

Objective and Subjective Dreams

by Meredith Sabini

In popular culture, it is commonly assumed that dreams pertain primarily, if not solely, to the personality of the individual dreamer. This attribution, which corresponds to the ethos of separatism that characterizes American society, is not found in dreaming cultures. In most indigenous traditions, it is recognized that there are little dreams pertaining to the daily life of the dreamer and big dreams pertaining to the ongoing life of the tribe.

In his first essay on dreams, written in 1917, C.G. Jung made a distinction between subjective dreams, which refer to the dreamer and their worldview, and objective dreams, which refer to the larger world around. He recognized that these adjectives were value laden, with objectivity being privileged over subjectivity (Jung, 1966, para. 130). Since the dreaming mind is capable of distinguishing between inside and outside, self and other, we might think instead of dreams being inward facing and outward facing (Sabini, 2008). Dreams themselves often indicate which direction they face: we dream of being inside our childhood home or outside on a city street, of repairing the interior of our home or changing the outgoing message on our voicemail.

Dreams that refer to a person known to us do not necessarily imply that they

pertain to that person in actuality. The dream may be showing our subjective picture of that person or it may be using that figure to signify an aspect of ourselves. To understand the direction a dream faces, a process of discernment needs to be undertaken; this will counteract any tendency to take the dream superficially at face value.

From a collection of dreams made over a 10-year period, those determined to be outward facing rather than subjective showed certain specific characteristics: (1) Their imagery is very plain, without fantastical or dreamlike elements; (2) the action is much as it would be in waking life; (3) there is little or no emotion on the dreamer's part; (4) the dreamer often has few if any associations to the dream, and meaning can be made of it only when it is considered to be outward facing (Sabini, 2006).

Western psychology has contributed to an understanding of projection, the subliminal process by which we give over to others a tendency or quality that belong to ourselves. The opposite process, absorbing into ourselves a quality or tendency that belongs to others, has received much less attention. This distinction between the subjective and objective dimensions of dreams, by which their contents face inward or outward, provides an important template for discerning the purpose or function a dream may have. It is a heuristically important template with many possible applications for both dream research and dreamwork.

References

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