

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Dreaming in the 21st Century: Social Dreaming Part Two

Larry Brooks · Wednesday, March 16th, 2016

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 March 16, 2016.

Said Conrad Cornelius o'Donald o'Dell.

“So now I know everything anyone knows.

From beginning to end. From the start to the close.

Because Z is as far as the alphabet goes.”

Then he almost fell flat on his face on the floor

When I picked up the chalk and drew one letter more!

A letter he never had dreamed of before!

And I said, “You can stop, if you want, with the Z.

Because most people stop with the Z.

But not me!!!

In the places I go, there are things that I see

That I never could spell if I stopped with the Z.

I'm telling you this 'cause you're one of my friends.

My alphabet starts where your alphabet ends!”

On Beyond Zebra! – Dr. Seuss

Social dreaming is the experience of bringing people together to share their dreams. Developed by Gordon Lawrence, the social dreaming matrix ™ creates an imaginal space that awakens the psyche and enables the interplay of the group's unconscious as participants deepen their relationship to the dream images through free association, expressive enactments, and reflection.

The goals and the experience of a social dreaming matrix vary depending on the particular group and the individual facilitators. Gordon Lawrence in his edited books *Social Dreaming @ Work* and *Experiences in Social Dreaming* presents various applications of social dreaming. It has been used in organizational consultancy, conflict resolution, and to explore creativity. [George Bermudez Phd.](#) and [Matt Silverstein, Ph.D.](#), two local Psychologists, see social dreaming as a means to create a community oriented psychoanalysis. They are particularly interested in giving voice to marginalized groups and healing the wounds compounded by social victimization.

In this essay I will describe the experience of participating in a social dreaming group. Whatever the stated goals of a particular group, social dreaming invites the unconscious into the room, an invitation that opens the door to novelty, uncertainty, complexity, and inevitably anxiety. Robert Bosnak in his book *Embodiment: Creative Imagination in Medicine, Art and Travel*, has described the encounter with the unconscious as “dream-worker’s panic, the moment of utter helplessness upon entering the world of uncontrollable unconsciousness.” The social dreaming matrix represents a theater for the unconscious that creates an imaginal space to give shape to unconscious experience.

Why experience this unsettling strange, uncomfortableness? In *Dreams and the underworld*, James Hillman states “The world’s soul echoes and moves its imagination in my dream.” The world is always coming to us. Waking consciousness distances us from this experience through such mechanisms as denial, distraction, and dissociation. In the night we are open to the world in a unique way. When you open the door to the night through dreaming, you become more open to what comes to you during the day that goes unnoticed. We dream to see the depth of the waking world.

Gordon Lawrence describes the social benefits of being in touch with one’s unconscious in the following way: “Provided we can remember our dreams, we can have confidence that we are in touch with our unconscious, and if we can associate to them, and use amplification, we are on speaking terms with our unconscious. If that is made possible, we can minimize the possibility of being caught up in psychotic-like social processes, because we can speak with our own psychosis.” To be “on speaking terms with our unconscious” helps us become attentive to projective mechanisms that distort our interpersonal perceptions, create confusion between our internal world and external reality, and undergird interpersonal conflict.

Social dreaming begins with an initial relaxation exercise that transports individuals into a waking dream-like state. Participants are then asked to share dreams. Some individuals bring dreams that have been active in their imagination and others allow the group setting to activate a dream. Participants are not required to share dreams. Dreams that are shared are offered to the group as a way to initiate a process of relinquishing individual ownership of the dreams and diffusing the boundaries between self and other. Participants are asked to listen to dreams as if they were listening to their own dreams. In this way individual dreams are linked to the collective dream experience.

There is often an uneasy silence at the beginning of dream sharing. Who are these people that I am exposing my inner psyche to? What will they think of my dream and of me? That dream is too crazy, too sexual, or too violent. The invitation to share dreams prompts the ego to vocalize its concerns. Social dreaming is a process of learning to loosen the ego’s grip on the self. Social dreaming is an unlearning process that takes time. Hillman says, “Dreams call from the imagination to the imagination and can be answered only by the imagination.” Social dreaming initiates an experiment in imaginal thinking that can be both disquieting and unburdening as one moves from an active, focused mode of understanding to a more receptive, passive mode of experiencing.

A dream is shared. *I’m in a tunnel under Gaza and I’m blindfolded like an American hostage. There’s a woman, someone close to me who is South African and Jewish and is standing behind me. She is guiding me. I keep wanting to go in a certain direction and she says “no.” I’m angry and my heart swells because I know she loves me and I trust her.*

Other dreams follow. *I’m in a living room, upstairs. I’m leaping from one foot to the other, wearing a tutu. To my right is a mess under a chair, to my left is a man, a love interest from my past. I am concerned that I will be asked to leave soon. I am mournful, yet super excited about where I will go next. There is a mirror in front of me and I’m by myself, leaping...leapt, just*

elevated.

Each dream is recorded so we have a record of all the dreams. An individual might share more than one dream. A time limit is established at the beginning and a two-minute signal is given as the group nears the end of dream sharing.

Free associations follow dream sharing. Each dream is read back and then associated to. Participants are instructed not to interpret dreams or try to uncover hidden meanings, but to listen to the dream with an open mind and let the dream evoke feelings, images, thoughts, and memories. Whatever pops into the mind or is felt in the body is an association. The initial challenge is to not suppress experience. There are no wrong associations. All associations have value.

The dream is like a boat moored to a dock. Most approaches to dream work examine the dream from the dock. Free association unmoores the boat, releasing dream images to drift on the wild currents of the imagination. Hillman states, “We must reverse our usual procedure of translating the dream into ego-language and instead translate the ego into dream-language. This means doing a dream-work on the ego, making a metaphor of it, seeing through its reality.” Free association further decenters the ego, a process of letting go in order to unmoor one’s conventional understanding.

The associations to the second dream follow. *You’re already living. The feeling of weightlessness. The too-too-muchness of things. Shame hidden in the pile of feces under the chair. Changing your life. Leaving things behind. Exuberance, glorious self expression. Mixed feelings about Kohut and self psychology. Hearing movement and playfulness. Pink. Little girl. Father figure. Letting go. What to do with old lovers and shame. Pirouette dance. Excitement for the unknown, unfettered, unweighted down, unknown future. Energy. Who is beckoning me? A shadowy sense that even if you leave it, there will be things you’ll have to deal with. Left behind. You can run but you can’t hide. The guide is the one that says no sometimes. Self conscious about dancing, feeling awkward. I love myself. Boots or ballet slippers. Footwear, omg! These boots are made for walking...or leaping. No choice. All choice always a choice. No good deed goes unpunished. I’m flying. Self-consciousness in the self reflection. I’ve already left. I’m remembering. It’s hard to be grounded. I feel so disgusted. Upstairs Downstairs and TV shows from the 70s. Why be grounded? Flights are grounded because of weather. People are grounded because of bad behavior. Thinking you’re gonna hide your stuff that you leave behind under the chair. Near dust bunnies. Human skin cells. Like Ganesh. Remover of obstacles created from the sloughing off of the skin. Is it my living room? Rules of ballet. Ganache and Gavroche.*

The associations are unruly, chaotic, silly, and confusing. The associations seem endless. Free associations leap over the wall of reason. Additional dreams and associations follow. Pandora’s box has opened with vehement delight. The dreams talk to each other through the associations. Associations are made to the associations. The dream is neglected under the onslaught of associations. I am feeling increasingly lost, confused and unsettled. The challenge is to find balance between the tendency to overly control the process through interpretation and the wild and unruly chaos created by a group that is freely associating. And this balance is as elusive as the dream.

After free associations, there is a short break. Dream reflection follows. It calls for a more focused mode of thinking. Dreams are read back as one continuous dream. Dreams are not analyzed for their individual meaning. The group looks for themes that appear in the material within and across the dreams. Efforts are made to see similarities, contrasts, and connections among the dream stories.

Dream engagement is the evolving, most experimental phase of our adaptation of social dreaming. Expressive techniques are used to access the non-verbal aspects of experience. So much of our psychological experience is embodied. Primary emotional experience that is not formulated or

processed is embodied and or projected into the world of things and others. Embodied experience is the unconscious breathing through our body, curdling in our stomach, aching in our neck. Early traumas can reside in unintelligible somatic states. Language alone cannot access this experience. The body has a story to tell that is dissociated from the mind.

There are different expressive techniques that can be employed from sand tray to mask-making to psycho-dramatic enactments. Our group has been experimenting with dream play based on a procedure Stephen Eisenstat developed called “dream council.” He uses dream council as a way to deepen one’s personal relationship to dream images bringing the power of the dream into one’s life. The dream council consists of a group of figures that represent important dream images. The council is like a personal cabinet consisting of unconscious dispositions encompassing the wide range of psychological experience. He will bring questions and concerns to his dream council. He uses a form of intuitive knowing to enable the dream figures to communicate.

We have adapted dream council to be used in a group setting. Individuals sit on the floor in a circle. They are asked to think of one image from the dreams that have been shared, to select a figure from a collection of figures to represent the image, and to think of a few words that describe the qualities or personality of the dream image. The play begins with individuals describing their figure to the group and then placing their figure in the circle. Individuals are told they can only move their figures. As figures are placed in the circle, the group is asked to be attentive to the feelings and sensations that are evoked by the movement of the figures. They are challenged to feel into the figure, to feel its intentions, desires, and reactions: to become their dream figure. With each turn, individuals express their feelings and reasons for placing their figure where they did. We repeat this process several time in order to allow the dream figures to interact with each other.

In this phase we are inviting dream images to interact with each other in an imaginary space. The group focuses on the relationship among dream images rather than on the relationship among individuals. It is the dream that is medium for discussion, not the individual, and the dream figures that direct the action.

The following dream images were named: Unformed Potential, Blue – Reflective, Intimations of Immortality, Transformation, Evolved Self, Nature connected to earth, Bi-morphic – Moving Backwards and Forwards, and Mad Max Dark Side. Except for Mad Max the images selected were abstract and positive representing potential and transformation. There seemed to be little space for darkness or dissension. Due to time limitations we had only two rounds. There was little conflict in the movements. The figures ended up in a straight line, with the figure of Nature slightly misaligned on the far right in the picture below.



The images and the interactions in dream play suggested a strong pull toward harmony and actualization of potential. Simultaneously there seemed to be an avoidance of images of darkness, difficulty and negativity even though the dreams contained conflict. It was interesting that while the figures aligned themselves “harmoniously,” the figure of Nature was out of alignment, suggesting that perhaps something was missing or out of sink in the dream play.

A social dreaming group is an experiment exploring the deeper psyche and the outer edges of thinking. This social dream group was open-ended without any particular focus or agenda except to see what emerged when individuals shared their dreams and associations. The experience generated excitement and energy in the group. Some individuals reported that their personal dreams expanded in meaning. In another social dreaming group one participant made a collage of her dream and I wrote a poem based on the free associations to the dreams. Sometimes in the aftermath of the group there is a flurry of dreams that were stimulated by the experience.

Social dreaming is activating. There is a process that occurs subliminally, a learning curve whose curriculum is unconsciously scripted. There is an evolving, dialectical relationship between

unconscious and conscious processes that social dreaming nurtures and illuminates. Over time as one becomes tuned to the rhythms and languages of the dream, a more intimate relationship develops between waking and dreaming realities.

Image Nswatugi Cave Paintings created by Stu. Used under creative common license.

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