it becomes secondary in importance to the dreamer's level of consciousness and

self-directed activity. Also, as I've noted already, the dreamer's capacity to respond to the dream imagery in non-lucid dreams is not emphasized in the lucid dream model. Unfortunately, perhaps, the focus on lucidity per se has unwittingly obscured the continuum of awareness that seems to exist in ordinary dreams. Indeed, as early as 1971, Ernest Rossi declared that there is a continuum of all possible balances between the ...." This statement challenges the uniqueness of lucid dreaming, and instead treats every dream as an arena for the expression of awareness and responsiveness regardless of whether the dreamer ever achieves full lucidity. In the dream of the rats and the snow leopard, the dreamer clearly exercises a significant degree of self reflection, to the extent that it precipitates and transforms her experience, even from a non-lucid state of awareness.

In summary, if traditional dream analysis places too much emphasis on the content without regard to the dreamer, then the lucid dream paradigm extolls the dreamer's capabilities without evidencing a commensurate respect for the importance of the unique imagery that arises in dream. Both the theory of mimesis and the lucid dream model emphasize one dimension of the dream at the expense of the other, and thus overlook or downplay the potential for a deeper relationship between the dreamer and the specific, spontaneously generated imagery of the dream. Also, by focusing on lucidity per se, the lucid dream model overlooks the wide range of dreamer capabilities that are already evident, and which potentially can be fostered, in non-lucid dreams.

The Integrative Paradigm

Largely as a result of research into the physiological functions of REM sleep, dream theorists have marshaled impressive evidence that dreaming facilitates the integration of new or dis-

tressing experiences into the dominant structure of consciousness. Hartmann argues that dreams, especially those that are intense and memorable, involve the "contextualization," or picturing of emotions that have yet to be integrated. He describes a process in which the contextualized emotion is effectively linked to earlier, similar experiences through an associative process that is much more extensive and wide ranging than is possible in the waking state. The arousal of various metaphorical imagery in the dream which, on the surface, has little direct relationship to the experience that precipitated the emotion and the necessity of the dream, allows the experience to be linked to, and informed by all similar experiences in memory.

The integrative paradigm assumes a temporary disconnect between new, troubling experiences, and the dreamer, who represents the status quo structure of consciousness. Thus, in this paradigm, the dream is an encounter between two separate forces—the dreamer and the intrusive emotion expressed by the imagery. However, Hartmann does not delineate the mechanisms for accelerating or inhibiting the integrative process, nor comment on whether responding differently to the imagery can facilitate its integration. And yet we know that this process is not always an easy one. Indeed, repetitive nightmares suggest that the integrative process does not proceed as smoothly or as rapidly as one might hope.

Research has shown that reliving a dream with a new, more pleasant ending, can be effective in alleviating the symptoms of PTSD, as well as effective in inducing lucidity in subsequent dreams. This suggests that by actively engaging the dream, the waking person can pick up where the dream left off, and effectively facilitate an integrative process that has been arrested in its development. In addition to engaging the dream in waking fantasy, it makes sense that the dreamer

can accomplish an acceleration of the integrative process by interacting with the dream imagery in the dream itself in such a way as to co-create or codetermine a more pleasant outcome.

How would the integrative paradigm as it is articulated by Hartmann approach the dream of the rats and snow leopard? Certainly the rats would be seen as the picturing, or contextualizing of an as-yet unintegrated fear of being overwhelmed or attacked. The latest incident of this experience might have been a recent verbal assault by a neighbor, a rear-ending auto accident, or any number of events that could have provoked a "storm" of emotion that had not been integrated. The image of the rats, according to Hartmann, might metaphorically embody a wide range of similar experiences, including the sexual abuse, in which similar emotions had arisen and—to some extent—been dealt with. Hartmann argues that the dream process draws widely upon memories of similar experiences to assist the individual in putting the latest event into a larger context, effectively linking it to a variety of earlier events that have since become less troublesome, if not completely integrated into the dominant structure of consciousness.

How would the integrative paradigm, as articulated by Hartmann, explain the change from the rat to the snow leopard? He might say that the associative processes involved in the dream experience had succeeded in reaching more widely into the dreamer's experience than the dreamer's conscious analysis, effectively linking the latest upset to experiences in which the dreamer may have felt differently in the face of power, or dealt with it more effectively. Perhaps the snow leopard links the dreamer to an array of experiences that have already been integrated and resolved, and thus may "inform" the dreamer that she can, once again, deal effectively with the latest version of the old theme.

I don't think, from my reading of Hartmann, that the dreamer's actions in the dream would come into focus within the integrative paradigm, which assumes that the process of integration is carried out regardless of whether the dreamer reacts to the contextualized emotion or not. The role of consciousness and volition is thus downplayed, and by implication the relationship between the dreamer and the imagery is not an important factor.

In summary, the integrative paradigm specifies a process of incorporating new, upsetting experiences into the dominant structure of consciousness. Unlike the mimesis paradigm, the imagery does not refer to just one experience, but metaphorically captures a common feeling provoked by a wide range of previous experiences. It also allows for a distinction between the dreamer and the dream imagery, and a process between them that promotes integration. But unlike the lucid dream paradigm, it fails to take into consideration the impact of the dreamer's conscious, directed efforts to confront and integrate the imagery that "contextualizes" the emotion.

*Co-Creativity and Reciprocity*

What seems lacking in these three models is an appreciation for how the dreamer and the dream imagery function independently in the dream experience, and may thus interact in such a way as to alter the dream's outcome. This unfolding interplay between the dreamer, who most would agree represents the ego or dominant structure of consciousness, and the imagery can easily be observed and tracked through the course of the dream.

Indeed, the dreamer and the rats seem to function autonomously in the dream. The rats invade the room, the dreamer flees, and the rats engage in hot pursuit. Family therapists would

refer to this simple drama as an approacher-distancer dynamic, which deteriorates as the distancer's desire to avoid an encounter precipitates a redoubled effort on the part of the pursuer. This level of analysis seems natural to many therapists who are familiar with the power of analyzing relationship problems from a reciprocal, or circular perspective in which both parties bear some responsibility for the deterioration or improvement in a relationship. Systems theory in general, and reciprocity in particular, underlies what I have referred to as the co-creative paradigm, and brings to dream analysis a set of tools that the three models of dream theory and analysis that I've discussed have largely overlooked.

Where did the concept of reciprocity come from? Although it formed a part of Lewin's work with group therapy in the late 40s, the concept under various names—reciprocity, circular causality, and cybernetics—effectively launched systems-oriented family therapy in the 1950s. It was then that Gregory Bateson and his associates at the Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto, California were trying to understand communication in schizophrenic families under the assumption that the relationship dynamics between mother and child effectively precipitated and sustained the psychotic symptomotology. Borrowing from the field of systems theory, Bateson hypothesized that communication is governed by synchronous feedback, in which living systems are constantly monitoring the feedback they are receiving, and adjusting their output accordingly. This leads to the notion of reciprocity, or *circularity* as opposed to simple cause and effect in understanding the origins and perpetuation of relationship problems. From within this relational model, therapy ceases to be focused on the individual, and instead targets the problem-sustaining dynamics between individuals. Bateson and his colleagues are credited for establishing that "reciprocity is the governing principle of relationship" (Nichols & Schwartz, 2004, p. 8).

Reciprocity should be observable in dreams if the dreamer is, relatively speaking, a freely acting agent apart from the source of the visual imagery. Or conversely, if dreams reveal reciprocal dynamics between the dreamer and the imagery, then one can reasonably hypothesize that the dreamer and the source of imagery are independent influences in the dream's formation.

Circular dynamics are clearly evident in the dream of the rats and snow leopard. When the dreamer reacts to the intrusion, the invading rats seems to pursue the dreamer, which of course increases her fear. Once it becomes evident that escape is impossible, the dreamer turns around and examines the threat more closely. This is a pivotal change in the dreamer's stance, and from the standpoint of circular dynamics, we would expect to observe a commensurate change in the imagery. And we do! At first the change is subtle: the fur appears lustrous. On the basis of this subtle change, the dreamer takes an even bigger step and initiates physical contact. In apparent response to the dreamer's actions, the imagery changes even more dramatically.

The presence of reciprocal dynamics suggests that dreams—at least repetitive, stressful dreams—can be seen as *initiations* or tests that repeat themselves until the dreamer has relinquished old "rules" in favor of effective new ways of relating. This interactive paradigm places equal emphasis on the dream content and the dreamer's responses in co-creating, or codetermining the dream's outcome. From this standpoint, dreams are not simply messages as the theory of mimesis would have us believe, or opportunities to free oneself of the illusion of one's self created reality as lucid dreaming paradigm would have us believe, or experiences in which integration occurs without regard to the dreamer's efforts. Within the co-creative paradigm, dreams portray an encounter between the dreamer and some aspect of self, the integration of

which depends on the reciprocal interplay between the dreamer's awarenesses and choices, and commensurate imagery transformations.

Applying the Concept of Reciprocity in Your Dream Work

It is probably true that most people seeking your help with their dreams still operate within the confines of the traditional content oriented, mimesis paradigm, and thus will expect you to analyze the imagery from that standpoint. How can you begin to introduce the idea that dreams are not merely messages, but also relationships that need to be analyzed as such? I have developed a systematic approach called the FiveStar Method which implements the principle of reciprocity and other aspects of the co-creative paradigm into a comprehensive approach to dreamwork. But introducing a relational perspective can be done subtly and simply by adding three techniques into your dreamwork process: *process statements*, *process questions* and *ideal questions*.

Process statements—which are associated with Murray Bowen's approach to family therapy and are used in systems-oriented family therapy all of the time—merely describe the circular nature of a particular relationship event. A process statement regarding the dream of the rats and snow leopard might go something like this. "It is interesting that at first, the rats were just dropping through the ceiling and not actually attacking you, but as soon as you got up and ran out of the room, the rats seemed to pursue you." Notice that the statement leaves out problem-saturated language which would support the dreamer's narrow viewpoint. For example, the statement doesn't say that "as soon as you got up and ran out of the room, the rats began to *attack* you." If the rats had attacked her, that's one thing. But since the dreamer only assumes that

the rats intend to hurt her, the dream workers performs a valuable service by refusing to ratify that assumption.

A *process question* would go something like this: "What do you think would have happened if you'd stayed under the covers?" or "In your wildest imaginings, what could you have done to make the rats go away?" The dreamer may conclude the obvious, that the rats would have attacked her there and then, but process questions underscore the dreamer's latent capabilities while also alluding to "embedded possibilities" that were not allowed to manifest due to the dreamer's assumptions and actions.

An *ideal question* explores what the dreamer would have preferred to do differently. In a dream such as this one, the dreamer's actions culminate in a profoundly positive experience, so an ideal question would be unnecessary in this case. Indeed, all of these interventions serve to introduce both a sense of personal responsibility and the possibility of positive changes into experiences in which the dreamer may be completely out of touch with what he or she is doing to contribute to a dream's unfortunate outcome. Whenever the dreamer assumes responsibility and catalyzes change—such as in the dream of the rats and snow leopard—then the dreamwork process ideally underscores the competencies exhibited by the dreamer that gave rise to positive changes, rather than the dreamer's unfortunate assumptions and responses.

In summary, without spending a lot of time educating your clients, you can begin to work within the co-creative paradigm simply by using interventions that explore the reciprocal interplay between dreamer and dream. In so doing, you will be bringing the best of a traditional content orientation, the lucid dream model, and the integrative paradigm into your work while adding at the same time a perspective which is lacking in each of these models: the seminal idea

that dreams depict our ongoing relationship to our unfinished business and unrealized potentials, the culmination of which depends upon our willingness to respond to these intrusive realities in ways that facilitate integration. It is an approach that parallels the goals of psychotherapy in that it underscores personal responsibility, unacknowledged capabilities, and creative solutions to problematic scenarios that arise in dreams and waking life.

And finally, one might reasonably ask, What should be the "product" or goal of co-creative dream analysis? If the goal of traditional content-oriented dream analysis is to analyze the meaning of symbols as a way of gaining insight into one's life, what should be the objective of co-creative dream work? In effect, we assist dreamers in becoming aware of how their responses to the dream mirror their responses to parallel life scenarios, and we engage them in considering new ways of relating to life's challenges wherever they may be found—in waking life, or in the dream itself. By eliciting new responses to the dream, we empower the dreamers to take more personal responsibility for what happens in their lives. In the words of Ghandi, we support them to becoming "the change you wish to see in the world."