

Dream Appreciation

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The dream language has more in common with the language of the poet than the language of the scientist.

DREAMS AS EXTRAORDINARY HUMAN EXPERIENCES

BY MONTAGUE ULLMAN, M.D.

Dreams are ordinary only in the sense that everyone has them. What makes them extraordinary are the gifts they bring to our lives if we learn how to receive them.

Let me share with you my ideas about dreams, which are not necessarily the prevailing ideas about dreams, because they are outside of the orthodox psychoanalytic tradition. Dreaming and the dream refer to two different, though closely related, events. Dreaming is an intrinsic part of the sleep cycle that recurs every 90 minutes during the night and is associated with distinct physiological changes that signify a state of arousal of the organism. The dream, in contrast to dreaming, is a remembrance in an awake state

of whatever it is that we can bring back from the previous night's dreaming experience. These two modes of consciousness resort to two different languages to say different things about the same organism. To understand the dream, we must begin with an understanding of the way the two languages differ and what it is we're saying when we speak the language of the dream. Our two languages appear to have evolved as a way of speaking to each other.

Let me begin with waking language. This appears to have evolved as a way of speaking to each other about the world and the way we experience ourselves in the world. The world is broken down into manageable and agreed upon categories, which can be communicated through a structured grammar which can convey in a logical manner how our experiences are organized in space and time. Language is a way of categorizing reality so as to be able to talk about

our experiences. It's actually a deeply rooted way of making reality more discrete than it really is.

But our needs go beyond what can be transmitted in this fashion through language; we seem to need a more direct way to encounter and express the impact upon us of the world we live in. We need a more effective language for the expression of feelings. In waking life in order to accomplish this we resort to the language of the arts, the language of music, the language of poetry. While asleep and dreaming, a pictorial figurative sensory language takes over and reflects our feeling states. The dream language has more in common with the language of the poet than the language of the scientist. Both the poet and the dreamer rely on metaphor for their expressive effect.

There are, however, at least three significant differences in the way that the poet and the dream use metaphor. The poet rear-

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 ranges words to create the metaphorical quality that best conveys the feeling that he or she wishes to communicate to others. The dreamer shapes images and pictures into metaphorical statements that also convey feelings. The poet addresses an audience outside himself or herself. The dream is a private message to oneself. Finally, writing poetry is a task of greater or lesser difficulty. Dreams comes naturally. Dreaming and the creation of these visual metaphors that occur to us come through no deliberate or volitional effort on our part. It is easy. All we do is go to sleep.

The neophyte in dream work has to learn how to look at the images, not as photographic replications of reality, but as metaphorical ways of conveying the felt nature of the predicament the dreamer is in at the time the dream occurs. We have adapted what in all likelihood was a primitive imaging capacity, which we probably share with animals lower on the evolutionary scale, and learned how to use it to serve as an instrument for symbolic, rather than literal expression. Our sleeping self is

concerned with managing residual feelings that stay with us until the time we go to sleep and that surface at the onset of the dream.

Metaphorical imagery is a most suitable, symbolic vehicle for containing and conveying feelings, just as it does in poetry. A man who pictures himself, for example, driving down a steep hill in his dream and having his brakes suddenly fail, will experience the sensation of being in an uncontrollably dangerous, life-threatening situation. He will experience this sensation far more powerfully than if, in waking life, he simply senses something is disturbing him. The dream examines and explores the depth of that disturbance and confronts the dreamer with the full reality of it. In the dream, we are part of the metaphor we ourselves are creating, a fact which places us in an immediate relationship to the feelings being generated. We are the actors, not the reporters of the scene that is taking place. There is no way out of the dream,

except through its termination, either by the generation of feelings strong enough to awaken us, or by somehow resolving the issue, at least temporarily,

so that there is a natural passage back into dreamless sleep.

The concept of the visual metaphor is basic to dream work, and its importance

cannot be overly stressed. We have been expressing our personal poetry in dreams, in a language we've been using since childhood, and yet which continues to feel strange and unfamiliar to us. To understand this fully, we must also take into account the unique content of our dreams. What is it that's being expressed through this language? When we use pictorial language, what are we saying that makes the dream so potentially illuminating when we are awake? Our imaging capacity provides the form that our consciousness takes, but where does the content come from?

As we fall asleep, we close off our input channels. We close ourselves

off to the sensory stimuli coming at us from the outside, with a few notable exceptions. For the most part, no new information is coming into our system, so that whatever we become conscious of during the period of dreaming has its origin sometime before falling asleep. Freud spoke of the day residue as the starting point of the dream. A recent event sets up a lingering tension that surfaces at the onset of a dreaming period and acts as a shaping influence on the content to be developed. What gives this recent residual feeling its extraordinary power to do this lies in the fact that regardless of how trivial or insignificant it may seem at the time, it connects with unresolved issues from our past. We're not aware of this connection. Asleep, it comes clearly into view. Our dream may open with a childhood scene in the house we grew up in, when we were five or six. The first important point then is that the dream starts in the present. The issue it addresses derives from our past, but continues to be of some importance to us in the present. No one of us grows up perfect in this world, and we're all working and re

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working residual issues and tensions from our past.

What we do with this residue while dreaming is quite extraordinary, as judged by waking standards. We seem to do many things at once. We scan our entire life history for past ways of coping with whatever vulnerable areas have been exposed, and we mobilize the resources at our disposal to come to some resolution. In short, while dreaming we are reassessing the significance of recent events in the context of the past. We are taking an historical perspective on our own lives. That is not easy to do awake. In a rather clever way, we express it all through pictorial metaphors that highlight the feeling tones evoked in the course of this self-exploratory adventure. It is all done effortlessly and seemingly instantaneously. We have brought a current residue into relationship to past feeling residues. In so doing we bring together important information relevant to whatever it is we're struggling with now. Dreams start with where we are now. They then gather more relevant information from our past. The most interesting and important quality of our dreaming life is its intrinsic honesty. While asleep, we are

alone and perhaps more alone than at any other time in our life. We have temporarily disconnected from the world around us, and in doing so suspended our social role and our social facade. We no longer need our social defenses, those various ways of protecting ourselves from truths we do not wish to reveal or cannot see at the time. In the act of going to sleep we undress not only physically but psychologically as well. When our brain gets a signal to start dreaming, there we are in our emotional nudity.

What happens next is best described by analogy. There is a magical mirror in this place we find ourselves in while dreaming. It is a mirror capable of reflecting a profoundly honest picture of who we are rather than who we would like to think we are or who we would like others to think we are. Another bit of magic in that mirror is that it is there for the dreamer only. No one else can look into it. Being alone and confronted with a mirror that provides so private a view, the dreamer risks looking into it. It is a view without pretense. It is the truth, as close as we can get to whatever we mean by subjective truth. In a sense, it is a privileged portrait of intrinsic value to a dreamer

in search of a more honest self-concept.

For the most part, our dreams are not understood or appreciated in their individual and social significance. We are largely unaware both of the personal and social opportunities offered in our dream life. Once awake, there is an overwhelming tendency to slip back into our familiar selves and our ordinary behavior. In short, our dreams offer us a spontaneously generated visual drama, depicting where we are subjectively at the moment. They help us understand the connection of the present to the past as we move into the future. It isn't just a free-wheeling exercise for the fun of it. We are all moving into the future. Our dream fortifies this movement by calling attention to aspects of ourselves we are simply

not attending to or not attending to enough, or not attending to clearly. They frighten, shame, ridicule, exaggerate, and at times expose wondrous feelings that we never knew we had, all of which offer us the opportunity to get to know ourselves better.

What is ordinary about dreams? Well, everyone can answer that question. They are every day or more exactly every night occurrences. They are universal. They range across all ages and cultures, present and past. There are very common dreams that most of us have had at some time in our life. We find ourselves flying or falling or having our teeth fall out or wanting to move and not being able to, and so on. The problem is that they are so ordinary that their extraor-

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MONTE WILL SOON BE ON THE WEB!

Soon there will be articles by Monte and articles from Dream Appreciation on the web!

Many thanks to Markku Siivola, a Finnish psychiatrist who has known Monte for many years, for creating a special section of his web site for Monte's work. The site is still under construction, but we hope to be able to give you more information next issue.

This is a work-in-progress which will continue to evolve. We are very grateful to Markku and his web skills for making this possible.

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dinary features are overlooked. Let's look at some of those extraordinary features.

Healing potential of dreams

The first one I want to call attention to is the connection of dreaming and healing. I have mentioned the way they link our present concerns to their roots in the past and the honesty with which they confront us with our own true feelings. When you consider that statement, it really has much to do with the way psychotherapy works. Therapists start with where the patient is at the moment. They are concerned with the relevance of the past

and presumably then offer the patient a more honest perspective on what is going on than the patient had originally. We have that kind of built-in potential capacity in our dreams, only we don't know it, and because we don't know it, we foolishly give dreams a very low priority in our culture. So-called primitive cultures are a little bit wiser. They give the dream a much higher priority.

Dreams exert their healing potential, in my opinion, by their capacity to portray the state of our connectedness with others and with ourselves. I think that's the essence of what they are concerned with. Anything that impinges on these connections, either in

a good or in a bad way, as a consequence of recent experience, becomes a focal point of a dream. On the good side, there are experiences that reinforce or expose positive qualities in us that we lose sight of, the innocence and curiosity of a child, as well as aspects of our own creativity. On the other hand, we are sensitive to anything going on in our life that corrupts, corrodes, or threatens to destroy or fragment our connectedness to ourselves and to others.

I have been referring to dreams as *potential* healing experiences because for that healing experience to fully materialize, we have to allow the confrontation to take place between what the dream has to say and our ordinary waking view of ourselves. This is the rub. Dreams are creatures of the night. If we are fortunate enough to be able to relate insightfully on awakening to the story they're telling, then to that extent, some degree of emotional healing can take place. We become more in touch with ourselves. More often it takes a more rigorous socializing process to get a dream to yield its secret. This involves a helping agency, and one that has

the knowledge and skill it takes to make the exploration effective.

Nine-tenths of my psychoanalytic colleagues will not agree with me, but the knowledge and skill involved in dream work can be conceptualized and taught to any dreamer — and that means anyone. Skills are involved, but people can learn these skills. Applying these skills takes time and experience. A violin teacher can tell a student how to put the bow on the violin, but the student has to practice the skill involved in using that bow.

In the past five decades, my life has been divided into three parts. At first, I was a psychoanalyst. Then I was a community psychiatrist, interested in moving mental health strategies out into the community. For the past two decades I've been involved in developing dream-sharing groups, exploring how people can get together to engage in what I think is a socially unmet need, namely to create a safe environment to explore through dreams the deeper aspects of their being, particularly the secrets that interfere with their connectedness to other people. I think ev-

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LEADERSHIP TRAINING PROGRAM

A Leadership Training Workshop in group dream work will take place at Monte's home April 14-16. This experiential three-day workshop will cover the underlying premises and key principles on which Monte's group dream work is based. It will explore in depth the kinds of problems that occur at each stage of the process as well as the technique of leading a group.

Even if you have attended one of Monte's Leadership Workshops before, this can be a helpful way to "fine tune" the process.

DATE: April 14, 15 and 16

PLACE: 55 Orlando Ave.
Ardsley, New York 10502

These workshops fill up quickly, so for information or to register call Monte Ullman at: (914) 693-0156.

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 everyone needs that, but not everyone needs therapy. Serious and effective dream work should extend beyond the boundaries of the consulting room and reach out into the community.

Let us take a closer look at the creativity of our dreams. While we are dreaming, we are in the metaphor manufacturing business. The metaphors we create are visual in character, generally, although any sensory modality can be involved. They are highly idiosyncratic in nature, in contrast to waking speech which is full of dead metaphors. In that sentence there are two dead metaphors. *Full* has a physical connotation. A container is either full or empty. *Dead* is a word we use in relation to living organisms that are alive or dead.

In my dream-sharing groups, I've listened to many, many dreams, but regardless of how many dreams I've heard, each new dream is a unique experience in the art — and I call it an art — of crafting meaningful, visual metaphors. There is also an art to doing dream work as we seek to help the dreamer bridge the gap between image and reality and thus capture the felt meaning of the metaphor. Over and

over again, I've had the impression, after we've worked through a dream in a group, that no matter how short that dream may be, even a tiny fragment, it still presents us in a holographic

way with significant connections between past and present that have never been fully conscious. If we had set out to do so, even if we were

Michelangelo or Rembrandt, we could not deliberately paint a picture in so few images that could capture so much information. This has left me with a feeling that while dreaming we're tapping into a universally shared creative source, available to all of us, a source that creates images that speak elegantly and accurately to our subjective state. Whether or not we view ourselves as creative in our working lives, our dreaming psyche reveals in its own seemingly unlimited creative potential. Catching on to the metaphor in the dream leaves us with an "Aha" feeling no different from the experience of the aesthetic quality of music, poetry, or any other art form.

Social references of dreams

Let me come to another quality of dreams that we have hardly begun to explore, and that is the fact that dreams, in addition to their

personal reference to our lives, contain social references as well. They make reference to the life we're leading in a specific so-

ciety. The issue of connectedness that I referred to in regard to the nature of healing goes beyond the individual and his or her immediate concerns. We are all aware of the toxic fallout from our society from crime, pollution, the residues of racism, and the generally prevailing level of anomie. What we are not so aware of is how the inequities and fallouts from the institutions and social practices that shape our existence are woven into the unconscious fabric of our lives. To the extent that this occurs, we remain unaware that it is occurring. We enter into an unconscious collusion with the very forces that so undermine our common humanity. Our dreams speak to our social concerns in

addition to the personal. What I find remarkable about dream imagery is the ability to depict the way social issues interlock with personal ones and how each one plays into the other in a mutually reinforcing way.

Here are a few examples of what I mean. A woman in her late thirties is about to embark on a new relationship. She senses some hesitancy on her own part, and she has a dream that displays the root of her ambivalence. In the dream, she sees her father sitting on a swing with four female relations, all in their heyday, dressed almost like can-can girls. What emerged from work on the dream were two powerful images that surfaced from her childhood that continue to influence her approach to a new relationship. One was that of the male, derived from the image of her father, as privileged to flirt and play around with other women. That's what he did. The other was that of the female victimized by the predatory male, as was her mother. These are images she is still struggling with. In a larger sense, they relate to the residues of sexism, a social issue, as yet not fully disposed of. The privileged male and the victimized female are still

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available social stereotypes that play into our unconscious.

Here's another example, also from a woman. Women gravitate to my dream-sharing groups more than men, in the proportion of about 9:1.

Women seem to be more interested than men in their feelings. This next dream also involves sexual stereotypes. Two significant images in the dream, related to this, are that of a wounded bird who was unable to join the flock in flight, and the other is that it is picked on by a group of arrogant pheasants. The pheasants, who pick on the wounded bird, were likened by her to a string of older brothers in relation to whom these trends emerge. You can see the interpretation immediately.

The second image is one of a contractor who in reality is involved in remodeling her home. In that dream, he tells the dreamer he can't finish off the basement for repairs without at the same time finishing the upstairs bedroom. What became clear from the dream work was that there was this unresolved tension between her husband and herself. She had recently gone into therapy with the problem.

The dream reveals what therapy was opening her eyes to, namely, the fact that in order to deal with the issues of marriage — the upstairs bedroom — she would also have to deal with the personal

problems — the wounded bird — and the disarray in her own basement/bedroom. That had to do with her submissiveness, her self-deprecatory tendencies, and her inclination to accept her husband as the stronger and dominant one.

I've simply tried to show the private issue highlighted in the dream gains expression by attracting to itself the images that are taken from social experience and carry a congruent, social meaning. This generally escapes notice, because we're not in the habit of extrapolating from the image to the social reality that lies beyond. The dreamer pauses nightly to assess these influences, particularly in regard to their capacity to upset any preconditioned, pre-existing equilibrium.

Our dreams remind us that we are part of a larger whole, and just as the dreams are carriers of the potential for personal change, they are also carriers of the potential for social change to the extent

that social factors become visible in our dreams. They reveal the content of our social unconscious, that is, what we allow ourselves to remain unconscious of with regard to what is going on in society.

Nazi Germany is an outstanding example. Much that was evil was going on at the time and gained expression in dreams. When the dreamer remains unaware of the message of the dream, the opportunity for deeper social insight is lost. No room is left for any challenge to the social order. There is room only for personal demons and the transformation of social demons into personal demons. Dreaming consciousness may, indeed, pose a danger to a technologically supercharged,

mechanically-oriented society.

Dreams and survival

Another quality of dreams that I think is underappreciated and has to do with the unusual features of dreams (and this is truly speculative), is the connection of our dreams to survival, but not in the sense of the word survival in parapsychology. I do not refer to the survival of the self as an entity after death, but more concretely to the survival of the human species. This speculation derives from two aspects of my experience.

One is the idea that dreams have to do with disconnects, from oneself and from others. If we simply extend this idea to the broader range of disconnects, then, perhaps, dreams move us toward a more realistic assessment of the nature and depth of our individual roles that perpetrate the historically determined fragmentation that the human species has been subjected to down through the years. We've grown up differently in different cultures and different geographies. The species has been fragmented to the point where its very survival as a species is at risk. Built into each of us

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Another quality of dreams that I think is under appreciated is the connection of our dreams to survival, more concretely to the survival of the human species.



DREAMWORKERS' CORNER

DREAMS

Dark secrets rise
in the middle of the night
and become visible
for a while

Mild light
from beyond
always and ever

The invisible dawns
intangible images
take me backwards
and forwards and
yet
I'm still in the
nowness of life

Then the light
fades away
it's curtain time

*

Burning brightly
I travel through the darkness
like a shooting star
into the holy space
from where it all restarts

*This was contributed
by Pia Ekstedt-Hägglom
of Hudiksvall, Sweden.
She is an active member
of the Swedish Dream
Group Forum.*

Dear Wendy,

Tonight I held a seminar at the institute where I work, Göteborgs Psyko-terapi Institut. It is a course on how to work with dreams in psychoanalytic therapy, and we are using Monte's group method for didactic purposes with the candidates at the institute. I have met the group of candidates and we have worked with their own dreams on three occasions, and today we were going to discuss a paper. It turned out to be a dull paper, so we decided to have a free discussion, which I was a little afraid of at first, but it went so well — people were so inspired by the earlier dreamwork which had their minds and souls really going. It is a great benefit to work with dreams this way, and the candidates really were contemplating how to integrate "the Monte method" in their work with individual patients.

Then I got home and found the fall issue of your newsletter, *Dream Appreciation*. What a nice coincidence! I just sat down at the kitchen table with my coat on and read the whole letter through!

I really felt connected — or perhaps one could say that I felt a bit of our interconnectedness Monte is writing about in his article, "Setting words to the music of dreams." And two articles about us in this little country in the north — very inspiring, indeed! Thank you very much for your work doing this newsletter. I will spread it to my dreaming friends.

Also, thank you for the great days (at the Association for the Study of Dreams conference) in Santa Cruz. I really enjoyed being there, working in your dream group, and visiting all the lectures and seminars.

As you know, Monte is invited to Sweden and the 10th anniversary of Drömgruppsforum in the spring of 2000. We have also invited him to our institute on the same trip since we are celebrating our 25th anniversary at the very same institute where Monte was teaching in the '70s. Monte wrote saying that he was glad to accept our invitation, so we are looking forward to seeing him again.

Kind regards,
Gunnar Sundström
Göteborg, Sweden

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is a genetically driven concern with something larger than the self, namely the preservation of the unity of the species.

The second aspect of my experience that has brought me to this kind of thinking has been what I've learned in 25 years of working with people in dream-sharing groups. This has completely undermined so many of the concepts I had as a practicing analyst. A quality of connectedness emerges that embraces the dreamer — and the group. When this occurs there results not only insight into a dream, but more importantly, a coming together and a deep sense of communion in the group.

Dreams and psi events

The next extraordinary feature of our dreams is the connection of dreams to psi events. I am referring to the way we can play tricks with space while dreaming and pick up information about events that are spatially distant, and also play tricks with time that result in veridical precognitive vi-

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sions. We seem to be more adept at this while dreaming than while awake. Here, too, it has always been my impression — and it's only an impression — that psi effects are somehow related to the importance of maintaining our connectedness to our human and natural environment. Speaking from my experience, psi events are the surface outcropping of this underlying sense and need for unity, a kind of deeply hidden connective tissue available when other connective strategies fail.

The feeling of communion generated in a

dream-sharing group and the focus on connectedness endows this dimension of our existence with potential spiritual overtones. Dream work does or should take place in a totally non-violent atmosphere where the dreamer feels safe enough to share what ordinarily is not shared in public.

If I have learned anything from the groups I have worked with, it is that regardless of any impressions one might have of someone, you cannot hate anyone who courageously and honestly shares what a dream has to say. It brings everyone involved closer to the ideal of the

Brotherhood/Sisterhood of Humanity.

So-called primitive cultures who take their dream life seriously relate to dreams in their capacity to reveal both the sacred and the profane. If we allowed them to do so, our dreams could help us sort out truth from falsehood at

both a social and a personal level. As Bertrand Russell once noted, "The rational connects us, the irrational separates us," and it is in that sense that dreaming and dream sharing bring about rationality and connectedness into a highly irrational and disconnected world. □

Dream Appreciation is published quarterly for people interested in working with dreams and the group process developed by Dr. Montague Ullman.

Comments, suggestions, questions and letters are welcome. Contact the Editor, Wendy Pannier, by phone at (610) 925-0758, by fax at (610) 925-0759, or by writing 105 Taylor Lane, Kennett Square, PA 19348. Our e-mail address is <dreams@kennett.net>.

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