

Meredith Sabini

THE FIELD OF DREAMS



What's "Wrong" with this Dream?

The provocative title for my column comes from the feature in the Sunday funnies, "What's wrong with this picture?" It shows a scene from life in which a number of elements are cattywampus, and you have to find them. There might be a car going down the road on three wheels or a tree with grapes hanging on it; a person wearing one boot and one sandal, a horse lacking a tail. The word "wrong" doesn't imply a moral condition but a practical one that would be familiar to most readers: you have to know that grapes don't grow on trees and horses usually have tails.

In the dreamwork world, we have templates or cognitive frameworks for evaluating dreams: what the main image or emotion is, who the characters are, what the dream ego is doing, where the dynamic tension appears. Such templates are essential for unpacking the condensed, raw material so a dream's fuller story can emerge. If we acknowledge that dreams have not just one single function, such as fulfilling unconscious wishes or compensating a limited conscious attitude, but a variety of functions, then we will need a variety of empirically validated templates. "What's 'wrong' with this dream?" isn't yet on

the map as one of them. But I hope to demonstrate its value.

In teaching dream seminars, I begin with the templates just noted. Later, I ask participants if anything seems missing from a dream. Here is an example: The dreamer was a young man who had suffered previous breakdowns, recognized the incipient signs, and came to a clinic for treatment. His initial dream was this:

My car is beginning to roll backwards, out of control.

We can see the main image: the car rolling backwards. We can see the dream ego's stance: apparently helpless. And we can infer the main emotion: fear. When I ask what is missing in the dream, the most common response is "brakes." The automobile stands for our ability to navigate life on a daily basis, the dream depicts with simple precision the impending slippage toward a psychological regression. With this diagnosis, the treatment plan could then help provide what's missing. The clinical setting could offer a safe container in which the regression could run its course without destabilizing his whole life; the therapist and the client's kinship group could offer the missing element of control by

making decisions while he is unable to do so.

The next example concerns a fifty-year-old teacher's aide who came for evaluation. Her initial dream was:

A five- or six-year-old girl is sitting in a corner of a room all by herself. Her head has fallen over onto her shoulder, as if her neck were broken.

There was no emotion in either the dream itself or her telling of it. When I have asked dream seminar participants what's missing in this dream, they usually reply, "People." There is no one who notices, attends to, or helps the young girl. The woman had suffered from a childhood depression that began after a major disruption to the family life at the age depicted; the abandonment she experienced injured her potential ability to keep her "head on her shoulders." Finding what is missing in the dream again leads to the area where healing is needed.

It was a particular, memorable dream that eventually led me to move beyond the question of what is missing to consider what might be "wrong" in the structure, plot, or characters in a dream. I heard the dream at a dinner party when another guest, upon learning my profession, publically exclaimed, "Oh, I had an interesting

dream last night. I dreamed that my dog's nose had been cut off." I did little more than politely acknowledge it, feeling alarmed by the dream, since a dog whose nose has been cut would be in dire straits, deprived of its primary, instinctive means of getting around in the world. We know what's missing: the dog's nose. What's wrong is that it's been cut off, implying an accident or act of violence, which would merit exploration. If she were telling the dream in my consulting room, I might have inquired if something recently had happened that impaired her sense of direction in life or her basic intuition.

My next example concerns a woman who was devoted to caring for others and reluctant to endorse her own artistic talents because they seemed "self-indulgent." She dreamed,

I am in a wooded area of an Indian reservation with young native children. Their faces are stained bright colors from the popsicles they were enjoying. I want to go back to the headquarters, but they want me to stay and play with them in the woods. Brooking no disagreement, I turn and walk away. The children all commit suicide.

Their faces reminded the dreamer of the bright palette

of colors she liked to paint with. The dream gives a shocking portrait of her avoidance of her talent, showing it as akin to the mass suicide of children who were doing nothing more than acting naturally. I believe the dream itself implies that it is “wrong” for her to turn her back on artistic play because it could have destructive consequence.

My last example is from a thirty-five-year-old woman being seen for suicidal depression by an intern at a clinic. She had repeated dreams similar to this one:

I'm in the ocean. The waves are huge. I'm trying to cling to rocks. I see you (intern) in a rowboat. Your hand is outstretched, but I can't grab onto it and you can't reach me. My hands keep slipping and I'm afraid I'll drown.

The patient is “at sea,” feeling inundated by upsetting emotions, and barely able to hold onto anything solid. Her novice therapist is trying but can't “reach” her, and she too is trying to reach his hand. The dream gives a graphic portrait of the effort the two are making, and its failure. Let's see what happens when we ask the question, “What's wrong with this picture?” One small detail reveals the whole problem with the treatment; to see it, you only have to put yourself in the “same boat” as the intern: a rowboat amidst huge waves and near rocks. Is this a good, safe, solid position from which to rescue someone on the verge of drowning? No, it is not. A rowboat requires both hands be on the oars; reaching out to someone in the water would put the sea-

man at risk. It is very dangerous to try and pull someone out of a turbulent sea from any small boat, especially near rocks. The rowboat is not the proper vessel for the circumstances: it is the “wrong” element in this picture. By revealing that the intern has only limited resources, the patient's wise dreaming mind has given an objective assessment of what is impeding treatment, despite their apparent mutual efforts made in good faith. On the basis of her

appropriate. In the above example of the boat in the water, balance is crucial; and it is the boat holding the healer and the healer's position in that boat that either provide balance, or not.

Over the years of becoming a dream specialist, I have received important trainings from dreams themselves. This dream, from 1976, when I was just out of graduate school and new at dreamwork, foreshadowed the perspective I have

portrayal of the client's situation. I say to just use your own judgment and common sense about whether the dream situation is natural and normal, or if it's bad or dangerous.

The night before, I had been reading a passage from James Hillman where he said that in dreams, anything can happen and we must suspend judgment and stay with whatever image is given no matter how bizarre or farfetched. The wisdom function in my psyche did not agree with this, and recommended that I take dangerous situations in dreams as just that. I took this dream's advice and as a result, have been able to make highly accurate diagnoses based on patients' initial dreams.

There is a tendency in the dreamwork world to privilege, even idealize dreams. I have been as guilty of this as anyone. Asking what is “wrong” with a dream, what is absent, out of balance, or out of Tao should not, of course, be the first question, but should come after the dream ego's stance, the main emotion and image, and the characters have all been elucidated. But the question should be asked, for if dreams are rehearsals for life, wish fulfillments, compensations for incorrect attitudes, then we owe it to them to explore all their dimensions, including the negative spaces of what is absent or “wrong” in the depictions they give. Taking this perspective has paid off enormously, leading to discoveries about the psyche's areas of woundedness as well as its potential for healing.

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serious suicidality, her recurring dreams of possibly drowning, and the intern's limited experience dealing with symptoms of this magnitude, the case was transferred to a senior clinician who was competent to deal with it.

It may seem peculiar to ask what is “wrong” with a given dream picture; the phrase “out of balance” may be more

been describing here:

I am giving a talk to people who do various kinds of therapy and healing, telling them how to assess their clients' dreams to watch for trouble signs. I say that for a guide, they should evaluate a dream 'naturalistically.' If there is a fire or flood or danger of some sort, take that as if it is an accurate