

The First Well-Interpreted Dream

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Dream research surveys and clinical interviews sometimes include the question, “What is your first remembered dream?” The assumption is that early dreams may contain themes that manifest throughout one’s lifetime, hints as to the life pattern that will emerge. I’m intrigued by a related but slightly different question: “What is your first experience of having a dream well interpreted?” My hypothesis is that if this had been a memorable and meaningful experience, it might have set in motion an interest in or openness to the world of dreams.

In my own background, one specific incident stands out. Though I’ve often told the story, appreciatively, of my first experience in psychotherapy, it’s only recently that I’ve realized just how profoundly the therapist’s interpretation of two brief initial dreams has affected my work and career interests, not to mention the direction of my life. I was prompted to reflect upon this when a group of female graduate students, whom I’m mentoring, inquired about how my connection with dreams came about.

It was the late 1960s. I was about twenty-five, and attending a clinical psychology M.A. program. It was expected that we would undergo psychotherapy as part of our training, and a professor had referred me to Magda Proskauer, a German-trained physical therapist who’d had a Jungian analysis and also practiced psychotherapy. I’d had numerous psychosomatic conditions since childhood, and her breath-based bodywork, done in groups, suited me well, so I attended these for several months. But a major decision was troubling me: I was torn over whether to remain in graduate school or join hippie friends who were moving out of state to a rural commune; so I asked for some individual therapy sessions.

When I’d moved from Berkeley to San Francisco for graduate school, I chose a place near Golden Gate Park and bus routes, since I had no car at the time. Without intending to settle in the area where the counter-culture movement had its true grass roots, I found myself on the periphery of the Haight Ashbury, exposed regularly to all the movement entailed. Among other things, Jung’s memoir was actively passed around, read, and talked about, so I had at least a vague idea what it meant to see a Jungian therapist.

Magda’s office was within walking distance of my apartment. At our initial meeting, she asked if I’d had any dreams before coming. Yes, I had, quite a memorable one: “*I dreamed I’d cut off all my hair.*” That was the entire dream—a sense of my hair cut down to the nub. There were no figures in it, no action, no dialogue; it was “just so.”

I can still hear Magda’s response, spoken in her heavy German accent (which I will try to spell out phonetically, as it had its own charm): “Vell, I guess you’ve been hanging out with zose hippies, hafn’t you? And zey sink you should have only feelinks! But you have a good mind and should learn to use it. Zat’s vat comes out of your head—zots!”

Vell! I was stunned. Hair stands for what comes out of our head? And I’d been cutting this off in order to adapt to the ethos of the counter-culture? I hadn’t realized the hippie world preferred feelings over intellect, though I quickly recognized the tendency once she mentioned it. The poignancy, not to say accuracy, of Magda’s interpretation left me sitting there, in her study, with mouth agape. Even though I’d never worked with a dream, I could see that I’d been the one to cut the hair off; no one had done it to me. And the cut was a butcher job; it was *not* attractive. This was my first lesson in what a dream symbol could refer to. The meaning of “hair” did not seem limited to my own situation but had broad, general implications.

I could afford to see Magda only every other week, and the wait until our next session seemed long. Did I have another dream? she asked. Yes, and it was an obvious sequel: “*I am at a beauty parlor, and an older woman is styling my hair, which is long, into a fresh, new coif.*” I knew

this must be an improvement over the previous dream.

This time, she didn't say anything, but got up from her chair and went to a bookcase, pulled off a large tome, and opened it to color illustrations of murals from Pompeii. Magda explained that they were painted on the interior walls of a chamber and depicted the stages of a young woman's initiation into womanhood. She pointed to one that showed a young woman reclining while two older women combed and styled her hair. Magda explained that the motif in my dreams was a classic one, basic to female initiation rites, and it boded well for our work together. She also commented that the current fad of wearing the hair straight and long, without any style to speak of, might indicate that the ability to think for oneself, to speak for one's unique viewpoint, was not yet developed. I asked her if she were the older woman in the dream. She said that dream symbols aren't easily boiled down like that, and it would be better to think of her as playing a role in the archetypal drama the dream described. She explained that archetypal situations always involve an I-thou relationship between two parties, human or otherwise, and that she and I were both participants in the initiatory process.

Without criticizing my wish to take up the peasant life my ancestors on both sides had lived, Magda indirectly gave me a sense of how dreams can signal to us when we are getting swept up in collective fad or trend, without thinking it through for ourselves. At twenty-five, I was standing at a crucial fork in the road of my life, uncomfortable being the first female in my lineage to go to college, much less train in a profession, and tempted to retreat from that challenge to a simpler way of life from the past, that of a rural homesteader. Magda was familiar with both worlds and could converse with me about the merits and drawbacks of each.

Magda helped me to admit that my psyche was bored with too simple a life; years later, a dream would explain in words that my family was "artificially superficial," and this gave me a way to understand my proclivity toward the "spirit of the depths," as Jung named it in *The Red Book*. It was in my destiny to find my way to the deep interior. I loved studying psychology and had been drawn to it since adolescence, when I volunteered in the geriatric ward of a state mental hospital. In college, I majored in psychology and religion, and, at the time of seeing Magda, I was interning at a local school for autistic and schizophrenic children, whose symbolic or mythic world was easy for me to enter into.

Without much hesitation, I opted not to move to the commune but to stay in graduate school, where I soon found good female mentors. The tension of these opposites—the rural peasant life and the modern professional life—ebbed and flowed over the ensuing years, and eventually found resolution in a less conflicted way, with room for each.

For a year and a half, this woman who was my first therapist followed the unfolding of my psyche as it manifested in dreams. She pointed out the hints they provided about where my destiny lay. Magda initiated me into the profound pleasure of symbolic thinking—about symptoms, about the body, and especially about dreams and their unique guiding wisdom. I am eternally grateful to her.

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