

To Integrate or to Overcome

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I am a full-time professional dreamworker. This means simply that people pay me to help them make better use of their dreams. In order to be helpful to a wide variety of people in a consistent and reproducible way I have learned to follow a few guidelines that keep the work on track. One of the most important of these guidelines has to do with threatening figures that appear in dreams.

When a threatening figure appears in a dream, you and the dreamer together must determine if the figure represents something essentially positive that should be met and integrated, or something essentially negative that should be overcome.

This determination should be made as soon as possible, because until it is made, the dreamwork session will tend to remain muddled and confusing. Rainwater falling onto a watershed must ultimately run in one direction or another; it cannot remain uncommitted. Similarly, in dreamwork we must commit to one direction or the other—either attempting to integrate the threatening figure **or** attempting to diminish its influence. If we don't do this the dream may be fascinating but it won't go anywhere, it will remain atop the watershed with its potential energy unused.

Typically the dreamer will not know which direction to choose;

this is why they need your help as a facilitator.

Surprisingly, it is often a difficult distinction to make, because the unconscious mind does not clearly indicate which figures in a dream represent something truly harmful and which figures seem intimidating but are ultimately positive. Many of the scariest characters that appear in our dreams are in fact trying to bring great gifts to us—disowned, repressed, and unknown aspects of self. I call these the **shadow figures**, borrowing the term from Jung and using it with, I believe, quite a similar meaning. They are true parts of self but they are still living in the shadows, they have not yet been allowed into the light of who we believe ourselves to be.

For example, here are two dreams from the same dreamer, a twelve year old girl. Both dreams contain frightening and threatening figures, but in one case the scary figures represent a positive potential in her psyche that should be supported and integrated, and in the other case the negative figure represents a negative and limiting fear that could (and ideally should) be overcome.

Before we delve into these dreams I would like to clarify two key aspects of my style of dreamwork:

First: The dreamer must want to work on the dream. After all, many people love to talk about

their dreams and think about what they might mean, but they don't particularly want to *work with them*. Once you are doing dreamwork you are actually committing to doing some work. You are not just engaging the meaning of the dream, you're actually doing something in response to understanding it. You are facilitating a change in that person's psyche. One lesson I've learned over the years is that dreamwork is not for everyone.

Second: Any insights about the dream and the elements in it must be arrived at together with the dreamer, and this insight must feel accurate for both the dreamer and you. This is what I call the "double resonance test"—you and the dreamer know together that you have hit on an accurate insight because you are both in a state of resonance.

Here is the first dream: **A Swarm of Teenagers.**

"I'm at my house. I look out the window and I see a whole bunch of kids from the school behind our house coming over the fence into our back yard. I'm terrified. I run and lock the back door, the front door, and the side door; I lock all the doors. But I forgot one door—the door in the basement! They went to the basement but I locked it just in time. They're begging to be let in but I just ignore them . . ."

As we discussed the dream I asked

the dreamer if the teenagers were actually doing anything harmful or nasty. She replied that no, they were just wanting to come inside. This is the hallmark of the shadow—a part of self that is kept outside wanting to come inside. The shadow does not want to cause harm to the total psyche, although it may need to cause a bit of mayhem in order to allow for growth.

I asked her, as an exploratory exercise, to imagine letting one of them in; not the whole swarm, just one of them for now. She proceeded to do this in her visual imagination. (We are now doing active dreamwork; starting from the state of affairs depicted in the dream we are exploring a possible new direction.) I asked her if the teenager was being nasty or harmful now that it had been allowed inside. She replied no, that she seemed grateful and friendly. Then she was able to imaginably let in the whole group, and the feeling continued to be friendly and even exciting.

This is an example of what I call a **positive shadow shift**—as soon as the dream ego is able to encounter the shadow figure and allow it to come in, a very characteristic shift in feeling tone occurs. A figure that had seemed threatening and dangerous moments before now shifts into something positive and exciting. This piece of dreamwork has supported a gradient of psychological growth that has been trying to happen but has been held back by fear; in this case the fear of change, of maturing and developing, the fear of becoming a teenager herself.

Here is her second dream: **The Ghost in the Mausoleum**

“My family and I were at the cemetery. We saw that the door of

one of the big stone mausoleums was open, so we decided to go in and check it out. When we were about to go in I felt something weird. I heard some loud noises. I saw a ghost, a white and gray form. It had a wide-open mouth and an angry face. Maybe it was mad that we were in its mausoleum. I thought it was trying to possess me or kill me or tell me something. It didn’t say anything though, it just made a hissing noise at me. The rest of my family didn’t notice it, I was the only one who saw it . . .”

As we discussed this dream I was struck by the fact that she had said: “Maybe it was trying to . . . tell me something.” Was this ghost trying to deliver some message that only she was able to hear? So I asked her directly: Do you think the ghost is trying to give you a message? She thought for a while, then replied: No, he’s just trying to scare me. When I asked her why it was that she was the only one in the family who could see the ghost, she replied: I’m the only one in my family who would be afraid of a ghost; the rest of them aren’t afraid of anything like that. Soon we arrived together at a resonant insight about the ghost—it represented her fears; fears that would often spiral out of control in her imagination, fears that nobody else in her family was subject to.

I then asked her what she would like to be able to do with these fears; she said that she’d like to get rid of them. Now we are shown the desired direction of the dreamwork—not meeting and integrating the ghost, not listening to what it might want to say, but getting rid of it. (Of course any of these other possibilities could have been true at another time for another ghost and another dreamer; you would not know without the dreamer showing you the way to the best response.)



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So the response we came up with was to have her imagine yelling at the ghost and telling it to “GO AWAY! STOP SCARING ME!” When she did this (in her imagination at first, then practicing out loud in my office) she felt she might now be able to do something in relation to her fear states; perhaps she could actually stand up to them and tell them to leave her alone.

Thus in this case we were led to an overcoming response, not an integrative response. Every case is different. As you listen to your client’s dream, remind yourself that you don’t need to know the answer; you just need to know that you need to discover, together with the client, what it is before you move on to do further work with the dream.

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