Cultural Daily

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Dreaming in the 21st Century: Dream Tending

Larry Brooks · Wednesday, May 20th, 2020

Dr. Larry Brooks was killed after being struck by a car on May 5, 2020, while walking near his home in Los Angeles's Arts District. Larry contributed several articles to Cultural Weekly describing his signature work in Social Dreaming. We are returning these articles to our home page each week to celebrate Larry and his vision. This article was first published on October 7, 2015.

When we approach dreams, we are entering what Freud called a "foreign country" the unconscious, the repository for our unacceptable impulses. Jung expanded the idea of the unconscious and described it as "that cosmic night which was psyche long before there was any ego-consciousness and which will remain psyche no matter how far our ego-consciousness may extend." Bosnak simply called it the (1) "uncontrollable unconscious." The world is always coming to us. Our psychic membranes distance us from experience. Through dreaming we become vulnerable to what comes to us and goes unnoticed.

If dreams are messages from the inner-beyond, and possess an intelligence beyond our intelligence to grasp, how do we optimally approach dreams? Dream tending is a way of working with dreams developed by Stephen Aizenstat. It is a non-interpretive approach that creates an imaginal space, a theater for the dream to enter the waking world.

Two qualities are foundational to dream tending: how the dream images are regarded, and the disposition of the dream tender. Aizenstat says, (2) "Dream images are not representations of our personal nature only, but are also informed by the subjective inner natures of the things and creatures in the world." They exist "in the wild place of dream time, and have their own intelligence." According to James Hillman, (3) "dreaming is a source of imaginal information from a psyche that is not merely mine, attached to my brain and within my skull," but connected to the *anima mundi*, an intrinsic connection between all living things on the planet.

Dream images have a dual existence, a semi-autonomous presence that exist beyond the parameters of the individual mind. To the extent that we simply interpret a dream, we limit ourselves to the parameters of our interpretive system. The dream image is like a boat moored to a dock. The image reveals more of itself, individuates, when it is unmoored and allowed to drift. Hillman states, **"**Dreams call from the imagination to the imagination and can be answered only by the imagination."

Dream tending is more a way of being than a technique. It prioritizes the importance of the dream tender's personal dream practice. The term was chosen to emphasize a relationship to the dream

characterized by curiosity and caring. The dream tender is not an authority but a guide. Dream tending is quintessentially improvisation, a playing with images, an attunement to affect, an overarching curiosity, and vigilance to the ever-present machinations of the interpretive ego. The dream tender is encouraged to meet the dream with patience and the curiosity of a tourist in a foreign country, to attend to the dream with "soft eyes," and deep listening that empties the mind of pre-conceptions.

Dream tending builds on the work of Hillman. His theorizing about dreams led to a radical approach to working with dreams**.** (3) **"**We must reverse our usual procedure of translating the dream into ego-language and instead translate the ego into dream-language. Dream images ask us to hear, see, feel, and think differently. "This means doing a dream-work on the ego, making a metaphor of it, seeing through its reality.**"** Within this framework, interpretation prematurely fixes a meaning to the dreams often to relieve anxiety in the encounter with the "uncontrollable unconscious."

Dream tending utilizes the techniques of free association, amplification, and animation. Free association was developed by Freud to tap the unconscious. It is a radical, subversive method of giving voice to the unconscious by encouraging the individual to say whatever comes to mind. This method links dream images to deeper meanings found in the personal unconscious. Amplification is a technique developed by Jung to expand the dream image, connecting it to the collective unconscious. Amplification links dream images to archetypal themes found in myths, movies, and literature that have universal meanings relevant to humankind.

Animation is the heart and soul of dream tending. It views the dream image as a living image that needs to be animated rather than interpreted. Tending the dream utilizes expressive and enactive techniques to bring the dream image into the present, to make it alive, so that it can be observed and interacted with, so that the images can individuate, and reveal their multidimensional meanings.

Animation involves an intuitive scanning of the affective currents in the dream. When a resonant image is identified, the dreamer is asked to name it, describe its significance, and imagine that image in the room. Who is visiting and What is happening now are two basic orienting questions, alternatives to asking, what does this mean. "Who …" invites the shadows of the dream image into active dialogue. "What is happening here" focuses on the present experience of the dreamer in relationship to the dream image. Through the interaction between dreamer and dream image, the image takes on new meanings, and the dreamer begins to experience the image differently.

Dream tending example. An individual in a dream tending workshop presented the following dream to me: "*There are six qualities intense and deep forming a rectangle, with someone standing with each one. I am standing with Death. There is a sense that all these qualities are about to be infused into David from the television show Six Feet Under. He is standing across from me. I understand that this is whole-making. That this is making David whole"*.

When she first told me the dream, I was struck by the abstractness of the dream. It seemed full of a dark, impenetrable emptiness. I asked about the other qualities in the dream. She said she couldn't remember any of the other qualities. I felt like I was moving around in a dark room clueless to any openings. I asked for her associations to the tv show. She described watching *Six Feet Under* when it first aired and she was involved in a significant relationship. The show is about a family of undertakers who live in a large craftsman house in Pasadena that serves as funeral parlor and their

dwelling. Recently she started watching it again that coincided with beginning a new relationship.

She strongly identified with the character of David who she described as sensitive. She expressed a strong identification with David and I asked her to imagine him in the room. She did this easily. Her ability to use active imagination made my dream tending much easier. After a while, she said, he was different than in the show. He had an edge of aggression. He conveyed the feeling that he could take care of himself. She talked about how difficult it was for her to integrate aggression in her life. She said, “It was like a rock that my ship kept breaking on.” She described feeling very stuck and sad. I asked her to imagine telling David about her struggle with aggression. She was silent for a very long time. I was impatient and I asked what she was noticing. She said with a sharp edge to her voice “I am getting to it, but it’s taking time.” I backed off, struck by the authority of her tone. She imagined a discussion where he conveys to her not with words but a “sense image” that aggression is part of nature. She then noticed that he was changing and taking on the personality of Walt Whitman. At a funeral in the show, a section of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass w*as read.

The session was close to ending. She had been moved by the way she had experienced aggression. I asked her, if she could imagine taking this new sense of aggression beyond our dream tending. She felt pretty confident that she could apply this in different aspects of her life, especially her new relationship. As we discussed the session, we both were amused by her edge of aggression that had been directed toward me.

There was more to this dream than my initial reaction feared and what was captured in the dream tending session. Death and Walt Whitman were not touched on, nor the implication for how she might bring this more assertive sense of herself into her new relationship.

The dream was not interpreted. An imaginal space was created that encouraged the dreamer to interact with the dream image of David. Animation of the image brought into the present an emotional engagement with aggression that represented a stuck point in her life. Interacting with the image of an edgy David facilitated a new positive, experience of aggression that was not destructive. She embodied this feeling in her interaction with me when she told me not to rush her. Had we only talked about her conflict, there would have been less of a transformative experience.

The surprising aspect of the work occurred when the image of David transformed into Walt Whitman. It lent credence to the notion of the “living image” that has an evolving life to be realized imaginatively. When you sit with an image and observe it rather than interpret it, you enter a transitional zone, in between what is known and what could be known. The potential space is a source for creative thinking for recognizing what Bollas has described as the (4) “unthought known.” The challenge of dream work is to be able to inhabit that transitional space and tolerate the not knowing that is the field upon which dreams live.

An epilogue. She later emailed the section of *Leaves of Grass, “Song of Myself*” lines *115-122* that was read in 6 feet under and some of her reflections.

> *What do you think has become of the young and old men?*
> *And what do you think has become of the women and children?*
> *They are alive and well somewhere,*
> *The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,*
> *And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,*

And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.
All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what anyone supposed…and luckier.

As we worked the dream, this is the nature of death that I experienced in the "quality" of Death that I stood with in the dream, and ties into how I experienced the David figure as "Whitmanian"– understanding the cycles of nature, which include both bounty and destruction. In that way, I experienced aggression as natural as the destructive forces of nature that kill and break things down so that they can become food for the next life cycle. "All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses," including aggression. I think those of us with a fear of aggression do fear that it will collapse things.

The David figure being made whole through infusion of these dark, intense qualities was profoundly reassuring. There was a solidness about him, even a kingliness– the quiet assurance and power of someone who is standing firmly in their whole character, nothing split off, nothing rejected. He was replete with himself, resplendent in his completeness. (I am reminded here of the Christian verse in which Jesus says, "Be perfect, as I am perfect"– and how I learned that in the Greek, it is better translated as "Be complete, as I am complete.").

1. Bosnak, R. (2007). *Embodiment: Creative imagination in medicine, art, and travel*. London: Routledge.
2. Aizenstat, S. (2011). *Dream tending: Awakening to the healing power of dreams* (Pbk. ed.). New Orleans, La.: Spring Journal.
3. Hillman, J. (1979). *The dream and the underworld*. New York: Harper & Row.
4. Bollas, C. (1987). *The shadow of the object: Psychoanalysis of the unthought known*. New York: Columbia University Press.

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