

Entering into a Cocreative Relationship with the Dream:
Empowering the Dreamer and Preserving the Sanctity of the Image

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I always like to start with a dream that illustrates the thesis of my talk. Not only does a dream provide the best “evidence,” but it adds dimensionality and feeling to an otherwise intellectual discussion.

This is a dream of a client of mine, who had once been an active alcoholic and cocaine addict, and who was nearing the end of our work together.

I am standing on the shore at Lynnhaven Inlet in Virginia Beach, near the restaurant where I work. I see a large wave approaching, out of which appears the body of a whale. It continues to approach until it comes up on the beach, partly out of the water, and stops a couple of feet from where I stand. I am afraid but mesmerized, so I stand my ground. It turns its head and looks at me. I look into its huge dark eye for a few moments, and feel its love and knowledge of me. Then it slides backward into the water. I look down and see a baby whale at my feet. Knowing that I must care for it, I bend down and pick it up. I will return to this dream later.

Objectives of my presentation:

To contrast the traditional content-oriented dream analysis with co-creative dream work.

To show how the co-creative paradigm fosters an awareness of dreamer competencies and deficiencies

To show how co-creative dream work preserves the felt sense of Otherness to the dream, and allows for healing that can only occur in an exchange between persons.

Traditional hermeneutics involves an interpretation of art, texts, and dreams in such a way as to render them understandable within the observer's frame of reference. This effectively treats the meaning or impetus of the dream image as a representation of something known, and thus potentially knowable, and endeavors to appropriate the image into a preexisting structure of consciousness or meaning. Whether an interpretation is "accurate" or not cannot be fully known, and whether interpretation is even justified depends on who you ask. For the interpretive exercise leaves the dreamer with a certain felt sense of rightness or not; and that is all we have to go on.

Some have argued that we have it all wrong; that the dream image cannot be fully known, and that to bring it into the realm of prior knowledge represents a soul-killing (to put it in James Hillman's words) form of ego-driven reductionism. Hillman was especially adamant in insisting that the interpretation of the dream brings a premature end to its life. About the image of a black snake, he once said, "the moment you've defined the snake, interpreted it, you've lost the snake."

If, as Hillman asserts, dream interpretation can be a soul killer, you have to ask, What is the alternative to interpretation if we're going to continue to find meaning in our dreams? Hillman's answer was to nurture and keep the dream image alive--to imagine ourselves as living within the image, rather than it living within us. "Stay with the image," he advised.

My own way of keeping the soulfulness of the dream alive is slightly different than Hillman's, but treats the imagery with equal respect: and that is, to embrace a relational, cocreative paradigm of dreaming. This is done by treating the dream as consisting of two interacting systems; the dreamer and the dream content, and analyzing the interplay between dreamer and the emergent novelty of the dream. Instead of seeing the dream as content to be interpreted, it views the dream as unfolding, relational process that produces one of many possible outcomes. This light went on in my head in the mid-70s after I had written my master's thesis on lucid dreaming, *Lucid Dreaming as an Evolutionary Process*. It was around then that I discovered Ernest Rossi's book, *Dreams and the Growth of Personality*, which described an approach to dreaming, in which the dreamer expresses in virtually every dream at least some degree of self-reflection and capacity to interact with the dream imagery. Rossi was the first to use "co-creative" to describe this relational approach to dreaming. His work became the theoretical foundation for my dissertation on lucid dreaming in 1983. I was already moving away from an exclusive focus on lucidity per se, which I considered out of reach for most people in psychotherapy, and looking at the dream as an interactive process between dreamer and dream content that leads to one of many possible cocreated, jointly produced outcomes. In Rossi's words, there is "a continuum of all possible balances of control between the autonomous process of the dream content and the dreamer's self-awareness and consciously directed effort" (1972, p.

163). Tracey Kahan's work has finally confirmed the accuracy of Rossi's original assertion by discovering that dreamers possess all of the faculties of a waking person, albeit to a somewhat lesser extent. I have recently discovered that Rossi influenced Tracey's early thinking, much as he did mine, and that we have been pursuing similar ideas for the past 30 years, but in different psychological disciplines; hers in the realm of metacognitive laboratory research, and mine from the standpoint of therapeutic dream work.

According to Thomas Kuhn, in his seminal classic *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, when a paradigm changes, the world changes with it. We see things we've never seen before. We begin asking new questions, formulating new problems, and arriving at new solutions expressed in language that doesn't make much sense from the standpoint of the old paradigm. In relation to dream theory and analysis, one might ask, What do I mean by the old paradigm, and how can we contrast the two? At the risk of oversimplifying, I think it's true to say that traditional dream analysis treats the dream as its content, and sees the content as representational. Such inquiry has a way of leaving the dreamer's thoughts, assumptions, and responses largely out of the picture in search of answers to the central question, "What does this dream mean?" This belief that dreams are their visual content can be traced back to ancient Greece, and survives today as a culturally embedded assumption that renders our approach to dreams as hermeneutical, or interpretive in its intent. Indeed, Freud's work with dreams only ratified this view when he focused exclusively on interpreting the dream imagery, believing as he did that the content contained the essential truth in a distorted form, and that the dreamer was motivated not to see its meaning. Jung took an entirely different approach to dreams, but remained wedded to the content-oriented paradigm by focusing so much on the analysis of the imagery, whether derived from personal sources, or universal archetypes.

If the the content-oriented dream paradigm raises interpretive questions, such as “What does this image mean or refer to?” what questions arise within a paradigm that treats the dream as an interactive process between the autonomous dream and the somewhat freely responding dreamer? The central question of the co-creative paradigm is, “How did the dreamer respond to the dream imagery?” Tracking this response as the dream narrative unfolds, other questions naturally follow, such as, “How did the dreamer’s responses impact the dream imagery?” and “How, in turn, did the changes in imagery impact the dreamer?” And finally, we ask, “How is the relationship evolving or regressing as a result of this reciprocal exchange?” Those of you who are therapists, and who practice relational therapy, recognize such questions reflect a systems theory orientation, in which problems and their solutions are created and sustained through reciprocal or circular dynamics between parties.

The cocreative dream paradigm may seem foreign to most dream workers, but not only does it produce a wealth of new information about the dreamer’s role in the dream’s creation, and by implication to waking experiences, as well, but it avoids some of the traditional pitfalls of content-oriented dream analysis. Content analysis is a conjectural, hit-or-miss proposition, wherein the meaning of a symbol cannot be conclusively determined. Even if we leave the ultimate meaning of the image up to the dreamer, as most modern dream work methodologies endeavor to do, one is still left wondering if the interpretation is accurate, or accurate enough. Such concerns create a fertile interpersonal context in which invasive suggestions, or projections, represent an ever-present threat to the integrity of the dreamer. Indeed, I believe that projections are an inevitable consequence of a content-oriented dream work paradigm.

How does the cocreative paradigm effectively discourage projections? These concerns are mitigated by analyzing the dreamer-dream interactive process before soliciting associations

to the imagery. While content-oriented analysis involves an attempt to discern a meaning that is not wholly evident, the co-creative paradigm examines a relationship that is expressed or implied in the dream narrative itself, especially if the dreamer is encouraged to include his or her subjective feelings, thoughts and assumptions in the verbal or written account. The need to import opinions in order to explain or interpret “what’s happening” is rendered unnecessary by the focus on process over content.

For example, if a dreamer reacts to his spouse’s emotional demands in a dream by secretly turning to the next door neighbor for comfort and sexual favors, the first priority of a co-creative approach would be to acknowledge that the dreamer’s first impulse when faced with interpersonal stress was to turn to someone else, or to “triangulate” from the standpoint of relational therapy. That relational pattern could be evident in many places. Indeed, that triangular relational impulse can be richly revealing without ever knowing what the next door neighbor represents, or “means” to the dreamer. Also, by putting the relational analysis first, the dreamer never loses sight of his or her responses as determining influences in the dream.

In my own co-creative dream analysis that I call the FiveStar Method, I encourage the analysis of the imagery--using noninvasive methods such as Gestalt role playing and Jungian amplification--after the dreamer-dream interactive process has been thoroughly explored. By putting an analysis of the interactive process first, the dreamer never loses sight of his or her responses as determining influences in the dream. Relational competency and patterns of relational dysfunction can both be highlighted without regard to the analysis of the dream content. In my experience, once the interactive process has been explored, the analysis of imagery produces associations that are contextualized by the interactive process.

The cocreative paradigm clearly shifts dreamwork toward a consideration of the dreamer's responses in cocreating the dream's outcome. Consequently, it indirectly serves Hillman's ideal of allowing the dream image to survive the dream work process by making interpretive projections far less tempting or necessary. Indeed, the cocreative paradigm, by giving the dreamer plenty of information about himself and his reactions to life, allows us to refrain from making hard and fast assumptions about a dream character's origins, or even its ontological status. Massimo, who is also a relational therapist in his waking life among other things, asked me recently, "What do you believe is the ontological status of a dream character?" After pondering the question, I realized that no matter what we believe, the ontological status, or ultimate nature of a dream character is ultimately indeterminate. I am not disappointed by this fact; indeed, I believe dream work is greatly enhanced by leaving this question unanswered. That may sound strange from a content-oriented approach where the value of a dream depends largely on the "sourcing" and discerning the meaning of a dream image.

But again, if the greater fruit in dream analysis is an understanding of relational process, then we can afford to touch lightly upon the interpretation of the content, and thus preserve its mystery and felt personhood. As a therapist, I know that if a person is self aware, is choosing well, and is assuming responsibility for the consequences of her own actions, she does not have to know much about the nature or intentions of those around her. She can be content to tolerate the ambiguity in her relationships without interpreting the actions of others. She doesn't have to figure out why her boyfriend always arrives late, only decide how she needs to respond to it. This client-centered focus can shift a person's attention to where the real power resides, and it can also preserve the autonomy and mystery of the Other in our relationships.

Let me describe how accepting the indeterminate origins and ontological status of the dream character can help us in preserving the sanctity and numinosity of certain dream encounters, and increasing the dimensionality of the dream encounter. I truly believe that this line of thinking about spiritual experiences, which has proven immensely valuable in my own work with clients, could have only emerged by embracing a relational model based on the independence of dreamer and of content.

As one who was blessed with innumerable encounters with light and higher beings in my early adulthood, I naturally wanted to preserve the impact of such dreams without stripping them of their mystery. Without having any awareness of Hillman's treatment of imagery, I sought to keep them alive by focusing on my part in a relationship with a psychologically, if not ontologically "real" or autonomous other.

After having innumerable experiences of encounters with higher beings, I solicited other dream and visionary accounts, and wrote two books in the 90s concerning dozens of encounters between dreamers and the two most significant figures in the Christian tradition--Jesus and Mary. While I was also interested in encounters with other higher beings, having had several with Eastern masters, I restricted my focus to Christian experiences for practical reasons and for popular appeal.

My focus on such experiences has always been from a relational point of view. While many of my readers have asked me, "What did Jesus look like?" which is an understandable content-focused inquiry, I cared very little for such things. Instead, mirroring my increasing commitment to a relational paradigm, I treated these momentous dreams phenomenologically as subjectively "true" encounters, and sought to articulate the relationship factors that accounted for

the immense subjective impact of such experiences. Later, as a therapist and academic interested in understanding the curative factors in psychotherapy, I subsequently revisited the encounters that I presented in my two books with a simple question: What qualities in these experiences account for their lasting impact, and how do these qualities compare with contemporary research into curative relational factors in psychotherapy? I wondered if, perhaps, the curative factors were different in such mystical encounters, and whether psychotherapists could emulate these factors, and possibly accelerate the therapeutic process.

If you are a therapist, you are probably already aware of the contributions that Carl Rogers made to our understanding of what has been called the “therapeutic factors” in the counseling relationship. He established what he considered to be the necessary and sufficient conditions for healing: that is, the counselor’s unconditional positive regard, genuineness, and accurate empathy. A substantial body of research has provided support for Roger’s contention that these factors do, indeed, facilitate positive change in clients.

I wasn’t surprised to find that the encounters with Jesus and Mary reflected these qualities. Indeed, unconditional positive regard is clearly present in all of them. A powerful, overwhelming sense of love is reported again and again. But something else is evident in these encounters. These beings express a complete knowledge of the dreamer. In the span of only a few moments, and usually with a paucity of words, these beings convey a complete love and a complete knowledge of the person. Knowing that the being knows everything, the dreamer thus becomes aware of his or her most significant faults or errors in the presence of all loving Person.

In one of my own that I’ve shared on many occasions, I had a lucid dream in which my friend Mark Thurston and I were flying around the interior of a new auditorium in order to

consecrate it before its opening. I saw Mark talking to someone through an open door at the back of the auditorium. I knew it was Jesus! I walked quickly toward the open door, hoping not to miss him. Passing through I saw him--a most beautiful man with black hair and beard standing in a field of white light. His love was intense and hard to bear, even though he looked sober, even stern. As I stood unable to speak, he asked me, "Are you ready to leave the earth yet?" I said (thinking that he meant that I would die if I was ready), "No." He replied, "Then go out and do what you know to do."

I termed this experience of feeling completely loved and completely known as "informed love." In a paper I published in *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* in 2007, titled "Informed Love as a Curative Factor," I compared informed love to the Eastern concept of "darshan," which translates literally as "glance." Of course, darshan means much more than a mere glance: it connotes a complete apprehension of the devotee by the master. In the moment of darshan, the student becomes simultaneously seen and blessed, thus impacting the self in especially deep and dramatic ways. In my paper, I argue that informed love is possible in psychotherapy over time, but only if the therapist is willing to probe respectfully into the client's perceived failings, and/or if the client is essentially willing to share them.

This line of thinking has been especially useful to me as a psychotherapist often working with clients who cannot readily benefit from unconditional regard until they feel that I know them well enough. They have to experience me as knowing them for all of their strengths and failings, not just loving them, for the full impact of the therapeutic relationship to have its effect.

In my therapeutic dream work, I see such experiences quite often. I have observed that they occur through momentary greetings between the dreamer and dream characters as well as

dramatic encounters with ostensible higher beings, such as in my client's encounter with the whale. I think the common thread in both simple and profound instances of such encounters is the experience of being seen--not by oneself, but by an Other who knows the dreamer, but whose nature cannot be determined. For darshan to be experienced in the dream--for the full impact of feeling loved and known to work its magic in the psyche--the Other must remain autonomous, mysterious and set apart from the dreamer. To analyze such imagery is, indeed, to rob ourselves of the power of a profound interpersonal anointing.

According to Tarnas in his classic *The Passion of the Western Mind*, “. . . in a relationship of true reciprocity—the potential communication of meaning and purpose must be able to move in both directions.” By implication, the Other must remain independent, possessed by its own volition and selfhood. To render it a part of oneself or even to refer to it as an archetype runs the risk of destroying a relationship of true reciprocity with it, thus undermining our experience of seeing and being seen, knowing and being known, and loving and receiving love.

So, in a true relational approach to dreaming, the dream character has to be granted, at least potentially, an indeterminate ontological status. We must be willing to preserve the felt sense of independence of the dream character. Now this may seem to violate the principle that governs most content-oriented dream work -- that the dream represents parts of ourselves, either repressed and forgotten as Freud might say, or emergent as Jung might say. It may seem ominous and regressive to introduce dualism into what is ostensibly a personal, interior experience. But we have to acknowledge the fact that the nature of the dream image can never ever be ascertained: all such conclusions are based on mere conjecture. Similarly, while one may dismiss certain dream images as products of memory or personal history, there is simply no way

to know for sure. And further, most of us would agree that at least some dream images seem wholly autonomous and independent from us. Jung would refer to these as archetypal images that have never been fully conscious, but even in that rendering, we find a certain reductionism that robs the image of its personhood.

Our dreams are fully capable of bringing us the experience of informed love. But in order to imbibe the life-sustaining essence of such moments as fully as we can, it is important for us not always to bring the Other into a familiar realm. While Hillman believed it was enough to “stay with the image,” I believe we can preserve the essence of the dream image by focusing primarily on our responses to to imagery during the dream.

I would also suggest that treating all dreams as relational events between a dreamer, who feels, thinks, and behaves freely in the dream, and dream imagery whose origins and meaning cannot be fully discerned is the very best way to analyze dreams, including those that are both profane and profound. Shifting to this perspective is, admittedly, a paradigm shift that may be difficult for some of us. However, it can be justified simply:

- by looking at the dream with fresh eyes and seeing how much the dreamer actually participates and co-creates the dream. It’s always there if you’re willing to see it.
- by considering the groundbreaking research of Tracey Kahan, which has established the fact that dreamers exhibit significant self-reflection and volition in nonlucid dreams.
- by assuming a phenomenological approach, in which we acknowledge how little we really know about the nature and origins of our dream imagery, especially the imagery in big dreams.

By placing more emphasis on what the dreamer feels, thinks and does in relationship to the dream imagery, and in turn, granting the dream imagery a certain autonomy and mystery, we not only help the dreamer take more responsibility for his or her contribution to the dream outcome, but we leave the dream content imbued with a certain mystery that not only keeps it alive, but preserves the precious experience of being fully seen by it.

I'd like to finish up revisiting the powerful dream of the whale that I shared at the beginning of my presentation. A content-oriented approach might seize upon the compelling image of the whale as the central repository of meaning for this dreamer. Allusions to ancient symbols of God, to the archetype of wholeness, to the contextualizing power of such a singular maternal force, and to the feminine aspect of the divine all come to mind.

From the standpoint of the cocreative paradigm, however, the things that stand out are the dreamer's willingness to stand her ground, and her decision to accept responsibility for the infant that the whale leaves at her feet. One would not have to know that the dreamer's biological mother had severely abused her and that the dreamer had promised never to have a child of her own, in order to celebrate her courage in this splendidly ambiguous encounter. Within a year, she was married with her own child. By focusing on what she did and didn't do at the time, I found it unnecessary to overly speculate on the nature and meaning of the whale. Of course, I didn't ignore that dimension, but for the dreamer, the encounter had been real, and the effects profound and palpable. She had been witnessed by a great other, and any analysis of that potent image might have diminished the lasting influence of its anointing spirit. By focusing on her own actions, and feeling the power of the great whale, she could experience the truth of Hillman's

words when he suggested that the dream image would continue to nurture us if we would only learn to respect it.

So I hope, in conclusion, that I have not only laid out a contrast between two distinct approaches to dream theory and analysis--the traditional content-focused analysis, and co-creative theory--but I have shown you how the cocreative paradigm enhances our understanding of the dream by placing much more emphasis on what the dreamer does and doesn't do. By focusing on what is essentially ours to control and change, we thus save the dream content from a withering gaze and scattered projection. We are left free to contemplate the majesty and mystery of it, to be witnessed by it, and to be contained within it.