

SHARING OUR DREAMS : AN EXTENSION OF OPEN DIALOGUE

[Evelyn Woodcock, who now lives in Norwich, was for many years both a regular member of Braziers' Sensory Committee, and one of the Editors of 'Research Communications'. This is an edited version of a talk given at the Members', Associates' and Friends' weekend 'The Future of Sensory', held at Braziers in November 2000.]

This morning I am going to talk about understanding dreams, not dreams meaning wishes for the future, one definition of the word, but dreams as spontaneous products of the mind during sleep, occurring usually in a rhythmic cycle every ninety minutes or so. I believe each dream to be meaningful, and that it is possible to arrive at some understanding of its meanings. This talk is about sharing our dreams in order to understand them better, and why there may be value in attempting this, both for the individual and, perhaps more importantly, for the group.

I had recorded my dreams since I was about twenty, and, when I first met John at Braziers, we found we shared an interest in the work of C.G.Jung, and, in particular, in his work on dreams. In 1963 I married John and went to live in a community in North London with him. I found I had married into a dream group, in fact into two dream groups : one in the community itself, which John had started, and the other one the group on which the community's dream group was based. This second group, in central London, was led by a man called P.W.Martin, then in his sixties, author of *Experiment in Depth*, a pioneer, in this country, of dreamwork in groups. Martin was a follower of C.G.Jung, but, unlike most Jungians at that time, he believed that it was possible to undertake inner development through what he called 'the fellowship of a working group'. Dreamwork was for everyone who sincerely wished for it, not only for the desperately sick person needing a trained analyst. Martin had a Quaker background, with its belief in the value of inner experience, and he believed, with Jung that, throughout life, there was a drive towards inner development. Dreams were the royal road to this within. Martin believed that a small group of men and women, meeting to help one another, sharing their dreams, might grow into a true 'fellowship in depth'. He died in 1972 and his groups in London did not continue for very long afterwards, but, since then, over the years, John and I have continued with dream groups ourselves. The last one in Reading is still going strong, though we've left it now and belong to a new one in Norwich. I feel very grateful to the many people in these groups, and to other writers on dreams as well to Martin. Most of all, of course, to John, with whom I've shared dreams and working in dream groups over the years. John has initiated these groups and has developed and tried out different ideas and methods for running them.

Since ancient times and in many different cultures dreams have been viewed as gifts of potential wisdom, insight and creativity. The chief dreamed 'big dreams' for his tribe; people slept and dreamed before visiting an oracle; Socrates obeyed his dreams. In our own Judeo - Christian background there are dreams and visions we can all remember: Jacob's ladder; Pharaoh's seven fat kine and seven lean; St. Peter's vision of the unclean beasts. Now Jung believed that visions, myths and dreams are the same, or come from the same source, rather. The American Jungian Joseph Campbell calls dreams 'private myths', myths being the collective dreams of different cultures. Many visions or dreams are known to us from mediaeval times. Hildegard of Bingen saw the universe as an egg (a great archetypal symbol, Jung would say). Julian of Norwich - her cell is in the city where John and I live now - saw 'a little thing, a hazelnut' and asking what it could be, was told that it was 'all that is made', and that it 'exists because God loves it'. In the 17th century, Rene Descartes, whose philosophy is generally regarded as the very essence of rationality, kept a dream book, and called a great dream he had, at the age of 23, 'the most important affair of his life'. It confirmed his conclusion that he should take nothing on trust from authority, and his discovery that all sciences are connected, and susceptible to mathematical analysis. But the work of Descartes himself and then of Isaac Newton, and the Enlightenment of the 18th century and the emergence of modern science, led to dreams being discounted completely - rationality was all. Only poets and artists valued the imagination - and its source within.

Not until the 20th Century did dreaming re-emerge as something to be taken seriously, worthy of scientific study. Freud and Jung were both doctors, approaching dreams in a completely new way, through work with and study of the mentally sick. This on the one hand opened up the subject to a radically new scientific approach, but, on the other, led to what has become a lasting popular misconception : that the study of dreams is only relevant in serious mental illness or crisis, to help really desperate people. Jung, of course, broke away from Freud and developed his own system, broadening the understanding of dreams considerably. Their scope is unlimited, Jung said. They are infinitely creative. Dreams are not only wish-fulfilment, as Freud, the great pioneer of dreamwork, in 1900, thought. Repressed wishes (in 1900 it was sexuality that was repressed), and compensation for one's conscious attitudes, form only a part of our dream life. Both Freud and Jung believed that in the course of evolution we have developed consciousness slowly and laboriously; it is far from complete, and '... large areas of the human mind are still shrouded in darkness.' (Jung). Psychologists have to assume the existence of an unconscious mind, and the unconscious mind produces symbols spontaneously in the form of dreams.

Now recently the interest in dreams, and particularly in dreamgroups, has been gathering momentum. Just like P.W.Martin in the '60s, it doesn't limit dreamwork to the realm of psychology, psychiatry, very sick people and highly trained analysts. Many people are writing on dreams, particularly in America. I will mention two here. One is Strephton Kaplan-Williams, who writes 'Dreams are a necessary part of.. (everyone's).. mental health there is a natural self-regulating centre which helps us process life. Each night this integrative centre... is sending us messages which give the current issues of [our life] and what to do about them...Yet many people don't know how to read the messages....' (*Dreamwork, 1990*)

Another American writer, and one who has taken part in dream groups for 30 years, is Jeremy Taylor. In his book *The Living Labyrinth* (1998) he writes about the creativity of dreams and myths. He also discusses, and I think answers, the recent 20th century scientific argument against dreams, which sees them as merely useless, irrelevant data, the garbage of the mind in the process of being cleared out of the short-term memory during sleep. The garbage theory was put forward best by Francis Crick (discoverer with J.D.Watson of the structure of DNA, and Nobel prizewinner) and Graeme Mitchison, in an article in the journal *Nature* in 1986. It has won a lot of support, especially among scientific materialists, for whom the question is now apparently settled. Moreover Crick and Mitchison effectively discouraged lay people from even remembering their dreams, saying that such remembering 'may help to retain patterns of thought which are better forgotten.' The traditional popular fear of dreams, which associates them only with nightmares, with bad experiences, with repressed things, with the occult, even, was thus reinforced - and by scientists!

Jeremy Taylor counters this view by pointing out that though the Crick and Mitchison research appears convincing, it ignores the fact that apparently nonsensical dreams are symbolic, and many - layered, (and not only disturbing or difficult!) He writes about the deep trouble we are in as a species, inexorably destroying the planet on which we live. This crisis has been precipitated by what he calls our 'sorcerer's apprenticeship in science'. The stunning success of science and technology has alienated us from our 'deeper, unconscious, more authentic and spontaneous selves'. It has also distracted us from two of the oldest and most reliable sources of restoring balance, sanity and evolving self-awareness: myth and dream. Our whole culture and education have thus conditioned us not to be able to speak the language of dreams. We no longer have a natural feeling for symbols - we leave that to the poets and artists! Moreover, dreams represent an authority not under our conscious control, and today's individualistic society doesn't like that, any more than, historically, religious authorities have liked it. However, I believe that dreamwork is worth trying - in fact, we need this dimension to our lives, even today, and at whatever stage of life we are: our dreamgroups recently have been run through U3A. The inner work of self-understanding is a useful, valid (if sometimes painful) pursuit. Dreams are a feedback system - nature wastes nothing ultimately - and they have their own kind of objectivity if one attempts an honest assessment and tries not to suppress difficult things.

It is because this is difficult that sharing our dreams with other people in a group can be helpful. A certain kind of friendship develops, as P.W.Martin knew - a sort of community even, if enough openness and trust can be nurtured. Now in the last few years at Braziers there have been some

faltering and intermittent attempts by people living here, and others closely connected, to share more openly their thoughts and in particular their feelings. This was seen initially as an extension of the Sensory process, necessary so that 'unfinished business' and purely personal matters should have their place, but not divert us from vital sensory dialogue on behalf of the whole. There is also an interest at Braziers in the work of Maurice Scott Peck and his ideas of Community Building, and Community Building weekends have been held here, in which people come together in order to share their feelings, and sometimes this sharing may include dreams.

Dreamgroups are different from this in two respects: they have a single agenda, people's dreams, and the shared dreamwork covers every aspect and is not confined to feelings, important though they must be. Moreover I believe that both community building and dreamgroups really need to be ongoing and not occasional, so that participants come to know and help each other in greater depth over a longer period. Having said this, I would agree that there is a place in both community building and in dreamwork for the weekend group, which can be very effective. I have experienced such myself. At a Community Building weekend the group is much larger, which may encourage people and seem less threatening. The dreamgroup weekend, while necessarily small, has more time for non-verbal methods, such as drawing or painting, and acting out people's dreams.

Returning to the ongoing group, how might one set up a two-hour, once-a-fortnight dream group? First, following the sensory principle, there should be no leader and no 'observer'! It needs to be a small group - eight absolute maximum, perhaps, - so that everyone has a chance to contribute at least one dream, usually all there would be time for. The group might employ the time-honoured Braziers tradition of the 'round', each contribution being followed by comments from each person in turn, and of course anyone should be able to say 'I pass' when their turn came to share a dream. If everyone agreed, people might take notes. This is how our groups in Reading and Norwich have proceeded, but I'm sure there are other methods that may work equally well.

Jeremy Taylor sets out the following general 'hints', as he calls them, for dreamwork:

1. All dreams come in the service of health and wholeness - even nightmares, which vividly draw attention to what we may most need to know. Jung says the most important question is, 'Why this dream now?'
2. Only the dreamer can say for certain what his or her dream means. Sometimes there's a sudden recognition - the Aha! And then we understand.
3. All dreams speak a universal language of symbol and metaphor. (I'd add that it's very important not to take dreams literally - because you dream you're going to Australia you don't need to book the next flight!)
4. All endings in dreamwork are arbitrary - one may discover something new at a later date.
5. All dreams have multiple layers of meaning.
6. No dream comes to tell the dreamer what he or she already knows - the dream takes us beyond known things. Here is where other people can help us in our interpretation. (I would add that a dream may repeat something we know already but are refusing to act upon!)
7. Anyone interested in his or her dreams should keep a regular dream journal, whether they are in a dream group or going it alone. (Our Norwich dream group was discussing this recently with a member new to dreams. We said how necessary it is to jot down the dream on waking, even in the middle of the night, and someone suggested two dreambooks - a rough pad or jotter for immediate use, and a proper dream book for afterwards, to be written up at leisure. Taylor suggests making pictures or sketches - no artistic skill is needed! In the Reading group one member often brings detailed drawings in colour, made after she's written down the dream.)
8. Record dreams in the present tense, for immediacy. (I must say we've never done this so far. What we have encouraged, as Taylor suggests elsewhere, is giving the dream a descriptive title - I've found this very helpful myself.)
9. Always say, when discussing a dream, 'If this were my dream.....' This avoids any accusatory tone, or pontificating, and he says that we each could have had that dream, however shameful, as indeed we could.

10. All group dreamwork must be confidential, in that if the dream is spoken of elsewhere, the dreamer's name must never be mentioned. Some dreams may need even stricter confidentiality.

I should like to add some more points:

1. We can't expect, or look for, 'big' dreams all the time. Dreams can certainly relate to world events, to the future, to anything, but very often they address questions concerning our ordinary individual daily existence and how we are coping with it. In this humbler capacity a dream may be very helpful to the dreamer. Ann Faraday (*The Dreamgame*, 1974) says we should consider what happened on the previous day or days, in order to find clues to the dream's meaning. But dreams are many-layered and deeper questions may emerge.
2. The dream group is not intended as a substitute for psychotherapy, or even counselling. Some people may need professional help, and should seek it if at all possible.
3. The matter of confidentiality may be a considerable problem when people are associated outside the dreamgroup itself, in a work or community situation. Close sharing of one's innermost thoughts and feelings, aims and ambitions, whatever arises, uncalled for, in dreams, may be an impossible requirement. Perhaps, also, people need mental, as well as physical, space. Perhaps for some time to come dreamwork will remain a minority pursuit, only appealing to certain people. And participation must always be a matter of individual choice.

However, as we know, Norman Glaister's aim, in founding Braziers, was 'to make more conscious in ourselves the shape of the process of which we are a part, so that we may facilitate its development...'. This future development, he believed, would lead eventually to the coming into being of what he called 'multimentality', the multimental group. In such a group its members in time would surely find themselves growing together, becoming inextricably intertwined like some trees, or long term human partners. And this relationship would surely include the sharing of the inner as well as the outer life. Thus, if dreams are the royal road to the inner life, as P. W. Martin said, some group members might come to wish to make the experiment of sharing their dreams. In such a group, I'd suggest, dreamwork would be seen primarily as work on behalf of the group, and, as well as their personal dreams, people would dream creatively on its behalf also.

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