

The Psychology of Dreams

Dreams tend to combine two very different qualities. First of all, they often feature persons or things or places that are familiar, often from the immediate past. However, they also tend to feature a paradoxical quality of unfamiliarity, illogicality, or strangeness. When the dreamer awakes this juxtaposition results, in extreme cases, in deep unease, or even terror, but usually simply a feeling of slightly comic bafflement. This aura of paradox that imbues the dream comes about because the dream is an inhabitant of two contradictory realms at one and the same time. It is true that the dream seems full of images of people, things, landscapes that we know in our conscious lives, but it has nonetheless emerged from the literally unknowable unconscious. When we return to the day-world, the dream often seems like a jumbled piece of nonsense, but this is simply because the unconscious, even when utilising the imagery of the conscious world, is not speaking the language of consciousness.. Wittgenstein said that if a lion could speak we would not be able to understand him. If we are lucky we can sometimes get the feel of a dream, but usually when we have discarded all the analytical tricks of thinking that we have laboriously learned, and are finally able to trust in our *not-knowing*, which invites the unconscious itself to help us.

Jung rejects any dogmatic theory of dream interpretation. Nonetheless he works on the assumption that dreams do have meanings, and that a well interpreted dream can add something important to our conscious knowledge. The dream, Jung insists, will never tell us something that we already know. If a series of dreams seems to be making the same point over and over again, it is because we have not yet understood what that point is. Invariably the point of the dream involves compensation. This is a characteristically Jungian idea, which assumes that the psyche is constantly attempting to regulate itself. When our conscious attitude becomes too one-sided we have dreams that attempt to help us to correct this imbalance. For example, a person who has a periodic tendency to withdraw from the difficult and sordid entanglements of the world into a position of superiority dreams that he is walking on long stilts, and stumbling over rough ground. If he can recognise the image as reflecting his conscious attitude then a whole dimension of which he has hitherto been completely blind can become suddenly visible.

Von Franz compares this event to suddenly seeing ourselves through the eyes of another - something objective that views us from the outside. But this notion of compensation is not as simple as it sounds. Because our knowledge of the psyche is inevitably limited it is not always easy to see where the compensation lies. General rules simply do not work, because the nature of the compensation depends on the whole nature of the individual. This is why it is crucially important for the dream interpreter not to come to dreams with a ready-made technique that can be applied to everyone.

Moreover, though many dreams are clearly compensatory in nature, to overemphasise compensation seems to devalue the unconscious in favour of consciousness. One should not fall into the trap of thinking that the unconscious is simply there to give us helpful hints on psychic balance. Sometimes the dream seems more prospective than compensatory, and then an extraordinary intuitive overview of the situation can become apparent. Von Franz differentiates two quite different aspects of the dream: one, where the dream appears to give advice, clearly nudging us in one particular direction and another where it seems quite impersonal, simply showing us the way things are. Often the so-called **big** dreams are of the latter kind, leaving us with a wonderfully numinous sense of our place in the scheme of things. It is these dreams that remind us in the most

satisfying way that there is infinitely more to the unconscious than a source of compensation. Jung even suggests that we should view consciousness as compensatory to the unconscious.

As to the contents of our dreams, the images themselves seem to fall into two broad categories: 1. People, places and things that we know in conscious life 2. Those that seem to have no conscious association. When looking at a dream it is important to know which is which. Therefore Jung recommends a meticulous working through of all the images, picking up all the feeling-toned resonances associated with each image, if they can be located. If not, one can sometimes get to the heart of an association by asking the patient to describe the object as though to someone who has no idea what it is. After all, it is never simply a chair that is dreamed, but this specific dreamer's idea of chair, and that may be very different from the analyst's idea of chair.

This brings us to the question of objective and subjective levels of interpretation. If I dream of someone I once knew many years ago I should probably interpret their associated qualities on the subjective level, i.e. as an aspect of the dreamer: myself. If on the other hand I dream about my wife, who I see every day, the dream is probably saying something about my actual objective relationship with her, though we must remember that even here a certain amount of subjectivity is required. After all, it is not my wife in the dream, but my image of her - how she appears to me - and the two are not necessarily the same. Jung tells us that 'the whole dream work is essentially subjective, and a dream is a theatre in which the dreamer is himself the scene, the player, the prompter, the producer, the author, the public and the critic.' What is certain is that it is hard to emphasise enough the level of knowledge of the conscious attitude of the dreamer that is required for dream interpretation.

Moreover it is important to bear in mind the context of the individual dream within the ongoing series of dreams. Over time, certain motifs will be revisited again and again in extraordinarily inventive ways. A dream series will also point to any mistakes in interpretation, helpfully allowing a second chance.

When we are faced with images to which the dreamer has no association, Jung says, rather dauntingly, that it is important for the interpreter to have an extensive knowledge of mythology, folklore, anthropology and comparative religion. This is so that he may recognise the archetypal imagery, and not mistakenly try to squeeze it into the strait-jacket of the patient's consciousness. Even with symbolic material, Jung emphasises that one must stick as close as possible to the dream images. Amplification should, through a circumambulation of the symbol, reveal more by looking back at the image from different viewpoints.

However, perhaps the most important thing Jung ever wrote about the dream is that the wise interpreter should approach every new dream saying to himself, 'I have no idea what this dream means,' and prepare for the unexpected. This is much harder than it sounds and means suspending all one's experience in dream interpretation and forgetting everything one knows about archetypal motifs, and simply allowing psyche to meet psyche, without trying to know the answer. One must brave the terrifying void, and only then, if we are lucky, something may come. Nor is it enough for the analyst to feel that she has interpreted the dream correctly. If the interpretation means nothing to the dreamer then nothing therapeutic has occurred. The process is a mutual discovery of meaning or it is nothing.

Finally, a strikingly beautiful description of the dream by Jung:

The dream is a little hidden door in the innermost and most secret recesses of the psyche, opening into 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. . . All consciousness separates; but in dreams we put on the likeness of that more universal, truer, more eternal man dwelling in the darkness of primordial night. There he is still the whole, and the whole is in him, indistinguishable from nature and bare of all egohood. Out of these all-uniting depths arises the dream, be it never so infantile, never so grotesque, never so immoral.

CW 10, par. 304