

Dream Appreciation

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“It is not that I feel what I do is above criticism. It has to do with common misinterpretations of what I am trying to do.”

AN AUTHOR REVIEWS HIS REVIEWERS

By Montague Ullman, M.D.

Authors, I suppose, vary in response to reviews of their work. I'm aware of an initial concern when a review of a book of mine is called to my attention. That concern often occurs when the review appears in a professional journal. It is not that I feel what I do is above criticism. It has to do with common misinterpretations of what I am trying to do.

The first is what might be termed the “oneirophobic” response, a response concerned with the danger of dream work and generally accompanied by a caveat to the professional reader that emphasizes the professional skills and training necessary to do dream work and the professional responsibilities involved. This, of course, flies in the face of my effort to deprofessionalize dream work in a safe and effective way.

In a recent review of my book *Appreciating Dreams* that appeared in the journal

Social Work, writer Dr. Helen Northen commented positively on the way the group process assures the safety and privacy of the dreamer and spoke respectfully and with understanding of the process. She ends the review, however, on so cautionary a note that I doubt that very many social workers reading the review would attempt to engage in experiential dream group work. While caution and responsibility are features of dream work, an overemphasis on danger plays into the mystique that dreams should remain in the domain of the experts.

From the review:

The dreamer controls the process, being in charge of what she or he wishes to share and what is wanted from the members. That principle assures safety and privacy for the dreamer whose needs are paramount. The group is a helping agent only to the extent that the dreamer wants help from the members. The dream process is not a group interaction one. The author writes: “The only occasion in which the dream process should justifiably be transformed into a group process is if a tension occurs between members of the group to the point that it impinges on the dream work” (p. 240). That involves hold-

ing the dream process in abeyance until the tension is relieved.

*The author has a strong conviction that, being universal experiences, dreams should be made accessible to everyone and groups are ideal media for that purpose. He believes that the process can be mastered by anyone, lay or professional, who has a natural curiosity about dreams. He recognizes, however, that competent leadership requires time and practice. **Owing to the problems and risks involved, in my opinion, social workers should not engage in this practice without thorough knowledge of dreams, the interrelated responsibilities of dreamer, group and leader, and skills in relieving tensions and avoiding risks to the dreamer or group. Supervised practice would seem to be essential.** (boldface M.U.) But the book can be a valuable resource for social group workers. Many of the principles and skills that are discussed can be translated and adapted to our practice. Read it and discover its relevance to improving you own practice.*

A second review of the same book appearing in a group psychotherapy journal is
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AN AUTHOR REVIEWS HIS REVIEWERS

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 more characteristic of the questions raised by psychoanalysts who have never been in a group of mine but are called upon to respond to the process. In the following review substantive issues are raised. In my response to the review I tried to show that these questions have been anticipated and dealt with in the book. I consider the review a fair one. It raises issues that should be set to rest. Here are portions of the review followed by my response.

In the theoretical exposition of this book, unfortunately relegated to a mere appendix at the very end, he indicates his belief that there is something "in dreams that binds us together, points to a common heritage, and provides us with a common language." "I postulate an in-born structural preparation for a nocturnal language capable of communicating to ourselves," he further asserts. "No one taught us this language, but we all speak it fluently" (p. 254). He positions the dream in a social context and, although he deals with it as quite an individual expression, he considers it "related to notions of interconnected-ness and 'unbroken wholeness'" (p. 256). When shared, he considers it an intrinsically interpersonal event, a communication that is interpsychic as well as intrapsychic. These underlying assumptions provide the rationale for members of a group who, although untrained in the art of dream interpretation, have the insight and capability to work

on and comprehend one another's dreams, and help one another decipher the unconscious messages contained in them.

Ullman's dream work is not, however, therapy. He asserts this emphatically and often, and is careful in his attempt to draw a clear distinction between the dream appreciation, as he calls it, practiced in his groups, and dream analysis. Nevertheless, the difference is not always as evident as he would like to have it appear. In this minute depiction of his technique, curious similarities still emerge. In the narration of the actual work with dreams, one can discern that the kinds of associations proffered by both the dreamers and the group members, as well as the apparent uses to which they are put, are historically and dynamically as incisive, and appear to have as much impact, as any therapeutic dream analysis might. Although he concedes that as "emotional healing is a social happening," (p. 224) and this type of dream work can provide emotional relief, he claims that "it is not therapy in the formal or technical sense of the term" (p. 229). That designation he reserves for what he characterizes as a more hierarchical arrangement, in which communication

flows primarily in one direction and expertise in the other, where a body of theory is ostensibly being implemented, a certain authority is being exercised and the relationship is distinguished by the elicitation of earlier "entrenched" attitudes.

The approach I use in teaching dream work experientially in a group is the distillate of my psychoanalytical experiences with dreams. The transformation from a clinical to a teaching context, however, does highlight certain distinguishable features.

One is tempted to contemplate, as Gertrude Stein's famous poem does, whether calling something by a different name will make it in fact different. Skilled practitioners will explore a dream, will apply its meanings, its contextual relevance, its historical references, its contemporary clarifications, and its dynamic explications in much the same way as Ullman suggests is done in his groups. There, as in therapy, dreams are merely another language in which we communicate, whether the recipient of that communication is a therapist, a peer, a lover, a friend, or a fellow group member. His delicacy toward the sensibilities of the dreamer does not differ from what any skilled therapist would do with a patient whose defense and anxiety tolerance must be respected. Such consideration of an individual's psychic imperatives is a necessary part of an effective and empathic professional's competence in this field. In short, then, the nature of the work is, by all

appearances, virtually indistinguishable from the therapeutic use of dreams.

The belief that it is possible for a leader to be seen as an equal by the group's members — especially when he is as eminent a presence as the renown (sic) Montague Ullman — seems another illusion. In his dream appreciation groups, he protests, the leader is merely the first among equals; he goes so far as to suggest that in order to convey this reality to the group members, the leader occasionally shares his or her dreams with the rest of the group, just as the other members of the group are invited to do. Further, he asserts repeatedly that the proceedings are in the hands of the dreamer, who can go as deeply or as superficially into the dream as he or she might wish. The laudable effort and intent is to introduce an egalitarianism and sense of safety that is often not present in therapy groups.

The context in which Dr. Ullman intends his method to be applied, however, remains ambiguous. Although not a form of therapy, it could apparently be used in a therapeutic group context. He seems to imply that the groups are organized for their own sake alone: a group of individuals convening for the sole purpose of appreciating their dreams and using them to deepen their life experiences. But could this happen in an institutional context? In private salons as a form of entertainment? In teaching seminars? As a personal growth initiative akin to the

1960s? One might expect him to be as explicit and detailed in his guidance for its use as he is in its depiction.

Whatever the nominal designation of his method may be, however, Dr. Ullman's description of it in this little volume is admirably thorough and complete. He includes a structured guide to leaders of such dream groups, detailed and explicit instructions for every step of the procedure, warnings of potential pitfalls, suggestions for enhancement of the process, detailed descriptions of each phase of the method, and recommendations regarding the facilitation of associations. Although an experienced clinician might consider some of his guiding suggestions for inquiry or facilitation simplistic, he is scrupulous in his attempt to cover any possible contingency that might arise in the group's ongoing work. Further, each phase of the procedure is nicely illustrated with case examples and vignettes demonstrating the particular stage or sub-stage of the work. Included as well are three chapters which together comprise a manual for leaders intending to conduct such "dream appreciation" groups. These alone would render the book eminently useful.

Dr. Ullman's method of dream work is decidedly unique and interesting, one with which group therapists who experience themselves drawn to working with dreams should be familiar. Although purportedly not psychoanalytic, its unique and cooperative exploratory

methodology can nevertheless render dream work in groups a remarkably helpful tool in bringing to light ordinarily obscure inner-life experiences of the participants. In this book, the exposition of that method is clear, comprehensive, and readily applicable. You will want to see it

There are many experiences in life which are therapeutic other than formal therapy and dream appreciation is one of them. If it weren't I would never have been drawn to it.

in the "dream" section of your bookshelf.

My response:

Editor
International Journal of Group Psychotherapy

I am writing in connection with Dr. Peter J. Schlachet's thoughtful review of my book *Appreciating Dreams*. (47 (4) 1997). There are several points he raises that require further clarification. The first has to do with the distinction I draw between dream appreciation as I use the term and dream analysis as it occurs in the therapeutic setting. There is much that is the same, as he notes, in what goes on between the group and the dreamer and "what any skilled therapist would do with a patient whose defenses and anxiety tolerance must be respected." The approach I use in teaching dream work experientially in a group is the distillate of my psychoanalytical experiences with dreams. The transformation from a clinical

to a teaching context, however, does highlight certain distinguishable features. The essence of the difference lies in the nature of the contract between the dreamer and the helping agency. These many differences are described in the book but the two essential ones are first that no one is

working with a dream in group therapy is the fact that the focus is not on group dynamics but on the life the dreamer leads outside the group. Happenings in the group are of course part of that and when they do surface in a dream, they are dealt with. With everyone including the leader sharing dreams and everyone participating in all phases of the process, a truly egalitarian atmosphere develops in which my presence is experienced as someone with more experience with dreams in general but not set apart from the group by his use of any particular theoretical or technical knowledge that the others are not privy to.

under explicit obligation to share a dream, and second that with the dreamer in control of the process, no one in the group assumes the role of a therapist in recognizing and resolving resistances. It is these and other features of the group approach that form the basis of the distinction I draw between formal therapy and dream appreciation. There are many experiences in life which are therapeutic other than formal therapy and dream appreciation is one of them. If it weren't I would never have been drawn to it.

I can very well understand Dr. Schlachet's concern that I may be underplaying my personal role with regard to the effectiveness of the group. At the beginning this was very much a concern of mine. Transference reactions do appear and when they do they are recognized as such and dealt with through the various strategies the group employs. What mitigates this and makes the process different from

Dr. Schlachet raises a question about the range of contexts in which this process is applicable. It is a very broad context. I have personally conducted groups with patients on an open ward in a day hospital, with the staffs of psychiatric hospitals, in geriatric day care centers and in a variety of training settings from residency programs in psychiatry to psychoanalytic training centers. My weekly groups are a mix of therapists, people in therapy, and anyone with a serious interest in their dream life. Others trained by me have used this approach in their work with incest survivors, Vietnam veterans, prisoners and college students. The one place you won't find the process as I use it is in "private salons as a form of entertainment."

These amplifications in no way diminish my gratitude to Dr. Schlachet for capturing the essence of what I have tried to say. □

IMPORTANCE OF FREEDOM IN DREAM WORK, FREEDOM TO CREATE

By HILDE GUTTENPLAN

The primary ideas for this paper were born out of self-exploration induced by a dream. This joyous, painful search was necessary in order to thaw the frozen, motionless pose derived from infantile archaic reality, and to eventually release me from the dark box of not knowing.

The notion of the existence of individual freedom was lacking in my childhood. Just contemplating the idea of individual freedom put me as a child in purgatory. This hellish, rigid pattern of being kept me entrapped in a ghost-like existence. I never learned to speak freely. Major haunting melodies were hushed in my childhood, fear-inducing words concerning displacement, survival and the terrors of war.

A vital counterpoint to this idea of life being so fragile that freedom was only possible in the form of a shadow-like existence were two experiences that strongly resonated within me. Both suggested that the desire for individual freedom was not such a menacing, terrible, lawless form of desire.

One such experience was listening to the low, comforting cadences of my grandmother's prayers. The other was nestling against my grandfather's chest while overlooking a mountain meadow, intently listening to the buoyancy of his voice conveying trust, adventure and choice. In those cherished moments I experienced the possibility of a vast, open space existing and caught glimpses of a more vi-

tal, radiant reality. These experiences helped me to feel that somewhere in the hidden recesses of my imagination was a secret chamber, urging me not to fully believe what I had sensed, seen and heard during the traumatic times.

It was a dream that eventually urged me to loosen the restraint muffling my voice. In it I observed my dream child step out of the limits of my existence. This released me from my imprisoned consciousness and allowed me to step over the boundaries of fear and rejection and abandonment.

Clay became my ally, urging my hands to explore and begin to articulate the psychic polarities within myself in concrete pictorial form. I was beginning to fathom the baffling rage, bitterness and deep sorrow within me. But at the same time, I finally allowed myself to relax and immersed myself in a bath of energy and trust. The pliable nature of the clay provided me with the accepting tenderness so much needed to deal with the pain and uncertainty generated by my growing awareness of a fragile self.

My dream became my key instrument in the creation of a polyphonic composition of clay chalices. It was my responsible overseer, allowing me to explore the matrix of memory by keeping the action within a certain focus. It helped me to explicate in a playful manner my individual voice in the chorus of yearning. The retelling of my dream helped me to establish a psy-

chological distance and thus helped rescue me from the grip of representational stagnation or literalism. It helped me have the courage to make statements that had validity in their own right. Creating a playful reality helped me to honor and value the image as an intrinsic gift — a teacher, aiding me to find my own quota of truth. Metaphor and narrative were the midwives helping me to give voice to my secret yearnings — a soft murmur that became louder and louder. I began to realize that I felt safe enough to see freely, to speak freely and to choose freely. Each unique chalice I created suggested to me that perhaps a simple principle of life and healing rests just in this shift in a way of seeing, and provided me with the awareness of an unbreakable human bond.

The obscure language of dreams seems to convey that in order to explore and have choice there must be freedom, not at the end, but at the beginning. Unless one is free one cannot explore, investigate and examine; one does not have choice. To look deeply one needs not only freedom, but the discipline to act on that freedom. Freedom and discipline need to intertwine in order to learn. The unique structure of dreams does not require a discipline that demands the dreamer to conform, imitate, suppress or follow a set pattern. Rather, it uses a structure whereby the dream is initiated in the act of learning, creating his/her own discipline to achieve the final integration

of a certain result.

Making connections depends on our capacity to vary small components. The unique structure of dreams suggests that one cannot make connections and learn about oneself unless one is free — free so that one can observe, not according to any pattern, formula or concept, but actually to observe oneself as one is.

Observation, perception and seeing bring about their own discipline and learning. In these processes there is no conformity, imitation, suppression or control whatever, and in that there is great beauty. The openly expressed oddity of the metaphoric language of dreams provided me with a refuge. Dreams favor the promotion of a learning style where "not allowed," "not eligible," "prohibited" — the "shoulds" and "oughts" leading to a perception of self that is small, vulnerable and powerless — are kept to a minimum.

Comments by Monte Ullman: Emotional healing involves the recognition and removal of obstacles in the path of our unending effort to reach toward as high a degree of personal freedom as is compatible with true and not fancied responsibility to others. This moving vignette by Hilde Guttenplan is a good example of one person's struggle to free herself from the suffocating personal and social constraints she endured as a member of a family caught up in the Nazi era. Her talent in her art

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DREAMWORKERS' CORNER

THE ORCHESTRATION:

If I were to sum up the process I use to help a dreamer work on a dream in a group context, it could be done in two sentences. First, let us do everything we can to stimulate the flow of thoughts and feelings the dreamer can bring to the imagery. Second, after listening to all that the dreamer has shared, and all the questions that should be asked have been asked, then and only then may the group offer their ideas about the connections between the dream imagery and the waking reality of the dreamer. These are offered as "orchestrating projections." It takes a little doing to get a dream to speak in its own voice both to the dreamer and the group.

It is this last stage that is often so important for the dreamer and yet is so difficult to teach. It often seems to me to be like a mysteriously spontaneous leap of faith. I have come to the conclusion it is impossible to teach. Experience with the process is of course essential, as is the mastery of the essential skills of listening to the dreamer and learning how to put questions to the dreamer that are helpful without being intrusive. But how does one teach empathy, intuition, sensitivity to metaphor?

The dreamer brings a dream to a group because he or she is having difficulty maneuvering in the emotional currents that resulted in the dream. Can you, by virtue of what you are able to give back to the dreamer in response to all you have been given by the

dreamer, transform this floundering into an alignment with the direction of the tide, thus enabling the dreamer to swim to the safety of the shore?

When I participate in a dream group, my orchestrating projections do not always result in this kind of a transformation. They do so often enough, however, to make me feel there must be some way I can communicate to others what I feel when I do succeed. I began by saying it is impossible to teach. Perhaps I should have added by any ordinary way of teaching, that is, by increasing your knowledge. It requires a change in attitude.

I'll begin with a feeling I always have when I do succeed in bringing the dream to life for the dreamer. The feeling is that I *am not doing anything*. True enough I am talking to the dreamer, but it is as if I am just a vehicle for thoughts that are forming themselves. Or, to put it another way: I know they are my thoughts but they seem to be coming from a place somewhere between the dreamer and myself. It is as if the feelings the group managed to elicit from the dreamer in the course of our work sets up an emotional field to which we all react to a greater or lesser extent. It takes very careful listening to tune into that field. It also takes another ingredient which is hard to define. The closest I can get to it is to so distance myself from what I *think* I know about dreams generally and this particular dream specifically so that all a priori assumptions are drained out of my system. Only then

LETTING THE DREAM SPEAK

do I feel properly prepared to receive what is being conveyed to me from the dreamer. This is not particularly easy to do. It involves the attitudinal change I referred to.

I'm not just talking figuratively when I refer to the emotional field that comes into being as the dreamer works on a dream. It is something palpable, but only if two conditions are met. Both derive from the fact that feelings when they ring true are the connective tissue that bind us together. To what extent have we helped the dreamer recover feelings that ring true in the way they convey to the dreamer awake the feelings that shaped the dream when he or she was asleep?

Secondly, to what extent do we come up with feelings

that ring true in us arising out of the way we juxtapose what the dreamer gave to us on to the dream itself? When there is a meeting in this way, there is also a merging. It is this merging that leaves me with the feeling that the words I utter are not exclusively my own. They are jointly authored through the merger. It is this merging that comes into being when orchestrations reach their mark. Then I know I have succeeded in being as honest with the dreamer as the dreamer has been in connecting with the dream.

When that level of honesty emerges in a group, the dream is sure to come into its own and to speak to us in a voice that is loud and clear.

— Monte Ullman

By invitation only

Chelsea Sunday Mornings

— if writing is your religion, this is your group —

A small group is forming. We will meet at 11 a.m. Sunday mornings to work on our dreams using Dr. Montague Ullman's Group Method. Then we will give each other feedback on the week's writing. For those who wish to arrive early, we will begin with an hour's silent meditation.

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Editor's Notes

ADDRESS CHANGES, ADDRESS CORRECTIONS -- PLEASE HELP!

Getting this issue of *Dream Appreciation* out was more of a challenge than usual. Knowing that I was moving before Christmas, I completed a good portion of the newsletter before Thanksgiving. That was great — until my whole com-

puter system crashed. Even my computer guru couldn't reclaim any files. There went the newsletter — and the mailing list — and everything else.

I had the mailing list backed up on another computer, but I receive changes

continually and am not certain if it is the most recent version.

Help me! If your mailing address is wrong, please let me know so I can correct it before the next issue.

Also note that I have a new address, new phone and fax numbers, and a new e-mail address (see box below). I have e-mail only — I do not

have a web site at this time, although it is something I am considering for the future. If there are readers who would like to see the newsletter on the web, please e-mail me and let me know.

Thanks for your patience and your help as I try to get my technological life back on track! ☐

IMPORTANCE OF FREEDOM

Continued from page 4
played a sustaining role, but not until she began to work with dreams in a supportive social context did she feel fully in touch with that spontaneous aspect of the self that manifests its presence in dreams. This so well illustrates the important connections between dream work pursued in a social context and freedom. It is the obligation of the group to provide that

degree of trust and respect for the dreamer that provides more room for the free expression of the dreamer's spontaneous self. Hilde put it so well when she wrote "*The unique structure of dreams suggests that one cannot make connections and learn about oneself unless one is free — free so that one can observe, not according to any pattern, formula or concept, but actually to observe oneself as one is.*"

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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