

## Optimizing the Potential and Avoiding the Pitfalls of Online Dream Sharing

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The Good Doctor once said, "Wonders are willingly told and willingly heard." He must have been thinking about dreams. For people are fascinated by their dreams, and readily disclose them.

Some concern is warranted in the sharing of dreams, because, as we know, the sharing of highly personal psychic material can make the dreamer vulnerable in unanticipated ways, and attract invasive projections from friends and strangers alike, who may interpret the dream according to highly subjective premises. Sharing dreams online is becoming increasingly popular, as evidenced by the emergence of dream sharing sites. In addition, web forums attached to sites such as the IASD's and my own at websites often encourage the sharing of a dream's full text in hopes that someone more knowledgeable may later post a commentary on the dream, and lend insight into the dream's meaning. People interested in supporting this movement and taking advantage of the opportunities inherent in online dream exchanges may do well to consider the well-known pitfalls in dream sharing, and solutions that may have not been widely considered. In this presentation, I will describe two underlying assumptions about dreams that stand in the way of an effective and safe online dream exchange methodology. I will show how challenging these assumptions is not only supportable, but will show how a new dream work paradigm emerges from the ashes that permits a vigorous and meaningful exchange between dreamer and dream

helper, while minimizing the hazards inherent in the traditional content approach to dream analysis. I will also demonstrate briefly how a dream worker can analyze a posted dream responsibly and effectively in the absence of real-time exchanges with the dreamer. I believe that dream sharing sites could achieve much greater success by adopting and advocating this easily taught approach.

Let's look first at the two biases that stand in way of adopting an approach to dream analysis that can facilitate healthy and meaningful online dream exchanges.

The first assumption is rooted in the Western view of art and dreams that was first articulated by the ancient Greeks. That view, simply put, is that the dream is its content, and that its content needs to be interpreted as a commentary on one's waking life. This is the theory of mimesis, which has gone largely unchallenged for over two millennia. Susan Sontag in her famous essay "Against Criticism," says that this theory is so entrenched that art (and dreams) cannot be viewed without assuming that there's some message or intent that needs to be discerned, or otherwise the dream has no value. Looking at a dream without that assumption-- that is, instead, as an experience that can be analyzed just like any other--is difficult for most people, because questions such as "What does this symbol mean?" or "What is this dream telling me?" are often the first questions asked by inexperienced dreamer and content-driven dream workers alike. I contend that such questions are driven by the unexamined ancient assumption gifted to us by the Greeks, and that they get us off on the wrong foot and preclude, because of the assumptions implied in the questions, any other view. However, by challenging the theory of mimesis, we lay the groundwork for seeing the dream as much more than just a static work with a presumed meaning. We permit ourselves to see it as a relational process, in which the dreamer plays an essential, cocreative role. Instead we might ask, What is happening in the dream? What

is the dreamer doing in response to what's happening? How does the dreamer's response affect the relationship with the dream? How is the dream content responding to the dreamer?

The second assumption that impedes the adoption of an effective dream work methodology is the belief that the dreams are necessarily bizarre and their meaning purposely obscure. This assumption derives from the work of Freud, who believed that dreams were, by definition, disguises of underlying urges and conflicts that we could not afford to acknowledge. We are still encumbered by this view. And yet, in recent years, dream research has shown that dreams are less bizarre than once thought, and that they parallel the content and concerns of the waking life. This more modern view has been referred to as the continuity hypothesis, and has been receiving increasing support in recent years. In addition to the support for waking-dream content parallels, research into dream process; that is, the degree of measurable reflective awareness, volition, and interactive process that can be discerned in ordinary, non-lucid dreams—has tentatively established that dreamers exhibit considerable metacognitive skills ordinarily associated with waking cognition. Freud would have found this finding puzzling and incompatible with his assumption that the dreamer's awareness is purposely impaired by the need to avoid the unconscious agenda. And yet, the traditional distinctions between waking thought and dreaming cognition have been largely undermined, in particular, through the work of Tracey Kahan, who has developed an instrument for measuring metacognition in nonlucid dreams.

So what does overturning these two entrenched assumptions do for us when it comes to the matter at hand; that is, sharing and analyzing dreams via online platforms? If you shift your focus away from an exclusive analysis of content onto an analysis of the immediate and fully evident dreamer-dream encounter, and you dispense with the notion that the meaning is obscure, you arrive at a mode of inquiry that analyzes the dreamer's subjective awarenesses and responses

to the content without requiring the imposition of "expert" knowledge. Over the past 35 years, I have been developing and articulating such a method, which I have named the FiveStar Method, but it is more of an orientation to the dream than a specific method--an orientation that I call cocreative dream theory. In a nutshell, this paradigm regards the dream as an interactive, cocreative process, in which the dreamer's feelings, assumptions, and actions influence the outcome. If you happen have training in existential-humanistic, family systems, solution-focused therapies--all cutting edge therapies that focus on individual choice, responsibility and relational competency--then this approach to dreams is arguably the only method that conforms to modern, noninvasive practice. Time constraints prevent me from describing the evolution of this method, but suffice to say that it had its roots in my early lucid dream research, which influenced my overall view of what was possible, and to some extent already happening, in all dreams. Unlike many of the early lucid dream researchers who remained focused exclusively on inducing lucidity, I shifted my interest to analyzing dreams from the perspective that the nonlucid dreamer is much more aware and free to respond than we ordinarily think. As I have said, this paradigm is receiving increasing support from research into dream metacognition.

Two years ago during the IASD Psiberconference, I published a presentation on the FiveStar method, which was re-published as an article in recent issue of *Dream Time*. During the web exchanges with people who read my paper, I agreed to demonstrate the FSM by working on a dream posted by Tony Hawkins from England. Tony wrote out his dream, and posted it on the web forum. I, in turn, agreed to work on it "offline" without having any exchanges ahead of time with him. While this may seem overly ambitious and unwise in practice, I think the results indicate that the FSM can produce useful information for the dreamer even when real-time

exchanges are not possible. Why is this possible? Because the analysis only focuses on aspects of the dream narrative, without inferring hidden meanings.

Tony shared the following dream:

*I am in the grounds of beautiful old college buildings. I step onto a gravel driveway as a tall beautiful, dark-haired young woman in flowing dress walking merrily away from a gathering of people, some sort of celebration, hands me cellophane wrapper from which she has just taken what I sense must be really big a bunch of flowers. I have a sense of white, full round heads. "This is for you." some words like that as she hands me the empty wrapping. I hold it up against the sky looking into its transparent emptiness. There are scattered small grey flower-head or plant images on the wrapper, otherwise it is empty, perhaps a sense of tiny plant detritus. I have my arm in side. I turn to the right and walk into another old stone college building, enter its pristine courtyard, with immaculate lawns and square trimmed hedges. On the exquisite grass, against the exquisite hedge is an old bicycle standing, not really leaning, just terribly upright, straight wheels, as though it ought not to be there and somebody might come at any moment and remove it. Sitting before the grass, on the grass, on a bench, it's not clear, are two prestigious looking women in earnest conversation. They are sensibly dressed. As I pass them I have taken four small branches with leaves, a bit dead looking, from the formerly empty wrapper. I tossed them down in a bunch/heap at the corner of the crisp lawn and hedge saying "Adding a little bit to the decoration" and keep walking. One of the women glances around looking very slightly puzzled and perturbed by this unwanted interruption to her conversation. The few sticks were, unlike the bicycle, in an untidy configuration and looking, even more than the bicycle, as though*

*they were only fit to be removed. I kept walking lest I was called back to remove them myself. There was nothing about my offering which improved the look of the place.*

Here is my work with Tony's dream, using the Five Star Method, which was posted as a response on Psiberconference's web board:

*Tony,*

*I read your dream when I awoke to meditate at 4:30 am, and thought about it quite a bit before I went back to sleep. I even had a dream that seemed related to it. But let me apply the FSM, and show you what it might reveal. Of course, I would prefer to be in dialogue with you as we worked on it together, but I will do my best to remain true to the model. As you will see, I can say a whole lot without engaging in "intrusive projections," which is more likely to happen in a content-focused, interpretive approach. But of course, without you present, my associations will be limited.*

*First I would ask you to retell the dream in the present tense, but since you're not here, I will proceed with your past-tense dream.*

*Step One: Feelings*

*I experience yearning, sadness, loneliness, annoyance, anger (toward the women), defensiveness, and excitement (as I look at the bicycle). You might not have these feelings, of course, but they came up in me.*

*Step Two: Theme*

*Someone receives something that seems to have lost its content, beauty or value, and disposes of it in a way that mildly offends others. He also becomes aware of something that has value but is not in use.*

### *Step Three: Responses*

*You accept the flower cellophane, but do not engage the woman, nor ask her any questions. You could have asked her something, or said something. When you encounter the women in conversation, who evidence some annoyance, you don't interact. You don't defend yourself, you don't greet them, etc. Indeed, throughout, you do not engage anyone or anything except the flower remnants. While you consider the usefulness of the bicycle, you do not mount it, yet. But there is a sense that you may do so. So you remain somewhat aloof from most of the dream imagery.*

### *Step Four: Imagery*

*If you were present, I would you dialogue with the woman, the two women, the flower remnants, and the bicycle, because there is so much there that never becomes revealed. I think it would be fruitful if you spoke to the woman, asked her questions, told her what you wanted, and then allowed her to respond. I think it would also be valuable for you to describe yourself as the flower remnants (once beautiful, now dried up, etc.) And what would you say to the women, who became annoyed at your mere presence.*

*They are much more active and engaged than you are. You seem to be on the outside looking into that relationship. But it seems positive that they are so active, as if to say, "How will you get into a relationship with us, because there's so much there and waiting for you?" Of*

*course, the content may also pertain to external relationship dynamics, as well, where you might feel left out or overlooked.*

*I would also encourage you to become the bicycle and address the dreamer. I feel that you might hear a certain vitality and youthfulness beckoning for you to embark on an adventure. Alone, perhaps, but nonetheless something vital that would take you to a new place. The bicycle is old, but he's good and still able to bear you.*

*Also, I noticed that the "flowers" were changing toward the end, becoming something more substantial just as you discarded them. Thus the imagery is moving toward something that you don't notice. One principle in this approach to dreaming is that nothing is ever dead, but remains dormant until we bring it to life with our responses to it. Your careful examination of it seems to have altered it, but you give up on it, perhaps too soon, to discover its lingering vitality.*

#### *Step Five: Application*

*As for application, if this were my dream, I would want to take strides to engage others more (perhaps women), rather than to remain a witness. Or from another standpoint, perhaps it would be best to desist from those efforts and apply yourself in a more individual direction, as represented by the "road trip" on the bicycle.*

*As a final step, I would encourage you to relive the dream in reverie, exercising new, more engaged responses at various junctures in the dream. Seize the moment, find your voice, and witness the changes in the imagery and outcome. I think reliving this dream could really unleash some of the pent-up forces of change that are clearly evident in the dream narrative.*

*In summary, I have done what I don't ordinarily do, which is to analyze the dream without the dreamer' present. But notice that I build everything that I say on the process that is clearly present in the dream. The specific "bridge" to your waking life is up to you, of course.*

*I hope this proves to be of value to you, Tony!*

And here is Tony's response to my work:

*Tony Hawkins wrote:*

That's really terrific. You've filled in the gap between my fanciful head take (difficult not to on a computer - which is why I'm impressed with what you've done) and something more minimal and depressing. You've emphasized the field of emotions, which is where I really am. And it gives me a very personal example to go on. I appreciate it would be better to have had my responses. Have you ever done this online, in a chatroom type situation?

When the circus is finally over I'll visit your website. I've had a quick look. I'm sure I'll have more to say at some future time. Thanks again.

Tony

And here is Ryan Hurd's comment on my work with Tony's dream. Ryan, as you may know, is a well-known lucid dream researcher, blogger, and creator of the highly popular dream website, <http://dreamstudies.org>:

*Ryan Hurd wrote:*

*Thanks, Scott, for this clear presentation of your dreamwork method! Seeing it in action with Tony's dream was also a treat (given the limitations of the medium). In particular, I really appreciate the "theme" step for revealing narrative structure.*

*My question right now is one of training. Do you intend this dreamwork method for all lay dreamworkers, or do you suggest it more for clinical psychotherapists with backgrounds like your own? (I see it is a method than can be used by lay dream workers or professional therapists alike.)*

*A final comment is that I am excited about the theoretical implications of the 5 star method. The dream is not a fixed text is a relationship in the making.*

In summary, I believe that by challenging some faulty assumptions about dreams, we can view the dream as an interactive, relational process that can be analyzed according to the effects of the dreamer's feelings, assumptions, biases, and responses (or lack thereof). By remaining exclusively focused on what is evident in the dream, rather than what is not, the dream worker can engage the dreamer without overstepping healthy boundaries, and make a significant contribution to the dreamer's self knowledge, even when the dreamer is not present.

Of course, ideally, this method would be used between individuals who are in a real-time exchange. But in the absence of that, the FSM in good hands remains true to the noninvasive ideal of modern dream work. For a video demonstration, and a variety of papers related to the FSM, go to my DreamStar Institute website at [dreamanalysisitraining.com](http://dreamanalysisitraining.com).

This presentation will be published there upon my return to the states.