

INTERSUBJECTIVE DREAMING



We dream about people and situations that have significance for us—friends, spouses, colleagues, and world issues. The dreams may show us how we perceive or misperceive the other, or they may illuminate certain aspects of the other. In a 1934 letter to a young psychiatrist, C. G. Jung wrote, “In the deepest sense, we dream not *out of ourselves* but out of what lies *between us and the other*” (emphasis Jung’s). This view is consonant with contemporary intersubjectivity and field theory.

The psychotherapeutic process is an ideal laboratory for studying this phenomenon because the therapist and client attend to the interactive field or third thing between them. For the past ten years, I have been collecting examples and teaching seminars on the topic. It constitutes a growing edge of the healing arts professions and dream studies in that we don’t yet have a full two-person psychology of dreaming.

In 1917, Jung made the important distinction between subjective and objective dreams. The former face inward and concern only the dreamer; the latter face the object world and concern people and situations in it. At that early date it was unusual to

consider all parts of a dream subjectively. Commenting on a woman’s dream of finding a ford to cross a river, then having her foot seized by a crab, Jung remarked, “The dreamer is the whole dream: she is the river, the ford, and the crab, or rather these details express conditions and tendencies in the unconscious of the subject” (CW7; par. 129). This subjectivist perspective now prevails among therapists of many orientations and is also commonly heard from the lay public. Jung also issued an important caution: if we take only the subjective approach, “it would make your life relatively illusory; you would be completely isolated because you would have burned all bridges which connect you with reality” (*Seminar on Dream Analysis*, p. 31).

In 1950, Erik Erickson introduced the term “ethno-syntonic” to describe dreams that concern the object world, in contrast to “ego-syntonic” ones that are subjective. Psychoanalyst Montague Ullman challenged the intrapsychic bias of the analytic profession, saying that he did not believe dreaming had primarily to do with the individual alone: “I think it is the manifestation of phylogenetic adaptive mechanisms that have

to do with the survival of the species” (1986, p. 383). His extensive writings emphasize the social scanning function of dreaming.

Jung offered simple, straightforward guidelines for distinguishing between subjective, or inward-facing, and objective, or outward-facing dreams. “If I dream of a person with whom I am connected by a vital interest, interpretation on the objective level will certainly be nearer to the truth. . . . But if I dream of a person who is not important to me in reality, then the interpretation on the subjective level will be nearer the truth” (CW8; par. 510). I have found that whether the figure in a dream is known to the dreamer and important in reality, or not, is only one of several factors to be considered; it alone may not be sufficient, for we do dream subjectively about people we know well.

How often do therapist and client tend to dream about each other? In two separate surveys of patients’ dreams, one in ten contained an undisguised image of the therapist. A recent doctoral dissertation on therapists in training found that they may dream as often as once a week about their patients or supervisors. Lester’s 1989 survey of Canadian

analysts and candidates found that dreams about the client occur during all phases of treatment and are not any more common among novice therapists than experienced ones.

I would like to give examples, starting with clients’ dreams. Due to space limitations, the dreams are brief and on a single theme. The initial dream of a shy young man upon starting analysis was:

I arrive at your door but find it is not a real door, not even a real house; it was two-dimensional like a movie set.

The analyst first asked himself whether this was an accurate portrayal of how he was coming across; he felt this was not too likely. So he inquired if this image depicted how people in the patient’s early environment seemed. It eventually came out that his mother never hugged him and he often felt he couldn’t locate her and experienced her as “flat.”

The next example comes from the famous psychoanalyst Helene Deutsch. A woman patient reported a dream in which a married couple were celebrating their eighth wedding anniversary. Although she typically was

able to associate to her dreams, she had none to this one. But Deutsch remembered that during the previous session, she had not been paying attention to the patient because she had been daydreaming about preparations for her eighth wedding anniversary that evening, of which the patient knew nothing! It was as if the dreaming mind said, “You weren’t here last time, but I know where you were!” (Servadio, p. 253).

Now let’s look at dreams from therapists. An intern had this dream about a female patient:

I am walking down the street with this attractive patient, but it’s okay because we have a brother-sister relationship, which won’t interfere with treatment.

Discussion with the supervisor led them to discover that the intern had been defending against erotic transference and countertransference, in general, by setting a “buddy-buddy” tone with his female clients.

Jung told his own dream about a woman patient who’d grown up in Java and tended to imitate the colorful attire of the native women. He felt awkward and went so far as to tell his patient that she couldn’t go on looking like that. Then he dreamed:

A young woman was seated atop the beautiful balustrade of a castle on a hill; I got a crick in my neck from looking up at her.

Upon waking, Jung immediately recognized the mistake he’d been making. He told the patient the dream, and treatment, which had been blocked,

opened up (CW18; par. 334–36).

Writing about dreams in interpersonal analysis, Wilner cites a dream he had about a woman patient the night before her session: *She is a freedom fighter in Montenegro*. During the session, he told her the dream and they spoke about the actual country, beset

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with ethnic splits, which paralleled the woman’s internal wars. The metaphor of a black mountain described well what she was defending, and they spoke of how her provocative manner incited him. A sense of their “interlocking darker sides and mutual efforts to defend themselves” began to emerge.

A wonderful example of an intersubjective dream comes from Jung’s 1929 dream seminar: the patient dreamed that he and his analyst had estab-

lished a joint checking account from which funds could be withdrawn. Jung commented that this indicated the man had reached the point where he could take charge of his own part of the analytic endeavor.

I believe we can say these dreams arose out of “what lies between us and the other” and the presence of the other occasioned the dreams. They emerged from the intersubjective field in order to correct, compensate, or more fully inform one or both members of the therapeutic dyad. I think that dreams like this function as the consultant in the room, whose job is to monitor treatment, keep it on course, and move it forward. In several examples, the content pertained to the dreamer: Jung realized he was looking down on a client, the intern became aware he tended to be brotherly with female clients, the young man discovered he experienced the object world as flat. In another, the content pertained to the person dreamed about: Deutsch was brought up short for daydreaming. Several provided a core symbol of the third thing that was present or soon to emerge between therapist and client: the joint bank account, the black mountain.

I think this material makes it clear that when we dream about others, we have to enter into a process of discernment. These are the questions to be asked:

- 1) Is the dream showing me how I perceive/misperceive this person?
- 2) Is the dream showing an aspect of myself that is portrayed by this person (i.e., projected onto them)?

3) Is the dream showing something, either compensatory or accurate, about the psychic reality of the person portrayed?

Dreams themselves often give clues in their opening lines about which direction they face. Here are two examples:

I am at my grandmother’s house, where I lived as a young child, and she is there. I am at a business meeting with a colleague and realize he doesn’t have the money to pay his share of the rent.

The first is a subjective dream from a regressive phase of therapy; the second is about an actual adult relationship that was floundering.

Although most dreams probably are subjective and do concern ourselves, we also dream about people and situations, perhaps more frequently than we have recognized. The dreaming mind is not entirely narcissistic! In fact, it has a broader bandwidth than the waking mind, which allows it to penetrate more deeply into the psyches of others and the field between us. If we assume that all dreams refer to aspects of ourselves, we risk taking in psychological contents that do not belong to us. Just as we try to stay alert about preventing or correcting projections, it is equally important to guard against absorbing nonpersonal contents from the environment.

By turning its spotlight toward the object world, the dreaming mind helps prepare us to deal with it with more wholeness and integrity, and potentially illuminates interstitial space, thereby enriching our experience of life, as I hope the dreams here have shown.