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### Group Dream Work and Healing<sup>1</sup>

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THE CONNECTION OF DREAMS TO HEALING is part of a long tradition with beginnings in the ancient world and continuing to the present era when this linkage achieved some degree of scientific acceptance in the framework of psychoanalytic theory and practice. Freud, and later Jung, emphasized the therapeutic potential of dream work although they differed considerably in the way they accounted for the healing effect. Freud looked upon dreaming as induced by internal, primitive tensions and serving to release them safely through the intervention of the censor mechanism and the mechanism of disguise. In the psychoanalytic session the healing effect came about through the reconstruction of the latent content using the associations of the dreamer. The net effect was the acquisition of insight into how current behavior was influenced by buried intrapsychic conflicts.

Jung had a more unitary view of dreaming, and the dream, and therefore a simpler and more direct way of looking at the healing effect. Dreaming, to him, was a way we had of allowing ourselves to see that side of ourself that remained in the "shadow" during our waking hours. What the dream presented us with was complementary to the waking personality. It was a means, so to speak, of gaining a view of the dark side of the moon. Jung believed that the dream was a communication to the self and was intended as such. He discarded the notion of a transfigured latent content and in working with the manifest content sought its message through analogy to the life of the dreamer and through "amplification" to the life of the species as reflected in myth, fairy tales and folklore. Dream work literally made the dreamer more whole by bringing his light and dark sides together.

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A contemporary approach, initiated by Perls and known as the Gestalt method, seeks wholeness by having the dreamer actively make every part of the dream, animate and inanimate, his own and working with each element as an aspect of the personality of the dreamer. These elements appear currently because they reflect "holes" in the emotional development of the individual. The dreamer acknowledges and works with the experiential referents of these elements, becoming more whole by filling in these "holes."

The knowledge which has been gained from the experimental work on REM sleep has made for more caution about the possible meaning and function of this strange phase of the sleep cycle. We have no certain knowledge about the adaptive function of REM sleep. The fact that we share it in common with other mammals and that there are vestigial indications of it in still lower species suggests an evolutionary origin and trend. Perhaps the simplest way of looking at it is that, regardless of the original adaptive function of the physiological REM state for the sleeping organism, we humans have learned how to use the accompanying psychological state, i.e., dreaming, to confront ourselves with images that can be found on awakening to have specific meaning for the individual dreamer.

What we refer to as the dream is a waking remembrance of the dreaming experience. It is now available for use in the waking state but the use we put it to must not be misinterpreted as its intended

function. The dreaming phase of sleep is the basic experience. What we do with the residue of this experience in the waking state can not, with any degree of certainty, be considered teleologically as its intended function. We simply have become clever enough to learn how to use the dream to the advantage of our waking adaptation.

For the past decade I have been exploring the healing potential of dreams in small group settings. The approach I use is intended to make dreams generally accessible. It is, therefore, not carried out in the context of any kind of formal group psychotherapy but, rather, in a context I prefer to speak of as Dream Appreciation.

What follows in this presentation is a brief discussion of the attributes of the dream that endow it with healing potential, the kind of help a dreamer needs to transform this potential into a healing experience, the process designed to provide this help and

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finally, a discussion of the various factors that enter into the healing experience.

The intrinsic properties of dreaming which make for its availability for healing purposes in the waking state derive from both the form that consciousness takes at the time and the content which is being expressed. With regard to the latter we might say that, while dreaming, we start with an emotional residue of some aspect of our recent experience, and then go on to explore it in depth by scanning our life history and bringing together bits and pieces of our past which are emotionally connected to what we are dealing with now. This ability to open our remote memory stores and to identify temporally distant but emotionally contiguous experiences is something that is not as easily done in the waking state. It is accomplished with remarkable ease while asleep. There is a further significant feature to the information that is thus mobilized. It is reliable. While dreaming we reflect back to ourselves a profoundly honest account of the ties between past and present events in our lives. We deal with these events in their actuality, in the way they actually registered at the time, and not as subsequently muted by various defensive strategies. Taken together these features of the content of dreaming provide the ingredients of a subsequent healing experience, namely, the linking of present and past, the bringing of more information to bear on a current issue than is ordinarily available to us while awake and the tapping into a way of being truthful about ourselves.

The language the dreamer uses to express this content is quite different from the language we ordinarily use. Verbal discourse is admirably suited for the exchange of information and the pursuit of knowledge. Language organizes reality into categories that can be dealt with referentially. Other forms of expression, however, seem to have been needed to convey our personally felt relationship to the world. These forms, i.e., poetry, music, painting, convey an aesthetic experience, originating in the feelings of the creator and resonating in the responses of others. The creative metaphor (Briggs, unpublished) best exemplified in poetry but applicable to other forms of art as well, is a powerful instrument for generating such aesthetic responses. A truly creative metaphor does touch some vibrant core of our being and does enhance the vision we have of ourselves and the universe.

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The images which appear in our dreams are borrowed from the pool of socially available imagery but they are transformed and arranged in a highly personal manner so as to allude to specific facets of our life. They are thus symbolic rather than photographic and convey meaning indirectly. They are, in essence, visual metaphors. The poetic metaphor comes to life as the listener or reader links the verbal image to its relevant context. In the dream metaphor the image appears and the life context referred to is not only unstated but is also unknown at the time. For the dream image to be able to evoke a metaphoric response the relevant life context has to be spelled out and identified.

There is another important analogy between the metaphor of the dream and the forms of creative metaphor we encounter in art. The power of the creative metaphor lies in its ability to move us in

a way which transcends any limited set of meanings or interpretations. The feeling of "fit" that ensues goes beyond linguistic categories and defies analytic approaches. Meanings enter into our response and play an important role in leading up to and facilitating the fit, but meanings are not the same as the fit and do not account for all that happens when the fit is suddenly felt. The felt effects of the creative metaphor ripple outward endlessly and makes the concept of limits meaningless.

Metaphor is thought of as involving an X and a Y term, referring to things that are not ordinarily linked together. The metaphoric response occurs when we are able to perceive an identity between these two different things. In dream consciousness the imagery may be looked upon as the X term and the relevant life context which remains to be uncovered as the Y term. When enough of that context is discovered a flash of intuitive understanding sparks across the gap between the nocturnal image and the waking context. That is the metaphoric response. The exploration of the content may provide significant and helpful insights but it is the metaphoric form itself that brings to this undertaking a very special effect, one that has much in common with any truly aesthetic response, one that holds the promise of an enhanced sense of being.

These considerations link the metaphor of the dream to the issue of healing. The first step involves the search for possible meanings. Meaning emerges when we succeed in connecting the relevant life context, present and past, to the images of the dream. But this is a beginning, not an end. Meanings are markers on the way toward

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eliciting the metaphoric response. Such a response reverberates through the dreamer at many different levels and transcends the limited set of meanings which developed in connection with it. In essence we are dealing with an aesthetic experience.

Let me now turn to the predicament the dreamer is in on awakening with a dream which appears strange and puzzling. There are a number of reasons why a dream seems like a more or less mysterious and not always a welcome intrusive event. The untutored dreamer is unfamiliar with the metaphoric language of the dream. He may have had no prior instruction on how to search out and identify relevant life contexts, present and past, which are being alluded to in the imagery. Furthermore, resistance may be aroused through a vague suspicion that the imagery may have reference to unflattering or embarrassing aspects of himself. Once awake the dreamer is again an actor in a social scene. His various strategies of social defense are again operative so that he may have considerable difficulty being as honest with himself as he was when he was asleep and creating the images in the first place.

In short, the dreamer finds himself in a paradoxical situation. There is an awareness of the dream as a highly intimate and personal statement and yet to arrive at some understanding of it he has to confide it to others. He has to go public with it. A small group can be a natural context for helping a dreamer, providing there is a clear understanding of exactly what kind of help a dreamer needs. Based on an awareness of the dreamer's predicament two basic needs can be identified. To risk going public with his dream he needs to feel that it would be safe to do so. He is plunging into psychological waters the depth of which is not known to him initially. His first overriding need is to feel safe and supported in this undertaking.

There is a second need which goes beyond the basic one of safety. Because of the gap in the clarity and honesty of the views he has of himself awake and asleep he is going to require of the group the kind of stimulation that will help him make discoveries about himself that are difficult to make by himself. I refer to these two needs as the Safety Factor and the Discovery Factor. The process to be described is structured to meet these two needs.

Because of the special nature of the sharing involved, safety in dream work rests on the premise that the control of the process from beginning to end must remain in the hands of the dreamer. The

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Safety Factor is built into the process by adhering to the following strictures: (1) The decision to share a dream rests with the dreamer alone and is purely voluntary. (2) The dreamer alone determines the level of self-disclosure that he wishes to engage in. (3) The dreamer can stop the process at any point.

## **The Process**

The process consists essentially of an interaction between the dreamer and the group, the goal being to help the dreamer experience the felt connections between the imagery of the dream, the life events that triggered the dream, the tensions portrayed, the way that past data are integrated into the present context, the resources and limitation with which the dreamer copes with the issue and finally, the appreciation of the artistry and creativity with which the entire drama is organized and expressed.

### **Stage I**

A participant presents a dream in response to the leader's question: Is there anyone who would like to share a recent dream?

After the dreamer has finished his account there is the opportunity to question him in order to clarify the content of the dream. The leader cautions the dreamer not to go beyond the manifest content in his responses.

### **Stage II**

The dreamer is now asked to listen but not participate actively. The group is asked to make the dream their own and is given the following instructions:

You have listened to the dream and have experienced feelings and moods which the dream may have evoked. Make an effort to identify those feelings. Try to put them into words. This is an exercise in making you sensitive to the fact that dreams originate in feelings and express feelings. We are not asking for objective comments on the dream and the dreamer. We are asking for your feelings which represent where you are and how the dream affects you. Later, when we check them with the dreamer you will probably be surprised at how much similarity there is between the feelings you pick up and those actually felt by the dreamer. In some instances you will pick up feelings that the dreamer had but was unaware of.

As much time as is needed is allowed for this part of the process to run its course.

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The group then embarks on a second task in response to the following request from the leader:

Let us now turn to the images contained in this dream. Look at them not as literal portrayals of a particular situation but as the metaphorical expression of the feelings, tensions and movement associated with some life situation. In other words, let us look at the images as visual metaphors in much the same way that we would look at poetic metaphors. Our task is to reach out and appreciate the range and intensity of the meaning conveyed by the metaphors. Everything we say is to be considered as our own projection. These are meanings we give to the images. They may or may not have any relevance to the meaning the images have for the dreamer. It is surprising, however, to see how often much of the group's input will not only resonate with the dreamer but will also open up the possibility of new meanings he may have not been aware of before.

When this is completed the group is ready to return the dream to the dreamer and invite his response.

### **Stage III**

In bringing the dreamer back into the picture we are inviting the dreamer to respond both to the input he has had from the group and to elaborate on his personal associations to the images in the dream to the extent he wishes.

The dreamer's reaction is usually one of surprise at how many feelings and metaphorical meanings offered by the group strike a responsive chord. In some cases the group's contributions mesh with ideas that the dreamer had about the dream. More often the dreamer experiences the group input as opening new meanings to the images, meanings he had not thought of but which now seem plausible.

The dreamer and the group have more work to do after the dreamer has had a chance to respond. The full sense of identification with the dream—ownership of the dream would be another way of putting it—comes about only when the dreamer is able to answer the question: What were the specific events in your life that shaped this particular dream and account for the fact that it occurred at this particular time in your life? When there is awareness of a specific context the metaphor suddenly springs to life. Much of the context, however, often remains obscure and seems to elude any conscious effort by the dreamer to get at it. For this linkage to occur the dreamer needs an assist from the group. A dialogue is initiated between the group and the dreamer to ferret out the

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triggering life events. Questions are put to the dreamer to help recall thoughts that occurred just before falling asleep. These are often linked to the day residue and lead into the theme of the dream to follow. It sometimes helps to ask the dreamer to recapitulate the events of the day preceding the dream. What starts off as rote recall is often interrupted by a sudden flash of insight. The group puts questions to the dreamer about any details of the dream that have not yet been addressed. This dialogue continues until a sense of closure is experienced by both the dreamer and the group (Ullman, 1979) ; (Ullman and Zimmerman, 1979) ; (Ullman, 1980).

I have used this small group experiential process with two goals in mind—first, as a way of making dreams accessible outside of a clinical or professional setting to any interested person and secondly, as a useful technique for orienting psychotherapists in training to the healing potential of the dream. Working in the United States and in Scandinavia I have been impressed with how meaningful and helpful dream sharing in this structured a way can be.

## Healing

The notion of healing can be applied appropriately to dream work in a number of ways. These relate to the nature of dream content, the way in which dream work is carried out, the altered relationship of the dreamer to his own dreams as a consequence of dream work and the changes that take place in his relationship to others.

## The Content of Dreams

The essence of dream work is tapping into the potential we all have for being honest with ourselves. Dream images arise out of deeper informational sources than is ordinarily available to us. Furthermore the information so obtained is reliable. It is these qualities of the imagery that makes their explication a healing experience. The result of dream work is a movement toward greater honesty and greater clarity, not about a trivial aspect of our life but rather, around an issue from our past that has intruded into the present in a way that has set up an unresolved tension.

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## Dream Work

There is a tendency, active or potential, for people to seek out emotionally healing experiences. Emotional healing, in contrast to physiological healing, takes place outside of the skin or physically

defined limits of the person. It takes place as a consequence of changes that occur in an interpersonal field. Other people and our relationship to them is a prerequisite for emotional healing. Emotional difficulties start with human beings and are resolved through human beings. Dream work proceeds in the context of an interpersonal field. The process is so structured as to elicit and maximize the ability of others to function in a healing way toward the dreamer. This has the effect of releasing the dreamer's own self-healing potential. Accompanied by the group he moves closer to a truer version of himself.

In group dream work general and specific factors can be identified as contributing to the healing effect. The general factors include: (1) The rapid generation of trust and the non-intrusive atmosphere created by the structure. (2) The interest in, concern with and respect for the dreamer that are all built into the supportive structure of the process. (3) The sense of mutuality and commonality of experience that is generated by the way the group members, through their projections, share aspects of themselves. (4) The lack of a hierarchical structure. No one acts in a professional way as the one responsible for the interpretations offered to the dreamer. The leader assumes no special professional role and has the same option to share dreams as everyone else. His special responsibility is to lead the group through the process. In all other respects he functions simply as one of the group members. This flattening arrangement makes for greater sharing.

The specific factors involved arise in connection with the way that the group facilitates the occurrence of metaphorical responses in the dreamer to the various elements of the dream. The group's ability to open the dream up for the dreamer begins with the range and virtuosity of their own projections during the second stage and is furthered by the skill and effectiveness with which the dialogue is carried out. The skills necessary for this can be taught and then deepened by experience.

### **The Dreamer and His Dream**

As dream work develops there are changes in the relationship of the dreamer to his own dreams. From being accidental, intrusive,

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strange and sometimes frightening visitations, they are transformed into useful communications which contain information of value to the dreamer. Dream work is demystified. There is a sense of the potential accessibility of the dream and an awareness that, when the dream is pursued in a supportive social context, the dreamer becomes better known to himself and others in a way that has elements of relief, release and a sense of greater wholeness. The freedom to let oneself be known to others is also the freedom to be oneself. One learns not to judge a dream on the basis of the immediate reactions it produces. These simply reflect the set and bias of the waking state. To judge a dream by the standards of the waking state is misleading and prejudicial to the dream. Such judgments are irrelevant to the nature of the dream. The dreamer soon learns that the only thing of importance is the connection the dream has to a larger and more truthful version of the self. Regardless of the context and feelings it produces, the dream comes to be looked upon as an available and helpful private resource.

### **The Dreamer and Others**

Healthy changes occur in the dreamer's own interpersonal milieu. He has been given privileged glimpses deep into the souls of other people and he has seen there the same mix of vulnerability and strength that he has come to see in himself. He has also had the rare experience of human beings who come together as healers for each other. He has learned how to participate both in the healing of others as well as himself. There emerges a greater awareness of the circumstances under which people live their lives, a greater sensitivity to the struggle that is part of being alive and a greater interest in and tolerance for others. The result is a healthier expansion and deepening of the social field, an openness to new experience and a greater competence in interpersonal relations.

The dreamer benefits not only from what the dream has to say but also how it is said. He comes to recognize and appreciate, sometimes for the first time, the range of how his own creativity keeps him

supplied with an unending source of useful imagery. He comes to learn that this creative source can also flow into artistic, aesthetic channels in the waking state. His night time imagery

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is experienced as a hidden creative resource which is there for his benefit and which can be called upon when needed.

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