

Psycho-spiritual: nature of imagination and dreams



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PSYCHO-SPIRITUAL THERAPY: DREAMS & THE IMAGINATION

with dreams and the imagination? Consider the nature of the imagination and dreams, and illustrate with examples from clinical literature.

‘ The dream is a little hidden door in the innermost and most secret recesses of the psyche, opening into that cosmic night which was psyche long before there was any ego-consciousness, and which will remain psyche no matter how far our ego-consciousness may extend ... in dreams we put on the likeness of that more universal, truer, more eternal man dwelling in the darkness of primordial night. ...’

(Carl Jung, 1964)

These words represent Carl Jung’s famous definition of the nature and significance of the dream. Other definitions possible: for instance, if one is a materialist, then he understands dreams to be little more than the secretions of chemicals from glands in the brain and so simply a collection of worthless memory fragments. But leaving these prejudices aside, this essay is concerned with the psycho-spiritual interpretation of dreams, and here Jung’s definition supplies us with an excellent starting-point for understanding.

For Jung and other psychotherapists, the dream is a gate and a passage, a ‘ *hidden door*’, into the personal and collective unconscious, which is the basic substrata of our psychic life. Freud spoke similarly of the dream as ‘ *the royal road to the unconscious* ’ (Freud, 1999). The collective unconscious is inhabited by the archetypes – for instance, archetypes of the mother, wise

old man, child, and trickster – which are' ... *irrepresentable, unconscious, pre-existent forms that seem to be part of the inherited structure of the psyche and can therefore manifest themselves spontaneously anywhere, anytime* ' (Jung, 1974). In other words, the archetypes are pre-existent typical situations, stored in the collective unconscious, that have occurred innumerable times in man's history and which appear to modern man in symbolic form in his dreams. These symbols are full of knowledge and restorative power for patients and therapists alike. Dreams are messages and compensating agents that give the dreamer advice about how to balance or re-adjust his thoughts, emotions, and attitudes to life. Moreover, they contain a numinous aspect that can transform the spiritual life of the dreamer. By consulting and heeding the advice of our dreams and our imaginations therapists and patients can learn profound and vital knowledge about themselves and about the causes and possible methods of treatment for psychological distress (Hillman, 1980).

Scientists and psychologists identify four basic states of consciousness: the state of waking consciousness, the state of dream consciousness, the state of deep sleep consciousness and the state of awakened consciousness (See: Allen, 1995). Two further dream states are also identified. *Lucid Dreaming* is where the dreamer is aware that he is dreaming and actively controls the images in the dream. Lucid dreaming can be of two types: ' low' state or ' high' state. ' Low' state lucid dreaming allows the dreamer to manipulate the images in the dream for his own amusement, pleasure, entertainment and so on. ' High' state lucid dreaming also allows the dreamer to be aware of the images and symbols of the dream, but this freedom is used by the dreamer

to request spiritual help, advice or guidance. *Non-Lucid Dreaming* is the state where the dreamer is unaware that he is dreaming. Non-lucid dreaming may also be divided into 'low' and 'high' states. 'Low' state non-lucid dreams arise from the personal unconscious and so are personally conditioned, being composed of fragments of memories from that day or preceding days or of anxiety, panic, excitement or other emotional states. 'High' state non-lucid dreams arise from the collective unconscious and are heavily laden and impregnated with images and symbols of religious, mythological or archetypal character. The images and symbols in these dreams are impersonal: that is, they are drawn from the collective fund of images that are stored in the collective unconscious; they appear to the dreamer however in a particular symbolic form that is meaningful for their psychic situation (Leuner, 1969).

Let us look then at a clinical example of dream therapy taken from Jung's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. In the chapter 'Psychiatric Activities' (Jung, 1973) Jung tells of an eighteen year old catatonic patient who had been sexually abused by her family as a teenager and who was now mute and schizophrenic. This girl had particularly strange dreams. She describes how she lived on the moon and was a member of a community who were forced to live underground because they were terrorised by a beautiful vampire who killed their women and children. The girl decides one day to save the moon people by killing the vampire; she takes a sacrificial knife and awaits the vampire on a tower. But when the vampire swoops upon her he is so exquisitely beautiful that she is enchanted by him and can no longer kill him. Jung tells how after these dream confessions the patient began to speak

again. The girl explained that by this confession of her secret ' moon' life Jung as her doctor had prevented her from leaving the ugly and painful Earth that she detested and escaping to the moon which was for her full of meaning. Though the patient returned into her catatonic state for several months after this analysis, eventually Jung was able, by explaining the symbols in these dreams, to lead the girl back to sanity.

Jung explains the dreams like this. The patient having suffered so much abuse in real life compensates for her tragedy by escaping to the moon where everything is beautiful; she is in Jung's phrase ' *humiliated in the eyes of the world, but elevated in the realm of fantasy* ' (Jung, 1973). The patient transforms the incest she suffered in real life, into a mythical and spiritual experience in the realm of fantasy; she is assailed by a beautiful and mythical creature (the vampire) who is the complete opposite of the father who abused her in real life. By explaining these images to the patient, and by telling her that these images meant that she had to return to Earth to confront her difficulties there, the girl was after a short while fully recovered and able to lead an entirely normal life.

This is one example of how the interpretation and explanation of symbols and images in a dream can bring about profound psychological healing for patients. The curious student will find many other such examples in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* as well as in James Hillman (1980) and Martha Crampton (1979).

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Our imagination is the centre of all human creative activity and is intimately connected to our dreams and to the world of the unconscious. Imagination defined strictly in a philosophical or dictionary sense means ' *the mental faculty of forming images of external objects not present to the senses* ' (OED). That is, we use our imaginations to form pictures or images of events or scenes that are idealistic or fantastic. And it is dreams and their symbols and motifs - such as the mandala (circle), Nazi swastika, phallus, quaternity (square) - that supply the basic materials for our imaginations. This is why throughout history great artists — from Beethoven and Wagner, to Shakespeare and Coleridge — have produced some their finest work when their imaginations have been inspired by images that they have seen in their dreams.

Technically the imagination is one of five basic levels of mental faculty; the others include: the abstract mind, intuition, the concrete mind and thinking. So too, imagination is the deepest lying level of mental faculty: it sub-ducts beneath consciousness to enter into the deepest levels of the unconscious: the collective unconscious, and its inhabitants, the archetypes. The imagination is thus effectively a bridge between consciousness and the unconscious. When we use our imagination we dwell upon images that we have seen in our unconscious in the form of dreams and we re-arrange this material in forms that are fantastic or creative. We *imagine* how we would like the world to be. Applied to clinical therapy, the use of imaginative techniques can engender profound improvements in the state of minds of patients. Carl Jung advocated a technique called ' active imagination', where whilst in a waking state a patient focuses intensely upon images that

appeared in recent dreams and so tries to enhance the features of such images and symbols and so contemplate their significance. By this concentration upon dream images, the patient is able to discover and then integrate the symbols that are being produced by his unconscious. This integration — named ‘individuation’ (Jung, 1973) – produces for the patient a state of psychic and spiritual equilibrium: that is, the unconscious and conscious halves of his personality are balanced against each other.

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In the final analysis, it must be said, that from a psycho-therapeutic viewpoint, dreams and imagination are of the utmost importance for clinical psychology. Dreams are a door to a vast and immense reservoir of age-old images and wisdom which when revealed to a patient in archetypal and symbolic form can transform his psychological attitudes and guide him out of psychic distress. The imagination is vital too as the bridge to this world of the unconscious, forming a link between this world and that.

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