

Dream Appreciation

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Dream “appreciation” is a term that speaks to the essence of the dream.

DREAM INTERPRETATION VS. APPRECIATION

By Montague Ullman, M.D.

Many years ago in a talk about dreams before members of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis, Marianne Horney Eckhardt uttered a phrase that resonated so deeply within me that I have used it ever since. In two words she precisely summed up what I, as a young psychoanalyst at the time, felt captured the essence of what dream work was all about. In her talk she eschewed the term “dream interpretation” when applied to the dream. She felt it was too restrictive and that it tended to pigeon-hole something that flowed through any interpretive net meant to catch it. She preferred a term that spoke to the essence of the dream as a creatively-crafted, unique and deeply felt expression of all aspects of the dreamer’s life. She felt that “dream appreciation” was a

more felicitous way of describing the nature of the engagement of patient and therapist.*

Nearly 40 years after the talk I referred to, Marianne Horney Eckhardt offered some reflections on her career as an analyst:¹

“I love working with dreams, as they show most clearly in imagery the direction in which the patient’s energy is being mobilized. . . . Dreams show us the battleground with ourselves and with others and are the best point of departure for revealing the past, present and future. Obviously I zero in on spirit and energy.” (p. 270)

Energy cannot be created or destroyed. It can be potential as in the imagery of a dream or kinetic when the imagery comes alive as the dreamer is helped to spark across the metaphysical gap between image and life experience. Either way, potential or kinetic, it has an effect. As potential energy, something that could be alive is kept inert and maintains a given status quo. When kinetic energy is

released in this form of the free flow of the feelings that shaped the visual metaphors of the dream, there is the relief that comes from granting full citizenship to that part of ourself seeking recognition at the moment. We may or may not like that part, but it is now in the public domain and can be openly dealt with.

Susan Sontag wrote a book about the misuse of interpretation.² Think about the following quotes in relation to your role as helper to a dreamer.

About interpretation generally:

Today is such a time, when the project of interpretation is largely reactionary, stifling. Like the fumes of the automobile and of heavy industry which befoul the urban atmosphere, the effusion of interpretations of art today poisons our sensibilities. In a culture whose already classical dilemma is the hypertrophy of the intellect at the expense of energy and sensual capability, interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art.

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* I may be taking liberties with what I think she said.

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DREAM INTERPRETATION VS. DREAM APPRECIATION

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Even more. It is the revenge of the intellect upon the world. To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world — in order to set up a shadow world of “meanings.” It is to turn the world into this world. (“This world!” As if there were any other.)

The world, our world, is depleted, impoverished enough. Away with all duplicates of it, until we again experience more immediately what we have. (p. 7)

About art:

In most modern instances, interpretation amounts to the philistine refusal to leave the work of art alone. Real art has the capacity to make us nervous. By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting that, one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, comfortable. (p. 8)

Interpretation, based on the highly dubious theory that a work of art is composed of items of content, violates art. It makes art into an article for use, for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories. (p. 10)

What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more.

Our task is not to find the maximum amount of con-

tent in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work that is already there. Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all.

“Dreams show us the battleground with ourselves and with others and are the best point of departure for revealing the past, present and future.”

—Marianne Horney Eckhardt

The aim of all commentary on art now should be to make works of art — and, by analogy, our own experience — more, rather than less, real to us. (p. 14)

It might seem at this point as if I am against the use of the term “dream interpretation.” I am not. I am against the improper use of the term. It can be properly used in formal therapy, if three conditions are met.

The first has to do with the fact that the dreamer is the ultimate arbiter of the authenticity of the message conveyed by the dream. Secondly, as Walter Bonime³ notes, any interpretation that is made should be offered as an “interpretive hypothesis” and only after all the necessary data have been carefully and methodically elicited to give the hypothesis a reasonable chance of hitting home. An “interpretation” can then be

viewed as a generalization offered to the dreamer linking the dream to other data that have emerged in the course of treatment.

Finally, the idiosyncratic

nature of the dream takes priority over any à priori notion of the symbolic meaning of any given image. Any dreamer can use any image in his or her own way. Freud knew that, but it became clouded over as the teaching of psychoanalysis became more and more formalized.

Hence, to me the concept of dream appreciation captures the nature of what we do in the group process better than the idea of dream interpretation.

Let me offer this analogy. The dreamer is seated in a theater witnessing the unfolding of a drama taking place on the stage. He is there in the company of a very close friend. As the performance gets underway, he has an uncanny feeling that the story being told has something to do with him. It gradually dawns on him that unbeknownst to himself, he has written the

play, cast the characters, created the set, produced and directed the performance.

As they leave this magical theater he turns to his friend, shares the confusion he feels and seeks her help. She happens to be a dream worker who has encountered this predicament quite frequently. Sensitive to the delicacy needed to bridge the gap between being a witness and being the creator, she sees her task as engaging in a dialogue with the dreamer to explore the relevance of each actor and each event in the drama to the dreamer’s life, past and present. She is prepared to follow rather than lead and to help clear the path the dreamer himself has embarked upon.

The end result is both an awareness of how aptly and how timely a truer version of our life emerges. Both dreamer and helper end up with a profound sense of what the play was all about and with that a shared sense of intimacy — appreciation if you will — for the personal impact of the drama that unfolded. This is what the group dreamwork process is all about. □

1. Eckhardt, M. H., (1997), Reflections, American Journal of Psychoanalysis, Vol. 57, No. 3.
2. Sontag, S. (1966) *Against Interpretation*, Dell, New York.
3. Bonime, W., with Bonime, F., *The Clinical Use of Dreams*, Basic Books, (1962) Da Capo Press (1982), New York.



DREAMWORKERS' CORNER

LETTER TO SWEDISH DREAM GROUP FORUM

BY MONTAGUE ULLMAN, M.D.

In 1989 a half dozen Swedish dream workers came together from above the Polish Circle to the very south of Sweden and, in consultation with me, formed the Drömgrupps Forum. All had had many leadership training sessions with me on my bi-annual visits to Sweden beginning in 1976. The goal of the organization was to educate the public on the importance of dreams, train new leaders in the experiential dream group process, and to alert all levels of mental health workers to the value of training in group dream work.

There are currently 77 members of the DGF, of whom 20 are on the training faculty. The make-up of the membership as well as of the faculty includes people from all walks of life as well as the various helping professions. There are now dream groups in nearly all the major cities in Sweden. The dreamwork has spread to other countries, notably Finland. Dröm Dialog is the official newsletter of the society.

The note that follows was written shortly after my last visit (May 8-20, 1998).

May 28, 1998

To the Members of the Drömgrupps Forum —

It's just a week since I left Sweden. The two weeks I spent there will always stand out in my memory. After working in three cities (Göteborg, Växjö and Stockholm) and meeting with DGF members in the last two and in Fortuna, I, more than ever before, realized how unique and significant is the work you are doing. Unique because you are the only organization offering safe and effective dream work to anyone who wants to benefit from their own dream life. Significant because you have grown large enough to make an impact on the community.

I want to stress your uniqueness because there is no other organization that I know of capable of and oriented to returning dreams to the people who dream them. Dreams, in their healing potential, bring people together in a respectful and compassionate way. The larger the scale on which this work is carried out, the more opportunities will open up for further work. For many

people it will be the first time they truly make contact with the deeply honest and creative core that lodges within each of us and shapes our dreams. While everyone can benefit, there are certain target groups that are at risk and for whom dream work can serve a prophylactic purpose by helping to prevent further difficulties. Such groups include adolescents, older people, drug addicts, incest survivors, criminals, etc.

In the course of my visit I had the opportunity to learn about your activities and to offer some suggestions for the future of the organization. Having established a firm foundation, I believe the next step would be to make yourself more visible in the community and to work toward evolving an educational program that would ultimately result in integrating dream work into all levels of the educational system.

The first would involve taking advantage of various public relations opportunities to make your aims and goals known to the community. In addition to that, you have a diversity of professions among

your members, such as the various health and mental health workers, teachers, doctors, engineers, artists, as well as those in the business world. Each member of the DGF has the possibility and obligation to acquaint fellow workers with the organization and its goals.

Tackling the educational system may be a bit more difficult. There is a good deal of misunderstanding about dreams. The fears of parents and the concerns of administrators about introducing so experiential a program into the classroom will have to be addressed. Several of you have already made a start both in grade school and with adolescents.

Lastly, I want to say a word about Swedish hospitality. It's the best! In the course of my two weeks in Sweden I stayed in three homes, those of Kerstin Andersson, Brittmarie Fellke and Ingegerd Hansson. In each instance, the warmth and caring that was extended to me moved me deeply. I want to thank them personally and also to thank all of you for the privilege of working with you on dreams. □

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FROM THE EDITOR

THOUGHTS ABOUT BALI, NEWSLETTER ENHANCEMENTS

The last quarter has been a busy and wonderful one — the one ahead promises to be the same.

The trip to Bali was magical. In addition to several people from Sweden, most of whom I had the privilege of working with last summer, we were honored to have several Indonesians join our dream group, including psychiatrists from the hospital in Denpasar.

Despite all the headlines of unrest in Indonesia, the small island of Bali was very peaceful during our visit. I found the Balinese a gentle, artistic and spiritual people. While in a restaurant talking to one of the staff, who spoke fluent English, I mentioned there didn't seem to be much

crime on Bali. He looked at me, puzzled, and said he did not know that word. Thinking this an anomaly, I made the same statement to one of the employees at the hotel the next day. The reaction was the same. When I explained what crime was he replied, "Oh, they have that in Jakarta; we don't have that in Bali."

What they do have in Bali is a culture where most people still live in small sometimes primitive villages and everyone knows everyone else. The peoples' lives revolve around family, community and religion. Perhaps these help inhibit crime.

The fall issue of *Dream Appreciation* will share some of our experiences.

Electronic enhancements

Monte and I are looking at ways we might be able to put *Dream Appreciation* on the world wide web where it could reach a broader audience without greater cost.

Those of you who use the Internet, let me hear what you think of this. Write me at: dreams@kennett.net

Some of you have sent me regular mail saying you had trouble reaching me electronically. When I switched to a new Internet provider there was a mix-up with my e-mail address. This has been corrected. I apologize for any inconvenience this may have caused. I really do appreciate all of your feedback! □

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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