

## The Problem Solving Function of Dreams in Children's Groups

Marco Bernabei

### Abstract

In this paper I will be referring to two dreams. The first dream was told by a little girl aged ten and a half, in a group that has been going for three years now, and is held in my rooms. The second was dreamt by a girl aged nine and a half who is a member of the same group. She told it to her mother who referred it to me.

I am describing these dreams for a particular reason. Above all I wish to emphasize the centrality that I believe the problem solving function (and the narration that results from it) has in the dreaming activity that takes place in groups during the period of development.

**Key words:** children, adolescents, dream, group, problem solving

In research on REM dreams, James L. Fossage sustained that REM dreams and dreaming in general <<*consolidate the memory, learning and problem solving*>>, three functions that he calls the <<*developmental function of the dream*>> (Fossage, 2001). Fossage agrees with Kramer when he sustains: <<*a night of well-dreamt dreams results in a progressive, figurative sequence of problem solving that lasts the whole night*>>(Kramer, 1993). On the grounds of this research, Fossage formulates the hypothesis that, the emerging of a new configuration in a dream leads us to believe that a person in this mental, dreaming activity is creating a <<*developmental junction*>> or at least <<*something that furthers development*>> (Fossage, 1998). Also Robi Friedman makes explicit reference to problem solving when he states that one of the characteristics of the dream is that of <<*reducing the tensions through 'solutions' that come about during the dreaming*>> (Friedman, 2000). My interest in these authors, could not neglect Freud who showed particular interest in what he called the "prospective tendency" of the dream. He stated that the dream seeks to <<*solve the problems that our psychic life is faced with, and it is not anymore surprising that our vigil consciousness attempts to do the same thing*>>(Freud, 1899). In his endeavour to "outline the solutions" he maintains that the dream <<*is a product of the unconscious and preconscious activity of the spirit*>>1.

I believe that some dreams dreamt by children and adolescents in groups not only demonstrate that there has been an developmental passage, as sustained by Fossage, but also the dreaming material indicates a solution to a problem felt in different but connected forms, both by the dreamer and the group. Therefore I think it is useful to consider oneiric activity not only as having a general problem solving function but it helps to indicate specific solutions to the group and its participants. For this reason my interest focuses on those dreams where the solution found for the dreamer to a particular problem also indicates a difficulty felt by the other members as a problem of the whole group at that particular moment.

David, a boy of ten, with three years of group therapy, had a good dream to tell at the beginning of a session. He met Buffon the goalkeeper of the National Football Team who gave him his autograph. At that time the group was composed of three girls and himself, all the same age. It met once a week in my rooms for one and a half hours, simultaneously a meeting with the parents was held once a month by another colleague. The dream David was telling us, at a certain point had a strange turning point: he was in a house that he described as the devil's house, full of small grave lights. Two men arrived with two wounds in their chests, they only seemed threatening, but they ended up throwing him into a cave. A man with a green revolver appeared at the window of the house, David's father took it from him and threw it away. The strange man was holding on to the window ledge with one hand, David started to hit it, and the man finally let go and fell into the precipice. But he came bouncing back up again, and only then did David realise it was a demon and not human. David also realized though, that it would no longer harm him. He finished his story, by telling us that he woke up all of a sudden in his mother's bed, very much afraid that what he had remembered perhaps had happened in real life.

David's dream came about after the previous session, during which an 'escalation' of naughty behaviour had culminated in the forcing of the locked door of the neighbouring room, which is my room where I speak to their parents and meet other adults. David had been the one to force the handle which gave way and was left in his hand, likewise the handle on the other side fell to the ground, and the door could not be opened. This event left them all speechless. They realised I would have to bang the door down if I was to enter into my room again. David was more worried than the others and wanted to tell his daddy, whereas the others didn't agree in letting the parents know. I came to the decision that I would let David's father in at the end of the group so David could show him the damage he was responsible for. Later on David's daddy reassured him saying 'there's a remedy for everything' and added that I would be able to reopen the door of my room without too much worry.

It was after that episode that David had the above-mentioned dream and felt the need tell it to his father. The following week as they entered together the father prompted David to tell it also to the group. The father's way of reacting to David's dream is a good example of how parents can function in situations of night-mares as "containers on request" for their children (Friedman, 2001) 2. It was after that session that David's father got in touch with me and told me, he felt that David had once and for all 'spat out the toad'\* and that he had started to feel much better. The vomiting attacks that had been assailing him for the past month before going to school had practically ceased altogether. David's father said the 'toad spat out' was the revolver in the dream. However when I associated it to the handle in David's hand, I discovered that his father had also had the same association. The important element of the dream for David's father was that David didn't give importance to the revolver as he had done in the session to the broken handle. He also wanted me to observe how capable his son was in the dream of getting rid of whoever threatened him.

In my opinion these two elements contained in the dream are the result of a problem solving procedure, ("developmental junction", Fosshage, 1998).

Observations of parents (like those of David's father) who are particularly in contact with their children, demonstrate how children in groups utilize dreams to formulate a modality for solving a problem that is presented to them with a specificness that is individual and of the group. I believe problem solving function prevails over any other utilization of oneiric activity in groups in the period of development.

David grew up in a family of strong Jewish traditions, his problems mainly revolved around a sense of guilt connected to his parents' separation, of which he did all in his power to contrast, (he even threatened suicide) but to no avail. The problem of the whole group on the other hand, was to try to modulate their aggressiveness towards the parental adult couple. All the children had separated parents and their representation of adult references was above all of people whose quarrelsomeness in couples created more than a few problems for them. The day the handle got broken, was a way of getting even with their parents, and was accentuated by the presence of all the fathers and two mothers assembled for the parents' group that was held by a colleague in another room but close enough to hear all the noise. My impression was, the particularly aggressive misbehaviour was strongly induced by the parents' meeting and even if I was the target, all that noise was directed towards them. David's following dream showed a not indifferent qualitative leap regarding the problem of modulating his aggressiveness. David achieved this in a different way rather than take all the fault onto himself. In fact, in the oneiric sequence, an adult, male parent showed what the terms of the problem were, (the need to disarm a very aggressive monster) and what modality could be used to solve it. An adult, David's father was able to do this. Immediately after, a boy employing the experience transmitted to him via his father was also able to get rid of the monster. From that moment on, the danger of the demon-monster diminished, and when it appeared again it was innocuous (bouncing up like a jack-in-the-box).

Telling that dream to the group, David showed to have fully understood his father's and my attitude towards his desperation for the broken handle. What he was able to get rid of in the dream definitely had to do with his overwhelming sense of guilt. But the fundamental aspect, and even more meaningful for the group, was the fact that David, telling the night-mare with a happy ending, showed the others a modality of solving a problem that was particular to that group. In other words, how to reintegrate the paternal function, linked in the dream to a protective, reassuring adult figure, that was also authoritarian, belonging to a familiar world dominated by adults, composed of single mothers but also single fathers, the beds of which are a welcome refuge for going to sleep in.

The father-adult had been asked to enter the therapy room by his son during the session on the handle, in order to face a very severe and authoritative adult -phantasm by whom the children had felt reproached for having impeded another adult, the therapist, to enter the adult's room. The father and I had started to placate David's sense of guilt, whilst the dream showed a further elaboration: it showed in fact, how the message transmitted by the two adults to David had been worked through. The threat, (put into perspective in the session) of retaliation by the adult, comes back in the dream, but this time there's David to face it and he's not alone as he was in the

session, the figure of the protective adult is present. In my opinion it is essential that the reassuring adult is still there to protect the child, whilst the small son feels conferred with the task of completing the action of the big father in neutralizing the demon.

Now I will recount a second dream in which the problem solving function is clearly seen. This dream like the other, refers to the difficulties that children with separated parents have to face. In this case the dreamer doesn't only express a procedure for re-integrating the paternal function into the family context made up of single parents, as David had done, but above all expresses a way of resolving a group problem. This problem is typical of groups where there is a predominance of children with separated parents. We are dealing with a problem of integration between a state of feeling grown-up and having had to face it early on in life, and a state of feeling small and wanting it to stay that way as long as possible.

What links up the two dreams is the need to bring the paternal function, a sustainment for growing up, into the family context where it is lacking. What differentiates them will be shown in the dream I will recount where the grown-up self of the dreamer is linked to being with a single parent, (the male parent), whilst the small self is linked to being with both parents, the ideal couple, (very strongly idealized) who are completely dedicated to their child.

In this dream, a second type of reintegration comes about that goes beyond David's request to let in a bit of paternal presence in a world made up of mothers and fathers who assume mother roles. The solution indicated in the dream is the grown-up self finally manages to take care of the small, fragile self, (this is symbolized in the dream where the grown-up self picks up and holds the small self in her arms). This further integration describes how the members of a group have the capacity to realize through a dream told by one of them, the impossibility to feel grown up the whole time, even though they are committed to being it with only one parent. By the same token, the dream expresses the impossibility to always feel small and act small, children of a couple that doesn't exist anymore (or never existed). The dream also expresses the situation of a child of a happy couple who dreams he/she is an only child (even though in real life he/she has to relate to a brother or a sister). Above all the dream describes an attempt to stop the oscillation between the two positions resulting in an efficacious way of integration. Jenny, the dreamer, who is in fifth class in primary school, is a new member to the group. She's the only one with both parents at home.

But the father and mother, and the father and Jenny, have relational problems due to his work as driver of tourist buses that keeps him away from home. During the first sessions she attended she was surprised every time, and always wanted confirmation, that all the members' parents were separated or were single.

Jenny's dream was told to me by the mother during one of the encounters that I had fixed with both the parents once a fortnight, owing to their marital problems. They also participate to the encounter I have with all the parents once a month. Jenny's ailment was a stomach ache accompanied by a tremor that she suffered every night at

bed time stopping her going to sleep, it would pass when her parents moved her into their bed.

In the dream Jenny's parents had bought two trucks. In one of them she saw her small self with her parents. Her brother (two years younger) was not born yet. In the other truck grown-up Jenny was with her father. The truck was as big as a garbage truck. The trucks split up taking different roads even though they both had the same aim: to search for gold. "We found gold first" Jenny recounted to her mother, "we" referring to herself the small Jenny, who evidently had a higher degree of identification with her father. "Then", Jenny continued, "big Jenny and Daddy found it". Soon the two trucks met on a road full of snow. Small Jenny ran off to play in the snow, whilst the others searched for her everywhere. Big Jenny watched the scene leaning on her father's truck. The dream finishes when small Jenny comes into view, notices big Jenny and runs and jumps into her arms.

In her dream Jenny seems to limit herself to resolving a problem of her family nucleus that was unable to go on trips together very often, she resolved this by departing separately but arriving all together in a mythical place of snow. At the same time Jenny, as the daughter of those parents, resolves a fundamental problem that was common to the other members of the group in these last two years. This group was made up of children with the problem of separated parents as already mentioned, and they all had a sister or a brother. Jenny's dream gave them a solution. These children constantly acted the part of being grown-up, and in particular they felt grown-up, both physically and emotively, when they were in the presence of only one of the parents. This situation came about during the week with their mothers and on the weekends perhaps even more, when they spent time with their fathers and had to get used to different life rhythms and sometimes having to participate to new relationships. However, these children regretted the time when their parents were together, that they related to an absolute devotedness towards themselves that would have been impossible in the presence of a sister or brother. (In fact in Jenny's dream her brother wasn't born yet). Only in that situation, that was really 'like a dream', could those children of separated parents finally afford to feel small, to relive their small self and act as small children. In order to do this they had to be able to idealize a happy parental couple, something that probably they had never been able to perceive.

Jenny had the capacity to embody this ideal condition in her dream. She manages this above all, by putting in the same truck, her small self together with both her parents who were habitually separated owing to her father's job. But her solution goes even further. Jenny perceives the impossibility to achieve for very long the project of being small and travelling with Mummy and Daddy, and playing at hide-and-seek with them in the snow.

One way of understanding it is to reunite the parental couple kept whole by her to her father who travels alone with his daughter.

Jenny is saying to her mother that even she cannot continue living in that mythical couple that doesn't exist anymore. Another way of comprehending it that is even more clear than the first, is the significance of the choice not to jump into the parents'

arms, but into one's own arms (those belonging to grown-up Jenny). This solution frees grown-up Jenny for good from the incumbent task of having to look (pretending to be grown up) after time and time again of one of her parents. It is in this part of the dream that the problem solving function is best manifested. The dream tells us that grown-up Jenny can now look after small Jenny, integrating her in a relation (between her grown-up self and her small and fragile self), a relation that is no longer conflictual caused by quarrelling parents that oblige children to make rigid choices. Either precociously grown-up with one parent, or small and hyper-infantile with both parents, intent (with typical symptoms of small children, for instance, Jenny's stomach pains and David's vomiting attacks) in an impossible endeavour to reunite the parents or to keep them from separating. And it was the perception of this satisfying oneiric atmosphere that made Jenny tell her mother what a wonderful dream it had been.

In children's groups I consider an important therapeutic factor to consent and encourage the members to have dreams like David and Jenny's. The mythical place, the snow, is the group space where the integration of the two selves can come about, for those who are constantly growing rather than being precociously grown-up, and those who nevertheless still feel small.

the group space is a therapeutic space, in that the procedure described above, not only because consents an integration between Jenny's two selves but also an elaboration of the generation gap that exists between the adult in the group and its youthful members. The sensation of having found a therapeutic space is perceived by these young patients weighed down as they are by problems equivalent to having found gold, (substantiated by how this space is represented in their dreams). That same gold that Jenny dreamt after so much searching, was found first by her small self and then by her grown-up self.

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## Notes

1.What Freud called "premeditative function of the dream" and that the authors define contemporary rather as a function of problem solving that he was framed, in a note of '14 added Interpretation of the dreams of the functions of "preconscious waking thought." To explain this place felt the need to point out that "after a match for a long time the dream with its manifest content, one must also look at the dream from exchanging with its latent thoughts." in the other note added in '25 to Traudeutung come to define the dream "a particular form of our thought, made possible by the conditions of the state of sleep"(S.Freud,1899, nota 3 ,p.460)

2.Robi Friedman found that the nightmares of children pressing interpersonal functioning: overwhelming emotions that can not be contained and processed by the ego still immature child (alpha function) wake up the baby in a panic. His scream is a communication almost impossible to ignore for his parents. If they act as 'containers on demand' is available rendereanno and calm down the little dreamer, especially with their presence and receptivity to the evacuation of the child. "Friedman believes that "this kind of interaction basic response is internalized and continues to be more or less potentially active for life" (R.Friedman, 2001)

**Marco Bernabei**, Psychoanalyst, group psychotherapist and Professor Isipsé (Institute for training in relational psychoanalysis and self psychology), a member IARPP (International Association Relational Psychoanalysis) and IASP (International Association's Self Psychology). Founding Member and director of GRID, association for research on the adolescence.  
E-Mail: mcberna@fastwebnet.it