

Associations and reflections on Social Dreaming

Lilia Baglioni

What... will take that great mass which everyone calls "the dreadful horror" and break it up into these tiny, precious particles? art cannot replace faith: Art lacks the power for the task, nor does it pretend to possess this power: Nonetheless, by its very nature, art constantly challenges the process by which the individual is reduced to anonymity (Appelfeld)

Key-words matrix, social dreaming, drem

SDM, said once a participant, is "a social gathering where dreams are divorced from the personality of their authors and shared freely", with the common goal of freely associating thoughts and other dreams to the dream presented so as to find links and discover connections to socially relevant elements (thoughts without a thinker of Bion, the unsought known of Bollas) in the environment, thereby giving the participants a glimpse of the otherwise invisible web of connectivity between nocturnal dreaming and the greater world of reality.

In so doing, a transitional space (Winnicott) comes into existence, which could also be described as a mental state close to reverie.

But this concept does not totally capture it.

Connecting the idea of reverie, as elaborated in particular in the tradition of Bion, with the concept of states of non- integration described by Winnicott in the context of his conceptualizing the development of the capacity to be alone, in the presence of another approximates a little more to the experience, as I would try to describe it outside of a dreaming matrix to a group of psychoanalysts.

To adumbrate the work of a matrix, I could also resort to the winnicottian Squiggle play, as a way of both delicately making contact between adult and child and of developing, in a symbiotic relationship, a formal container of meaning, capable of hosting /expressing the emotional worlds of the dyad in their environment, a technique conducing to better differentiation and communication.

From the point of view of a participant, the activity in a matrix results, first of all, into a deepening of the feeling of "going on being"(winnicott) and a strengthening of the muscle of negative capability (Bion), both necessary for living creatively and responsibly.

As the work of the matrix proceeds, and the emotional tension -release patterns stabilize, surfacing in the spoken text as a harmonic admixture of dreams and associations, rhythmically expanding contracting the breadth of possible universes of meaning, or discrete realities, this state may at times shift to one closer to a

hypnagogic one, with contemporary optimal activation of primary and secondary process and partial dissolving of self boundaries.

This is the state ostensibly conducive to the kind of dreams (like Kekule's or Coleridge's) always used in the literature as evidence of the problem solving and creative function of dreaming. The dreams, that is, in which the thrust of the image is also "upward".

As we progress, attention freely moving and pausing, the participants become more aware of each other in the room, and of the different thinking-feeling stiles present as well as of a new non personal component in the room, a "presence", that for lack of better metaphor I'll describe, borrowing from Rose talking about the responsiveness to art, as a "witnessing presence", responsive itself and therefore intrinsically benevolent. (cfr. Rose, in "Necessary illusion")

By the use of ongoing matrixes or by the connection of different dreaming matrixes (interfacing), the extent and the quality of the invisible network becomes evermore obvious, adding evidence to the fertility of new evolving holistic and non-reductionist paradigms.

SD has in fact pointed to the relatedness of dreams to social events, but this would not have been possible, in our western culture, until now: a way of construing the cosmos and the mind favorable to the development of this idea had first to come into existence.

We seem to be now in the process of testing /living/ creating the span of a potential symbiotic relationship between the evolving idea of social dreaming and its environment

I believe that "social dreaming" points to elements that are of crucial importance today for all of us as individuals, that means as creatures that are part and parcel of a collective, no matter how isolated and remote we may appear or perceive ourselves to be, related to each other by the context in which we live, reproduce / not reproduce and die.

This collective, that can be regarded and described in many different ways, Gordon Lawrence proposes to look at as a collective of dreamers, engaged in co dreaming reality into existence, including the reality of ourselves as individuals, as groups, as species, as elements of a local ecosystem and finally of cosmos and mind. This I regard as a promising methodological choice, a potentially fruitful basic assumption or working hypothesis strongly embedded in the matrix of scientific method as nowadays recognized by the so called hard sciences as well as in the matrix of the so called traditional sapiential doctrines.

I see the link in the expression "learning through experience", which we paradoxically do by using the very nature of our being (bodymind) in the process of becoming, out of the pressure put on the bodymind (apparatus for thinking thoughts), by the presence/absence of a specific irritative element called thought in the felt presence of an Other and of an environment shared by both

As the world has just began to exploit the power of connecting millions of disparate, small, privately owned computers into a colossal analytic computing procedure to find solutions to scientific riddles heretofore impossible to address for lack of large enough computers, such as capturing and analyzing for meaning the sounds from outer space, foregrounding background noise, looking for signals of presence of intelligent life in the cosmos, desire and memory give as always the first form to the cloud of uncertainty: if something is there, will it be friend or foe? Good for mating or eating? Or ...

What is it that is filling our scientific enlarged sensory apparatuses with stimuli reluctant to categorization, sometimes driving them crazy, sometimes driving the "observers" to develop a better instrument?

The answer, someone maintained, is the endemic malady of the question ;but what about hybrids, like "exclaminter", for example, like sphinxes and such creatures? Do they have illnesses too?

I recently read an article in a daily paper ,about the venerably old sphinx in Giza.

As it seems, archeologists and the larger public of those concerned with the preservation of valuable cultural artifacts in the world, are becoming concerned about the fact that restorative interventions brought to the limits of therapeutic furor, might precipitate the beautiful although dilapidated creature into becoming a large heap of dust. An archaeologist put it this way" The more you study it, the more you kill it".

I have a very special affection for Egypt and a familiarity with the old monument that I go greet almost every year, on my frequent trips to Cairo, so I could not help being strongly touched by the news.

Sad story, especially because this particular sphinx, the Egyptian kind, the survivor of her family that was once much more widespread in the area was, as it seems and as I like to believe, much more of a pacific and profound animal, compared to the better known Greek specimen so determinant in the fate of Oedipus.

"Social dreaming matrix" has its roots in experiences that were attained through participation in groups and psychoanalysis, as in the use of thoughts that such experiences impelled: What is social dreaming idée mere, I don't know, maybe this is something we are also exploring in the dreaming matrix.

I am here using the term idea as Bion used it. (Memoirs of the future)

There is some agreement in recent psychoanalysis, for instance that which moved ahead under the stimulation of the thought of Bion and Winnicott, and that has representative thinkers also in this country, that we have to dream first what we are afterwards to call reality and play with it with another engaged in the same task (see Antonio Ferro, for one)

This builds on Bion's seminal idea of alpha elements (Pictograms that are a transformation of the rough sense data, beta elements) and alpha function or dreamwork alpha as a continuous unconscious processing of lived experience going on, wavelike, by day and by night.

This underlying process would surface and become knowable and ready for further transformation in the form of narrative derivatives, of course including dreams proper.

What do we do then as "dreaming souls?"

This to me amounts at this moment, for shortage of a better metaphor, to what Bion said when he spoke of psychoanalysis as of a probe that enlarges the field it explores, and Winnicott when he spoke of the creation of transitional space and of the created/found object.

Bion was pointing to a function of the mind, as yet quite primitive, embryonic in the humane individual

Bion, as I understand it, did not think of the mind of the analyst, but of the mind itself, although stating strongly that this function can be more or less developed in different individual minds and can be cultivated through relentless and inspired exercise,

Including the kind of exercise people engage in during an analysis in a dyadic or multipersonal setting, that is connecting- through an emotional experience- to the evolutionary nuclei of meaning created by the individual/ individual or group/ individual dyad in order to promote their development and differentiation.

This Bion thought could be better done by suspending memory and desire on the one side, a reformulation of Freudian evenly hovering attention, and by actively sustaining the state of reverie so promoted through the use of free association and imaginative conjectures.

He also thought that psychoanalysts and patients had some glimpses of the nature of the mind in their search, practice and "theorizing" activity:

He wondered whether, having seen the "stripes on the back of the tiger...we would one day meet the burning bright creature herself".

So we may assume, as working hypothesis, that dream comes first, that there are "dreams in search of a dreamer" and that we have to dream reality before it can become really real for us and maybe dream it a number of times to allow getting into contact with it effectively.

In this process, we change, and reality changes too.

We transform each other and our environment as we go, in a process that is at the same time finite and infinite.

Evidence collected by Gordon Lawrence and other "social dreamers" around the world seems to suggest that this process of digesting, dreaming -narrating reality in common is that which creates the web in which we are all contained or suspended and that contains and suspends us while we work at weaving its threads. It is also through this process that we come to know /unknow.

This net, generated from the inside, like in the Australian myth about the invention of the fishing net, is a multiverse of dreams and dreams themselves are, in this sense, containers for meaning as well as containers of meaning (see Armstrong)

A cradle for evolving thoughts

The term matrix comes from the Latin for uterus, the place from which something grows

The concept of postnatal uterus, developed by F. Tustin comes to mind, the place in which the process of growth and development of the "child mind "(see also Meltzer, Harris, Milner ...) continues after birth, as not just restricted to the realm of pathology, from which it was derived.

Two other concepts might help to construe and explore a model for SDM, borrowed this time from the psychoanalytic work with groups: protomental system (Bion) and syncretistic sociality (Bleger):

The former stresses more the non- differentiation between the biological and the psychological; the latter introduces a clear image of the connecting net underling discrete behavioral phenomena and so to speak spacefies the first concept and adds dimensions.

Do dreams grow from such a terrain, and if so won't they be connected, made of the same elements of the soil from which they grow into the daylight of awareness?

With a quantum leap that I would not allow myself, were we not in the realm of dreams and free associations, (where jumping is the norm,like on the moon), I would like to put to you, as metaphor, a "Scientific Truth".

Stars transform hydrogen into helium, and from their combination azotes, oxygen, carbon, phosphor, potassium , the elements without which amino acids would not be, nor would the proteins indispensable to life.

Without the radiations coming from the stars and liberated in this cosmic process, millions of stars would freeze and die.

As living creatures we contain the same genetic code of other living creatures including amebas and dinosaurs. (See Morrone, in "Le stele e la rana")

We are essentially made of Adenosine, Cytosine, Guanine, Thymine: A.C.G.T, and.... we are very different from each other, the forms of life being many, expanding-contracting universes themselves.

So,we seem to also "depend on the stars".

Social dreaming matrix is a different medium compared to group, therefore we may expect that different phenomena will become visible as they transit through it adding or detracting evidence from what we know and probably highlighting new objects.

Coming back to the collective of dreamers(SDM)and to the concept of a multiverse of meanings created by the encounter between dreams and associations, as Lawrence words it, I have the impression that having stated a working hypothesis SD, and having devised a technical apparatus to test it(The sdm),we are now exposed to the effects of this new medium:this is what we set up to explore,what are we going to discover on the way is probably that people dream socially, that individuals are continuously monitoring and communicating, through dreams, about the context in which they swim like vortexes in a pool of water, that the water seems to have a direction, that the direction changes, as for the effect of invisible undercurrents ,that the feeling of disconnection usually leads to a frantic search for connection creating larger vortexes, that at the boundaries of the vortex it is virtually impossible and also useless to keep talking of vortex and pool as separate entities if we want to make some sense and keep swimming.

At this point we may want to take a plunge into the current.

References

- Appelfeld,A(1994),Beyond Despair New York:Fromm International
- Armstrong(1991)Thinking aloud:contributions to three dyalogs.in W. G.Lawrence(ed)Social dreaming@work .London.KarnakBooks
- Baglioni,L(1997),Sensibili alla Vita,in A.A Paesaggi della mente:una psicoanalisi per l'estetica.Ed. by Sandra Gosso.Milano .Franco Angeli
- Bion,W.R.(1987)Clinical seminars and four papersLondon:Karnak Books
- Bion,W.R(1991)A Memoir of the future.London:Karnak Books
- Bion,W.R (1992)Cogitations. London .London Karnak Books
- Bion,W.R(1997)Taming wild thoughts. London:Karnak Books ?????
- Bleger(1967)Simbiosis y ambiguidad .BuenosAires,Paidos
- Bollas,C.(1987)The shadow of the object.London :Free Association
- Corrao,F;Neri C.Introduction.Monographic number of the Italian Psychoanalytical Review dedicated to the work of Bion,XXVII,3-4,363-367
- Ferro ,A(1999)Narrative derivatives of Alpha Elements.Clinical implications .In: International forum of Psychoanalysis,(2002)
- FreudS.(1900)The interpretation of dreams.Standard Edition,4 &5.London: Hogarth Press
- Freud(1908)Creative writers and daydreaming.Standard edition,19;12-66.London: Hogarth Press
- Morrone,M.
- Neri,C(1998)Group London Jessica Kingsley Publications
- Briggs,J. Peat,D, (1984) Looking Glass Universe, New York, Simon and Schuster
- Lawrence,G(1989)Social Dreaming @work.London :Karnak Books
- Lawrence,G(2000)Tongued with Fire: groups in experience. London :Karnak Books
- Milner,M(1957)On the suppressed madness of sane man.London and New York:Tavistok Publications
- Rose,G.J(1996) Necessary Illusion:art as witness Boston : International Universities Press
- Tustin,M(1981) Psychological Birth and Psychological Catastrophe in Do I dare disturb the universe?.London :Karnak Books
- Winnicott(1971)Playing and reality. London:Tavistok Publications
- Winnicott(1953)Transitional Objects and "Phenomena".Internat.J.of Psychoanal.,34;89-97

Lilia Baglioni

Psychoanalist (SPI). Past Director of segretario ABA in Rome (Ass. For Research and care of Anoressia e Bulimia). Socio fondatore di ARGO (Ass. Research on Homogeneous Groups). Director of Istituto per il Social Dreaming in Rome, that collaborates with Institut of London, directed by Gordon Lawrence. E-mail: baglioni@tiscalinet.it