

# Dream Appreciation

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**Keep in mind that both the actor and the dreamer are dealing with the same basic problem: How do you make contact with an unconscious domain that doesn't play by the same rules as waking life?**

## ON DREAMS AND ART: PART IV

### **ACTORS ARE SPEAKING: DREAMERS LISTEN!**

By MONTAGUE ULLMAN, M.D.

In what follows, the actors and directors who appeared on the TV program, *The Actors Studio*, hosted by James Lipton, will be speaking personally to you about their professions and the craft that undergirds their work.

It is my hope that hearing from the actors themselves in terms of what they experience in their effort to give an authentic portrayal of the character they are playing will further develop the analogy to what a dreamer goes through in identifying with the view of the self thrown up by the unconscious, a view that he or she is now called upon to fully portray in waking life. Those of you who have had prior experience in one of my dream groups will be quick to grasp the analogy and, I hope, learn from some of the strategies used by actors. For those who have not had this experience, I suggest that famil-

ilarity with the first three parts of this series of essays would be helpful. (See the website, [www.pp.fi.msiivola/monte](http://www.pp.fi.msiivola/monte))

First, a reminder about the quotes I will be using. In some instances the talk was too rapid to literally reproduce exactly what was said. I do, however, feel reasonably confident that I captured the meaning of what was said. If any of the actors should read this, I apologize for any misperceptions I may have conveyed.

The actors are about to take over. Before they do, keep in mind as you listen that both the actor and the dreamer are dealing with the same basic problem: How do you make contact with an unconscious domain that doesn't play by the same rules as waking life? Most of us (probably all) bring to waking life a blend of honesty and expediency. Asleep and dreaming there is an incorruptible core of being at

work that tells it like it is. It is this level of honesty that both actors and dreamers seek. What might be called the "honesty differential" between the waking ego and the dreaming psyche is what makes the task so challenging and rewarding.

Without the eloquence and background review that their host James Lipton shares with the audience before the actor appears, here are the actors. I am going to begin with Mike Nichols, who so insightfully took into account the unique features of this unconscious domain, how to make contact with it and how to put it to good use.

#### **Mike Nichols**

"A motion picture is a *dream*. When you see it you are in the dark. A movie involves drawing on your *unconscious* in the same way that *dreams* come out of the unconscious. All the time. Your best work comes out of

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#### **Note:**

Monte's website is: [www.pp.htv.fi/msiivola/monte](http://www.pp.htv.fi/msiivola/monte)

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your *unconscious*. It has the same sense of humor as you do. You have to coax things out of your *unconscious*.

“What really happens in a movie is what I call an “event”. It is something happening in spite of the words. It happens in, around and under the words. One *unconscious* connects to that of others. I’m aware of the creative use of the *unconscious*. Once you acknowledge it, you can count on it.

“There are ways to coax the unconscious out into the open. For me, this happens during ‘down time’ and works best for me around 3 a.m.”

### Comment

What Mike Nichols is stressing in many different ways is the importance of the unconscious as a source of creative ideas in acting and directing. The unconscious can’t be forced out into the open but you can facilitate its appearance, as in the case of dreams, if you prepare the necessary groundwork. For Nichols, it meant learning to trust the unconscious to come up with novel ideas and to facilitate their spontaneous arrival by being at his most relaxed and most removed from the concerns of the day.

In discussing “Working Girl” Nichols made the point that an opening scene should express the theme of the movie. The same is true

for dreams. The opening scene in a dream pinpoints the issue to be explored in the subsequent imagery.

While several other actors who appeared on the program mentioned dreams in discussing their approach to acting, Mike Nichols was most explicit in linking the

a rhythm to the dialogue. The meaning comes through in the rhythm rather than the words. It is the rhythm that gives meaning, not the cognitive approach.

“Part of me loves to pretend. It’s fun. I get pleasure. It’s always a little

pressing yourself through your body and movement, not your intellect.

“I get into a role out of curiosity. I’m being tested but I’m going to have fun and learn something.

“Actors put limitations on themselves.

“Theater can only exist in the beauty of the moment. It’s the most thrilling thing in the world when it is working. There is nothing like it. It is the most powerful, healing thing. It’s a feeling of being connected. It’s healing in the broadest sense.

“I come to the story with a beginner’s mind. Open heart, open mind.

“You apply yourself and something is revealed without judging. Otherwise you are bound by your conscious mind. I’ve got to be serious about it, yet I’m going to have fun. I cleanse myself of any image of what is possible.

“The variety of roles is like a dream.”

### Comment

The undercurrent that is discernible throughout the interview is his effort to stay in contact with this deeper unconscious domain as he attempts to “walk in someone else’s shoes.” His references to openness (open mind, open heart), to rhythm, to dance, to music, all bear this out. It is serious and hard work but fun, satisfying, and healing in the way it expands his emo-

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**“What really happens in a movie is what I call an “event”. It is something happening in spite of the words. It happens in, around and under the words. One unconscious connects to that of others.”**

— Mike Nichols

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unconscious domain to both acting and dreaming. He recognized the creativity intrinsic to the unconscious and was sensitive to its truth-telling nature in the way it registers what is actually going on beneath the surface of verbal discourse. He is explicit in mastering the art of coaxing it out of its nocturnal hiding place and using it to enlighten (and lighten up) his waking life. In his response to a question from one of the acting students in the audience, he said it not only gives us good ideas, it (the unconscious) is the only thing that makes us happy.

### Christopher DaFoe

“In one scene I found myself (spontaneously) singing the lines. The director (to my surprise) said it was O.K. I find there is

scary. When I am performing I feel alive and awake. It’s an adventure walking in someone else’s shoes.

“I love doing different things, bending myself to the material.

“I hide in order to find my true self.

“I work from a place of curiosity and not knowing. I’m more interested in the adventure than the script.

“I don’t judge the characters I play. I just apply myself to the situation and something is revealed. I’m bound not by psychology and meaning, but by my unconscious and the feelings that come.

“I look for the authority to pretend.

“Dance is the purest form of art. You are not standing outside of what you are doing. You are ex-

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tional range as different aspects of his own personality are revealed.

All of this closely parallels the view of dreaming as arising out of an innate creative impulse aimed at realigning and expressing the feeling residues of waking life.

Each time I have listened to the interview with DaFoe in its several repetitions, I have picked up more and more specific references to features that equally apply to dream work, e.g., curiosity, eagerness, the leap of faith, the feeling of vulnerability, the importance of avoiding any à priori judgment (of the character or the dream), and the serious yet playful quality of the work itself. How much can be discovered in the art of pretense!

### Christopher Walken

"Life interferes with craft. You'll find yourself making odd choices if you don't think linearly. I avoid being involved in the scripts linearly. I look for what in dance is called 'balans', the lift that lets you take off. It's like making a jump and staying there. When I first read a script I take out all the punctuation marks.

"Craft can be compared to zen. No judgment is involved. You are in the moment. You are right there. It's spontaneous.

"Acting is child-like in the sense you believe what you are. You surprise

yourself at what you are saying. A good movie, if it's real and entertaining, creates its own world. It's consistent and real, but not reality.

"When I am saying my lines I don't know what is coming next. That's what you aim at.

"You end up a better person. You are exercising your emotional power. You go out better off."

### Comment

Actors differ in what aspect of their craft they find personally useful. Walken and DaFoe are both eloquent and highly idiosyncratic in the way they described their feelings about acting. Resorting to an oxymoron I would say there was a remarkable idiosyncratic similarity between them. Both so eloquently described the techniques they resort to in their research for the freest possible way of identifying in depth with the character they are playing. Both have a clear idea of what it takes to distance themselves from the constraining effort of the linear logic of waking thought. They have worked out their own ways of swimming about in a more fluid non-linear medium. More prosaically for both, there is a greater sense of joy and aliveness exploring the depth of the sea than walking about on dry land.

Abstract expressionists

generally agree that you have to master the craft of painting representationally before you can truly transform feelings into images on canvas. Both see improvisation in the same way, as a higher skill and a more spontaneous rendering of feelings. Both feel free to indulge in it, often to the welcome surprise of others as well as themselves.

Both feel they emerge as better people through the work they engage in. Both enjoy the possibility of re-connecting with the innocence and honesty of childhood play.

The actor has to learn craft in order to achieve the necessary dimensional transformation. Craft for the dreamer involves learning the nature of this dimension and its potential contribution to waking life.

The dreamer brings to himself or herself what the actor brings to the audience. The art involved in both instances is the art of mastering the transformation between two qualitatively differently states. When it is done successfully, it is known as healing.

### Gabriel Byrnes

"Acting is becoming true to yourself. It is the most difficult, the most courageous, the most truthful way of being.

"Actors are children, wounded children, seeking universal approval.

"What you need from a director is to understand your process and to allow you to take risks. The more you reveal yourself to the audience, the greater is the gift you give them.

"Acting has a spiritual

### LEADERSHIP TRAINING PROGRAM

A Leadership Training Workshop in group dream work will take place at Monte's home September 21-23. 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: September 21, 22, 23  
PLACE: 55 Orlando Ave.  
Ardasley, 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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dimension. There is transcendence and passion. It's a journey, a process. Once you start you can't be anything else.

"Listening and reacting are key. You become a wonderful listener.

"The camera captures your thoughts revealing what the essential 'you' is.

"We have lost contact with myth and magic."

### Comment

*Truth is not easy to define but we feel it at some level when we encounter it. Perhaps this has something to do with the oft-repeated saying that the camera captures the truth. At any rate, I have often linked the dream to a magic camera that reveals who we are and not who we think we are or what we want others to think we are.*

*The various features of the acting process that are also intrinsic to dreams are not unique to them. They are also in varying degrees aspects of waking life. The difference is that in acting and in the dream they are more insistently compelling.*

*The healing component common to both is what makes dream work so special in therapy, as Freud first pointed out. The psychotherapeutic use of dreams, whether post-Freudian or post-Jungian, seeks out truth in our dreams but goes about it in very different ways. In the*

*case of the former, the dream is a mask which has to be removed. For the latter, it is a pictorial rendering of feelings ready to emerge. I am partial to the view that dreams are every bit as metaphorical or imagistic renderings of feelings as are words used by the poet. Both use the powerful tool of metaphor to bring nascent feelings to the surface.*

*You couldn't mistake the passion and joy Byrne displayed during the interview. I feel the same way about dream work.*

### Ron Howard

"Craft is necessary to get into the character, to touch the part of yourself you didn't know you had. You never leave high school.

"Acting activates me in a way that life doesn't switch on.

"When the director says, 'Cut, print!' it gives me a surge of satisfaction. It thrills me.

"I'm excited about a film when there is something I can learn.

"Don't sell the honesty of the moment down the river.

"I like when a director creates an environment

where an individual style can come through.

"An actor needs people to trust.

"You never know when you will be part of a great moment, so you have to stay on your toes.

"Movies turn on a switch in me that otherwise doesn't occur in my life. I love that about my job."

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**"You never know when you will be part of a great moment, so you have to stay on your toes."**

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— Ron Howard

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### Comment

*You can go right down this list and count all of the above as analogies to the sharing of a dream in a group.*

1. *There is a craft to dream work and mastering it is a lifelong task. It takes time to develop a sensitivity to the subtle ways information is processed in the dream. Thinking shifts to a symbolic mode that includes metaphor, metonymy synecdoche, double entendres and puns. As the group process unfolds, one has to learn to be open to the empathic responses of others. As I believe Freud once said, we can read each other's unconscious better than our own. Preparation for dream work involves recognizing recent feeling residues that frame the issue and remote residues that reveal connections to*

*the past. In the dialogue, which is the central feature of group dream work, listening and reacting to what is going on requires focused attention and unbroken concentration. Finally, as trust and interest in dream work evolves, the sense of vulnerability gives way to freer self-exposure.*

2. *Ron Howard's reference to feeling more alive while acting strikes a chord with me. Others have noted the excitement and even passion I bring to dream work that belies my less colorful day-to-day personality. To put it in the vernacular, being challenged by a dream – mine or others' – turns me on. I am writing this a few months after the death of my wife. Several weeks ago I resumed my regular dream group. I needed the lift it gave me to get me out of the dark place the loss left me in.*

3. *Speaking of a surge of satisfaction, there is nothing quite like the "aha!" feeling when suddenly everything falls into place and the mystery of the dream stands revealed.*

4. *The essence of dream work is self-discovery. Everyone in addition to the dreamer learns a bit more about himself or herself.*

5. *Successful dream work depends on being as*

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*honest about ourselves awake as while asleep and dreaming.*

6. *The foundation of group dream work is trust. What I have referred to as the "Safety Factor" is built into each stage of the process. I don't care too much about military analogies, but it is true that emotional cohesiveness within a group makes heroism possible. The dreamer is a hero in the war against self-deception.*

### Jessica Lange

"'Streetcar' was such an emotional experience for me. It was a spiritual experience in every way.

"You have to reach the soul of the character. It's like a piece of music resonating with that soul.

"If you are able to find the most truthful moment, everything else follows.

"I stay open. I stay away from any fixed ideas.

"You rely on your craft, relaxation, sensory work, emotional recoil, but then leave it up to your imagination. You will find the right emotions.

"Don't worry about what is coming up in the next moment.

"Keep that concentration and focus. It's like a waking dream.

"You are in a state of humble transparency. You are taking a leap of faith. It's a chance to go out on a

limb. I'm grateful for the parts that let me go out on a limb."

### Comment

"Humble transparency" is such an apt phrase. It captures the true predicament of both the ac-

tor and the dreamer.

*In likening the acting experience to a waking dream, Jessica Lange has come upon the analogy I am trying to draw. The actor, as in the case of the dreamer, enters into a domain that is both real and*

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— Jessica Lange

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*tor and the dreamer. Talent and creativity, features of both endeavors, are gifts. That's where the humility comes in. Both involve self-disclosure – risking others seeing right through them in their transparent honesty. The search for the truthful moment, so essential in acting, is the goal of the dreamer as well. To get there often involves that leap of faith.*

*Dream work for me is the closest I have come to the felt meaning of the word spirituality. Successful acting or dream work requires the help of others. When that interplay occurs at so deep a level as it can do and often does for both actor and dreamer, there arises a transcendent quality of closeness and communion that is precious and*

*unreal at the same time.*

*The examples of interviews that I have chosen illustrate the main features of acting that draw my attention to the analogy in dreaming. What follows are briefer excerpts from other interviews that added a bit more substance to the analogy.*

*The following are added without comment, hoping the reader can make any analogies.*

### Ed Harris

"When an actor is listening to a co-actor, he is more than just listening. He is listening to his soul. You have to get out of yourself to do that.

"You have to allow yourself to explore all areas in yourself from depravity

to joy.

"Be unafraid. Surrender. Be willing to go there."

### Tom Hanks

"Acting is like holding up a mirror to nature to find out who we are, how we got there and how we are getting through all of this.

"In one scene where I'm saying something to Gleason, it is as if I were saying it to my own father. There was something of the spiritual that came through."

### Robert DeNiro

"You never put the character down. You have to respect the character.

"Don't be afraid to take a chance. You have to leap sometimes.

"Film is truth twenty-four times a second."

### Jack Lemmon

"Acting is a glorious profession. You can change someone's life, move them into an area they haven't thought about. That is really what we are after. Acting is about giving, not getting."

### Alan Alda

"It's a glorious feeling to be able to nourish yourself through your art.

"You have to listen in a way that enables you to be changed by the other person. It's letting them in.

"It's play, fun. It's

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spontaneous, the way children play.”

### **Sigourney Weaver**

“You can trust your body to take you in the right direction. Keep your body loose so it doesn’t know it’s acting.

“You need help to find the essence of yourself and to help you stay out of your head.”

### **James Woods**

“Don’t play the character. Let the character play you.

“I’m happiest when I am acting. It’s an incredible profession.

“You have to find something good, even in an evil character, somehow, a quality.

“You are exploring parts of yourself you resist exploring.

“You are opening up your imagination in every way you can.

“I embrace and love the job.”

### **Susan Sarandon**

“Acting comes from the same place as loving. You have to find something you love in the character.

“I need a director to create an atmosphere in which the creative process is free to go.

“Film work involves a cooperative group, like a family.”

In the next issue of this series, I will explore the question of the value

group dream work may have for actors. Is the analysis I have been drawing too far fetched to be of any use to actors? Or can it in its own way contribute to the craft of the actor?

My guess is that if it has any practical value for actors, it might be for those

just starting out. Older, successful actors have already worked with their unconscious and how to draw on it when needed. They have already built up their own way of trusting it to come up with the right solutions at the right time.

*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](mailto:dreams@kennett.net).

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