

The Development and Applications of the Five Star Method of Dream Analysis

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Introduction

I had been licensed as a professional counselor for only a few months in 1983 when I began working with a woman who had just previously tried to commit suicide for the second time. Prior to her second suicide attempt, she had undergone two regimens of electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) along with every available antidepressant medication at the time—all to no avail: Barbara remained deeply depressed and suicidal.

Although she tended to disregard most of my initial interventions as all-too-familiar strategies that had been tried already, she brightened almost imperceptibly when I first asked her about her dreams. Shortly after our work began, she shared with me a remarkable dream that seemed to foretell of her eventual recovery. It is one of my favorite dream of all times, and you will find it in many of my papers on co-creative dreamwork.

In the dream, Barbara had arrived late for a family picnic beside a lake. When she went to get something to eat, she discovered that all of the food had been eaten. Only the bones of a large fish remained on a platter. For some reason that she could not explain to me, she took the platter down to the edge of the lake and lowered it into the water. As she did, the bones came to life again, and the fish swam away.

The initial situation in the dream paralleled Barbara's outsider status in her family of origin. Her mother had orphaned her at an early age. After being reunited with her mother several years later, her stepfather sexually abused her, and her biological father also abused her sexually when

he came into her life for the first time. The content of the initial dream made the situation clear: Whatever nourishment had been available in her family had been consumed by others. From another perspective, the fish was an apt metaphor of Barbara's own decimated self. But what was more remarkable about the dream than the imagery was Barbara's remarkable *response* to the dilemma. From that moment onward, I used the dream as "evidence" that she had the capacity to participate in her own recovery process. And because she had experienced this capacity, if only for a moment, she could never entirely deny it.

Background

For centuries, dreams have regarded as a message, or a representational commentary about the dreamer's life—an oracle which if understood, could provide insight and guidance, as well as knowledge about one's future. We owe this deeply held, but largely unexamined assumption—referred to as the theory of *mimesis*—to the ancient Greeks. From this standpoint, dream analysis involves the translation of the dream's visual content into understandable, waking state content parallels. While this approach has proven useful, I believe that it is also fair to say that this view of the dream overlooks the possible impact of the dreamer's feelings, choices, beliefs, and actions on the dream's outcome. Only through the lens of an altogether different model of dreaming—one that treats the dream as an interaction between dreamer and dream content rather than a message to the dreamer—can the dreamer's responses rise to the level of significance in the subsequent analysis.

The Origins of the FSM

The Five Star Method (FSM) is a dream work approach based on a relational, co-creative view of dreaming (Sparrow, 2006a, 2007a; Sparrow & Thurston, 2010). That is, it analyzes the

dream as a real-time interplay between the dreamer's responses and the emergent dream content. It assumes that dreams are indeterminate from the outset, and co-created only as the dreamer responds to the content. Instead of treating dreams primarily as communications that need to be "interpreted," the FSM treats the dream as a relational process, the quality of which is determined by the dreamer's ability to respond in creative and appropriate ways to the dream's emergent agenda.

The FSM has its roots in my early exploration of lucid dreaming and my subsequent experience as a psychotherapist. It was influenced by several well-known theorists, including Van Eeden (1913), Jung (1966, 1974, 1984), Perls (1969, 1973), Rossi (1972, 2000), and Ullman (1996). As the FSM evolved, it was continuously tested and refined in my practice as a psychotherapist. In its current form, it can be used by individuals who are working with their own dreams, by laypersons who are assisting their friends and associates, and by professionals whose dream work methods must fit within the constraints of the therapeutic hour.

When I consider the 38 years that I have spent studying dreams, and the 27 years that I have used dream work in individual and group therapy, I realize that my desire to develop an effective dream work methodology was present from the beginning, even though it took years for the FSM to reach its current level of refinement. Of course, such design becomes evident only as one looks back and marvels at the apparent design operating behind the trials and errors of ordinary life.

I first began working with dreams in 1970. I was only 19, and I had just experienced my first lucid dream. Hungry for more knowledge concerning dreams, I immersed myself in Carl

Jung's work, and acquainted myself with the two references to lucid dreaming in the literature at the time, Charles Tart's *Altered States of Consciousness* (1969) and Celia Green's *Lucid Dreams* (1968), both of which pointed to the seminal and largely forgotten work of Van Eeden (1913). Lucid dreams soon became a common occurrence in my dream life, and the white light described by the mystics became, in turn, a familiar experience in the context of the lucid dream. From the beginning, the possibility of becoming more aware and responsive in the dream state informed my work with so-called ordinary dreams. Rechtschaffen once said, "Only when we see the possibility of the lucid dream do we fully realize what a massively non-reflective state dreaming usually is" (1978). I saw it differently. To me, the possibility of the lucid dream suggested that dreamers could become more aware in every dream. In fact, as I began to look carefully at "ordinary" dreams, I also discovered that dreamers were already quite aware and responsive—a fact that had been overlooked by traditional dream analysis up to that point.

I wrote a master's thesis on lucid dreaming in 1974, titled "Lucid Dreaming as an Evolutionary Process," making the case that human consciousness was "moving" into the dream state, much as it emerged in relation to the outer world thousands of years ago. Shortly thereafter, I wrote *Lucid Dreaming: Dawning of the Clear Light* (ARE, 1976), which was the first book (tiny though it was) on lucid dreaming published in the US. Eight years later, I conducted a dissertation study of lucid dream induction at William and Mary (Sparrow, 1983), in which I tested a pre-sleep lucid dreaming induction strategy that I'd been working with since the mid-70s. The Dream Reliving Method, as I termed it, was a simple exercise in which an individual would rehearse new, "lucid" responses in the imaginary enactment of previous, non-lucid dreams. I

thought it was reasonable to expect that this waking rehearsal of new responses would trickle into subsequent dreams, and result in more constructive dream outcomes.

In addition to measuring the impact of Dream Reliving on subsequent lucidity, I posed a second and equally important research question in my dissertation study that laid the foundation for the Five Star Method: Would Dream Reliving also enhance a broad array of dreamer "competencies" that were first articulated by Rossi (1972, 2000)—such as reflectiveness, interactivity, role change, and the actualization of constructive behaviors—even if the dreamer never became lucid in the process? Believing that lucidity is relatively unavailable to most dreamers, I wanted to explore the possibility of enhancing less obvious, but nonetheless significant occurrences of dreamer awareness and responsiveness in the dream. This shift away from focusing on lucidity per se toward an exploration of the continuum of dreamer awareness separated me from other lucid dream researchers at the time, most notably the work of LaBerge, who focused on lucid dream induction without regard to the enhancement of non-lucid dreamer capabilities (LaBerge, 1985; LaBerge and Reingold, 1990). It also coincided with my early work as a psychotherapist, in which having an effective dream work methodology that acknowledged the possibility of developing greater awareness and responsiveness in the dream became increasingly important in my day-to-day therapeutic work with clients, many of whom had never had a lucid dream. I thought this orientation was significant at the time, but Olsen (2009), who has studied the history of lucid dreaming in the West, recently concurred with my assessment:

Sparrow's 1983 dissertation is a historical milestone in the field of lucid dreaming. In this dissertation, he introduced Dream Reliving, a lucid dreaming induction technique that involves re-experiencing troubling dreams from a lucid perspective while awake.

Through this technique, Sparrow inaugurated a new direction within the science of lucid dreaming. Some researchers from the 1970s and early 1980s were exploring the connections between lucid dream induction and certain Eastern meditative practices, and other were developing spiritually and psychotherapeutically neutral induction techniques. Sparrow was the first researcher to integrate the lucid dream induction process into a thoroughly developed psychotherapeutic approach to dreamwork. Since the early 1980s, Sparrow has developed and refined this technique, and remains at the forefront of exploring the relationship between psychotherapy and lucid dreaming (Olsen, 2009).

In order to measure the non-lucid aspects of dreamer development in my dissertation study, I developed a scale called the Dreamer Development Scale (Sparrow, 1983), which was specifically designed to assess the non-lucid variables of self-reflection, interactivity, role change, and the actualization of new behavior as described by Rossi (1972, 2000). I found that the individuals in my study who used Dream Reliving evidenced significantly higher levels of dreamer development qualities overall in their resultant dream recall as an apparent by-product of trying to induce a lucid dream. Suddenly, dreams were not so much lucid or non-lucid, but characterized by varying degrees of dreamer awareness and responsiveness. This clearly supported Rossi's view that "there is a continuum of all possible balances of control between the autonomous process and the dreamer's self awareness and consciously directed effort" (Rossi, 1972, p. 163). As a result of this research, I set about to teach dreamers to recognize the presence of incipient awareness and responsiveness in their own dreams, and to build upon these

capabilities for the purposes of therapy or personal growth. The Five Star Method was eventually the centerpiece of this broad-based outreach to all dreamers.

Applying the Five Star Method

Step One: Establishing the Context for Effective Dream Work

Alongside my interest in assessing and enhancing dreamer awareness and responsiveness, I was interested in developing an approach to dreams that respected the integrity of the dreamer and the dream, but which also unleashed the dream worker's ability to assist the dreamer in seeing aspects of the dream that are nearly impossible to see from the inside. This, we know, is a tall order, but it is a task which is quite familiar to family therapists, in particular, who frequently assume a very active role as change agents, but only after getting to know each family member, exploring the family's unique experiences and values, and assessing the family's relationship structure. I realized that effective dream work had to be preceded by what family therapists call "joining" activities in order to establish trust and congruence between the dream worker and the dreamer.

Effective dream work begins by listening carefully and experiencing inwardly the dreamer's narrative. This preliminary step is essential from my experience, and has been recognized and appreciated by both Ullman (1996) and Taylor (1992), but it is often skipped over in our headlong, intrusive pursuit of "the interpretation." Having studied dream work with Ullman at his home in 1978 opened my eyes to the power of what might be termed, the *vicarious appropriation* of the dream. From that time onward, I have always listened to a person's dream as if it were my own.

How To Do It. The first step of the FSM is really a twofold exercise: 1) The dreamer shares the dream in the first-person, present tense, as recommended by Perls (1969, 1973) and 2) the dreamer and the dream worker alike reveal the feelings that were aroused within them during the dream sharing, as practiced by Taylor (1992) and Ullman (1996). While this step resembles Ullman's first step, I choose not to isolate the dreamer from the dreamer worker's associations, but rather to enter into a dialogue from the initial sharing. While this runs the risk of exposing the dreamer to the dream worker's intrusive projections, I think it is a more natural and dynamic process. Also, by focusing on the phenomenology of the dream and the interactive process that is clearly evident in the dream report itself, the Five Star Method minimizes the importance of interpretation.

Although this initial step of the FSM precedes a more active exploration of the dream, it is not without surprise and discovery, because each of us experiences the same narrative in a different way. As the dreamer and the dream worker compare their emotional reactions to the dream narrative, they often discover quite different reactions that reveal their underlying assumptions about life, the effect of previous experiences, and their proclivities to react in predictable ways. Thus begins a subtle and significant "ordeal" in which the dreamer is encouraged to acknowledge that his or her own response to the dream was, ultimately, only one of many possible responses.

Step Two: Formulating the Dream's Theme

From the early 70s, Mark Thurston and I were in constant dialogue about dream work methods, and somewhere along the way he and I began to discuss the problem of distilling the essence of a dream from its often wildly disjointed narrative. In specific, we were puzzled by

some of the dreams that were submitted to the famous clairvoyant Edgar Cayce for psychic interpretation. We observed that Cayce rarely went into much detail in his analysis of the submitted dreams. Instead, he seemed to summarize the dream in a very succinct but cogent statement about the person's life. Mark and I began working with this concept, and found that by temporarily ignoring the specific content of the dream and stating the dream's essential action, we were able to formulate a brief statement that accurately described the course of the dream's unfoldment. We also discovered that formulating a dream theme enabled dreamers to quickly identify areas of the waking life where the same theme was evident. After we wrote about the Dream Theme Method (Sparrow, 1978; Thurston, 1978, 1988), the technique became quite popular among lay and professional dream workers. Gongaloff has built an entire system of dream analysis around this concept (2006), and Garfield has featured it in her approach to dream analysis, as well (2001), but these approaches differ somewhat from what Mark and I originally intended by formulating a list of universal themes. I believe that such lists run the risk of making dreams conform to our expectations, rather than allowing the dream itself to reveal its pattern.

How To Do It. While the dream theme or process narrative is fairly simple to formulate, it requires considerable discipline to stay focused on the task. All one has to do is to restate, as succinctly as possible, the dream's essential action while leaving out all mention of specific images and characters. The more general one can be, the better. The following statements are examples of correctly formulated dream themes:

"Someone is trying to get away from someone else, but no matter what he does, he does not escape."

"Someone is relieved to find that something that he thought was lost is still possible to locate."

"Someone is trying to decide between two things, one apparently easy and the other difficult and challenging."

This type of summary reveals and preserves the underlying pattern of the dream, and organizes the subsequent steps in the FSM around a framework that the dreamer can quickly understand. It is not unusual for the dreamer to experience significant insights about the dream during this single step alone.

Step Three: Analyzing the Dreamer's Responses to the Dream

This step is typically overlooked by conventional imagery-focused dream interpretation, and yet it forms the heart of the FSM. I would suggest that the preoccupation with interpreting dream images has effectively retarded our discovery of the obvious: that the dream is a richly interactive process in which the dreamer's choices and reactions are clearly distinct from the dream imagery and partly determine, or co-create the dream's outcome. Focusing on the imagery alone has the way of rendering the dreamer a spectator, instead of an active agent who, in being free to respond in a variety of ways, bears some responsibility over the dream's outcome.

Barbara's dream is again an excellent case in point. What makes Barbara's dream especially powerful from a therapeutic standpoint is the fact that the dreamer herself—a woman without a shred of hope for herself— somehow found the strength and wisdom to bring about the renewal of another hopeless condition. Her action in the dream became my strongest "selling point" in support of her capacity to recover. Throughout our work I was able to refer back to the dream as

proof of her own capacity to survive and to recover. She could never refute the evidence of her own experience, and eventually—after years of therapy—her dream came true.

A traditional interpretive approach may have arrived at the same "good news," because the implications are clear. However, a traditional approach might overlook more subtle dreamer actions in favor of analyzing the imagery. These subtle responses can be just as crucial in turning the tide of the dream drama, and in the waking life as well.

Take for instance the dream of another client, who had been abused by her mother. The young woman was addicted to drugs and alcohol, and adamantly opposed to ever becoming a mother herself. After two abortions, she entered a 12-step program, and began psychotherapy with me. Later, toward the end of our work, she had the following dream:

She is standing on the seashore, near the restaurant where she worked as a waitress. She sees a wave approaching, and it turns toward her. A whale's back appears above the surface and comes all the way to the edge of the water where she stands. The whale's head is now above the water, and it turns its head until a single eye looks directly into the dreamer's face. There is a moment of breathless eye-to-eye intensity, and then it recedes, leaving the dreamer standing alone with a baby whale at her feet. She knows that she is supposed to care for it so she bends down and picks it up.

This, of course, is an astounding dream, with life changing implications. The content is "bigger than life," and deeply evocative. However, the most important dimension of this dream to consider from the standpoint of the response-oriented Five Star Method is the what dreamer does, and does not do. She stands her ground, which in itself is remarkable. And then, when she sees the baby whale, she assumes she is supposed to care for it, so she takes it into her arms. In

the context of the woman's burnt-out life, the dreamer's responses to the immense challenge offered by the dream indicated her readiness to enter a new relationship with herself, and with "the mother" within and without. The last time I saw her, the woman was happily married and the mother of a baby girl.

Such dreams as these provide "leverage" for the dream worker to refocus the dreamer onto what might be considered the emergent competencies that we may still deny in ourselves. Once the dreamer is able to own these capabilities, such pivotal dreams can become additional support for their new sense of self, and just important, for a new response to life. By focusing on the dreamer's responses as well as the content, the dream work process makes the dream work deeply empowering as well as a source of insight.

When a dreamer is convinced that he or she is unable to respond differently to the dream, I have found that there are two sources of evidence that may eventually persuade the dreamer to reconsider. First, I often share dreams of other people, who, while experiencing similar content, responded in different ways. This "teaching stories" approach is used a lot in family therapy to get clients to get some distance from their emotional reactivity, and to consider a different way of dealing with problems. However, while this approach may broaden the dreamer's perspective, the better evidence comes over a period of time from the dreamer's own repetitive dreams, in which the dreamer's change in response is clearly mirrored by a change in the imagery, and in a more positive outcome. For instance, I had a client who dreamt that he is floating above a barking dog. He flaps his arms, and rises up above the dog, but then starts to sink whenever he stops moving his arms. The dog keeps barking and jumping toward him, so the dreamer remains quite anxious until he awakens.

In discussing this dream using the FSM, my client realized that his response was inadequate to the opportunity. Specifically, he realized that he mistrusted his own instincts, specifically his sexual and aggressive impulses. When we considered his responses in the dream, he decided that he needed to "come down to earth" and engage the dog in a friendly way.

A few weeks later, after working on various ways of embracing his instinctual side, the man dreams that he is hovering over a beautiful woman, who is trying to grab his foot and bring him down to earth. He flaps his arms, once again, to elude her, but feels playful and aroused, as well as a bit anxious. When comparing the two dreams, my client was able to see that the therapeutic work that he had done, had enabled him to feel differently about the dream encounter, even though he still had some work to do to "come down to earth."

How To Do It. The dream worker needs to look for the points where the dreamer responded—which includes emotions, beliefs, assumptions, choices, and actions—in such a way that could have affected the course of the dream from there on. Then the dream worker, in dialogue with the dreamer, critiques the dreamer's responses to the dream encounter, especially at the obvious response points in the dream. Where did the dreamer show a willingness to accept a challenge, or take a closer look at something ambiguous? Where, in contrast, did he or she turn away or avoid an encounter? Where did the dreamer respond creatively, and when did the dreamer react without thought of the full range of options open to him? Based on what the dreamer tells the dream worker, the helper assists the dreamer determine whether the dreamer's response is ordinary and predictable, or a constructive departure from his or her usual reaction to such situations. It is important at this point for the dream worker to take the lead from the

dreamer, because what might be counter-indicated for one person (e.g. avoidance or anger) can represent a breakthrough for someone else.

Then, the dream worker engages the dreamer in expressing what he or she would like to do differently in future dream encounters with similar situations. Also, the dream worker involves the dreamer in imagining how the imagery might evolve as the dreamer adopts a more desirable (as defined by the dreamer) stance toward this issue in the dream. The dream worker also asks the dreamer to imagine what the culmination of such an encounter might be like, and to use active imagination to "dream ahead" and to experience the benefits of such changes.

Step Four: Analysis of the Imagery

At this stage in the FSM, the dream work takes on a more conventional, imagery-focused analysis. The dream worker is free to introduce various methods of analyzing the content, including Jungian amplification, in which the dreamer provides his or her associations to the imagery. Or the dream worker might introduce Gestalt dialoguing between the dreamer and dream images, or suggest other nonintrusive methods that leaves the dreamer in control of the process.

Regardless of the methods used, the dreamer will discover that the imagery analysis is much easier as an embedded step in the FSM than undertaken as a stand-alone approach. By first exploring the relationship between the dreamer and the imagery, the dream worker effectively establishes a context or framework in which the meaning of the the imagery can be more easily discerned.

When teaching the FSM to beginners, I often ask my students what it would be like to communicate only with nouns. I have them try, and it becomes rather comical as they engage in

caveman-like pronouncements that severely limit what they can communicate. I compare this limited vocabulary to a dream work approach that considers only the images, and then I suggest that the feelings in the dream are like adjectives and adverbs, and the theme of the dream emphasizes the verbs that tie the images together. The dreamer's responses, in turn, are specific interventions, and therefore verbs, as well. Students grasp this parallel quite easily.

While standard approaches to imagery analysis can be introduced in Step Four, an altogether nontraditional method of content analysis proceeds from the FSM model. Just as the dreamer's responses are no longer considered a given, the imagery itself is no longer considered static: Both can change in the course of the dream's unfoldment. Indeed, changes in the dreamer's responses and the dream content are viewed as reciprocally related, such that a change in one will usually mirror a change in the other. We might say that the dreamer's response to the emergent dream content "co-creates" the specific imagery. From this perspective, we can say that the image is not concretely formed by the unconscious, but rather resides within us principally as a broad potentiality, which can assume many different forms depending on the dreamer's stance in relation to it. Even after an image first appears in the dream, the image remains in a fluctuating state, deriving its stability from the response of the dreamer to the particular issue being presented. If our attitude toward the issue is unchanging, the image remains fairly constant. If, however, our attitude evolves or regresses, then the image usually becomes more refined, or regresses, in response to this change.

An excellent example of how imagery changes in response to the dreamer's response can be found in the above-mentioned dream of the man who dreamt of trying to escape the dog. Clearly, it is important to discuss what the dog relates to in the dreamer's life, but it is also

important not to become too fixated on the specific image. After all, the dreamer soon experienced the dog transformed into a beautiful woman. Our approach to imagery must, therefore, have sufficient latitude to anticipate such transformations, rather than regress into a "dream book" approach where each symbol has a specific meaning or referent. How does one get a beautiful woman out of a black dog unless one considers the underlying issue (such as the dreamer's instincts or feelings), which can be experienced in a myriad of forms depending on the perceiver.

How To Do It. In practice, the dream worker evaluates any changes in dream imagery that occur and how these changes might relate to, or mirror the dreamer's changes in response. Obviously, when imagery is considered a fluctuating reality that mirrors the dreamer's responses, questions such as "What does this symbol mean?" become somewhat distracting and relatively useless. Instead, the dreamer learns to ask alternative questions such as, "What is the general issue that this image brings to mind?" and "How is my response to this issue affecting my relationship with it?" While these questions may not result in clear categorical answers, they respect the complexity of a dynamic relational process which, if honored and kept alive, can culminate in profound experiences of healing and integration.

Step Five: Applying the Dream Work

In any therapeutic or growth-enhancing approach to dreams, the dreamer must eventually consider parallels in his or her waking life, and formulate ways to bring about constructive change based on the insights of the dream work. Thus, the final step of this dream work process involves identifying areas of one's life where new responses can precipitate positive changes.

The summary might involve an analysis of what general life issue, or life challenge, the dreamer encountered in the dream. Rather than seeing dreams as relating to very specific situations, dream workers can encourage dreamers to view their dreams as presentations of general developmental challenges, which may, of course, take on a variety of specific forms in our dreams and waking experiences.

Given the nature of the relational challenge that the dreamer faces in the dream, the dreamer worker may ask: Where is this type of encounter occurring in your waking life? If the dreamer can see a parallel between the dream issue and some waking situation, then the dream worker may ask the dreamer to consider new responses that can be made in that waking-state relationship to encourage working through the challenge. Your work on the dream might suggest creative and novel options which translate easily into the waking context. But, then again, it is not always a good idea to encourage a dreamer enact what is otherwise a desirable dream action in the waking state! Kissing a frog in public might bring you trouble! Dream workers should encourage the dreamer to think metaphorically in order to translate a desirable dream action into an appropriate waking action.

Applying the dream can also take the form of preparing for future dreams. In some instances, dreamers will be unable to identify any parallels in the waking life, even after completing the first four steps of the FSM. In this case, planning for future dreams may be the only obvious venue for applying the dream work. But even when clear parallels with the waking life are evident, planning for future dreams can become part of this final step of the FSM, as well, especially if the original dream was unpleasant. The dream reliving process underscores the dreamer's freedom of choice, flexibility and creativity. Regardless of whether it bears obvious

fruit in the context of a future dream, it will surely have an overall benefit on a person's sense of confidence and self-esteem.

Summary

The Five Star Method represents a competency-based approach to dream work based on the dreamer's capacity to become more aware and responsive in the dream environment. It is built upon the principle that a certain amount of non-lucid awareness and responsiveness can be discerned in every dream, and that these qualities can be cultivated. It signifies a movement away from treating the dream as a static text toward considering the dream as an interactive, relational process that offers the dreamer a chance to respond to the dream and to waking life in a new way. By focusing on what the dreamer does, and can do differently, the FSM naturally enhances a person's sense of personal responsibility. While the FSM may seem at first to minimize the importance of dream imagery, it actually does what traditional dream work methods often fail to do—that is, to establish an affective and relational context in which the images can be more easily understood.

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