



The Therapeutic Use of Dreams

Dreams are much bigger than whatever you suppose. They are as big as you might ever be.

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“Your dreams are your spirit, your soul and without them you are dead. You must guard your dreams always. Always. Lest someone steal them away from you. I know what it is to have your dreams stolen. I know what it is to be dead. Guard your dreams. Always guard your dreams.”

— **Gerald Brom**, from *Krampus: The Yule Lord*

Contemporary Dream Theory

“Freud and Jung came into a world that had reduced the psyche to the rational mind and had underestimated or dismissed emotion and instinct... Jung came to realize that a loss of symbolic thinking compounded the situation. For without a conscious faculty for symbols and images the deeper reaches of the unconscious remain foreign and unruly, generating never-ending battles.”

— **Glen Slater** (2012, 15)

Freud's theory of dreams used dreams to substantiate his theory of personality. Dreams were not tools but symptoms. Jung's approach gave dreams autonomy as symbolic presentations of parts of our personality.

The idea that dreams are a codex for the secrets of the psyche leads to schools of dream interpretation and the idea of archetypal symbols. From this perspective, a dream's meaning can be extracted by someone skilled at translating their symbols.

In the 1970s dream research became a field of its own, and new tools and new ideas worked together to create modern dream theory. Many researchers explored the biology, physiology, and psychology of sleep in animals and humans. Two opposing hypotheses have developed: the continuity hypothesis (Schredl and Hofmann, 2003) and the discontinuity hypothesis (Stickgold et al., 2001).

Continuity refers to the connectivity between daily experience and dream content. Ego and pathological aspects of the waking state correlate with dream contents though not with dream logic. For example, a person's depressive, anxious, content, or psychotic states will be reflected in the structure of their dreams.

Discontinuity, despite its name, is not contrary to the idea of continuity. This approach focuses on the neuropsychological function of dreams. It's found that dreams aid in the consolidation of memory, though it remains unknown how this is done. Dreams often replay elements from recent waking life, but these are trace memories. Dream ideas have little depth and virtually no breadth compared to the extent of the daily memories we form.

Horton and Malinowski (2015) suggest dreams build our emotional attitudes by extrapolating hyper-associations between recent events. This repeats the classical error of mistaking the path that's followed for a map of the territory navigated. It's not by having an infinitesimal notion of what makes sense that we place ourselves, it's by creating a map of the relatively infinite expanse of things that do not make sense.

If you know all that does not make sense you will also know what's sensible if it exists. In contrast, if you only know a few sensible constructions, then you'll have no understanding of the tremendously larger territory that exists beyond these. To be sentient is to create as large a map as possible.

The function of dreams in consolidating memories is not reflected in the scatterings of dreams that we recall. This is consistent with a person's ability to form memories without remembering any dreams at all.

Dream Therapy

The therapeutic use of dreams develops from the continuity hypothesis. The general idea is that if dreams reflect daily life, then daily life can be better managed by mining our dreams' understanding. That is to say, dreams contain refined information about our thoughts, moods, and behaviors and that we can better regulate these by exploring our dreams.

A typical spectrum of variation in recalled dreams is how the dream ends. It can end well, badly, or, most likely, ambiguously. It's never been made clear whether the way remembered dreams end is affected by the fact that we remember them, since, in these dreams we're waking into a controlling state of mind.

Greenberg et al. (1992) showed that "effective dreams" diminished the impact of waking-life problems, whereas these problems persisted after "ineffective dreams". Effective dreams were defined as dreams in which a dream problem that bore a resemblance to a waking life problem was either resolved or subjectively diminished in the dream, or where metaphorical connections were established in the dream between the problem and other aspects of it.

Jeremy Taylor (1993), a leading educator on dream therapy, promoted both group dreamwork and dream interpretation. Modern dream therapy follows Taylor in looking at dreams as picture metaphors, a form of communication with both meanings and messages. Taylor's approach prevails today for creating community and for fostering individual insight.

"The metaphoric meanings of a dream are there from the very beginning. They are not manufactured after the fact by the effort to understand... This previously existent, unconscious knowledge about the significance of a dream is the only reliable source of insight into the many levels of meaning and significance that reside in all dreams... All dreams have multiple meanings and layers of significance. There is no such thing as a dream with only one meaning."
— **Jeremy Taylor** (1993, 6)

Rescripting Techniques

Rescripting is an example of how therapy approaches dreams as a tool for shifting your emotional perspective.

"I think the new dream ending must feel authentic to be deeply experienced, and to move the business of the dream forward in the direction it was intended to go. An ending that's surprising is an indication of the authenticity of the process."
— **Leslie Ellis**, from *A Clinician's Guide to Dream Therapy*.

The technique of dream re-scripting can be applied when you wake up and remember a dream before you need to get up. Replay the dream and simply rewrite a section of it. Then close your eyes and rehearse your new script and fall back asleep.

Since it isn't necessary for you to remember dreams for them to fulfill their role, it is not necessary for you to dream, or remember you've dreamed your rescripted version of it. It is sufficient that you have asserted your desire and experienced a different hallucination.

Dream extension involves changing the dream's ending and letting a new theme play out. People differ in their abilities to create narratives, but the hypnopompic state that we're in when we just awake supports greater creativity. The more half-awake you are, the easier it is to re-script and extend the dream.

In one dream I found myself in a dark and creepy house and I woke up without being able to find my way out. After waking, I imagined myself finding and exiting the front door. I then commandeered a bulldozer and completely destroyed the house. In subsequent years, it is the empowered memory of destroying the house that stays with me.

A client of mine had recurring nightmares of being frozen in bed while a dark figure emerged from the shadows and stabbed her. I asked her to recreate this image in her imagination. Then I asked her to imagine that the figure reached out with their other hand and showed her what they held in it. She told me the figure offered her a diamond.

In both of these examples there is no need for dream interpretation. You don't need to know what anything means. You're sculpting situations and invoking associations in the present, which is the context dreams offer. You're looking beyond the dream.

You can engage the dream without retreating to your analytical mind. Yes, you're exerting control, but it's in the phantasmagorical context of dreams. You feel the symbols, you do not speak them. You are not rationalizing.

Explorations of Chaos

Perhaps it's materialist culture that has deceived us into thinking that growth is rational and progress moves straight forward. We are not taught to be creative or encouraged to explore. As a result, we feel more uncomfortable when we're lost than would a person from a less managed culture.

Exploring means entering new territory, places where novelty carries new arrangements and old reasons don't apply. If you had to map a new territory in the way that you map a new neighborhood, how would you do it?

Mapping new territory does not mean following a path to your destination. It means seeing in all directions and discovering how things are connected. In the realm of concepts and perceptions this means testing rearrangements, and the most important rearrangements are those that cause difficulty or concern.

When assembling a jigsaw puzzle, most of the pieces you consider don't fit, but progress results in recognizing what does not fit more frequently than finding the pieces that do. You build islands of sense amidst a sea of nonsense, which is just what your dreams do.

There is little need to dream about good things because we already know that territory. We can better figure out those situations in waking life. But our areas of waking difficulty need reconceptualizing, and dreams can provide this.

Dreams don't fail to make sense because their message is obscure, they make no sense because they are exploring what does not yet make sense. They are testing new associations between pieces of significance.

Dream interpretation is stressful and somewhat misguided. Dreams may no more have a message than learning has a message. They are just as likely to have many messages as anti-messages, warnings against being given an academic meaning.

Looking for hidden messages, especially those to be revealed by experts, makes dreamwork less rewarding and casts it as a kind of work. This is why few people do it and, perhaps, why few people remember their dreams. Freud, the father of dream interpretation, famously disrespected your point of view, and the interpretive approach to dreams retains something of this flavor.

When dreamwork is welcomed as a form of conceptual play (Bulkeley 1993) it becomes recreational. You don't have to share dreams, endure dreams, or reveal them. See your dreams as explorations of all the relevant things that don't make sense. Take that attitude and you'll feel relieved and rewarded.

Post Contemporary Dream Theory

A 2004 review (Pesant and Zadra) explores the use of dreams in the psychoanalytic (Freudian), Jungian, existentialist, cultural, Gestalt, somatic, and cognitive therapeutic approaches. In all cases, the primary questions are what is the content of dreams, and how can this be used? In each case, dreams are interpreted according to some framework.

In the 3-volume series "The New Science of Dreaming" (Barrett and McNamara 2007), thirty-eight authors explore the religious, anthropological, neurological, psychological, psychotherapeutic, and historical aspects of dreaming. Dreams have and continue to play a role far beyond what's recognized in any one of these fields.

For the Kalapalo, an Indigenous peoples in the Xingu region of Northern Brazil,

"... dreaming provides them with useful models for the formation of new roles and relations, or more simply, new and different feelings towards some problem. Kalapalo interpret their dreaming as a way the self creates a goal rather than as a means of arriving at some satisfactory solution to a distressing problem or the conclusion of some goal, as Jung believed."

— **Ellen B. Basso** (1992, 96)

For the Ese Eja, an Indigenous group living in the border Amazonian regions of Peru and Bolivia,

"(dreams) guide their daily life and gives them a sense multi-natural perspectivism, which... implies a blurring of dreaming and waking realities and gives animals and all animate beings a dimension of personhood, which allows their human identity to permeate through different realities and gain knowledge through their dream narratives."

— **Daniela M. Peluso** (2004)

This suggests dreams are explorations of individual, psychological, ecological, and social boundaries, not statements about them. Dreams are not of the self or the not-self (Gregor 1981), they are a process of creating reality from them.

“I have come to believe that the entire procedure of dream interpretation aiming at more consciousness about living is radically wrong. And I mean ‘wrong’ in all its fullness: harmful, twisted, deceptive, inadequate, mistaken, and exegetically insulting to its material, the dream. When we wrong the dream, we wrong the soul... This move from logos to mythos, this move against the historical stream of our culture, has been taking me quite some time.”

— **James Hillman** (1979, 2ff)

Post contemporary dream theory suggests going beyond interpretation to view dreams more as art than language. This means seeing dreams as having their own structure that may be irrational, rather than as signifiers of rational ideas.

Rather than seeing dreams as a product of our thinking, we can see dreaming as a process that underlies our thinking. In that case, dreaming is a process not aimed at making statements but aimed at creating the context in which we can make statements.

Replacing the word poetry with the word dreaming in Rumi’s “Poetry is like a boat and its meaning is like the sea,” gives us, “dreaming is like a boat and its meaning is like the sea.” This highlights another way of looking at dreams in which the meaning is not in the dream. The meaning is the reality we create around the dream.

“In Gestalt therapy we don’t interpret dreams. We do something much more interesting with them. Instead of analyzing and further cutting up the dream, we want to bring it back to life”

— **Fritz Perls** (1992), co-founder of Gestalt Therapy

As modern neuroscience has redirected our attention to our emotions and their substrates, the project of extracting meaning from dreams has become less reductive. To some degree, this is a return to a perspective espoused by Carl Jung in his later works. Namely, that a dream is better seen as a work of art than a codified message. It can embody both many meanings and no meanings at the same time.

Dreamwork Certification Programs

While you’ll find lectures and presentations on the various roles of dreams in culture, history, and identity, all psychotherapeutic dreamwork certification programs are largely Jungian. That is, they tend to be interpretive.

Despite Jungian psychotherapy having a more human and individualist tenor, or perhaps because of it, a minority of psychotherapists encourage their clients to engage in dreamwork. To broaden the appeal of using dreams therapeutically, eclectic programs may explore dreams’ from more existential, cultural, Gestalt, and somatic perspectives.

Jungian

The Haden Institute: Dream Work Certification

In-Person and/or Remote 2-year program, US\$7,600

<https://www.hadeninstitute.com/dream-work-certification/>

This Jungian Life: Dream School

Remote 1-year program, US\$624

<https://thisjungianlife.com/join-dream-school/>

Jung Platform: Dreamwork Certificate Program

Remote 1-year program, US\$2,995

<https://jungplatform.com/programs/dreamwork-certificate-program>

University of Toronto, Emmanuel College

Dreams: Psycho-Spiritual Therapy

Remote 1 Semester, fees vary

<https://www.tst.edu/course/20221-emp3538hs-3538-9101-dreams-psycho-spiritual-therapy>

Jung Centre: Dream Interpretation Course

Remote, 5-day, US\$738

<https://www.jungcentre.com/flawless-dream-interpretation-course>

Eclectic

Sofia University: Dream Studies Certificate

Remote 1-year, US\$10,000

<https://www.sofia.edu/courses/dream-studies-certificate/>

Dr. Leslie Ellis: Embodied Experiential Dreamwork Certification

Remote 1-year, US\$2,205

<https://drleslieellis.com/embodied-experiential-certification/>

Institute for Dream Studies: Dream Certification Program

Remote, 1-year, US\$5,950

<https://institutefordreamstudies.org/dream-certification-program-details/>

Dreamwork Theatre: Dreamwork Online Course

Remote, 6 month, US\$465

<https://www.dreamworktheatre.com/dreamwork-course>

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