

Meredith Sabini

THE FIELD OF DREAMS



The Anatomy of Dreams

“A dream comes from the same source as a tree, or a wild pig,” Jung’s associate Marie-Louise von Franz remarked in the 1988 film, *The Way of the Dream*. This remark has functioned as a koan for me ever since I heard it. A challenge is inherent in its utter simplicity: if dreams are like trees, do we need theories to precede us into the forest of dreamland? Does a naturalist need a theory to discover the texture of bark, the shape of leaves, and size of seeds on one tree in order to be able to compare them with others? In this column, I’d like to share with you my reflections on this conundrum and the attempt I’ve made to craft an analogous means by which we could take note of the basic structure of dreams, their pulse and their vital functions.

In a wide range of settings, I’ve been teaching how to engage with dreams for several decades, and I’m always struck by how ready people are to speculate about a dream’s purpose, how eager to get to its core. Therapists usually trot out their favorite clinical theory and refer to it as a map while they perambulate the dream, but rather than function to guide them, theory usually becomes a template

superimposed over a dream’s content, which is then forced to fit the theory. Paul Lippmann, in his keynote address to the 2003 IASD conference, noted this tendency:

“... blinded by the brilliance of Freud, and then of Jung, in regard to dreams . . . clinicians more and more followed the dictates of theory and saw in dreams what they were told to find . . . repressed infantile sexuality for the Freudians, mythic themes of the collective unconscious for the Jungians.”

Dreamworkers who use the popular Ullman-Taylor approach likewise may skip the initial step of naturalistic observation of a dream, and go directly to interpretations. Moving too quickly toward a dream’s possible purposes and meanings has the same effect as walking too quickly through a forest: we miss details that may be an essential part of the picture.

I believe that the dreaming mind has already worked hard to concoct the dream specimen that is being examined, so perhaps we could work less hard ourselves and give the dream more room to show itself off. As an aid for thera-

pists, I developed the Dream Assessment Protocol (©1997), designed for use with clients’ initial dreams. It requires careful attention to the details and the specific language of these singular dreams in order to decipher the important diagnostic information they contain. The protocol has a dozen items that identify a dream’s basic structure and dynamics—its “anatomy.” I recently modified the protocol for application to a wider range of settings. Titled “The Anatomy of a Dream,” it can be used for teaching college or graduate students about dreams; as a tool for dream research projects; or as a prelude to any type of individual or group dreamwork. It is not based on any theory, but is the dream-naturalist’s guide for unpacking a dream to see what’s actually in it.

There are eight items or components, stated as questions, that are to be answered using only the dream’s own language: what is the setting of the dream; its atmosphere; characters; resources; main theme, topic, or problem; what is the dreamer’s relationship to that theme; what changes take place in relation to it; and is there a resolution or outcome? What emerges is not a two-dimensional skeleton but the living blood-and-guts of a dream.

Not every dream will contain every item. Goldston (1995) categorized dreams into four morphological types: narrative, montage, meander, and amorphous. Narrative dreams are the form most likely to exhibit all components, but other types may as well. I will describe each of the items and then apply the protocol to two sample dreams.

The *setting* of a dream is often given by the opening line: “I was walking in the park near my grandparent’s house” or “I am downtown in an office complex,” and tends to indicate what topic the dreaming mind wishes to address. The *atmosphere* is the overall quality or valence of the dream: “It’s a dark and stormy night” or “It’s a bright sunny day.” Other more specific personal emotions may be mentioned, but the atmosphere is the dream’s general qualitative tone. The *characters* in a dream refer to all of the sentient figures that appear.

Finding the *main theme*, topic, or problem in a dream can be done by giving it a title or caption or summarizing it in a phrase or sentence. Since dreams may have more than one scene, each can also be given a title that captures its theme. The dreamer’s *stance* in relation to the main topic may be active or passive, engaged or remote; again, a single

word or phrase is sufficient. The *resources* in the dream would include the implicit and explicit attributes of all the dream figures plus resources existing in the scenes shown. This component tends to reflect the dreamer's ability to cope or deal with life challenges.

The *dynamic tension* within the dream may occur between contrasting figures, emotions, or actions that are portrayed. The *resolution or outcome* may be the final dimension of the dream, showing where the movement of the main theme ends up. Of course, dreams often lack a final conclusion.

Here is our first example:

I am in the kitchen. The light bulb above the sink goes out. I stand on a ladder to replace it, but find the socket loose, so I get a wrench and tighten the bolt. I get a tremendous shock and am thrown off, falling in slow motion. I wonder if I'm hurt. I realize there is a short in the wiring and telephone an electrician. He says he will come over with his crew and take a look so they can fix it.

What is the dream's *setting*? The kitchen of the dreamer's own home. The *atmosphere*? It seems to be an ordinary day. *Characters*? The dreamer, an electrician, and his crew. The *theme* or problem? At first, it's changing a light bulb; then it is that the wiring needs to be replaced. Another theme is the shock and fall of the dreamer. What *resources* are available? The wrench and ladder; the telephone; the electrician and his crew. The dreamer's *stance*? She is active in relation

to both problems, trying to fix the problem herself and then calling for help. What is the *dynamic tension*? We might say that it is between the expectation that the problem is a simple one and the discovery that it's more complex. The *outcome* is that a professional will come to assess and repair old wiring.

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Here is the second sample dream:


I am in a wooded area of an Indian reservation with some young native children. Their faces are stained with bright colors from popsicles they are enjoying. I want them to come with me back to the reservation's headquarters; they want me to stay with them in the woods and play. Brooking no disagreement, I turn and walk away, whereupon the children all commit suicide. (G. Mogenson, "Collectivity, Individuality, and the Dream," *Quadrant*, Winter 2004, 34:1.)

What is the *setting* of this dream? Outdoors, at an Indian

reservation. The *atmosphere*? It seems to be daytime and involve human engagement. *Characters*? The dreamer and some Indian children. The *main theme* or topic? Whether to stay in the woods and play or return to headquarters; or, we might say the theme is who is in charge of deciding what is to take place. What is the

ors on their faces reminded her of the palette of colors she liked to use. The dream seems to suggest that painting is a natural activity akin to the play of children; and its denial is likened to suicide, a severe outcome.

Using the protocol in a dream group will allow everyone to participate in the discovery process. The leader can name the items and members can respond by saying only what is given in the dream. The point is to avoid any interpretation of symbols at this early phase. But it's easy to see how personal and objective associations could easily emerge in the next phase: what wiring or the kitchen might stand for; why the second dream is on a reservation and the kids have popsicles and not candy, for instance.

I have intentionally given very short answers here in order to show that what you obtain from using this protocol is, in fact, the "bare bones" of a dream's anatomy. I believe this can and ought to be the starting place for any subsequent dreamwork. 

If you are interested in using the Dream Assessment Protocol or The Anatomy of a Dream for educational, clinical, or research purposes, please contact me to receive the complete copyrighted packet of materials.

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