

## Traditions of Spiritual Guidance

# Dream work as a pathway

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A WOMAN IN THE LAST THIRD OF HER LIFE, an avowed atheist with a schizophrenic son and a healthy daughter, dreams:

I am a disembodied observer. I see a man, a 'potter', talking with a woman. The woman is a great admirer of the potter's work and asks him to make a piece especially for her. He agrees and makes her a small bowl, about the size of two hands cupped together. When he gives her the bowl, she admires it greatly and says that it's 'too beautiful' to actually use. Instead, she wants to display the bowl as an art piece, and so she asks the potter to modify his creation so that 'invisible fish line' can be strung through it, and it can be hung up on the wall. She goes on to say the inside of the bowl is as beautiful as the outside, and she wants to be able to display it either side out, and shift from one view to the other. The potter takes the bowl, and 'against his better aesthetic judgement' drills two holes in the base, and two holes in the rim. He has to 'reinforce' the thin rim of the bowl to accommodate the unplanned-for holes. He does all this because he is in love with the woman and wants to give her a love-gift that is to her liking. She accepts the bowl with rapture, but does not notice the potter's gentle hints about wanting to court her and have a more intimate and personal relationship with her. Time goes by, and the woman calls the potter in great distress and tells him that the bowl is broken. He visits her house and she shows him the bowl split in half. The potter takes the two pieces from her and drops them, shattering them into even more fragments on the floor. He departs and creates another, even more special bowl for his love, even though she has not asked him to do so. He changes the design so that there is now a rhythmic pattern of holes all around the rim of the new bowl, fully integrated into the aesthetic conception, as well as regularly spaced holes incorporated into the base. He makes a single loop of invisible fish line that passes through two of the holes in the rim, and two of the holes in the

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base, so that the bowl can be easily displayed on the wall to exhibit either side. He brings the new bowl to the woman and gives it to her as a gift. She is ecstatic to receive the beautiful, new bowl. The potter believes that her joy means that she really does want to have a deeper relationship with him. He proposes marriage to her, but she rebuffs him – she loves his work, but she doesn't love him . . . The disembodied observing dreamer feels 'sadness' for the potter and his unrequited love.

*The basic approach: 'If it were my dream . . .'*

The dreamer brought this dream to a seminar focused on 'Dreams and Spiritual Development' held at a Catholic college near San Francisco, California, in the summer of 1999. The work exploring the dream was carried out in a classroom setting with seven other students, lifelong learners as well as graduate students in counselling. Each member of the class shared and worked one of her dreams in depth with the full participation of all the other members of the class, using the 'If it were my dream . . .' technique.

In this particular way of working together to find the dream's deeper layers of meaning, everyone involved consciously acknowledges that *all* interpretative commentary about any dream is *projection*. People working with dreams in this way always preface any interpretative remarks and suggestions with some version of the idea, 'If it were my dream . . .' The words may vary – 'In my version of this dream . . .', 'When I imagine this dream for myself . . .', 'When I, as a man, imagine being a woman having this dream . . .', 'When I, as an older person, imagine being a young person with my whole life before me, the following things occur to me about this dream . . .', etc., but the basic idea and the embracing, accepting attitude it conveys remain the same.

Anyone who has any idea about what deeper meanings may exist below the surface of the obvious appearance of another person's dream can only have come to that idea from contemplation of *that person's own imagined version* of the dream. All dream commentary is therefore, of necessity, a projection of the commentator's own imagining of the dream and the dreamer's life circumstances. In this way of working with dreams, the conscious repetition of acknowledgement of this fact is a central part of the process.

### *The 'Aha!'*

The other pillar of this particular way of work is the clear understanding that only the original dreamer can say with any certainty what his or her dreams mean. When some aspect of the deeper truth below the surface of appearance is touched in the course of exploring and projecting on a dream, the dreamer will usually experience a 'recognition reaction'. I like to call this the 'aha!' Ann Faraday calls it 'the tingle test'; Eugene Gendlin calls it 'the felt-shift'; Strephon Kaplan Williams calls it 'the "just so" reaction', etc. Again, the words may vary, but we are all talking about the same thing – that moment when the dreamer realizes: '... I might not have thought of that on my own in a million years, but hearing you say it I *know* – yes! – tingle, pop, aha! – that's true! ...!'

This 'aha!' of the original dreamer is the only reliable touchstone in this work. I believe the 'aha!' is a function of *memory*. In that moment of insight, the dreamer is *remembering what he or she already knew the dream meant when it first occurred*, only that 'knowledge' was unconscious, or (as our ancient Anglo-Saxon ancestors used to say) 'not-yet-speech-ripe'. When another person offers words that express this unconscious knowledge, there is a release of energy in the psyche. The previously unconscious memory of the deeper meaning of the dream surfaces in the dreamer's consciousness as an 'aha!' of insight and understanding. Obviously, the only one who can *remember* what a dream means is the one who had it to begin with, but since the archetypal, symbolic language of the dream is universal, there is an excellent chance that the suggestions and projections of others will awaken this experience of insight, not only in the original dreamer, but in many of the others who have imagined their own versions of the dream as well.

The 'aha!' is only a positive test. The absence of an 'aha!' means very little. Perhaps the comment really is off the mark, and then again, the projection may simply have been offered in a way that is not immediately appealing to the dreamer's conscious mind. Even a full-blown negative 'aha!' is still an 'aha!' If a dreamer responds to a suggestion with annoyance and strong rejection, it is often a very reliable indication that the suggestion is, in fact, right on the mark. Subsequent work with the dream (or with clearly related dreams), often demonstrates that some version of the original notion, so firmly rejected by the dreamer, turns out to be quite germane. Obviously, it is not particularly useful to confront an annoyed dreamer with this possibility in the middle of group work with a dream, since to do so usually leads

to a deterioration of the interpersonal dynamics and the overall tone of the group. What is most important to keep in mind is that it is the *emotional force* of the 'aha!' that is the primary indicator of its importance, not whether that emotion is immediately positive or negative.

### ***Dream work as projection***

The use of the 'If it were my dream . . .' form acknowledges the inevitable and inescapable process of projection, and affirms to the dreamer, as well as everyone else in the group who has imagined their own version of the dream, ' . . . there is nothing in you, or your psyche, or your dream – no matter how confusing, or bizarre, or downright repugnant your dream images are to me – that I'm not willing to look for and find in myself as well . . .' In this way, prefacing any comments about someone else's dream with ' . . . if this were my dream' affirms our deep shared common humanity. Our dreams spring from this profound common source, and direct our attention back to it. We all speak a shared symbolic language in the world of the dream, no matter what our gender, age, race, social class, cultural background, etc.

Any 'aha!' that one person has while exploring another person's dream is absolutely valid for that person, whether the projection is confirmed by the original dreamer or not. In this way, the benefits of exploring dreams in a group are never limited just to the original dreamer, but accrue to everyone engaged in the work. Each person, while exploring someone else's dream, is doing his or her *own* psycho-spiritual work in projected form. In fact, it is almost always easier to do one's own work in projected form in the context of exploring other people's dreams, because we are *all* uniquely and selectively blind to the deeper significance of our own dreams.

### ***Dream work as a spiritual discipline***

When dream work is undertaken in this form, it regularly becomes much more than just an intellectual interpretative exercise, or a mere parlour game of symbol hunting, and becomes an authentic spiritual discipline. Any activity, the reliable and predictable result of which is an increased conscious awareness of, and appreciation of the energy of the Divine, is, by definition, a *spiritual discipline* – and dream work regularly produces this result. To put it another way, working with dreams regularly produces an increased awareness and appreciation of the deepest sources of our most compelling sense of meaning and value

in our lives. In the technical literature of psychoanalysis, projection is usually called 'transference' and 'counter-transference' and is seen primarily as an annoying source of 'bias' in analytical work. In fact, it is a natural and inevitable human process, which, properly understood and consciously acknowledged, can become a way of deepening our appreciation of our shared human predicament, our shared longing for greater connection with one another, and our hunger for greater communion with the Divine.

*'Beauty' as an archetypal metaphor of 'truth'*

When the group began to explore this dream of 'The two bowls and the potter's unrequited love', a number of 'aha's!' emerged. The first set of shared 'aha's' emerged from the exploration of the dreamer's strongly felt sense of the beauty of the two bowls. An 'aesthetic response' to *beauty* in the dream world is very often an archetypal metaphor of the encounter with deeper psycho-spiritual truth. When Keats says in 'Ode on a Grecian urn', "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," – that is all/ Ye know on earth and all ye need to know', he is giving voice to an ancient archetypal symbolic equation. In the waking world, there are undoubtedly many things that present a deceptively beautiful face to the observer, a face that hides all manner of nastiness, but in the dream world, the experience that something is *beautiful* is a very reliable indication that the beauty in the dream is a living symbol of a higher and deeper order of truth in the dreamer's life, even if that order of truth may also involve sorrow and bitterness.

As we explored the dream further, it came out that the dreamer harboured some bitterness about the 'unfairness' of her son's schizophrenia, and the tragic limitation of her son's (and her own) life and ability to love and be loved that is the result. It was, in fact, one of the things that turned her toward atheism, since she found it impossible to sustain belief in an 'all-good' deity who would randomly visit such a scourge upon the innocent. At this level, the dream depicts in symbolic narrative form the dreamer's quarrel with the Divine. At the same time, the woman's excitement over the second bowl is a symbolic representation of her transpersonal gratitude for her second, beautiful, healthy child. It was a shock to her to realize, as demonstrated by her own 'aha!', that she 'loved the potter's work, but not the potter'; that is to say, she loved her children, but not the Divine, which she had once believed was the source of all love.

*'Unrequited love' as a symbol of spiritual longing*

The love of individuals (or the lack of it) in a dream is often a metaphor of even deeper longings and desires, the most compelling of which is the universal, archetypal desire of all human beings to live in a universe that makes sense, the deep desire to inhabit a cosmos that is not simply a meaningless consequence of random events and brutish collisions. All humans have a deep desire to live lives that are animated by a deep and reliable sense of purpose and value beyond their physical and emotional comfort or discomfort at any given moment. The longing to relate to something 'beautiful' that is infinitely larger than the waking ego or the individual life remains alive in our unconscious depths, even when conscious experience has led to the abandonment of active searching and struggle. The exigencies of alienated, postmodern, industrial life often lead to deep disappointment and disillusionment with flawed religious institutions, and to the sense of frustrated idealism. These feelings often emerge as a consequence of even the most sincere spiritual search. In this dream, that spiritual longing for deeper meaning was given shape by the 'potter's' unrequited love, as well as by the dream woman's attraction to 'his work'. It also echoes in the disembodied dreamer's sense of 'sadness' upon realizing that the 'potter's' desire to love more deeply and intimately is not shared by the woman.

*'Unprepared for the final exam'*

The problem of disappointment and disillusionment occasioned by apparently failed religious and spiritual search is very common in our postmodern world. It regularly finds symbolic shape in dreams, and in the psycho-spiritual struggles of many dreamers. Any person using dreams as a focus of spiritual counselling and direction is almost certain to meet this issue in the work with clients. It is important to understand that this drama takes many apparently different symbolic forms. In this dream, it is given shape by the 'potter's unrequited love', and it is also often reflected in the very common dream of 'discovering that I have been enrolled in a class that I totally forgot about. I never went to class. I never did any of the reading, and now I suddenly discover that it is time to take the final exam!' Whenever a person abandons his or her deepest spiritual longings and unresolved questions because of the frustrated failure to find adequate answers, that person increases the likelihood that he or she will have a version of this 'classic' dream.

The ubiquitous appearance of this dream, at the larger, collective level, is quite an indictment of western civilization. Widened access to higher education and the products of scientific/technological achievement have offered the promise of answering our deepest questions about ourselves and the nature of the universe, and have delivered only larger and more complicated versions of the same unanswered questions and unsolved problems. At first glance, it might seem utterly absurd that two images as diverse as 'the potter's unrequited love' and 'the anxiety occasioned by the final exam in the forgotten course' could be related to one another in any meaningful way, but in fact, they are *both* clear symbolic and emotional metaphors of unfulfilled spiritual longings.

*We each have our own 'broken bowls'*

As the group continued to project on this dream, it became clear that at one level, the 'beautiful broken bowl' was a metaphor of the dreamer's schizophrenic son, and the 'beautiful replacement bowl' a symbolic picture of her sane and healthy daughter. At another level, the 'bowls' were symbols for injured and uninjured parts of her own psyche. The 'broken bowl' is particularly resonant with the child's simplistic faith that was 'shattered' by the adolescent's initial encounters with the world's imperfections, and later with the adult's experience of 'unfair' birth defects. The 'second, even more beautiful bowl' symbolizes her slowly dawning intuition that the significance of 'creation' (the stunning beauty and grandeur of nature, and the amazing human capacity to create) is greater than the seeming individual and separate things created.

At yet another level, the 'two bowls' evoke the two 'halves' of the dreamer's adult life: the first half, when she was married and working to serve her family and hold it together, and the second half, after being deserted by her husband who left her with the two children to look after on her own. At that level, the 'holes' drilled into the first 'bowl' represent the disruptions and unexpected disappointments of her early married life and her efforts to make the best of them. The 'beautiful bowl with the holes "fired" directly into the clay' represent the ironic truth that it was only after being deserted by her husband, and facing the 'imperfect' world of single motherhood (particularly single motherhood of a child with dramatic special needs) that she began to discover the depth of her own 'beautiful' authentic character and deeply creative energies. It was as a result of these 'holes' and this 'trial by fire' that she

began to have a more conscious appreciation of the true extent of her own strength and potential.

### *Deus Faber*

The 'potter' has long been an archetypal metaphor of the divine demiurge, *Deus Faber*, who longs to love his creation even more fully, if we will only open ourselves to it. Even in this dream of an avowed atheist, the 'potter' turned out (as confirmed by the dreamer's own 'aha!') to be an image of God longing to love and be loved more fully.

As we explored the dream further, the 'potter' also emerged as a metaphor of personal loneliness. At one level, *everything* in a dream is a symbolic representation of aspects of the dreamer's own psyche and character. At this level, the dreamer *is* the 'potter'. The 'potter' in the dream is not only an archetypal figure, 'he' also stands for the dreamer's own frustrated desire to love and be loved by more than just the members of her immediate family. This personal loneliness, in turn, also reflects her previously unacknowledged longing to be related to something *more* than the ethical ideals and principles that for her, decades earlier, took the place of her belief in a personal deity. Working with this dream, she realized with a shock that this part of her that 'longs to love and be loved in a more transcendent fashion', both personally and spiritually, is not just a childish atavism, but a robust and valuable part of her mature psyche. It is almost always the case that the exploration of dreams leads to the revelation of intimate personal details of the dreamer's emotional life. Most often, through sharing these details, as they are revealed and emerge from dreams, the energies for psycho-spiritual growth, transformation and healing are awakened and released.

### *The shared benefits of the work*

As the group continued to explore this dream, other people in the seminar began to realize that the ability to imagine and project upon this narrative was affording them an unparalleled opportunity to explore their own particular versions of the universal 'frustrated longing to love and be loved MORE'. Several of the participants experienced their own 'aha!'s about the ways that their own abandoned or disappointed spiritual searches had caused them to place an undue burden on their interpersonal love relationships. Because the desire for personal, direct experience of the Divine had been abandoned out of frustration, several people realized that they had unconsciously

tried to make their human loves carry the weight of the longing for divine love, and, of course, this impossible demand had made these inevitably imperfect relationships seem all the more inadequate.

Each person in the group began to see some of the emotional/relational dramas in their own lives more clearly. There was a shared 'aha!' that some of them were also 'loving the bowl(s)' without realizing that they were 'gifts of love from the potter'. There were also comments from several people that made it clear that one of the things the group work with the dream was making more clear was the competitive desire to put their long-term loves and relationships 'on display' – to 'drill holes in them and hang them on the wall for others to appreciate', worrying about 'how things *look*', and 'what other people think', without giving the same attention to how those relationships actually *are*.

### ***Spiritual search and 'alchemy'***

The exploration of this dream points to the fact that 'atheism' is often just a thinly conscious abreaction, an instinctively outraged response to deep pain, 'injustice', and incredible life difficulties, and not a true rejection of the possibility of more conscious relationship with the Divine. 'Atheism' is often just an emotionally theatrical stage of a 'lover's quarrel'.

The work with this dream also demonstrated another great spiritual truth: that only when a person's spiritual perspective extends completely into the 'darkest' and most distressing and 'evil' aspects of both personal and collective life – into the most noxious and base of 'base matter', as the alchemists avow – can the 'true gold' of authentic and reliable spiritual perspective be created.

Throughout our lives, our dreams continually bring us metaphors of the 'worst' that is in us, and the worst that is in the world (along with all the other joyous and wonderful things they do!), in order to provide us with the opportunity of 'turning our own "base matter", whatever it may be, into the "gold" of authentic and reliable spiritual experience'.

Any spiritual perspective that systematically avoids 'the worst', either personal or collective, will also reveal itself to be illusory 'false gold' in the final analysis. When a dreamer who has used 'piety' to shield him- or herself from confronting his or her 'worst demons' faces death, alone, confronted with the previously repressed and denied 'worst things' (which the false religious and spiritual perspective has been carefully designed to suppress and ignore), there appears to be 'no

hope'. In such a situation, spontaneously manifesting grace alone can lift the dreamer up from despair. It has been said that 'luck favours the prepared mind'. It could be said equally that 'Grace favours the sincere soul', and attention to dreams is a profoundly reliable touchstone of sincerity, even beyond the pitfalls of self-deception. Dreams are the eternal enemy of premature closure and self-deception. Even casual attention to our dreams makes it much more difficult to ignore these 'worst case' aspects of our lives and psyches. When we confront and embrace our own most problematic and difficult experiences and desires in our dreams, it is much more likely that we will deal with these aspects of ourselves more responsibly and creatively in waking life. In this way, we also open ourselves to the Divine.

Working with dreams in spiritual direction and companioning, particularly with the clear acknowledgement of inevitable projection on and from all parties, can be an invaluable practice for the only alchemy that really matters – transforming even our worst fears and experiences into the dance of deepening encounter with the Divine.

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