

Field of Dreams

Cats in Dreams: Helping Revitalize our Instincts

Meredith Sabini



In a 1958 lecture Jung said, "In dream symbolism, animals refer to instinctual processes . . ." This has become an axiom in the field; the type of animal is thought to signify a particular instinct. We don't hear much about instinct these days; it is no longer a topic of psychological or philosophical inquiry, and it isn't taught in graduate school or the subject of research. Yet according to Jung, "In the last analysis, most of our difficulties come from losing contact with our instincts, the age-old unforgotten wisdom stored up in us." (*Jung Speaking*, pg. 89) We are not encouraged to sleep when tired, eat when hungry, or socialize as the wish arises. But animals of all sorts seem to be returning in dreams, apparently determined to re-awaken the dormant phylogenetic instincts that are foundational to our species and essential for our own survival on the planet.

When I was practicing as a psychotherapist, there was a period in the '80s and '90s when about half of my female clients were bringing in dreams about cats; feline images were also appearing frequently in my own psychoanalysis. Intrigued by this trend, I began recording all the dreams I had and was told, and soon noticed thematic patterns. Cats in

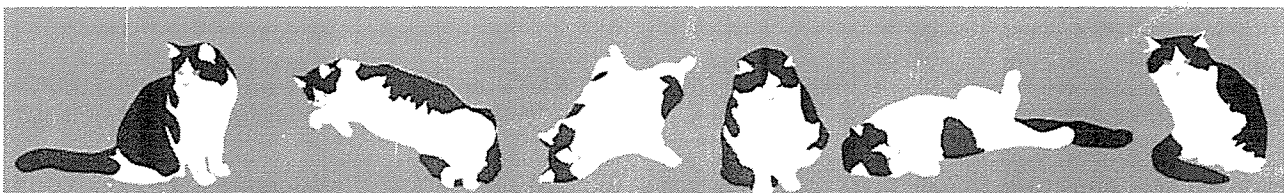
early dreams were often injured or abandoned, trapped in cages, or left with no food or water. Then, after some time, the dream cats were being cared for, taken to vets, fed well, and they became playful, adventurous, and engaging. It was as if the cats were in need of treatment as much as the dreamers and benefited from it along with them.

I've regularly added to the initial collection of about 50 dreams and perused available references on animal symbolism, but I find what is written about cats to be unsatisfying because it deals mainly with abstract mythological aspects. Interpretations given for feline imagery are more often based on collective cultural projections than on actual characteristics of cats. If the presence of animals in our dreams signifies the effort of instincts to revive themselves, then we need to pay close attention to each animal's basic nature in order to correctly apprehend their function and purpose in our dreams.

I've come up with several working hypotheses about the meaning of cats in dreams, and I invite you to consider which, if any, apply to your own dream life, with the caveat that my research has been limited to women's dreams, due to the predominance of women in my practice, dream groups, and seminars. I hope that others will take up this project and investigate whether any of these hypotheses also apply to men's psychology. My own impression is that men dream less about cats than women do.

In the two dreams that follow, the cat graphically portrays how the feminine instinct is wounded. A South American woman who immigrated here in her 30s felt this dream very accurately depicted the troubled atmosphere of her family of origin:

I'm 7 or 8 and arrive by car with my parents at the house where we lived then. In the dream, I wonder what my memories of it are. A neighbor calls over to me, "It must be difficult to come back, since you used to be so unhappy here." Then there is an explosion coming from my bedroom on the second floor, the window shatters, and a kitty comes flying out and lands, dead, on the ground. My mother is inside visiting with her friends."



On telling the dream, the woman wept openly, and said that her mother had had one of her pet cats killed but tried to hide the fact. The metaphor of “cat expulsion” became one we used throughout her therapy. The next dream is from a graduate student suffering from mild anorexia:

I am in a cafeteria with classmates, sitting next to an overweight woman. A fellow comes up and does some puppet tricks, but it turns out he’s using one of my cats. She was being teased a lot and possibly in danger.

Like the dreamer, that particular cat was affectionate but skittish and had to be coaxed to eat her food. The dreamer’s family used to tease her about being so skinny and her overweight mother watched her eating habits too closely. These two dreams verified for the dreamers the maltreatment they’d received when young and helped them to recall the accompanying emotions.

The next dream, from a rather conventional older woman, illustrates another common theme: the risk that the cat might “get out.”

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Jung noted that if we ignore our instincts, they may show up in dreams as animals that barge into our house or angrily attack us, actively carrying the instincts we’ve neglected.

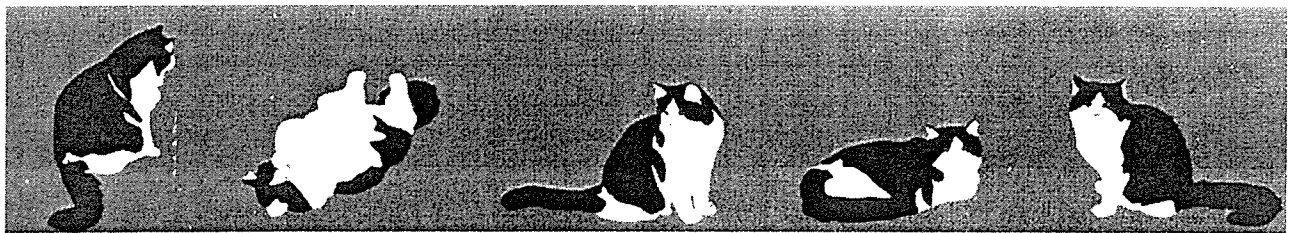
I am driving to a resort. The road becomes dirt, then wet and slippery. I come to a place to get gas and step out of the car. I have a pet animal with me, a rabbit or cat. It’s not a good idea to let it out, but it needs fresh air, so I borrow a box and carry it around.

A dream of my own was very similar:

I’m moving. The car is all packed up, with my cat inside. After driving a while, I get out for a brief stop. When I return, I see that I left the window open and the cat got out. Oh dear! I get a box of food and coax it to come. It’s a new kitten and comes easily.

What was at the risk of “getting out”? Clearly, the cats in these two dreams simply wanted to be unconfined, allowed to roam freely, as cats like to do. I realized that this woman and I both were the eldest and tended to take care of others’ needs, putting our own last. To help us understand this motif of the cat wanting to get out, I’d like to contrast the basic qualities of dogs versus cats, the two animals that live most closely with humans in this culture. Dogs are social creatures that keep constant and careful track of their humans; they tend to adapt, accommodate, and try to please. Cats, on the other hand, tend to be independent, self-reliant, adventurous, and seemingly aloof, although they are often deeply loyal also. Dogs like to accompany people on walks and in cars; cats are much less keen on these activities. I believe we could say that dogs tend to be outer-directed and extraverted and cats tend to be introverted.

When I considered this in relation to my clients who had cat dreams, I realized that most were introverted. Furthermore, those who exhibited the pattern of cats being undernourished or injured, confined and in need or care, had come from extraverted families, as I did, that pressured them into a false adaptation. When I was a teen, my father used to pass my room and taunt me by saying, “Navel-gazing again?” It took some years of analysis for my introverted instinct to be restored to its natural integrity. Using this hypothesis to explain the dynamic in those



dreams, of course the cat would want to “get out.” And the dreamer, predictably, would be anxious about letting her instinct for introversion out, as it may lead her to spend a day alone reading instead of cooking for the family, or taking a trip on her own rather than with a partner.

Another primary characteristic of cats is their ability to take excellent care of their bodily functions: if healthy they eat just the right amount, manage elimination discreetly, carefully check out other animals in the neighborhood, and take plenty of naps. The gray tabby I have, who assiduously avoids fights, once developed a small abscess on his shoulder but managed to clean and drain it and then keep it open so it healed properly. In this sense, I wonder if cats stand for the introverted sensate function which, at its best, carefully tracks our bodily needs and symptoms as they arise. Many of my clients were intuitive types, like myself, who often pay insufficient attention to bodily processes. Dream cats may compensate for this chronic lapse.

A dream of my own illustrates how a cat can be a guide for self-care:

Lucy is biting my hand through the pair of heavy work gloves I'm wearing. She tears fiercely at my fingers. After she stops, I take off the glove and feel my hurt hand. I ask her, "Why?"

As I rose out of sleep, I immediately knew the answer: she was letting me know that I'd overworked in the yard the day before, in those very gloves. Jung noted that if

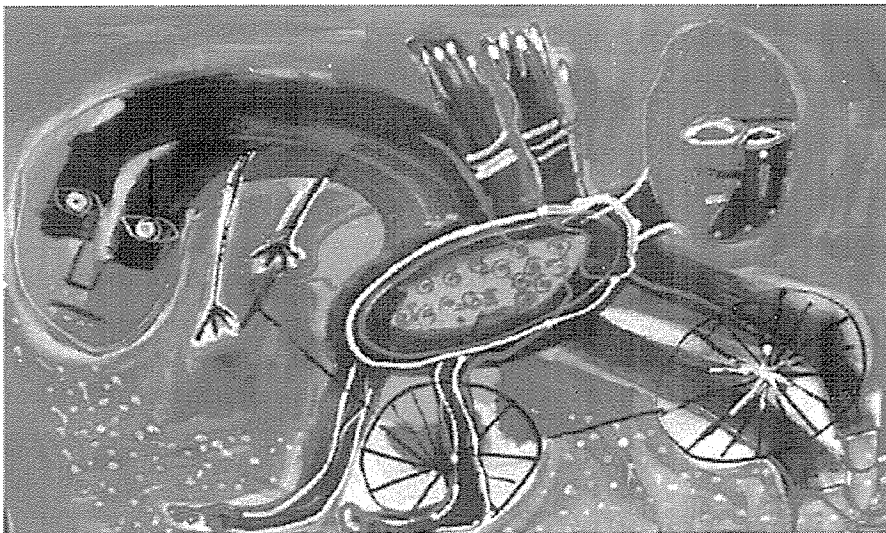
we ignore our instincts, they may show up in dreams as animals that barge into our house or angrily attack us, actively carrying the instincts we've neglected.

Cats are not only good at self-care, they take pleasure in their bodily existence: sprawling lazily on the lawn, curling up in a warm lap, snuggling with a feline pal, purring when stroked. In our workaholic society, the pleasure principle is not exactly high on the list of respected values. The basic presence of cats in our dreams may serve to remind us that we might be better off to keep our purr running than our motor. Sleep deprivation is endemic; what animal can remind us of the pleasure and health benefits of a nap better than cats?

With this larger perspective in mind, I will close by suggesting that cats in dreams may have a collective meaning as well as a personal one. They are less domesticated than dogs, less domesticable, and thus can remind us of ancient instincts that are not meant to be overridden by the modern work schedule. The final dream shows the importance of taking the pulse of our cat-self every now and again:

I'm lying in bed on my back, half asleep. My cat is lying alongside me, stretched out on its back with its legs toward my shoulders. I gently place my hand on its belly, and I feel a pulse of resonance between us

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Art Show 2016

Osagie Edomwandagbon
(Nederland)
Vrouw op fiets / Woman on
bicycle
(80 x 120; acryl verf op canvas /
acrylic paint on canvas)