

Notes on Space – time memory throught the dream

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Abstract

Dreams represent the activity of the unconscious mind that can transform and digest unbearable emotional states of mind into a “theatre of mind”. In this theatre, dreams play to the audience of the dreamer, want to be listened to and understood. Ella Freeman Sharpe, the English psychoanalyst, wrote that “the only dreamless state is death”.

In group analysis, we recognise that the internal and external are always in flux, so in dreams we need to pay attention both to the social context in which the dream has occurred, and recognise the state of the internal society that is reproduced.

Keywords: dream, group, knowledge, memory

1. The Dream as a Path to Knowledge of the Internal World

Introduction

In the examples that follow, I will try to show how the dreams present themselves to the dreamer and to the group context, as the activity of mind in dealing with deeper issues that are being called to the attention of the dreamer.

We view the past through the present and thereby reconnect that which has been disconnected. Early on in her group analysis the patient, who is a woman in her 50s, who has led a successful business career, who is now turning her attention to the life of feelings, has a long and complex dream, which includes the bodies of children which are neatly divided in half, top and bottom separate, and without any feeling of revulsion or anxiety, she carefully lays two halves side by side. She begins the work of reconnecting, the upper and lower, adult and child, thought and feeling. Soon after, she has a dream in which a different form of connection is represented. Her husband shows her a “cat’s cradle”, string stretched between the two hands of a person or between one person and another to form a communicating net. She and her husband often connect sexually. I have often had the image of group matrix as a cat’s cradle, the network of interconnections taking place in group time and space.

2. Reconnecting with Self through Connecting with Others

Early dreams in the group demonstrate the fears of exposure and shame, the dangers met on the journey to inner space, the private space made public through the dream. The dream is a personal and private experience, therefore sharing it in group moves it across the highly charged threshold between what belongs to oneself and what can be shared with others. A woman in a group with a male co-therapist dreams of lying in bed covered with a sheet spotted with blood. Another dreams of entering into a tent where two camp leaders (co-therapists to the group), are talking to each other and she feels embarrassed, an intruder. She has entered into a private space, but in recounting her dream her own private space becomes public.

3. Shame and its Defences

Such dreams represent the fear of rejection for being dirty and defective. A man dreams that the skin is torn off his finger, but what is revealed is not flesh and muscle, but a machine. A machine cannot fear exposure or experience pain.

4. Meeting the Rejected Self

The same man whose body is represented by a machine later dreams that he is carrying an ill little boy in his arms. A woman responds with a dream of adopting a child and holding it by its hand. A woman dreams that she has a frightening monster inside her. Over the course of the next year, this image of the monstrous inner self elaborates into recognition of envy and jealousy, fears of rape, Oedipal rivalry, Oedipal sexuality.

This inner journey is characterised by an increasing capacity to recognise in dreams those disconnected parts of the self that contain aggression. Sibling rivalry and death wishes can be symbolised, translated and recognised. A woman dreams of travelling with her father, and able to oppose his wishes. She throws a banana skin at him and sees this herself as saying “keep your penis, I have my own”. A man dreams that he is part of a computer game which represents madness to him, but he is no longer afraid, is excited by and enjoys

the madness of the dream. In another dream, he has a painful image of his mother starving and naked. What is important to him is that he does not have to help her.

The relationship to his mother has been worked out with a woman in his group, whose own mother was repeatedly psychotic and died in a psychotic illness.

5. Dreams of Transformation

A deeply disturbed man who has reached his 60s without having had any fulfilling sexual relationships and who repeatedly withdraws into glacial regressions, dreams of a sea full of dirt and mess that becomes clean and clear. He dreams of discovering a small bird hanging upside down, just alive within a container in a room that seems to contain only dead objects. The group recognises that there is internal life where before there had only been death.

A deeply disturbed borderline woman, who lives in a state of constant pain and torment, dreams of travelling in a ship out of whose funnel emerges a deathly cloud of filthy smoke. She realises that the ship will sink under the weight of this discharge. She values the dream, as representing her inner state. Her jealousy is so painful, that it feels as if it will kill her, but she does not want to lose it, because it represents her pathway into life. What will kill her is the constant rage and anger which threatens to overwhelm her. She has had many years of psychoanalysis, has been some years in the group, this dream represents a powerful and clear symbolisation to her and to the group of her inner state, which can now be shared and integrated with the underlying group process.

A young woman who acts out by always coming late to the group and is very bitter in her attacks upon the therapist, awakes from a dream in which she is strangling her

father and injuring his throat. She feels relieved to have had this dream, because it connects her with her rage towards her father, which she has not fully recognised or accepted and releases

her from having to feel that her husband or the group conductor are provoking her rage. She reconnects with a powerful source of inner anger that seeks targets.

6. Time as a Link of Present, Past and Future

Nearing the end of a closed group, two months before termination, a woman dreams that she constantly loses and re-finds her wrist watch. The last time that she finds it, it no longer has a clock face and cannot register time. Through the dream she recognises, as do the other group members, her fight against the passage of time and the wish to annihilate time. In itself the dream represents the exploration of time, time past, seen from time present, time present connected with time future.

Dream as a Release from Time

“Last week’s session must have freed me up because I have had three dreams”. The dream I focus on was where his son was sitting in the toilet and producing lots of faeces, but he was enjoying this, smiling at his father, what was coming out of him was not at all “odious” (meaning odorous), was chocolate-coloured. The patient is puzzled as to why he had had these dreams and we reconstructed that what was important in his last session (he comes once a week), was to do with time. He had been complaining about how he always hurries, that when he goes for a walk, he is pacing himself and exercising, that he drives his car too fast. I had said that I had thought that he was always marching to his mother’s time. This had made a big impression on him and since then, he has been for walks with his wife on Hampstead Heath, strolling along, both of them enjoying being together, which is unusual for them. Thus, in his dream, he is not anally performing for his mother, he is enjoying what he is doing and what he is producing is good enough to eat, like chocolate. He is mistrustful of his inner world and does not believe that he can produce anything good. Neither of his parents have represented good internal objects and his father had said when his son had made a big deal in business “He is not a big shot, he is a big shit”. Significantly, the dream occurred on the first anniversary of his father’s death and he had not consciously remembered about that. The next day, his sister had rung up to give him the Jewish message “May you live a long life”, that is magically disengaging him from his father’s death. But in his dream, which produced this very long and lively shit, he had in fact given himself a long life. In this session, he also associated to the American film “An Officer and a Gentleman”, where the hero is a black soldier, who has all the good qualities that anyone could want in a father, courageous, kind, physically powerful. The patient was brought up in South Africa, where black people could be experienced as warm and friendly by personal contact with them, though there was also a community fear of them. Thus, this dream illustrates freedom from the pressures of performance, from fear of the super ego and a capacity to reconnect with the pleasures of the body and of exhibitionism. He produced freely in his own time and what he produced was good enough to eat. The

other thing that this patient is concerned about, is how his moods take him over, either his elation or depression. He recalls that his mother, instead of modulating his moods, would join in them, making him feel more excited than he was excited, or more sad when he was sad. Thus, there was not an attunement that was appropriate between child and parent. Instead, there was a reinforcement of the intensity of the affect.

Space and Dream

An agoraphobic woman tells her group that suddenly when sitting in a bus, she realises that she is no longer anxious. A few sessions before she had reported two dreams:

1. I walk along the sea and want to get across to an island. There I can see two friends, a couple. Suddenly a porpoise, or was it a dolphin, came up to me. I sit astride on its back and it swims towards the island. In approaching the island, I see two yapping dogs, which prevent me from going ashore.

2. I am doing cross-country skiing. A man is accompanying me. We are passing through an icy landscape, nothing but snow and ice, then arriving at a lake which to my surprise is frozen. I catch a big salmon, just using my arms. I flay the fish and take out the entrails. The man has also come to the lake and at his request, I hand him the blood of the fish. It is light red in colour and he drinks it.

In the second dream, a landscape was offered to the group and in the session people talked about lakes and landscapes, getting lost and through being lost, finding openings into outer or inner space. The men were preoccupied with the drinking of the blood and spoke about the behaviour of primitive tribes.

The women spoke openly about sexual pleasure, the pleasure of riding on the porpoise and talked openly of their own sexual experiences.

It can be thought that this woman had reached to an exploration of her inner world and of her sexuality and was no longer frozen by fears of her inner world projected on to outer space. What is particularly interesting, is that her dreams seem to intermingle with those of another woman in the group who dreams that she is on a boat with a friend, they have a valuable cargo on board, but the crew instead of being friendly, takes control over them, tries to rape the friend and pursue not to rape her, but to kill her. In terms of the group matrix, it can be thought that when the agoraphobic woman gave up her fears of being attacked, that they then passed over to the second woman for whom space, the journey on the boat becomes dangerous.

The conductor of this group writes <<*Her phobic anxiety had been replaced by dream activity. The change had not come about by insight into the unknown fears of phobic symptoms. It was rather that her unknown fears by dreaming, had been transformed into unknown desires. Dreams are not objects of knowledge, like natural objects, dreams might be rather vehicles of thinking about unknown objects*>>.

Inner Space Explored in a Dream

Funzione Gamma, rivista telematica scientifica dell'Università "Sapienza" di Roma, registrata presso il Tribunale Civile di Roma (n. 426 del 28/10/2004)– www.funzionegamma.it

The woman who had dreamt of strangling her father soon afterwards has a dream in which she gives birth. What she gives birth to is not a baby, but a shapeless lump like dough. In giving birth, she is surrounded by her family and she is terrified not knowing what to do about this shapeless form. She dreams of waking up and finding that her mother has taken this thing away to have it adopted. She recognises her dependency on her mother who can take charge and remove this frightful object. She also recognises that she is giving birth to a part of herself in the dream that can be brought to the group where it can be moulded and shaped into a part of herself that she can recognise and own. She is able to tell this dream at the end of a long and painful session in which other group members had been confronted by horrifying images. Thus, a man who sees himself as being fair, honest and peaceful, is seen by a woman as a member of Hitler's Youth Movement, capable of cold cruelty. He is furious with her having seen him in this way, but it begins to take him on a journey into his own inner space, which mobilises both his anger at being misread, but which leads him to look within himself in a different way.

Dreams as Unconscious Connections in the Group Space

The dreamer of the ship that belched out dangerous smoke, erupts in the next session with rage against two women, whom she declared did not want her to speak about her dream. She is calmed only by the older man sitting next to her, who shows a sympathetic understanding of her and then tells of a dream that he had had two days after the last session. He had woken in the morning, feeling rather depressed and had gone to sleep again in a chair. In his dream, the therapist was in his house doing the washing up at the sink, later on washing the kitchen floor. The therapist's three children came into the dream, all of them had some speech defect and the therapist had to explain this to the patient and then interpret for him what they were saying. In the dream, the patient thought that the therapist really must be a human being after all. He woke up feeling better. In this session, he was warm and gentle and two women in the group were moved to tears at the thought of losing him and his capacity for emotional honesty and understanding. I thought finds of a connection between the dream of the smoke, which threatens to submerge the ship and the dream in which the therapist is humbly cleaning the floor of the kitchen to get rid of the dirt. She had erupted in group space, where her rage can be contained and responded to with firmness and understanding and does not elicit a counter-response of rage. The man has often brought a terrifying cold rage to the group with paranoid feelings to the therapist, but in this dream, there is no damage, but a move towards listening to and understanding what has not previously been expressed and communicated. The three children with defects seem to represent the defective parts of ourselves, the recognition that to be human is to be defective.

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Funzione Gamma, rivista telematica scientifica dell'Università "Sapienza" di Roma, registrata presso il Tribunale Civile di Roma (n. 426 del 28/10/2004)– www.funzionegamma.it

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