Cultural Daily

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Dreaming in the 21st Century: Social Dreaming Part One

Larry Brooks · Wednesday, November 18th, 2015

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 November 18, 2015.

Who was she who made love to you
in your dream, while you slept?
Where do the things in dreams go?
Do they pass to the dreams of others?
And does the father who lives in your dreams
die again when you awaken?

Pablo Neruda, *Book of Questions*

Dreams have been part of our history as a species. In certain indigenous cultures, they occupied a central role in society. They were shared in groups, told to shamans, and used to guide important decisions as well as critical to healing.

With all the gadgetry, virtuality, and possibility intrinsic to our age of technology, there has been a turning away from the inner world and a disconnection from the self. Social dreaming is an attempt to recover qualities of being, thinking, and relatedness that have been lost as a result of post-industrialization. It is a way to work with dreams developed in the 1990's by Gordon Lawrence, an English psychoanalyst. Social dreaming, or "dreaming the social" as Lawrence has also described it, brings individuals together to share their dreams.

Dreams by their nature both enrich self-experience and stretch the boundaries of the self. Social Dreaming sees the dream as having both individual and collective meanings. Intertwined with the personal, dreams contain the shared anxieties, desires, traumas, and hopes of the culture, reflecting the circumstances of the human condition.

Social dreaming attempts to create a psychological space that is receptive to the influence of the dream world. Lawrence coined the term *social dream matrix* to capture the generative potential of collaborative dream work and to differentiate it from groups that focus on interpersonal dynamics.

The matrix encourages the emergence of unconscious thinking that shifts individuals from an egocentric perspective to a socio-centric one, from a rational, logical point of view to one of reverie and imagination. The dream is not only the "royal road" to the unconscious, but is also a bridge connecting individuals to each other at deeper levels of psychological experience.

The Self. Social dreaming views the self as a composite of self and other qualities. We are more alike than we presume. This contrasts with the prevailing ideology of industrial society that views the individual as a self-contained, distinct and autonomous entity. Social dreaming conceptualizes the boundaries of the self as porous, extending beyond the skin into the world, enabling transpersonal factors to be absorbed. This conception of self is not easily recognized given our ego and its attachment to the idea of the Individual, but it is represented by shared emotions and images that are often unnoticed. It is the basis for empathy.

The dream. Social Dreaming sees the dream as embodying social and personal meaning. It is a source of un-realized potential, tapping the unconscious well of mystery and creativity. Dreams open the individual to the infinite, the mystical and transcendental dimensions of reality. This infinite world of psyche can be thought of as a collective mind-stream that is the milieu of individual subjectivity. Lawrence states, "The dream is always enlarging the space of the possible. Through the dream we are brought into tension between the finite (that which we know) and the infinite that which is beyond our ken."

The dream is an imaginal experience to be realized, an inherent disturbance that defies logic and resists interpretation. This is why dreams are often so disquieting and puzzling. According to Lawrence, "The dream is an anticipatory parallel state of our being-in-the-world." In other words, it is about something yet to be known. The dream asks the dreamer to suspend logical thinking and to allow the dream to provoke associations, feelings, images, memories, and new ways of thinking. While there is value in interpreting dreams, especially within a therapeutic context, social dreaming sees the power of the dream in its ability to modify, deconstruct, and transform our thinking process. Insofar as it is disturbing, disruptive, and subversive, it is within an arena of play that its novelty emerges, enabling one to see what hasn't been seen before.

Billy Collins poem, *Introduction to Poetry*, captures this playful quality of dream work.

I ask them to take a poem   ?and hold it
up to the light   ?like a color slide
or press an ear against its hive.
I say drop a mouse into a poem   ?
and watch him probe his way out,
or walk inside the poem's room   ?and feel
the walls for a light switch.
I want them to waterski   ?across the
surface of a poem?waving at the author's
name on the shore.
But all they want to do?is tie the poem to
a chair with rope   ?and torture a
confession out of it.
They begin beating it with a hose   ?to find out
what it really means.

The Dream Matrix. To host and experience the intelligence of dreams requires patience, vulnerability, and a mind-set that is different from our rational mode of thinking. The social dream matrix creates an imaginal stage upon which dreams play out their drama. Certain conditions facilitate this process.

First, chairs are arranged in a snowflake pattern so that individuals are not facing each other, or sitting in rows. Lawrence did this to create an atypical environment to facilitate the suspension of our familiar expectations. Alternative chair arrangements can also be used such as a spiral or circle.

Second, individuals are asked to offer their dreams to the group and listen to the dreams of others as if they were their own dreams. Relinquishing personal ownership of the dream diffuses the boundaries of self-experience. It initiates the individual into the collective.

Third, rather than interpret dreams, individuals are instructed to free associate. Learning to think freely and imaginatively is a process. According to Freud, free association "is to surrender oneself to trains of thoughts, without monitoring them for importance, relevance, or whether they are nonsense or disagreeable." Whatever pops into one's mind is an association. Lawrence states, "It is the dream that is medium for discourse, not the individual." And in this medium it is the group that thinks through the individual. The group thinks associatively using dream images as the links.

Fourth, expressive techniques that utilize non-verbal and enactive means of expression are used to play with the dream images. Play accesses non-dominant, non-logical cognitive-emotional processes. What I am calling *dream play* adapts Stephen Aizenstat's technique of dream council. It is one of many expressive modes that one can interact with dreams. In this process individuals sit on the floor in a circle. Each individual selects a small, non-representational object to stand for a dream image. They describe the qualities that the image embodies. Individuals place their figure(s) in the circle that becomes an imaginal stage. They are asked to listen intuitively to the figures as they are positioned in relation to the others. The group takes several turns where they move their figures in relation to the other figures, sharing the feelings attending the movement. In this way the dream images interact as iconic guides leading the dreamers beyond the limits of language.

The social dream matrix alters the thinking process, enabling individuals to tap the group's unconscious mind. Through the sharing, associating, and "playing" with dream images, meanings emerge that enlarge the personal dimension of a dream and deepen one's connection to others. The group adds multiple layers to the dream that loses its individual identity, and the many become one communal dream. The individual is de-centered from a narcissistic perspective and is oriented to the collective.

Bibliography & Links

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Conversation between Anthony Blake and Gordon Lawrence

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