

Meredith Sabini

# THE FIELD OF DREAMS



## Dreams About Others: How Can We Understand Them?

*“We dream not out of ourselves but out of what lies between us and the other.”*

—C.G. Jung, 1934 Letter

We dream about people familiar to us all the time, but how are we to know if a dream actually pertains to someone? The popularized notion that all parts of a dream refer to the dreamer is useful as a dreamwork method, but can leave us wholly self-centered. Our sophisticated dreaming mind is surely capable of focusing outwardly on people and situations in the world!

Jung distinguished between “subjective” dreams that refer mainly to ourselves and “objective” dreams that pertain to the object world around us, but he didn’t provide any guidelines for making this distinction. Many indigenous dream traditions identified “little” dreams about the life of the dreamer and “big” dreams about the life of the tribe. I have been collecting and studying objective dreams for some years and want to share with you the specific characteristics they seem to have. I hope the list that follows will be useful for your personal dreamworking, for research endeavors, and for therapeutic application.

The theme of inner vs. outer surprised me as the topic of a dream I had in 1979:

*I am at a dinner gathering, talking with two men who ask what I do. I say I am a doctor of psychology and a writer. One asks about dreams and the perception of physical vs. psychical. I say that people assume we see the physical world objectively and it is the utmost reality, but that is not the case. Instead of saying “I see a tree” it would be more correct to say “I am experiencing the image of a tree and I believe its source is in the physical world” or “I see a burning bush and believe its source is in the psychical world.” I explain that the method of perception is the same, but the source varies. This makes the two worlds equal, each registering through our psychical awareness.*

The adjectives “objective” and “subjective” can be problematic, and Jung recognized this: the former can be used to mean “factually accurate” and the latter can signify “merely” one’s own viewpoint. The scientism of the dominant paradigm has elevated objectivity and denigrated subjectivity, though this is finally shifting a

bit. We certainly have subjective dreams about ourselves that are quite accurate; and we have so-called objective dreams about others that are not factually correct. Instead of using these value-laden terms, I propose we identify dreams in a more naturalistic manner as “outward-facing” and “inward-facing.” These designations are bulky but nevertheless descriptive and value-free.

Dreams themselves often indicate which direction they are facing. We dream that we are “inside” our childhood home or “outside” with others downtown. I dream of repairs being done to the *interior* of my house or of needing to update my *outgoing* answering machine message. The dreaming mind is capable of distinguishing between inside and outside, self and other, so we might be able to take our cues from the dreams themselves.

When a dream does face outward, we can’t immediately know, however, if it is giving us accurate information about someone or something or if the dream is revealing to us the way we view that person or situation. I may dream that a man friend looks like my brother; does this show me the rose-colored glasses through which I am seeing him or does the dream help me see that he’s behaving in a little-broth-

erly way? This necessary distinction can come with careful questioning of oneself and with good dreamwork. To apply Jung’s criteria, the first meaning would be subjective, the latter would be objective. The new theory of intersubjectivity allows for the third possibility that this person and I come together jointly around a shared archetypal dynamic of “siblingness” with which each of our psyches are resonant.

I am going to focus here on dreams that are objective and factually accurate in their content, for I believe that this is the area of dream discernment that has not yet received much attention. Two research surveys of psychotherapy patients discovered that ten percent of reported dreams referred to the therapist in the manifest content. It makes sense that in this highly specialized and intense relationship, both parties would dream about each other. Though the finding of ten percent comes from a limited sample, it gives us a starting point for estimating how often we might dream about others. The percentage would fluctuate, presumably, from person to person and from one phase of life to another. We don’t yet have baseline data on this subject—a research project waiting to be done!

Here, now, are some outward-facing dreams selected

both for their brevity and the accuracy of the information both for their brevity and the accuracy of the information they contained. The famous explorer Rasmussen told the story of the Inuit medicine person who dreamed of a land across the frozen sea of Baffin Bay to which he could lead his starving tribe; those who went with him did survive while those who did not trust the dream and remained, perished. Jung heard the dream of a Somali chief in which he saw that a cow had just given birth down by the river; he was too old to keep track of his cattle, but the cow and calf were found at just the particular spot he dreamed they were.

These two examples involve perceptions of the physical world. The next two involve perceptions of the psychical. From the famous psychoanalyst Helene Deutsch comes the charming story of a client who dreamed, following her last session, of a couple celebrating their eighth wedding anniversary. It made no sense to the client; she had no associations to the dream and was unable to engage with it as she typically could. To Deutsch, the dream made immediate sense: she has been distracted during that session, daydreaming about her own eighth wedding anniversary to be celebrated that evening! Jung told the story of a young man who came to see him about recurring dreams that cast his fiancée in an unsavory light; they did not match his view of her and were very distressing. So persistent were the dreams that Jung finally advised him to make discreet inquiries; the young man discovered that the dreams knew something that he did not. Jung commented that the shock did

not kill him, but cured him of both his neurosis and his bride.

Dreams like these have been labeled “telepathic,” a nondescript moniker that adds little to our understanding and implies an unusual perceptual ability. Information such as these four dreams provided stems from situations that exist in actuality. It would be an error to subjectivize such dreams by saying that the new calf was wish fulfillment, the wedding celebration a compensation, the land with resources problem-solving

to have, social creatures that we are. The emerging field of evolutionary psychology, including Revunso’s “threat-simulation” theory of dreaming, broaden our view of dreams even further by taking into account the ancient survival functions they can serve. Though not all dreams perform a social scanning, threat-simulation, or any other single function, the four cited here happen to exhibit a survival function: finding land with ample food, preventing a problematic marriage, knowing about births

1. Action in the dream is much as it would be in waking life
2. The imagery is very plain, lacking the symbolization and the fabulous elements we call “dreamlike”
3. The situation portrayed is “just so,” a given
4. There is little or no emotion on the part of the dreamer
5. The dreamer often has no associations to the manifest or latent content
6. When the dream is considered to be outward-facing, then the meaning of it can be made

Undoubtedly there are dreams that have these qualities but are not outward-facing; a dream could meet all these criteria and still be purely subjective. Some dreams contain a blend of inward-facing and outward-facing elements. These characteristics will probably describe some dreams some of the time, just as all good dream theories do. Test these criteria for yourself by going over dreams from, say, last year’s journal. If you find some that have these characteristics, you can ask yourself whether viewing the dreams as outward-facing adds a fresh perspective on them. Does the dream merely amplify the personal feelings or attitude you have toward that person, or does it show you something about them you hadn’t considered or known before? Dreaming about others takes place for many reasons. Just as we need our dreams to help us understand better our own selves, our own lives, we also need them to help us understand better the dynamics of others and the interplay between us.

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solving, or the prostituting fiancée an anima figure. Speculating how the dreaming mind accesses objectively factual information is tempting; a question that may be easier to answer and more relevant to us as dreamers is why the information has come.

With his theory of the social scanning function of dreams, Montague Ullman helps us to appreciate that outward-facing dreams would be natural for us

among one’s livestock, understanding why a person we count on is distracted so we don’t take it personally.

I have presented here only short dreams on single themes; our dreams are often much more complex and may contain both known and unknown figures. But these examples illustrate well the basic characteristics that outward-facing dreams appear to have: