

Monty's Dream and The Development of the Five Star Method

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For a more thorough, academic treatment of this topic, see A New Method of Dream Analysis Congruent with Contemporary Counseling Approaches, or The Five Star Method: A Relational Dream Work Methodology, which can be found at www.dreamanalysisitraining.com

Introduction

As I drove across the Tappanzzee Bridge in the winter of 1978, I felt a bit apprehensive. Heading for Dr. Montague Ullman's home in Ardsley, New York, I would soon be joining a dozen dreamers for a weekend of dream work training with one of the most famous experts on dream work in the world. I had never met "Monty," but had heard about his warm and unassuming style, and the power of his method. But regardless, it was new to me.

As I drove along, I reflected on the task that lay before me. Dr. Herb Puryear, had commissioned me to design a course in dream analysis in my role of Manager of Special Projects for the Association for Research and Enlightenment. Since I'd completed a thesis on lucid dreaming and had recently published *Lucid Dreaming: Dawning of the Clear Light* (ARE, 1976), the project certainly fit my aspirations, but it required me to bring more contributions to the table than just my background in lucid dreaming.

I learned a great deal from Monty that weekend, and became impressed with the power of his method. However, at one point I asked him if he'd ever considered exploring the theme of the dream, along with the feelings and images. To give you some background to my question, my

friend Mark Thurston and I had, for some time, been puzzled by Edgar Cayce's terse analysis of dreams during his clairvoyant "readings." Cayce had a way of reducing long and confusing dreams to brief summaries without addressing the meaning of the specific content. In pondering his avoidance of the content, we eventually decided that Cayce's practice of extracting the dream's basic theme or narrative was, in itself, a method of analysis that revealed the underlying storyline of the dream. While I had not worked out the rest of the method that would become the FiveStar Method, I was thoroughly convinced that extracting the dream's theme provided a valuable supplement to Ullman's focus on feelings and images, and I was eager to share my enthusiasm. But looking back, it was presumptuous for me to recommend changes to a system that I'd only begun to learn!

In response to my question, the most famous living authority in the field of dream analysis politely and simply answered, "No, I have never considered it."

Not knowing when to leave well enough alone, I asked, "Why?"

He replied, "Because it doesn't seem necessary." And that was that.

The next morning, however, Monty said that he'd had a dream the night before that he wanted to share with the group. In his dream, a young man arrived in a red sports car. Monty went out to greet him, but felt a little thrown off by the man's energetic style. After the group had worked on his dream and Monty had reentered the conversation, he revealed that the dream character reminded him of me, and that the dream had probably been provoked by my question the day before. He added that I was the first person to have ever questioned his method. This did not seem to concern him. To the contrary, he treated me kindly for the rest of the seminar. Later, when I wrote and asked for his permission to incorporate some of his ideas into the course,

Monty gladly consented. It was clear to me then, and now, that Monty exhibited a generosity of spirit that permitted me to ask my own questions, and to go on to develop my ideas about dream analysis. Who could ask for more in a mentor?

I have found over the years that there are a variety of dream analysis methods, and that each exponent or creator is equally convinced that his or her particular approach is the best one. This is not surprising, given the fact that we cannot easily compare dream work methods. Beyond the difficulty of setting up parallel interpretations of the same dream for the same dreamer, the dream itself doesn't make itself available for scrutiny in the usual way, as a consensual reality that can be viewed and evaluated by anyone. What we have is a story—the dreamer's story—which is subject to distortion and embellishment in the retelling. Our ability to make sense of the dream, and to exploit its value for the dreamer is largely tied to the dreamer's faith in our particular approaches, and our ability to artfully apply them. In the end, it is the worldview of the dream worker that is expressed by the methods. The dream remains a mute witness to our efforts to understand it.

With that in mind, I realize that I have been "driving a red sports car" since I began theorizing about dreaming and developing my own dream work method. That is, I have introduced some novel, if not provocative elements into the dream work community.

The incorporation of Ullman's emphasis on feelings, and his way of encouraging dream workers to experience the dream as if it were their own provided the first step of a comprehensive approach to dream analysis that I developed in stages over the course of the next 30 years. Not surprisingly, extracting the dream's theme became the second step. But the third and most important step in the Five Star Method of dream analysis occurred to me later, as an

outgrowth of my dissertation on lucid dreaming in 1983 and my early clinical work. Perhaps it is again presumptuous of me to say, but I believe that by incorporating this third step into my approach, the FSM represents a turning point in the history of dream analysis.

The Dreamer's Response as the Key to Understanding Dreams

I had been licensed as a professional counselor for only a few months in 1983 when I began working with a woman who had been referred to me by counselor in a nearby state. The therapist had become aware of my work with spirituality and dreaming and, for some reason, believed that I would be able to help Barbara, a woman who had just previously tried to commit suicide for the second time. Prior to her second suicide attempt, she had been flying to New York on a monthly basis to undergo treatment with one of the foremost experts on depression at the time. She had also undergone two regimens of electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) along with antidepressants—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.

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 dream made the situation clear: Whatever nourishment had been available in her family had been consumed by others. However, what was remarkable about the dream had little to do with the imagery. It was Barbara's response to the dilemma that was puzzling in the context of her near-total sense of hopelessness. From that moment onward, I used the dream as "evidence" that she had the capacity to participate in her own healing process. And because she had experienced this capacity, if only for a moment, she could never entirely deny it.

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 a response-oriented approach 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 *response* to the immense challenge offered by the dream indicate 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 cite the examples of similar dreams that I have heard from other dreamers. For instance, a young woman reported having a dream in which she is outside her childhood home, and sees a fleet of UFOs approaching, belching fire from their undersides and scorching everything in their path. The dreamer reacts by fleeing to her bedroom where she hides under the bed before awakening in fear. Her question to me was typical and understandable: What do you think this dream was warning me of?

Gently skirting her fear, I told her a dream that I had heard from another dreamer who also had seen UFOs approaching, spewing fire upon the earth. In his dream, his family is in panic, preparing to flee the home. Instead of joining them, he thinks, "If they have come to destroy the world, then there is no place where we can hide." He then wonders if the extraterrestrials would, by chance, stop destroying the world if they know that humans have spiritual aspirations. So he closes his eyes and begins to meditate, attempting to commune with the beings aboard the UFOs. The UFOs immediately stop scorching the earth, and eventually land on a beach. Their owners—

sages in saffron robes—are greeted by throngs of singing people as the sages emerge from the spacecrafts.

These dreams have almost identical content, but move in opposite directions due to the dreamers' contrasting responses. Thus such comparisons can illustrate that the dreamer's response often makes the difference between a "good" and "bad" dream. However, sharing the dreams of other people can provoke defensiveness in anyone, so it must be done sensitively in the spirit of raising hypotheses about what the dreamer might want to do differently, if the dream should recur.

While citing the responses of other dreamers offers to broaden the dreamer's perspective, the best 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 seems intent on biting him and so the dreamer remains quite anxious until he awakens.

In discussing this dreamer's responses to the dog, my client realized that he mistrusted his own instincts, specifically his sexual and aggressive impulses. His father had abused him severely whenever he had expressed his feelings, so my client tended to dissociate from his feelings, and then turn to pornography or to explode when he could no longer suppress them. 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 embracing his emotional intensity, 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, paired with a more playful response in the dream enabled him to see the beauty in his emotional nature, even though he still had some work to do.

How To Do It. The dream worker, or dream group, needs to look for the points where the dreamer responded—internally and/or behaviorally—in such a way that could have affected the course of the dream from there on. These points are like forks in the path where the dreamer effectively chose which way to go by his or her response to what was presented. 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.

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.

Given the nature of the 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 arena 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 signifies a movement away from treating the dream as a static message toward considering the dream as an interactive 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 is a competency-based approach to dream work that 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 interactive context in which the images can be more easily understood.

Behind this method also stands the unspoken possibility of having direct experiences of light and encounters with embodiments of higher power. Indeed, by assuming responsibility for our reactions in our dreams, we may experience the kind of ecstasy and healing that we rarely allow ourselves to hope for. While I have lectured and written extensively about such pinnacle experiences (Sparrow, 1994, 1997, 2002, 2003), I rarely speak of such lofty fruits while I sit with my clients in the trenches of their ordinary struggles. But keeping these possibilities in mind and gently introducing them when the opportunities arise surely communicates something of what also may await them.

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