Postcards from the Couch: A Patient’s Dreams as Communication in the Intersubjective Field During an Impasse

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I propose that during an impasse, analysands’ dreams can be usefully conceptualized as a form of communication when defensive processes blockade the verbal narrative. A change in the presentation of dreams heralded their new function to present information that could not be articulated directly, or even known consciously, because doing so was presumed to be too threatening to the wellbeing of the relationship. The dreams showed the analyst’s unknown trauma-based self-state. This dissociated transference was prolonging the impasse by triggering the analysand. Dreams spoke to what needed to be brought into the analytic dialogue and conscious focus to resolve the impasse. Case material shows how intersubjective-systems theory, which addresses the interplay of organizing principles in both analyst and analysand, was useful to unlocking the communication in the dreams and dissolving the impasse.

Patient and analyst together form an indissoluble psychological system, and it is this system that constitutes the empirical domain of psychoanalytic inquiry. [Atwood & Stolorow, 1984, p. 64]

This article began with curiosity about a sharp increase in the number of dreams brought to sessions during an impasse over a financial matter. In addition to a change in frequency, Colin’s way of pressing them into service altered. They now came written down and thrust toward me as a way to begin sessions. If I set them aside, he would bring my attention back to them. And I was having a visceral sense that these dreams were meant for me, and to tell me something.

Colin had begun weekly psychotherapy nine years before. Now, after a year at analytic frequency, the work had suddenly become superficial, our relationship brittle and distant. In our first psychotherapy session long ago, Colin had requested a sliding scale. He later revealed that he was supported by a trust fund, and this social-class difference played a part in the impasse I discuss. In contrast to Colin’s experience, my economic background had become traumatically constricted at 10 years old and I had worked since. Over time, the sliding scale fee arrangement came to feel

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Colin is a fictional composite, to protect privacy.
unfair to me. I had attempted to correct the situation without success. Then, when Colin agreed to become an analytic training case, I raised the issue again. Despite what I perceived as the adequacy of Colin’s nest egg, he avoided or blocked attempts at exploration.

We entered into an impasse that was dissolved only after I found a replica of my own traumatized self-state with a distinctive body language, reflected in Colin’s dreams. My transference had been triggered by current circumstances that reminded me of a devastating financial crisis that had changed my life. I remained unaware of this, but Colin unconsciously perceived it in my body language, tone of voice, and attitude. Once I recognized that I had been thrown into what R. D. Stolorow (2007) termed a *portkey* (the message given me by Colin’s dreams), I began to reflect on my emotional world. Recognizing what had happened changed the quality of my presence and liberated Colin’s ability to confront me, facilitating the resolution of the impasse. I realized that he had been unconsciously substituting dreams for the articulation of conflict with the hope of greater emotional safety. His dreams served a communicative function speaking to the intersubjective conditions impeding our process.

Ferenczi (1913) was the first to consider a relational approach to dreams. He discovered that patients’ dreams revealed, along with the patient’s transference, his own, as well. “We analysts know that one feels impelled to relate one’s dreams to the very person to whom the content relates” (p. 349), signifying that dreams are formed with a specific listener in mind and are a communication to that listener. Blechner (1995) suggested that “dreams are not just a reflection of intrapsychic process, but can instead be used by the dreamer for interpersonal communication” (p. 2).

Robert D. Stolorow and George E. Atwood (1982, 1992), and the phenomenological-contextual perspective of intersubjective-systems theory, offered a new perspective on dream interpretation, and this theory is used to discuss the clinical events in this article. A few key ideas central to this theoretical approach to dreams are described here.

The notion of a self, described by Kohut (1971) as an entity, is replaced with a *selfhood* system, the aspects of which are named in process terms: most importantly, a sense-of-mineness for identity, a subjective set of organizing principles (or themes) for character, and the terms self-state or self-experience. The latter describe finite moments in selfhood’s emergent, varying, emotional experiencing as influenced by organizing principles interpreting contextual changes. The resultant transient self-states differ by affects, levels of awareness, sense-of-agency, self-cohesion, self-esteem, and other attributes.

Organizing principles are formed to anticipate and respond to potential repetitions of past traumatic experience, or to anticipate and seek repair. They endure as prereflective unconscious processes, sorting and interpreting all implicit and explicit somatically based incoming information into familiar emotional scenarios. Shaping meaning-making about events in relationships, lived experience, memories, cognitions, and dreams, they codify experience, creating, protecting, and

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2 A “portkey” (Stolorow, 2007, p. 18) is when a triggering situation apparently collapses time and returns a victim emotionally to the living experience of the trauma.

3 Kohut (1971) uses a Cartesian perspective for the self (once “cohered” at about age two) writing about it as if it is an isolated object with a linear model of development.

4 Mineness is understood to be a sustained, benign illusion, a sense-of-unity left largely undisturbed by the vicissitudes of varying self-states or life experience.

5 For more about the relationship between character and organizing principles, see Stolorow (2012).

6 For an extensive account of the relationship between dreams, organizing principles, and change in psychoanalysis, see Stolorow and Atwood (1992).
adapting a subjective emotional world (Stolorow, Brandchaft, and Atwood, 1987). Affectively intense experience can create new organizing principles, or reinforce or diminish those active, in a given context. The healing relationship, and the analyst’s work to illuminate and interpret (as they shape the distinctive attributes of the dimensions of the transferences), using sustained empathic inquiry and emotional dwelling, can reduce their convincing grip over meaning-making which then reduces the need for defensive process.

The analytic dyad is conceptualized as an intersubjective system (a nondualistic but nonunified whole) within which reciprocal mutual influence operates and stabilizing activity occurs. The analyst, central to a patient’s emotional world and coconstituent of the intersubjective field, also brings matching or opposing themes and defensive processes to the analytic moment, and patient and analyst influence and impact one another’s meaning-making and the analytic process.

Transference is conceptualized not as a regression or displacement, but as the result of the effect of organizing principles. The interplay of the themes of both the analyst and the analysand sometimes determines the focus of the analytic process. There are two different types of transference—the threatening or repetitive, and the desired or developmental.

The repetitive dimension is a response to the perceived threat of retraumatization, involving a set of responses to potential emotional danger and conflict, marked by increasing emotional vulnerability and defensive activity. The developmental dimension is the activation of painful yearnings and the desire that the other will provide what was missing, interactions that could compensate for lost growthful opportunities as a result of inadequate childhood environments. These two dimensions oscillate between the foreground and background of conscious awareness in reaction to moment-by-moment relational experience as interpreted by the thematizing work of organizing principles. Identifying themes, dimensions of the transference, defensive strategies, and contextual influence, provides clinically useful understandings and an explicit and particularized set of guiding clinical conceptualizations for interpreting a patient’s content, process, dreams, and dream symbols.

Defensive processes, considered to be creative self-protective strategies, are always present because a multitude of vulnerabilities impend on both participants of any relationship, including analysis. Traces of these processes appear in dreams and will often relate to the analytic relationship, increasing and decreasing in complexity and profundity depending on the dyad’s level of attunement. In a situation of conflict, the first person’s repetitive-dimension-driven defensive move could stimulate a sense of threat to the second person, and his or her defensive strategies will also be activated, a situation described in this article. As transference configurations are worked through, the analyst is increasingly experienced as a nontraumatizing other, weakening the expectations of traumatic reactions, due to the integration of new relational experience.

Conjunctions and disjunctions refer to a dyad’s similar and different (respectively) meaning-making about the same relational situation, are inevitable between two differently organized

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7 For a full description of the role of the analyst when “dwelling with,” see Stolorow (2013).
8 The grip of an organizing principle describes its convincing strength, persistence, exclusiveness, and truth, to felt experience. The more it has a grip, the more difficult it is to become free of the persuasiveness of the repetitive or developmental transference. Analytic interpretations can loosen the grip (of an organizing principle) by naming its origins, and providing a relational home for its associated affect.
9 For a full description of the intersubjective-systems perspective on transference, see Stolorow, Brandchaft, and Atwood (1987).
people, and frequently give rise to the impasses that interrupt ongoing mutual processes. In the case of a conjunction (which feels like a comforting likeness) the danger is that shared assumptions will remain unexamined. A disjunction can occur when an issue is organized in differing ways so that its meaning for each person contrasts, possibly incongruously. Either, conjunction or dysjunction, if left uninvestigated, eventually leads to misunderstandings. In this case study, a conjunction of mutual senses-of-financial-anxiety hid a disjunction about the differing significance of money.

From a systems view, dreams brought into an analysis in which the analyst works with them as a regular feature of the process, would be especially likely to contain both content that organizes the dreamer, and signaling to the other intended to create or maintain needed safety or risk. For example, the more defensively disguised a dream (and hence difficult to understand), the more likely repetitive organizing principles are in the foreground. Themes, self-experiences, and influential contexts are revealed.

Understanding of dream symbols is based on the dreamer’s meanings, discovered using the patient’s (and sometimes the analyst’s) associations, presentation, narrative, images, content, affect, and the context, and what is known about organizing themes, and typical defensive processes. Mutually agreed understandings of dream symbols occur after dialogue about the subjective and intersubjective context. Dreams, session content, and process become a holistic unity when interpreted through organizing principles. Like all other psychological phenomena and concretizations, dreams are regarded as functioning to maintain the familiar assembly of life and relationship expectancies.

Some dreams reveal organizing principles being stabilized, created, or broken-down, an activity concretized into convincing sensorimotor symbols or events utilizing visual, auditory, kinesthetic, oral, verbal, behavioral experience, and so on—the convincing illusion of bodily perceiving and experiencing of vivid REM dream imagery. Stolorow and Atwood (1982) explained the significance of this: “By reviving during sleep the most basic and emotionally compelling form of knowing—through sensory perception—the dream affirms and solidifies the nuclear organizing structures of the dreamer’s subjective life” (p. 211). When dissociation is a major component of the dreamer’s system of defenses (like my analysand), a dream image may carry (displace and hide) an enormous emotional charge unknown to the dreamer. Thus, dreams may communicate what is not yet consciously known if received by an established listener.

The context is important to interpreting dreams in several ways—dreams reflect the current intersubjective process, they may show the action of organizing principles, they may contain dissociated experience and other defensive activity, they may be used as communication, and the presentation and attitude toward dreams by the patient all carry significant information.

The case material includes four dreams. The extraordinary initial dream of the series of thirty-seven impasse dreams is included because it reveals organizing activity after a relational shock.

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In regards to contextuality, Robert D. Stolorow remarked that dreams must be an institutionalized part of the analytic process (personal communication, September 28, 2009), and George E. Atwood added that if the analyst is receptive to dreams as messages (personal communication, September 20, 2010), then dreams can become a third stream of communication, along with the verbal and nonverbal.

It is most interesting that current scientific research explains that under highly affectively charged circumstances, the neuroplasticity of the brain increases, making change in brain structure possible. Change occurs when the pathways of neuron firings are modified (Cai, Mednick, Harrison, Kanady, & Mednick, 2009).
Two dreams with the character, Ella, are included to demonstrate how aspects of both the patient’s and the analyst’s organizing, opaque to each person, and significantly inhibiting the resolution of the impasse, show up in dreams. I also include the turning-point dream that describes a shift in relational expectations.

CLINICAL WORK – INTERSUBJECTIVE FIELD

Colin is a single gay man in his fifties. We have in common age, cultural background, and mothers who rejected mothering activities. As children, Colin and his younger siblings were mostly left in the care of others, such as nannies and neighbors. At eleven years old, he was sent to a prestigious music academy to develop his talent. This event had long been anticipated, but when it came around he found leaving home difficult and it deepened his sense of being deserted, in part a result of his emotional calls home being treated with derision. I, too, had suffered from parental malattunement and neglect. My parents consistently chose work over family activities, and I developed an organizing principle that always anticipated rejection. Colin and I had both learned to avoid expression (or awareness) of dependency longings and we both came to value independence and to conclude that there is something fundamentally repulsive about our longings and being. Consequently, one feature of our intersubjective field is a certain ambivalence about connection. This conjunction was to play a significant role. At the same time, our backgrounds had significant differences: wealth, identity, and financial security for Colin; loss, struggle, and financial catastrophe for me. These differences played out through the meaning of money—a symbol of family unity, identity, privilege, and superiority for Colin, a concrete reality carrying reminders of trauma for me.

ANALYTIC PROCESS

Developmental Achievements

Colin is ambivalent about the work, because needing help confirms his parents’ terrible criticisms that he is weak and needy. In contrast, within the analysis he has found a sense of “I am,” which he calls his inner “rebar.” Colin is becoming agentic; there is new awareness of a variety of affects and preferences, and a significant reduction in the use of dissociation and what Brandchaft, Doctors, and Sorter (2010) referred to as pathological accommodation. Lately, he can better recognize abusive treatment and protect himself. Colin is becoming a man of substance, very different from the former brash, unreflective, party-hard musician. Yet insight remains uncomfortable due to its implications about his old self, his life, and his circle of friends. In reaction, he occasionally longs for the old comfortable unconsciousness, where nothing mattered and he could handle “anything.”

12A rebar (short for reinforcing bar), is commonly used as a tensioning device in reinforced concrete and reinforced masonry structures holding the concrete in compression.

13In pathological accommodation, the pre-eminent organizing principle that “I must be what you think that I am” structures selfhood.
Defensive Structures

The analytic process is made difficult by Colin’s dissociation (due to early physical abuse), avoidance, withdrawal, compliance, devaluing, and denial. He will, by turns, talk over me with a wall of words, “play possum,” or check out. Emotions such as disappointment, loss, and grief are brushed away: “think positive,” or “everything happens for a reason.” Colin finds it especially difficult when I “make his parents wrong” (usually an attempt to reduce his shame), and he becomes defensive. Occasionally, he wants to “bring in his inner child.” Sometimes it is an “as if” experience, sometimes he is a child-self.

Maternal Repetitive Organizing

Colin’s mother partied, took excessive pills, and was psychologically fragile. She hid her vulnerability with intrusiveness, domination, controlling, competitiveness, and absence. Her son’s needs were treated with sarcasm and judgment. Under the ruse of helping him develop his talent, his mother had instructed Colin in what to think, do, or avoid at every moment. When we first met, he had not differentiated from her nor developed a sense-of-agency. Colin called himself “The King of Independence,” thus avoiding attachments.

I had become similarly self-sufficient, but in the different context of feeling rejected, rather than overcontrolled. Avoiding dependency on others was a norm for both of us, but because of different necessities. When dreams showed that Colin had dependency longings, he denied it because they were dissociated, and my themes left me ill equipped to respond to them.

Paternal Repetitive Organizing

Both of our fathers were entrepreneurs who located well-being in financial security. Colin’s father had been very successful, but conflated love and money. He gave Colin money when his son craved fatherly approval, attention, and mentoring. For his adult years, Colin’s life had been supported by an inheritance that he has been spending down. He has never needed to work (although he had sporadically worked in a music studio, a guitar shop, and had tutored music students), but he was becoming alarmingly concerned for his financial future. Although a good salesman, the guitar store job had been a source of ambivalence and he had stayed only briefly. He took pride in his competence, yet felt that the work was below his expectations as “a man with talent,” confirming family opinions that he had not fulfilled his promise.

My loving father was less successful and inadvertently sacrificed our family’s security when he took a risk that precipitated financial disaster, which was soon followed by a brief period of homelessness that has left me with insecurities. There have been instances of other financial catastrophes during my adulthood, reinforcing my fearful expectations. For me, the resultant organizing principle is always alert for the possibility of homelessness. Early in the impasse, I was unaware that my financial situation had stimulated old themes and insecurities were creating resistances that went unperceived. With the current economic recession, my private practice had suffered and I had lost long-term patients I had come to love. This loss resonated with the historical loss of my parents as they were plunged into depression and absent from home at low-paid jobs for years after the disaster. The personal stress and need to forgo activities
that I had come to rely on for psychological nourishment provoked the conviction that I was again nearing catastrophe. In my struggle against the dread of retraumatization, I had become literal (non-analytical) about financial matters. Although I had noticed that my affect was off when I decided to talk to Colin about a fee for missed sessions while he was on vacation, I had brushed the awareness aside and did not see that, for Colin, money was an example of what Bollas (1987) called a “transformational object” (pp. 13–29), that is, much more than the thing itself.

From the beginning of our work seven years before, I recognized that Colin’s obsessional worry about “nickels and dimes” resonated with my own trauma-formed tendencies. In fact, a substantial disjunction hid behind an apparent conjunction. When I honored his first session request for a sliding scale, I felt compassion for his anxiety that he needed to preserve every penny, and I took it concretely. Later, having worked through the impasse that constitutes the subject of this article, I grasped that when Colin feels existential fear, he finds reassurance in money because it represents the only security he has had and he uses it for control and to reinforce self-esteem. By contrast, in my experience, money is mercurial and not dependable. What I perceived as a sufficient trust balance, was for Colin, “never enough.”

Reference to imminent financial disaster was, and is always, a feature of Colin’s narratives, and I had taken it at face value. I had not focused on our substantial financial differences, which, looking back, was probably to evade the painful awareness of differences in our lives, my reactions to his sense of privilege, the awareness that my otherness was invisible to him and my needs insignificant, the tentative quality of our attachment, and, because I valued harmony, I avoided conflict about the fee.

Dreams and the Analytic Process

Colin has always brought in dreams but has little to say about them—a few associations at most—but he does want to know what they mean. He is usually enthusiastic about my dream interpretations, which I try to co-create: I float one or two hypotheses, and we look for an increase in his level of energy and a bodily response. The analytic narrative has been vitalized by more nuanced understandings gained from dream interpretation because his dream images and themes are powerful, characteristically having directness, impact, and succinctness in contrast to his dissociation-punctured chronicle.

During the impasse, Colin made sure that I would attend to his dreams, but his presentation was different—he separated himself from them as if they were an entirely separate agent. He was afraid to know what he knows, and to speak it. Dreams were his unconscious compromise between a defense and a communication. Looking back, the message of Colin’s dreams became clear: “We’re stuck because you’re missing the meanings this situation has for me.” Their increased frequency was to press home their communiqué, and if I didn’t listen, another dream-postcard (picture on the front, message on the back) would be sent.

At the time the impasse began, Colin’s six-week annual luxurious summer family vacation was ahead. Because I knew that Colin’s history of trauma related to separation, I found openings to explore developmental longings but he avoided answering and would divert attention. I then tried a different approach:
Triggering Event

Following the analytic model I was subject to myself, I requested that we continue at least some sessions by phone or that Colin pay his training case fee while he was on his vacation,\textsuperscript{14} I proposed an experiment that would be a rich conversation that I thought might help: My concept was that we take a playful attitude and negotiate, each from our own interest and sense of what is fair, and work with all that arose in the process. Money was a fraught issue for both of us and I thought this effort had great potential. Although it would be difficult, I liked the idea of a playful attitude of engagement with subject matter that had always been in \textit{deadly earnest}, and spoke to \textit{survival} for both of us. I conveyed these thoughts and how I thought that it would help him, and I suggested that we might explore any and all possibilities. Excited that I could now play with the topic of money, I wanted Colin to have the same freedom. To my chagrin, he was noncommittal and vaguely resistant, and said that he would think about it. Thereafter, he diverted or derailed the issue, acting like nothing unusual was happening. I did not understand that Colin was convinced that any protest was doomed to bring humiliation. Formative relational experience had left him with two options in the maternal repetitive transference—comply or lose connection.

A series of dreams began the night after my request. The initial impasse dream was:

\textbf{The Spa:} I was at a Spa with Dad. The waiter brings a bottle of vodka after dessert, and asks if Dad wants a glass. He says “Yes!” The waiter says: “It’s two thousand dollars a glass.” Dad says “Go ahead.” I’m paying for dinner, and Dad doesn’t understand how much two thousand dollars is.

A pretty woman works in the Spa as a massage therapist. She’s here on her day off. I’m going back and forth about whether to have a massage. I really, really want one, but it’s really too expensive.

It’s time to check-out. The manager reiterates that I have a two thousand dollar charge on my bill for Dad’s drink. I am trying to think how I can get the money back once I pay it. Maybe my step-mom will give me the money once she hears the story.

Now I am trying to get a cousin a birthday present. I have found a couple of things, and I ask his mother what he wants. She said he really needs a hand vacuum, but that is too expensive for me.

This dream is a response to the shock of my request and shows the destabilizing scenario, followed by elaborate scenes available to be organized as either repetitive or developmental possibilities. The ambiguity of the symbols functioned to allow an oscillation of meaning making until a synthesis of familiar interpretations stabilized his emotional world. His associations led to the memory of many of his family vacations at “health and diet spas,” a metaphor for analysis. Penelope-experienced-precipitating-an-impasse matched Colin’s past maternal experiences. The two central issues—the maternal issue of care and its price (in all senses of the word) and in the paternal equation of money with love—structure the dream. In the first scene, when I (the waiter) proposed my experiment Colin makes no protest (as in life). The cost of a glass of vodka is exactly ten times his weekly fee, a point surely meant for me! I interpreted “the waiter is greedy and taking advantage!” The dream as protest let me know his feelings, while he stayed safe from engagement with me and the anticipated consequences of conflict.

\textsuperscript{14}My patient was paying a reduced fee, and I did not feel it would be a hardship for him.
In life, his father suffered from Alzheimer’s, and had no sense of an appropriate cash-for-materials exchange. I thought that the Dad in the dream stood for a defensively disguised self-experience in Colin. This self-state needs help from a therapist, and Colin is not sure what to do about my request for a fee while he was away, and could give in to anything, no matter how exorbitant.

The developmental longing suggested by the waiter is for a parent that will welcome, meet, and serve his needs for sustaining provisions. The maternal repetitive theme shows up as the waiter who offers vodka (a treat) but at exorbitant cost. Colin feels attracted to my soothing mood-altering skills, but fears the price. In his history the high price of care was—and is felt to be—accommodation, entrapment, diminished awareness, dissociation (“time to check-out”), a sense of defectiveness, and low self-esteem.

The massage (psycho)therapist, enters as someone potentially providing a desired motherly experience of the earliest months of life—being metaphorically held, touched, cherished, and protected from the world—but Colin ends up deprived again. Skin (metaphor for his psychological defenses) is a frequent theme in his dreams, and a massage therapist gives lots of skin contact, just as his analyst works on defenses, another form of protection. Of course, proximity in analysis is not contact and touch; it is session frequency. During in-session associations, Colin unconsciously misstated the dream’s ending: “I shouldn’t spend the money” as “I shouldn’t waste the money.” Because I was in the repetitive dimension myself, I felt devalued and was unable to understand that Colin’s concreteness about money was a cover-up for the feeling that now therapy was too emotionally dangerous. The detail in the scene, that “she was there on her day off,” was an absence and presence together, an employment scene, and a metaphor for therapy while on vacation. He organized me as acting from duty but rejecting his infant yearnings, and for him working while he wanted to be playing.

In the paternal repetitive transference, the manager in the dream stated that Colin will have to pay. As I offered him a creative opportunity to work on his central issue, I was unaware that my body language was discordant to my words, a message ambiguous enough to need a dream. Colin’s dream boldly stated, “Penelope, your empathy has gone; you’re demanding!” My own immanent homelessness theme had been triggered. My body showed trauma-based attitudes relevant to survival—such as deporting myself with an air of uncompromising toughness and determination, while I consciously thought and spoke of connection, negotiation, compromise, and expansiveness. I remember noticing that I was surprised by (unusually) hearing my native British accent (which, I assumed, betrayed some anticipatory anxiety about my analytic move), and that my posture was upright (this, I thought was positive excitement). I ignored a slight awareness of peripheral anger.

During the impasse, the pressure my homelessness theme exerted on my self-experience was obscured because it was associated with the general economic climate of that time. With Colin’s refusal to become a (developmentally longed for) relational home that would understand and respond to my distress (as my parents also had not—thus bringing forward the repetitive dimension), the partially backgrounded traumatized state became acute and foregrounded by the events between us—the intersubjective context—session by session.

In life, in contrast to the dream, Colin’s stepmother is outstandingly self-serving, yet Colin consistently hopes she will help him (especially financially) and he dissociates his anger to maintain ongoing contact (as he was doing with me). The dream reveals his deep longing for a maternal figure who loves him enough to set aside her needs for him. In case I did not understand this, the
dream showed me a mother in the last scene who knows exactly what her son needs. The gift of a
hand vacuum might represent the wish for a way that the mess in our relationship can be cleaned
up, in the developmental a symbol of attachment, or in the repetitive that I was sucking up his
money! The expense reinforces the theme that the cost of care is too high.

Colin continued to avoid negotiation. I remained unmoving, unwilling to take back my request
or agree to a position of domination despite accommodative invitations such as his offer that, “I’ll
just give in if you want me to.” What remained unsaid by Colin was that to engage in a dialogue
was too relationally dangerous, and from his point of view, doomed to fail.

Ella changes the rules: I’m with Ella, and she says you owe me thousands of dollars, all those things
you didn’t think you’d have to pay for, well now you do.

(In the following section italics highlight process material, and underlining within parentheses
reference the dream. Ella is a former employer.)

Session That Preceded the “Ella Changes the Rules” Dream

Colin felt abandoned and fearful after having to pay for an audio engineer at the
music studio (where he was creating a recording), help that had been volunteered in the past
(Penelope now wants a fee for missed sessions for the first time due to the change from
psychotherapy to analytic frequency). Colin was agitated, concerned with the sense that there
was a force (metaphor for his mother’s critical voice), wanting to keep him small and unknown
(Penelope is felt to be taking control of him, needing him to be dependent, as his mother did).
He exclaimed that he was doomed to comply with other people’s musical direction because that
was the only way he could get any (analytic) help, or his recording project (he) would be aborted
(I would send him away). He must play the role of dependent one and pay them (identified patient
for me, his “employer”). Becoming more direct, Colin alluded to not understanding why I had
never explained the fee issue to him (change of rules). I believed that I had. In fact, he complained
without pausing, that in his whole life no-one “ever” explained the whole story to him (indicates
repetitive organizing). He’d always been told partial information, and later would be excoriated
because he did something “incorrectly.” (Now has to pay “thousands.”). He didn’t actually feel
angry, but an irritable bowel attack was beginning (subject to several forms of somatization,
Colin had suffered with this condition since childhood and associated it with vexation. Upon
my inquiry, he revealed the danger. “Why bite the hand that feeds you?” he bitterly exclaimed
(suggests his maternal theme).

Following my investigation of possible traumatic repetitive experiences in Colin’s encounter
with me in the session, his mood shifted. Clearly in a dissociated traumatized-state, I heard a tear-
ful child’s voice; “I want you to love me unconditionally, under any circumstances whatsoever,
love me no matter what.” Then a fast oscillation to the repetitive, “What will I do? . . . She’ll kick
me out. . . . What will I have to do? . . . Get out! . . . Go to the academy!”

I was shocked. Although I was used to Colin’s dissociative narrative, I was now seeing a
dissociated child self-state. Furthermore, he experienced me as wanting him to stay dependent
(in the dream, “a force to keep him down”). Had I failed to provide a safe enough environment
for his anger to be heard, and was I now to blame for his irritable bowel syndrome flare up? I
was having a painful sense of having done something wrong, rather than having made creative
use of an opportunity. I felt concern about how to respond to his powerful repetitive organizing
and the deepening impasse, and there were many questions to weigh: had I minimized my own shame about financial needs, when talking to him about the fee structure? Was I to address this concretely or analytically? How could I respond, in the context of my own needs, to his longing that I “love him and never throw him out,” without creating an experience of rejection and shame (with which I could identify), or give in to my tendency to accommodate, and not feel trapped?

I couldn’t yet bring myself to rescind my request, and Colin was enraged over something he claimed I had omitted to tell him, when I thought I had. I was becoming angry and my resistance was increasing as my empathy was decreasing. As I worked internally to modulate my affect, I inevitably became less present to him, adding to his fear of abandonment. I was also aware of another of my organizing principles emerging—the danger of being misunderstood and tarred with a black brush.

Furthermore, the demand of Colin’s traumatized child-state was touching, but extreme. It scared me; I felt I could be overwhelmed by his needs, and I did not feel receptive. Colin organized me as a mother who controlled by only telling him half the story and was likely to tear him down. The emotional experience of being ejected from his home and family life to the anonymity and deprivations of a music academy were overwhelming him as I fought off my parallel fears of homelessness.

The dream intrigued and puzzled me. Ella is now a friend with personality traits not dissimilar to Colin’s mother. I tried to fit the interpretation to our context but subjectively (to me) the concrete situation appeared entirely different to what Colin seemed to be experiencing. I was no authoritarian and I didn’t relate to the attribution, yet I felt perturbed. I reflected on the situation: (a) The new fee structure was for a new analytic context, and I was fairly certain that I had discussed it fully. (b) I was being creative by offering the chance to negotiate, so I was certainly not being demanding! (c) Was he reacting to less warmth from me due to our financial issue? (d) The atmosphere between us was strained and I knew I could not assume that I was blameless. (e) I wondered if I could be reminding him of his mother, but I dismissed this because, in contrast to his mother, I was acting so reasonably! These felt like valid possibilities but there was no clarity, no aha! moment.

Meanwhile, Colin did not show his usual appreciation of my dream-based insights, and remained stonily upright on the sofa. Usually, good interpretations would be met by him softening and slumping cozily into the cushions with a Buddha-like look of contentment, and then a sly smile of recognition and appreciation would emerge. He flintily said he had no associations and seemed to harden more. I looked at him, despairing at the distance between us.

One thought persisted: I vaguely felt that there was something familiar about Ella’s reversal, but I could not respond to this intuition because it made no sense to my conscious mind. I felt an inchoate but distinct uneasiness. Colin’s organizing principles were easy to see, but perhaps there was something more. An epiphany was beginning to take form just out of my awareness. Only later did I understand the feedback loop we were in, as his organizing of my attitudes, in turn influenced my organizing and vice versa, escalating the impasse. Meanwhile, I continued justifying my position, reasoning that he was gaining so much for so little money!

Still, how could Colin see me as this tyrannical employer? In his experience with mothers, power equality had been impossible. For Colin, the price of having a relationship is being the weak one (unable to assert himself) and paying for it. Colin’s associations to the dream revealed that he did see himself as coming to work for me by acting as my training case, confirming my thesis that Ella is a defensively disguised transferential image. How could I be confused with
Ella? I concluded that I must consider the attributions the dream announced as something beyond mere attributions—I had done something that (given Colin’s relational expectations) could be organized into a demanding, critical, rule-changing taskmaster mother-employer, as well as a source of support.

“Thousands!” The affect showed that the very moderate fee has inflated into something mythic. It conveys: “I need you to see this is trauma!” Confronting me, this dream spoke what Colin dare not say: “You’re supposed to care about me, yet you’re acting like a bad employer! You’re traumatizing me!” Colin will have to pay for things that he thought were free. There appears to be a confirmation of his theme that love, support, a place, are not free (things), one has to pay dearly. I wanted to work with the distinction between freely given valuing, love, and caring, and monetary arrangements as it applied to our relationship and the upcoming separation. I was missing what his unconscious processes were communicating. My focus was channeled by my theme that “he doesn’t value you, he’s leaving, and you’re about to be homeless and alone.”

Months later, Colin explained that when I spoke about a fee for missed sessions I had been entirely unlike my usual self. Apparently my arms were crossed—an unmistakable body language—and the rest of my body was as if ‘at-attention’ and my vocal tone was assertive and icy, whereas normally I consider myself a warm and expressive person. He reported that I seemed to be staring coldly. I remember some anxiety and an internal struggle about my request. My body language was a somatization, a sign that I was in a portkey. This implicit communication transported Colin back to childhood, and he experienced me not as a willing negotiator, but as a stern mother(-employer), a portkey for him. The dream disclosed that the nonverbal expressions of my repetitive organizing principles were invalidating my verbal, conscious intentions, helped along by the grip of his themes. Colin dare not articulate the experience that familiar friendly Penelope was replaced by an Ella-Penelope, given his sense that challenge could only lead to ousting.

Unfortunately, by the following session Colin’s themes had gained ground and coalesced into the conviction that I would send him away. My antidotal reassurances were ineffective for assuaging his fears: Memories of childhood came, and he explored how his mom was “two-faced.” nice to people, then criticized them later.

The dreams kept conveying themes that I needed to investigate: (a) Colin’s inability to protest and negotiate on his own behalf; (b) his feelings of extreme vulnerability; (c) his longings to be nurtured, loved, and protected; (d) his fear of abandonment; (e) his self-experience of being incapable of dealing with money, especially earning it; and (f) domination by his mother.

In my own analytic session three days before the following dream, my analyst and I revisited my history of financial trauma illuminating my fears and linking them to present stressors. The impasse was also briefly explored. I said nothing to Colin about this, but a shift in the work seemed to occur. The grip of immanent homelessness had been loosened, and my self-experience had shifted, changing my implicit communications. One month after the first Ella dream, Colin dreamed:

I am walking to the beach. I have forgotten my sunscreen and I panicked because I wanted to go swimming in the ocean and sunbathe. I go into an administrative building. I ask a guy if he has

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15 Many persons with a history of trauma form rigid “certitudes” because of the unbearable uncertainty about life and relationship following traumatic events. The disturbing uncertainty can create the urgent need for a reduction in complexity, usually oversimplified into dichotomous notions (Brothers, 2008, p. 54).
sunscreen I could borrow. He says, “No.” I walk on down the path and I see a high table with purses and fanny packs and there is a very, very, very, teeny, tiny little tube of sunscreen. I go into a group meeting and ask who owns the sunscreen and can I borrow some? A guy says, “Yes.” I put it on, thinking it’s not enough.

A subjective and contextual interpretation of the symbol of purses is a reference to the fee-based impasse, and sunscreen refers again to skin (and defensive process), and sunscreen is one of Colin’s set of characteristic dream images referring to protection and safety. In the first part of the dream, ineffective assertion (and danger) is associated with administrative activity—that is, a relational dynamic of supplicant and superintendence (old organizing). By contrast, success and a teeny, tiny chance of protection (being safe from exploitation) is associated with a meeting, a noncoercive and related form of cooperation. This is the first sign of a new theme of mutuality and agency. This dream narrative conveys the loosening of an old organizing principle and the cautious formation of a new one.

The shift in my affect from traumatized to receptive after speaking to my analyst was followed by a session in which Colin (after coaching by a friend), confronted me about the fee issue by lobbing many accusations and devaluing assertions. He angrily claimed that I was unfair, accused me of betrayal and lack of commitment, made demeaning comments, and threatened to quit and find another analyst. I listened, empathized, investigated his perceptions, and tried to understand, interpreting that “I’m acting just like your mother,” and puzzling about how I could disentangle love and money.

After the anger was spent, his mood changed; he teared-up and spoke of his desire that I give him “this break.” Furthermore—“I want you to love me unconditionally, under any circumstances whatsoever, love me no matter what.” I struggled. I was dedicated, but Colin’s passionately delivered longings, fears, and demands for until death us do part promises scared me, and I felt I could be overwhelmed. As he left, I said, “We matter, and we’ll find a way to work it out because I care about you!” Although Colin had raged and threatened, I had not retaliated. In his history with mothers, such boldness had previously led to disaster. I was confounding his expectancy by declining to dominate or send him away. After another session:

**Ella and the old job:** Ella hires me back, but I have told her I knew she couldn’t afford to hire another person and that I needed thousands of dollars, not just what she could pay me three days a week. She said that’s OK, she would hire me anyway, and would see me on Monday.

The key symbols—three days a week (our frequency), Monday (a session day), thousands of dollars, and Ella,—reinforce that this dream is about our enactment. Uncharacteristically, Colin addressed his unstated judgments: He does not like to admit to the importance of therapy (our relationship), and “would prefer to have a real job.”

The use of personal pronouns in the dream has a muddled quality, suggesting the necessity for defense against a revelation that could feel intersubjectively risky; Colin’s long-standing meaning-making was that if he revealed that he needed me, surely I’d abuse the privilege (as his father had). This dream showed a dramatic shift: that I would work with Colin, whether he pays me (a fortune) or not. The dream implies that we need each other and are in this together, reducing his fears. The presence of the Ella symbol suggests that my repetitive self-state diminished distinctions between his mother and me. He still experiences himself as coming to analysis as an accommodation (for my profit) and the unempathic mother-boss theme lingers. But now the
dream depicts a bilateral relationship (rather than two competing unilateral states) of need. Colin needs Ella, but Ella also needs Colin and will pay money, a metaphor for caring.

The dream communicates that Colin senses my vulnerability in financial matters. But he has perceived a new receptivity to his words and dream images. Organizing that there was no longer a requirement to accommodate, Colin told me about his observations of my body language that had scared him months before. This was followed with the vehement expression of anger and need to which I could respond without defensiveness.

DISCUSSION

Although both Ella dreams address monetary and dependency themes, there is a clear developmental progression. The first Ella dream emphasizes a unilaterally imposed change of rules about money in a relationship of inequality; tyrannical Ella, passive Colin. The second emphasizes the hopeful possibility of reconnection between two people who need each other (albeit instrumentally) for mutual benefit.

Residues of my history of financial-trauma organizing themes, never consciously disclosed to Colin, were mobilized in the intersubjective field, but dissociated and held in unconscious process, until formulated in his dreams. The threatening meaning of these dreams was articulated through my interpretations. These dreams appear to have a dyadic communicative function—showing me a self-state of which I was unaware—for purposes of raising awareness and facilitating reconnection during a painful enactment.

The analytically useful communication of the Ella changes the rules dream is that for the triggering situation to have occurred (although I did not think so), I must have been ambiguous when I discussed the new analytic fee arrangement. Only with abstruseness from me could Colin have dissociated the information about vacation fees—unsurprising because discussing money is risky for me and comes with vulnerabilities. The self-experience shown in the dream, Penelope as Ella, is tyrannical and inflexible. This is a self-state I do not recognize, but theory helped me conceptualize that this may be the embodied materialization of my own traumatized self-experience. It is this self-experience that shocked my patient and called out dreams to show me myself. My conscious mind held the missed-sessions fee request as a relatively minor issue (in the context of the years-long sliding scale fee) and as a prelude to a helpful negotiation in which I was prepared to be generous. My trauma-based prereflective unconscious organizing principles recognized the possibility of loneliness, defenselessness, homelessness, and associated losses, and my self-protective determination (unknown to conscious me) was conveyed to my patient. Colin’s repetitive dimension expectations were triggered in response, setting the stage for an impasse. For my patient, any amount seemed traumatic—evoking a fear of reliving the loneliness and neglect of a small boy whose natural needs were scorned and the cause, he may have concluded, of being sent far away to a music academy. Fear of financial loss was a concretization of the terror of losing the ability to spend to generously provide for friends and win their attention, an antidote to his fear of being cast-out and reexperiencing psychological and relational annihilation.

I might have realized earlier, if I were not caught up in my fear of homelessness theme, that the impasse grew from our historical variance in the realms of money and dependency, deepened by the upcoming vacation separation. Our superficially similar, yet profoundly divergent, organizing
principles led to a situation described by Atwood, Stolorow, and Trop (1989) as one composed of combined conjunctions and disjunctions.

The money issue had formed a conjunction (a similarity) hiding a disjunction (a dissimilarity). The conjunction was the mutual association of poverty with vulnerability to severe loneliness; the disjunction was that the etiology of our fears came from substantially different circumstances, causing divergent meaning-making about the role of money: for Colin, simply an antidote to fears, and for me the potential cause of disruption, loss, and grief based on experience of poverty and its sequelae. The concreteness of my experience made it difficult to empathize with Colin’s imagined meanings (along with his wealth). For him, poverty symbolized a global, formless, endless, existential annihilation threat.

The dependency issue was (oppositely) a disjunction that hid a conjunction. The disjunction was contrasting defensive strategies (and organizing principles) to guard against the conjunction—the dangers of dependency (and its corollary, the desire to be wanted without impediment). Colin’s defenses were created to protect against injuries involving self-loss: “I must accommodate the other or I will be abused or sent away.” Mine were created in response to other-loss: “No matter what good I do, I’ll be rejected.” Colin was “The [as-if] King of Independence,” self-protectively rejecting my caring and attempts to establish ongoing connection. This triggered my fears of the dangers of loss and impoverishment, and I had diminished empathy (for either of our fears) until the grip of my organizing loosened and I could be less concrete. When a conjunction/disjunction forms, the forward and stronger aspects distract from investigating hidden aspects of the issues and form the conditions for an impasse.

Through dreams, Colin’s unconscious processes expressed his perception that my connection to him is strong and that I will take him back. We learned, as a result of the impasse and our struggling through it together that even if our harmonious connection was lost it can be reclaimed (expressed as the reunion in the second Ella dream) in contrast to being sent away.

CONCLUSION

This impasse was resolvable once I deciphered the third stream—along with the verbal and non-verbal forms—of communication from my patient. I had worked with dreams for over twenty years, yet all my experience had not introduced me to the possibility that I could find a representation of my own repetitive transference, of which I was unaware, reflected in the relational images of dreams. It was the lived process of struggling through an impasse with Colin and responding to the moves he made, that brought me to the recognition that my current general financial situation was a portkey to the trauma of impoverishment and, unfortunately, this inhibited the work. Puzzlement, hurt, and confusion were eventually rewarded with improved agency for Colin and with a theoretical and personal insight for me.

My experience with this patient suggests that some dreams can show the analyst’s repetitive dimension transference. These dream images are not solely how analysts are organized to be by the analysand, nor a pure mirror of what is, but show unconscious aspects of the analyst available to be organized by the analysand, and could be said to be asymmetrically coconstructed. Paradoxically, both Colin and I dissociated aspects of this self-state and it was expressed in the
dreams to be brought into the process as an analytic object and *autocatalyst*\(^\text{16}\). I conclude that the receiver of these types of dreams is meant to understand them (at first) liminally\(^\text{17}\) to be safely confronted, while the dreamer remains unagentic and safely not responsible. Thus, dreams become a form of communication for the current analytic purposes, in this case timely resolution of the impasse. The dreams presented material that could not be articulated directly (or even known consciously), because doing so was expected to be too threatening to the wellbeing of the relationship.

Dreams can support analyst and patient in discovering influential, but hidden, longings and fears that are impacting the work. I conclude that some dreams can become a third stream of communication and should merit a place of importance along with the verbal and the nonverbal in analytic theorizing and practice, particularly during an impasse.

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REFERENCES


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\(^{16}\)William J. Coburn’s complexity theory, a systems theory, offers the encouraging information that a perturbed system produces its own “autocatalyst” (2009)—in this case dream frequency and image - whose presence helps the system reach a new level of stasis.

\(^{17}\)Liminal states occur between sleep and waking, consciousness and unconsciousness, etcetera.


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