

NIGHT DREAMS AND THE INTENTIONAL DE-CONSTRUCTION OF NEGATIVE SELF IMAGES

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Introduction

How to construct individualized imaginal exercises which, if practiced, will de-construct negative self images is the subject of this article. In order to construct these imaginal exercises, we must first be able to contact these negative identities within ourselves, and night dreams are a way of doing so. Therefore, an examination of night dreams from the perspective of psychological phenomenology will be introduced before instruction on imaginal exercise-building is given. Discovering the negative "what is" of our lives and de-constructing the self identity go hand in hand because, if we are unaware of a particular negative self identification, we are not free to change it.

From the phenomenological perspective, night dreams can be seen as the direct presencing of the "what is" of our lives. Night dreams are essential happenings in which we find certain phenomena entering into our openness and receptivity. In dreams we sometimes find ourselves existing in particular modes of being. It could be a mode of fear, anger, avoidance, expansiveness or one of the literally millions of ways we as human beings can exist. The experience of dreaming offers us the unique opportunity to be simultaneously the observer and the observed and, through this observing and experiencing of ourselves living in a certain manner within the dream, we are able to accept this mode of being as our own, whether the mode be deemed positive or negative.

Besides finding ourselves existing in certain forms of being in our dreams, we also find ourselves in relationship to certain appearing phenomena, be it person, place or thing. Why these particular

persons, places or things, out of the billions of images that could have entered into our dreaming, is a question that this approach always seeks to answer. In addition to discovering the meaningfulness of the appearing persons, places or things, the dreaming is always to be understood historically. Sometimes dream examples dramatically reveal a historical factor in our lives. Take, for instance, the dream of a 35 year old college mathematics professor over a six month period. He had an excellent capacity for recall of dreams and, during this period, 80 percent of his dreams found him in his first two years of high school. Night after night in his dreams he sat in the classroom, ate in the cafeteria and roamed the halls of his old high school. This man had entered treatment for feelings of depression and his inability to develop relationships with women. He had been a mathematical genius and had been admitted to an Ivy League university after his second year of high school. In reviewing his dreams, he claimed that being in high school was the last time he felt socially comfortable. He was equally as uncomfortable as a 15 year old in college as he was as a 17 year old doctoral student. The dreams enabled him to see that he was socially comfortable at one time in his life and from then on, when he had dreams where he experienced himself as socially alienated, imagination exercises were developed to de-construct that image of himself.

From the perspective of psychological phenomenology, what we experience as dreams is a real level of existence where concrete sensory events take place. But unlike our waking lives, in our dreaming, experience happens outside linear time and unfolds within the transpatial realm. The dream should never be understood as the individual creation of a dreamer but as an appearing truth—truth in the sense of truth as *Aletheia*—truth that informs us of the "what is" of some aspect of our current lives.

Dreams are one of our guiding lights for understanding and acknowledging the "what is" of various aspects of our lives, although this guiding light rarely presences itself into our awareness in a logical and orderly manner. We must accept that dreams are eventful, unpredictable and operate in the world of concrete symbols, beyond cause and effect, and outside of linear time. An anchor in this sea of confusion is this phenomenological perspective which does not resort to preconceived psychological or neurological

theories to explain the dream, but keeps asking how does this dream experience, in its totality, relate to the manner in which we live our waking lives. We must persistently look at our dreams from the vantage point of waking life, asking ourselves what the dream discloses as to what possibilities in our lives we are open or closed to fulfilling (Medard Boss, *A New Approach to the Revelations of Dreaming and Its Uses in Psychotherapy*, New York: Gardner Press, 1977).

To read the text of our dreams in this phenomenological manner requires practice. The following series of dreams will serve as an introduction to this method of seeing that enables us to discover various "what is" aspects of our lives. These dream examples are taken from my clinical practice where those with whom I work consistently grace me with their courage and with their dreams. I thank them for permitting and teaching me to see.

Once these dreams have been individually discussed, I will turn to demonstrating how imaginal exercises, which de-construct negative identities within the dreamer, are developed from each one of these dreams.

Dreaming, Presencing and De-construction

The first dream in this series was reported by a woman in her middle forties who entered this form of therapy because she felt herself to be at a new threshold of her life and was experiencing confusion and anxiety.

I dreamt last night that I had walked up through a hilly city and arrived at a college dormitory. I was a new student. I then found myself at the school of nursing where I registered for classes in the nursing school. But as I was doing so, I kept feeling like I was forgetting my primary purpose. All the teachers and nurses wanted me to stay, but I wanted to run out and get to where I am purposed to be.

The dreaming initially finds her existing as a new college student, having taken up residence in a dormitory after traveling uphill to get there. When asked how this part of the dream related to her present life, she stated that it reflected her present sense of starting something new in her life, although she is anxious about it in the same way she was anxious when she started college years ago. The

dormitory residence, she claimed, related to her waking life tendency to overcrowd her life, a life at time devoid of privacy.

In the next part of the dream, she is registering at nursing school but felt she was forgetting her primary purpose. What does nursing school have to do with her waking life, and how does it relate to forgetting her primary purpose? This woman's whole life has been one of taking care of others: parents, siblings, partners, and employees. It was not a surprise to her that she would be entering nursing school. What did surprise her was that this way of being (registering at nursing school) blocked her from being aware of her primary purpose.

The concluding part of the dream saw her become aware of wanting to flee the nursing school in order to find where she is purposed to be. Teachers and nurses are trying to persuade her to stay but she wants to go. The dream ends in a state of her wanting to go but, at the same time, listening to the people who want her to stay. She was readily able to see that in her waking life any time she moved away from being this "taking care" person she would hear the protests of others.

This overall dreaming reveals a mode of being in which she has denied herself for the sake of others. Self sacrifice is an admirable quality, but when it is a habitual reaction and not an authentic choice, it proves to be self obscuring. Here in the dream this 45-year-old woman does not know what is her primary purpose. Others (teachers and nurses) will readily assign her one, but she is only certain that she does not want to be there. In the language of this phenomenology it can be stated that this woman's mode of being (self sacrificing) blocks her openness and receptivity to discovering her primary purpose at various times in her life. This mode of being, this identity of "care taking," must be de-constructed before she can open herself to new becomings.

In order to de-construct this "what is" identity of care taking, the images and structures of the dream are used to create the exercise. It must always be remembered that the essence of de-construct exercises is our *individual intention* to rid ourselves of the particular identity. In this particular exercise, the woman was instructed to close her eyes and to begin to breathe evenly and regularly, breathing in through her nose and out with long, slow exhalations through her mouth, imagining herself breathing out gray smoke

as she counted backwards from three to one with each exhalation. The newer someone is to this work, the longer the induction should be. But the induction is not concerned with creating a state of deep relaxation. It is concerned with having the experiencer turn the senses inward in order to contact the imagination.

Once the induction was given to this woman, she was instructed to re-enter the dream at the scene of registration in the nursing school, to turn her back on the teacher and nurses and run out of the building. The more senses she is able to utilize within the experience, the better. She was instructed to do this exercise every morning for 21 days with the intention of letting go of her old way of being. The entire exercise took only 30 or 40 seconds but, as she continued to do it each day, she began to accept as her own her ability to say "no" to people, not only saying no to imaginal teachers and nurses but also to demanding waking life acquaintances and friends. She had successfully de-constructed her old way of being (care taking) sufficiently to let the possibility of saying no into her life, and with that came the authentic possibility of choosing self sacrifice. Some identities die hard and these require a series of exercises, but for anyone who persists, the de-construction will result. This particular woman eventually found herself at a college of art one day in an imaginal exercise and realized that this was where she was purpose to be in her waking life. She was a very talented artist who had been neglecting her art out of over-concern for the administrative aspect of her business. She resolved to give this side of herself more attention.

The second dream was reported by a woman in her late 20s who felt she had not found her real vocational direction.

I dreamt I was in a flying machine. It looked something like a helicopter but not exactly. Beyond the flying machine is a vast, beautiful horizon. I notice that my father is at the controls of this machine. We cannot take off. I feel stuck.

A general rule of this work is that you cannot leave anyone in an image of being trapped, stuck or without the ability to move. All illness is an impairment of our movement. Whether it is through a phobia of heights or a broken leg, both effect one's ability to move.

In this dream, we see this young woman ready to take off in a flying machine. She is pleasantly excited by the prospect of moving into this vast horizon but discovers her father at the controls and

is unable to ascend. She feels stuck. Repeating the dream aloud to ourselves or to the dreamer assists treatment in becoming more focused. The main negative identity that presented itself in this dream was her inability to move into the beautiful vast horizon. She saw this as being directly related to waking life reluctance to committing herself to a career. Within the dream her openness and receptivity perceived the horizon as the condition for the possibility of movement. But what prevents her from moving (taking off)? How does the fact that her father appears at the controls of the flying machine relate to her inability in waking life to enter into vocational commitments?

The "what is" of her life that presented itself through the image of her father being at the controls was that her father's conservative, non-risk-taking qualities were impairing her freedom of movement. Here in this dream the concrete symbol of her father at the controls represented the abstract quality of non-risk-taking and general conservatism that was influencing her life. In phenomenology, a concrete appearance can never be symbolic of another concrete person or thing, but always points to the abstract quality inherent within the concrete symbol. A cigar is a cigar but to be smoking one in a dream may point toward an unhealthy mode of being or a mode of satisfaction.

Returning to this particular dream, the dreamer experienced her conservatism and non-risk-taking as a negative identity in need of de-constructing. So the imaginal exercise here was to have her re-enter the dream after the induction and do whatever was necessary to get the flying machine off the ground. In the exercise she had to wrestle the controls away from her father and, when she took control, the aircraft lifted and flew into the horizon. She was instructed to repeat this imaginal exercise for 21 days. Two weeks after starting this daily exercise she reported a dream in which her father was on his deathbed. I believed this to be an indication that this fatherly quality of conservatism and non-risk-taking was dying within her as a major influence.

A thirty-year-old married woman related the following dream:

I dreamt that I was in bed with my husband. We were wrapped in red satin sheets in a passionate embrace. We were about to make love. I then observed my parents sitting in two winged-back chairs next to my

bed. It felt natural having them there but I was no longer interested in making love.

What does this dreaming reveal about her sexuality and her relationship to her husband and her parents in her waking life? Out of all possible modes of being that she could be existing in within the dream, she initially finds herself in a passionate embrace. Her sensuality and sexuality are existent and are directed towards and shared with her husband. In this dreaming, the passionate embrace does not move towards consummation but what follows this embrace with her husband is an awareness of her parents sitting next to the bed. Their presence in the midst of sexual intimacy seemed natural as did the stiffening of her body and her lack of interest in continuing this passionate moment.

This is a markedly transparent dream for a woman who had entered treatment because of marital conflict surrounding her lack of interest in sexuality. Unfortunately, it was not as apparent to the dreamer as it was to me and it took several months of treatment before she could accept as her own any negative identity that presented itself in this dream. Needless to say, she realized that it was not appropriate that her parents be in her bedroom but she was not ready to accept that certain qualities of her parents were within herself and were disrupting her sexual life with her husband. She was able to see that she could exist in a sensual, sexual and passionate manner and was pleased by it. But why did this way of being cease upon the appearance of her parents?

After much discussion and several collaborating dreams and imaginal exercises, this young woman saw that the negative "what is" of her sexual life was her parents' prudish and inhibiting attitudes towards sensuality and sexuality. These attitudes had been within her and within her bedroom and had been stiffening her sensuality most of her life. Now that she discovered this "what is" of herself (identity of sexual inhibitions) an imaginal exercise in order to de-construct it was formed from the dream. For 21 days she was to imagine herself back in the bedroom scene and see herself escorting her parents out of the bedroom, all with the intention of ridding herself of this prudish identity and self image. Incidentally, I also recommended that she purchase red satin sheets like the ones that appeared in the dream and encouraged her to wear that color red as an acknowledgement of her sensual, sexual

and passionate qualities. These kinds of recommendations are only given when an individual, specifically of her own desire, wants to add to her life what she determines is missing.

The next dreaming was told by a 16 year old boy who had entered treatment specifically because of underachievement in school and the general appearance of living his life in a passive, dependent manner.

I dreamt that I was at the zoo and I was alone in a room watching a caged panther. He is trying to escape.

I felt very frightened—so much so that I couldn't move.

The locus of this dream is of immediate significance for this young man in that he is existing in a place where the freedom of movement of animals is severely limited. Even though he is endeavoring to escape, the black panther's world is restricted to a cage. What does a black panther trying to escape and the young man's state of being frozen have to do with the manner this young man lives his waking life?

A traditional psychological answer to this question would be to look at the black panther trying to escape as a symbol denoting an impulse disorder, thereby designating the being of this young man to be the being of a disorder and closing the door to becoming. Even though this young man is passive in waking life and not impulsive, the passivity would be viewed as a defensive measure against his impulse disorder. From the perspective of psychological phenomenology, the symbol of the black panther would be seen as the presencing of the qualitative possibilities of instinctiveness, strength, and reactivity that this young man has not as yet become comfortable with accepting in his life. Treating the symbol in this manner, it enters the world of becoming in that these qualities become possibilities for concrete fulfillment in his waking life. Through discussing the dream, the young man saw that the negative "what is" of his life was his fear of his own power, and once he was able to articulate it, an imaginal exercise was constructed to de-construct it. He was instructed to imagine himself, with as many senses as possible, making friends with the black panther. At first, after the induction, he was instructed to experience himself thawing out and moving toward the cage, then speaking with the panther and, eventually, entering the cage and playing with the animal, ending the imaginal exercise with taking the panther out

of the cage and into the world, but under his control. This young man did the exercise each day for several weeks, and I also instructed him to draw the experience in color as a means of further concretizing his experience. The young man's passivity receded and he started to do well academically several months after starting psychotherapy within imagination. The following year he went out for and made his school's tennis team, a sport in which movement, reactivity and strength are essential.

Having just withdrawn from college, a young man in his 20s reported the following dream.

I dreamt that I was running on the beach. I was making great leaps. It was bright and sunny. I feel free, full of energy as the salt brushes my skin. Suddenly I approach a group of students from my old high school. I no longer can leap into the air. My energy has faded.

Here in this dreaming the young man is experiencing an expansive mode of being. He feels free while his ease of movement appears to validate his feeling. It is bright and sunny, but once these students from time past enter his openness and receptivity, his energy and leaping ability cease. Out of all possible people that could have appeared to his world, what was meaningful about this particular group and what does it mean that he is no longer able to leap into the air after encountering them? Most importantly, how does this mode of being relate to his current waking life?

The particular group of high school students that presented themselves are a group of athletes who were very aggressive and towards whom he felt very inadequate. As a matter of fact, he remembered that when he found himself in their company back in high school, he would always withdraw. The "what is" of his life that he discovered in this dream was that he consistently turned his back on aggressive and competitive people. He felt that this was the major reason he had withdrawn from college.

Now the negative identity that was in need of de-constructing was a mode of being that feared competition. The imaginal exercise of de-constructing had him return to the beach and individually challenge each of these athletes to a leaping competition. He was to see, sense, and experience himself leaping against each student from his past. In so doing he was de-constructing the old non-competitive identity and constructing a competitive one. I intentionally

did not instruct him to see himself outperforming each student but left the outcome to his imagination. This young man won the majority of the competitive confrontations and continued doing this imaginal exercise for several weeks.

This work within dreams and imagination has a built-in evaluator, for if the exercise is proving effective, you see modes of being changing in subsequent dreams that reflect a movement away from the negative "what is" of our lives. This young man had dreams which allowed more and more confrontation and in the following semester he returned to college and became a very good student.

The concluding dream of this series was told to me by a 28-year-old man. It illustrates an important aspect of intervention that should always be followed within imaginal work. The dream was reported as follows:

I dreamt I was stuck and sunk up to my knees in a dark marshy swamp. All is dark but the moonlight suddenly reveals my parents and three brothers looking down at me from atop a mountain.

Two negative modes of being reveal themselves in the dream. He is existing in this dream in a state of stuckness. He cannot move. His ground is a soft, marshy swamp. Relating this way of existing to his waking life would not be quite accurate. The other negative "what is" of his life that is revealed in this dreaming is that when other human beings enter his life out of the darkness, they do so from a lofty position. They are above and he is below. In his waking life, when people enter his life he always compares himself unfavorably.

We can never let ourselves remain in a state of stuckness within a dream or imaginal exercise. Therefore, the imaginal exercise of deconstruction here would be to have this man see himself extracting himself from the marshy swamp, using whatever means he can imagine. It is imperative that he get unstuck and if he cannot find a means of extracting himself, one should be given to him. If you were doing this kind of extraction exercise on your own and were unable to find a means of becoming unstuck, you should open your eyes and discuss with a trusted other a means of extraction, whether it be magical or mechanical. In this imaginal exercise, once this patient became unstuck, he was instructed to climb the moun

tain until he was on equal ground with his parents and brothers. He was instructed to do this for several weeks with the intention of putting movement back into his life and decreasing his mode of being in which he is consistently comparing himself, in a negative way, to others.

Conclusion

This article has dealt exclusively with the presenting of negative identities within ourselves that appear in night dreams, but it should be understood that these negative images can also appear in imaginal exercises. We have seen that the process of imaginal de-construction is really a two-fold process. First, it is a practice of *self attention* which strives to bring about greater awareness of the negative identities within ourselves. These negative identities obscure our openness and receptivity to new modes of being or, stated another way, these negative images block our becoming.

Second, it is a practice of *self intention* in which we perform imaginal exercises with the specific intention of de-constructing a particular mode of being. The word "exercise" etymologically originated in the Latin word *ex-arcere*, which means "to drive out of an enclosed area." This is exactly what these imaginal exercises of de-construction are meant to accomplish, in that the practice of the exercise is to take ourselves out of the enclosure of our negative identities. It is the practice of removing that which veils our openness and receptivity to life. A "practice" is rooted in the Greek *praxis*, which means a doing of an action, and in this work it is the taking of an action (doing exercises) that transforms us.

A chart reviewing some elements of imaginal de-construction is presented on page 49 to assist you in understanding how to develop your own exercises. Your own images are always the most effective for your life, since they have been sent to you. You can start to record your dreams and then find your own negative identities. Once you have found a part of yourself that you wish to de-construct, consult the chart in order to review how exercises were developed out of the dream examples. Once you have developed a de-construction exercise, perform it each morning for three weeks. Remember that the exercise is preceded by a simple induction in which you close your eyes and breathe in through

your nose, then out through your mouth in long, slow exhalations. Counting backwards from three to one, you see yourself taking in a blue-golden light and breathing out gray smoke. The induction should take only 20-30 seconds, and then you begin the de-construction exercise, which should last only 30-40 seconds. The exercises are purposely designed to last a short time, much like a homeopathic dosage that uses a small increment of the infection to heal the whole. In imaginal de-construction, we use a small negative image and are de-constructing it over a period of time, usually 21 days. If you feel that you need to work on this negative aspect of yourself for more than three weeks, you may do so, but only after taking one week off between each three week series of imaginal exercise practice.

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De-Construction

Practice of SelfAttention

1. Discovering the negative “what is” mode of ourselves that appear as images within our dreams or imagination.
2. Everyday for several weeks accepting this negative identity as our own.
 - A. Mode of being the automatic caretaker.
 - B. Mode of being in which one was unable to fly into the horizon.
 - C. Mode of being in which one’s sensuality and sexuality stiffen.
 - D. Mode of being in which one own power.
 - E. Mode of being in which one turns away from aggressive and competitive individuals.
 - F. Mode of being in which one is stuck and sunk up to his knees in a marshy swamp, with his parents and brothers looking down upon him.

Practice of Self Intention

1. With the acceptance of this negative identity comes the intention of “letting go” of it.
2. Imaginal exercises to be performed each day for several weeks to intentionally de-construct the particular negative mode of being.
 - A. See, sense and experience yourself fleeing the nursing school.
 - B. See, sense and experience yourself taking controls away from father and flying the machine.
 - C. See, sense and experience yourself escorting your parents out of your bedroom.
 - D. See, sense and experience yourself thawing out and making friends (playing) with black panther.
 - E. See, sense and experience yourself competing against each student in a leaping contest.
 - F. See, sense and experience extracting yourself from your own stuckness in the swamp and climbing to the levels of your parents and brothers.

