

## Working With Dreams in a Health Care Setting

by Christopher Sowton

A few years ago, while looking at a copy of the Utne Reader, I came across a quote that caught my eye:

*“Puzzling out what a dream might mean is hard enough. But there’s a deeper question: What does it want?”*

The article was called *“Exploring the Power of Healing Dreams”* by Marc Ian Barasch (Utne Reader, Nov-Dec 2000). I found the article fascinating, but it was this simple quote that really stayed with me. So much so that I photocopied the quote and its wonderful accompanying illustration of a shamanic dream owl (by Joel Nakamura) and pinned it on the door of my consulting room, where it remains to this day.

As a naturopath and homeopath I have worked with my patient’s dreams in a health care context for about 25 years. Over this time I have developed a style of dreamwork that has two key characteristics—first, it puts relatively more focus on the information dreams give us about our health and disease; and second, it can be done in a relatively short time.

### **Doing dreamwork within time constraints**

As I suspect is the case for many health care practitioners who work with their patient’s dreams, I often find that I cannot devote as much time and focus to a particular dream as I would ideally want. I have often had to do my dreamwork quite quickly. This is all the more true because many of my patients have not necessarily signed up for dream therapy; they are consulting with me for their health issues. They and I are usually in agreement that dreams have a lot to say about our health and disease, but still they may not be ready for an hour long immersion into the depths of their dream, as fascinating as that may turn out to be.

When we have the luxury of a willing client and lots of available time it is wonderful to explore all the associations and possible meanings of the dream figures, the setting, the feelings, etc. In the end I believe this kind of method usually allows for the richest and fullest experience of the dream. But, sadly, the choice is often between working *quickly* with the dream or not working with it at all. So—I have long grappled with the question: can we get significant benefits from dreamwork within a relatively brief time frame? Here are three techniques I have used successfully to shorten the time frame of dreamwork; they are all well suited for use in the helping and healing professions:

### **Change the starting point from: *“what does this dream mean?”* to: *“what does this dream want?”***

Most dreams are asking for something. They want the dreamer to actually *do* something in response to understanding the message they have just received. By asking the question: *“what does this dream want?”* early in the process rather than later there tends to be an accelerating, a jumping ahead towards the punch line (rather like turning to the end of a mystery novel and finding out who done it without taking the time to enjoy all the middle chapters). It doesn’t work with all dreams, and some nuances may be missed, but this kind of ‘cutting to the chase’ may be the best option for some types of client, for some types of dream, and for some types of situation.

Here’s an example—let us take the very common dream motif of a frightening figure trying to break into the house. If we start from *“what does the dream want?”* the dreamwork session might go something like

this:

First, you (the facilitator) ask yourself and the client:

*“Why would your (dreammaker/unconscious/inner guide/higher self/etc.) send you this dream now? What does it want you to do?”* Or simply: *“What do you think your dream want you to do?”*

Most clients will respond with some version of: *“Well, usually in these dreams I am too frightened to go to the door and confront the figure, but I think that my dream is telling me that I should go to the door.”*

We now know that the dream is referring to a potential meeting that the client’s unconscious *wants* to take place. It is *setting the stage* for an encounter that could be critical in the evolution of the dreamer’s personality. Using Jungian terminology we might say the dream is setting the stage for an encounter with *the shadow* (as Marie-Louise von Franz said: *“in our dreams we are often assaulted by parts of our own personality”*); although I would say rather—the dream ego *fears* that it will be assaulted, although typically no such assault actually occurs in this type of dream. By using this shortcut we have approached the *meaning* of the dream within a few minutes. It means that some new part of the dreamer is emerging and trying to *get into* their sense of who they are, but the dreamer will not let it in because of fear.

This method is particularly suited to those of us who work in the helping and healing professions, because dreams constantly ask us to make changes—changes in behavior, lifestyle, mental attitudes, priorities, even how we handle our habits and addictions. In every one of us there is a constant stream of feedback and advice coming from the inner healer, and much of it comes through the dream life. So, if the health care practitioner holds the question: *“what are this person’s dreams asking for?”* they are in a good position to help the client tune into this inner guidance.

For me holding this question has led to another question, related and perhaps deeper—*what does our unconscious want for us?* I suppose we all have our own answers for this question, but for me the answer must contain the following elements: SELF-AWARENESS, GROWTH, WHOLENESS, and HEALING. In other words I believe that there is something in us that *wants us* to be conscious and self-aware; it *wants us* to grow and evolve; it *wants us* to be whole and not split apart by trauma; and it *wants us* to heal in whatever ways we can. This is why I think it is so valuable for those of us who work with dreams to practice putting the focus onto *what the dream wants*.

### **Zero in on the element in the dream that the dreamer is least identified with**

Another effective way to cut to the chase in dreamwork is to pick one key element or figure in the dream and zero in on it. How do we know which element to pick? This is often a matter of intuition, but here is a good tip: pick the thing in the dream that the dream ego is *least identified with* (ie: frightened of, intimidated by, angry at, fighting with, running away from, in awe of, etc). It is very likely that the dreamer’s unconscious wants them to change their attitude to, or relationship with, this element.

Let’s take for a working example a dream recently reported to me by a 27-year-old woman who is struggling to establish her independence from her parents:

*“I am in my parent’s house. I’m doing ear acupuncture on a childhood friend. My Dad is there watching, and he is critical of what I’m doing. He’s saying that this kind of thing doesn’t really work. I defend it and*

say that it does actually work. My Mom is also there trying to defend me. I put a big thick needle into the top part of her ear and it splits the ear, like splitting a piece of wood along the grain.

Then—a big wind starts to blow. It pushes against the house so strongly that it bows the windows, like they could blow in and be shattered. I am exhilarated! Then the wind lifts the house right up off the ground and moves it to a new location, and turns it around so that it faces in a new orientation. I feel unsettled—the house is not where it used to be, but nothing has actually been destroyed.”

There are many interesting elements in this dream that we could work with—the splitting ear, the critical father, the defending mother, the thick needle, the lifted house... but let's imagine that we have only ten minutes available. What would you do? If you begin by zeroing in on the element that the dream ego is least identified with—the big wind—you will have a good chance of helping the dreamer towards making a resonant connection even in this short amount of time.

There are many ways to help the dreamer explore the possible meaning of the big wind. Here is a brief summary of some of the options, starting with the subtlest and most time-consuming and proceeding towards the quickest and most direct:

**asking for associations**—ie: *What do you make of the big wind?* or *What do you associate with the big wind?* or *What does that kind of wind mean to you?* etc.

**ask the dreamer if they can identify with the part**— *“Can we look at big wind as a part of you? What part of you would it be?”* or *“Can you identify with the big wind?”* or *“The good thing about this big wind coming would be \_\_\_\_\_.”* *“The bad thing about this big wind coming would be \_\_\_\_\_.”*

**highlight and ask** (highlight and reiterate the qualities of the dream element, and ask the dreamer if she sees any of those qualities in herself)--*“So, the big wind in the dream wants to blow your parents house off its foundations and move it ...is there a part of you that wants to do that?”*

**ask the dreamer to be the part**— *“Be the big wind”* or *“Imagine that you are the big wind”*. Some people are able to do this very readily and will need no further prompting—they will immediately be experiencing the energy and the purpose of the wind right before your eyes. But, if they have difficulty, ask them to say out loud that they *are* the big wind, then ask them and complete any of the following (or similarly constructed) phrases:

- *“I am the big wind”*
- *“I want to \_\_\_\_\_”*
- *“My (purpose/plan/goal/intention/hope) is to \_\_\_\_\_”*
- *“What I (want/need/fear/hate) most is \_\_\_\_\_”*
- *“I will not leave (dreamer’s name) alone until \_\_\_\_\_”*

These techniques all have their time and place, so if your first choice is not working well be prepared to switch gears and try another approach. In this instance I used the third option, the *highlight and ask*—I asked her if there was a part of her that wanted to blow her parent’s house off its foundations. *“Oh yeah!”* She had no trouble getting into the power and anger of the wind—*“I want to rock them! I want to blast them! I don’t want to really hurt them or damage anything, but I want them to see me differently! I want them to treat me differently!”*

Asking for associations can be a very mixed bag—sometimes it brings out the richest and most unexpected treasures; other times it starts us off on one false trail after another. If someone is defending (either consciously or unconsciously) against the insight that the dream is trying to present they will be able to do this most readily if the associative method is in use, for the simple reason that they can put forward any number of associations, each of which the dreamworker must treat as possibly valid and worthy of consideration. It is the most respectful and the most careful way to do dreamwork, but also the most time-consuming.

### **Be prepared to hand it back to them even if things are unfinished**

The third thing that I do a lot in my practice is *hand the dreamwork ball back over to the dreamer*. In the dream example given above the dreamer has clearly arrived at a resonant understanding of the dream's message. But she still needs to figure out what an appropriate response in her waking life might be. Clearly her unconscious *wants* her to change something in the relational field with her parents, but what should she do? The dream is very clear that it does not want her to do anything really destructive, just something that would impact her parents and help bring about a change in their orientation.

But our ten minutes is up! Your next client is in the waiting room, and it's time to wrap things up. So you need to say something here that ends the session but keeps the dreamwork alive. What it amounts to is assigning a form of *homework*. (I know that some people don't like to give homework and a lot of clients don't like to do homework, so you may want to present it as something else.) The critical thing is that the client invests a bit of time and energy to carry forward the process that you have begun together.

In the case of the *Big Wind* dream I simply asked her to devote some time to thinking about her options-- what she might she do to exert some healthy impact on her parents? Then we would discuss this at her next appointment. Of course you (the facilitator/dreamworker/therapist/doctor/etc) you need to make sure you live up to your end of the bargain and remember to check in about this issue at the next appointment.

There will be times, unavoidably, when you are *not* able to arrive at a satisfactory understanding of the dream before your time runs out. In these instances the 'homework' could be to ask the dreamer to keep thinking about the key figure or element in the dream (*eg: Over the next two weeks just imagine that you are the big wind starting to blow against your parents house. When you do that you may make some connections to what the wind is, and what it wants. Just write down anything comes to you and bring it to the next session*"). Again, you are putting the onus onto the dreamer to keep the dream alive and hold the thread of continuity until the dream's message has been understood and responded to.

Using these three techniques I have found that a great deal of valuable dreamwork can be done within the constraints imposed by time and by the need for other concerns to be concurrently addressed within a health care visit. I don't like to 'squeeze in' my dreamwork if I don't have to, but I'd rather do a little squeezing and shortcutting than leave an important dream unattended and eventually forgotten.