COUNSELLING IN PRACTICE

Counselling with Dreams and Nightmares

Delia Cushway &
Robyn Sewell

Series Editor:
WINDY DRYDEN
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E. THOMAS DOWD

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Counselling in Practice is a series of books developed especially for counsellors and students of counselling which provides practical, accessible guidelines for dealing with clients with specific, but very common, problems.

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Preface

We have been friends and colleagues since 1969, and we began to develop our Dreamwork in 1985. Our interest was initially stimulated by the casual picking up of Patricia Garfield's book *Creative Dreaming* from a bookshop shelf. We have never met her but owe her a debt of gratitude for starting us off. We have also been inspired by Ann Faraday, Strephon Kaplan Williams and the other authors we've mentioned in this book.

However, our book could never have been written without the unstinting contributions of the many people who have attended our workshops, particularly at Vaughan College, Leicester, and the Westminster Pastoral Foundation, London. We would also like to acknowledge our many clients who have given of themselves generously. To all these our thanks.

Most of the dream material in this book has been drawn from our workshop participants and clients. Names have been changed, as have some of the dream details, to protect anonymity. Where people have specifically wished to be included, we have used their proper names and actual dreams. In this respect we particularly want to acknowledge the contribution of Annette Greenwood, whose brave and creative use of her dreams has been an inspiration. We also wish to thank our friends Mary McMurran and Chris Gilbert for their dreams and their support.

Delia would like to say a special thank you to her sister, Alison Jaggar, for her ongoing love and encouragement as well as for providing a base in the Rockies to write part of this book.

Finally we would like to thank Windy Dryden for his helpful and perceptive editing, Barbara Hudson for her skilful use of the word processor, and Susan Worsey at Sage Publications for her enthusiastic encouragement of this project.

Delia Cushway and Robyn Sewell
June 1992

To Ben Cushway and Mary McMurran
for their love, loyalty and support

Delia

To Geoffrey Sewell and Thelma Milton
for their interest and encouragement

Robyn

Allow your dreams to come to your aid
and they will, and they do.

Terry Waite
BBC Radio 4
26 June 1992

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Introduction and Background to Dreamwork

Introduction and aims

We believe that our dreams belong to us the dreamers and are thus accessible to us to interpret, to use creatively, to gain wisdom from, to play with or, if we choose, to ignore; it is up to us how we make sense of them. For the last seven years we have been running dream workshops and we want to share with you the methods that we have developed in our workshops and found helpful in working with our own dreams and those of our clients.

Our interest in dreams first arose from our familiarity with Gestalt techniques, which we had used for many years in our dreamwork. In 1985, we ran our first Dream Workshop under the auspices of Leicester University's Adult Education programme. Our first workshop drew heavily on our Gestalt experience but, encouraged by the interest and demand for our workshops, we began to develop our ideas and incorporate the other approaches that we are going to present to you in this book. Our approach is thus eclectic, rather than psychoanalytic. We have found that this allows people to make sense of their dreams in a way that is helpful and meaningful to them and therefore believe that it offers a valuable approach to working with dreams.

We have now, together and separately, run almost a hundred workshops and courses. They were initially intended for people interested in understanding their own dreams but increasingly participants, who have included counsellors, teachers, members of the clergy, psychiatric nurses, art therapists and psychologists, wanted to learn ways of helping clients and others to understand their dreams. We owe our workshop members a great deal; they have contributed much to the process of developing and evolving the ideas described in this book.

When we began to talk to people about dreams we discovered that, although historically dreams have been regarded as significant both for individuals and for cultures, in more recent times they have tended to be seen either as irrelevant or else as accessible only

through the medium of expert analysis. In general it was difficult to find commonly used ways of integrating dreams into waking life, even though some parts of our culture do use dreams as resources. The art world and the worlds of music, literature, drama and films have all given dreams the status they deserve as individual imaginative experiences we have and create for ourselves. Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote 'The language of the dream/night is contrary to that of waking/the day. It is a language of images and sensations, the various dialects of which are far less different from each other than the various day-languages of nations.' But many people nowadays regard dreams as either irrelevant or perhaps as revealing rather shameful sexual, aggressive or guilty feelings which they do not fully understand. Some people report having had frightening nightmares for many years which they are able neither to understand nor to control. Another common viewpoint is encapsulated by the person who declared 'There's nothing as boring as listening to another person's dreams.' It appears to us that many people today seem to be alienated from their dreams and see them as somehow disconnected phenomena that are outside their control and yet can have the power to frighten them. Many people do not attempt to integrate dreams into waking life, rather they choose to distance themselves from them or trivialize them.

When we started our workshops, we anticipated that participants would be primarily interested in the paranormal aspects of dreams, for example, predictions or telepathy, or in learning more about psychoanalytic theories of dream interpretation. Our expectation was based on the fact that these seemed to be the two main aspects of dreaming available in the public domain. However, from our very first workshop, we were surprised and delighted to find that our expectations were not fully met. There was indeed interest in both of these areas, but the majority of people have attended our workshops because they have been fascinated by their own dreaming. To varying degrees, they had remembered, recorded and tried to make sense of their dreams and were looking for ways to try to understand what they knew to be an important and undervalued aspect of their lives.

When we talked to our colleagues in psychology and counselling we found that many were at a loss when presented with clients' dream material. As acknowledged by Means et al. (1986), dream interpretation has remained a neglected technique in most contemporary counselling and psychotherapies. Means suggested two primary reasons for this: 'First, just as dreams are considered mysterious phenomena, the process of dream interpretation has

often been considered a complex and abstruse art. Second, dream interpretation often has been linked to particular theoretical orientations, and methods of interpretation have been infrequently applied outside these orientations' (1986: 448). Working with dreams was thought for many years to be the prerogative of psychoanalysts, since dream material was a product of the unconscious mind and was thus, by definition, not readily available to us. Those committed to an analytic point of view, such as many counsellors who have been trained on psychodynamically-orientated counselling training courses, see dreams as valuable but rarely feel they have sufficient training to interpret them. Those belonging to other orientations often have eschewed dream material. Thus psychologists with a behavioural or cognitive-behavioural training have generally left dream material well alone. With the exception of Gestalt counsellors and therapists, who are usually trained to use dream material, many practitioners working in a humanistic, experiential way with 'here and now material' have not wished to 'interpret' dreams. As a result only those clients in analysis and Gestalt therapy have been encouraged by their counsellors and therapists to present dream material.

Academic psychology, too, has largely ignored the study of dreams and it is interesting to look in a little more detail at the reasons why this has been so, since it has been a major reason for the failure to develop strategies for using dream material in counselling and clinical situations. Haskell, a US dream researcher, states that, since 1900, when Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* was first published, academic psychology has consistently refused to recognize the legitimacy of dream data. He comments: 'It is a curious irony in the history of psychology and science, however, that psychologists concerned with scientific evidence should conclude on the basis of folklore, as well as Freud's ostensibly unscientific analysis, that dream data were not appropriate phenomena for scientific research. It would seem at a minimum that the more scientific course would have been to conduct research before rendering a conclusion of this magnitude' (1986: 134). Haskell goes on to discuss the reasons why dream data have not been considered significant scientifically. One reason is that dreams have generally been considered primarily as sensory and visual-pictorial phenomena and have therefore been viewed as perceptual rather than cognitive events. Also, dreams have generally been considered to be irrational and bizarre, that is, lacking in logic and reasoning. These perceptions may help to explain why, until recently, cognitive psychology has largely ignored dreams, although it doesn't explain why perception and information-processing

psychologists have ignored them. Haskell also considers that, as a result of the Freudian legacy, dreams were considered to be pathological phenomena and were thus relegated to the status of 'interpretive' case studies which were not methodologically controlled. This further reinforced the view that dream data were unreliable and invalid as cognitive data. It was believed that waking thoughts and feelings were so different from dreams that the latter would have little to contribute to cognitive psychology.

Although the exact similarities and differences between waking and sleeping cognitions, or thoughts, have still to be established, many of the similarities between dreaming and waking cognition have been pointed out by researchers. Webb and Cartwright (1978), in their review of the status of dream research, gave two general explanations for the paucity of dream studies. One is the attitude that dreams, being available only to one person, and thus unobservable by others, cannot be studied by the intersubjective methods proper to scientific study. Another reason for the lack of research is a practical one. The working conditions under which dreams are collected are difficult ones. Experimenters must gather their data at night while subjects are sleeping and expensive sleep laboratory equipment is needed. Thus most studies have had few subjects and have not been replicated. Also, the nature of dreams makes it difficult to carry out some kinds of studies; for example, nightmares don't seem to occur under sleep laboratory conditions. There are thus many reasons why the study of dreams and dreaming has not been accepted into academic research. The view of the US dream researchers cited above is that we can no longer afford to ignore the important cognitive data found in dream states and that any adequate model of cognition should be able to explain both waking cognitions and dreams. We agree with their conclusions and appeal to researchers to pay more attention to dreams so that the methods and strategies we describe in this book can be evaluated and developed.

To summarize: It is our belief that we do not have to be trained analysts to understand and own our dream material. All of us, if we so choose, can make sense of our dreams in a way that is helpful and meaningful to us. All of us should also be able to incorporate our dream material into our waking lives both to increase our self-awareness and to extend our creativity. It is our aim in this book to describe our model and methods of working with dreams and nightmares so that they will be more accessible to counsellors, mental health professionals, or to anyone who has a desire or a need to work with their own dreams.

While this book is intended as a practical guide, it is helpful to

begin by considering dreamwork in a historical perspective while briefly considering some of the types of books on dreams that are available. The review is not intended to be comprehensive but rather to guide the practitioner to useful or important material. We shall focus primarily on the psychology of dreams, i.e. on dream interpretation, rather than on the psychology of dreaming, or the process of dream formation and the psychophysiology of sleep and dreaming. However, although the majority of this book is about dream interpretation, we think it is important for counsellors to have some basic understanding of the process of sleep and dreaming. Thus, in the final section of this chapter, we will set dream interpretation in the context of psychophysiological sleep and dreaming research, explode some common myths about dreaming and provide basic factual information as a background to the practical work which will follow.

Historical perspective and brief review of relevant literature

Ancient civilizations

Dreamwork and dream theories have an ancient and rich history with religious, spiritual and paranormal links. In ancient times dreams were seen as messages from the Gods to warn, prophesy and encourage. Some of the earliest recorded information about dreams comes from the ancient Egyptians, who saw dreams as devices of the Gods to communicate helpful information to mankind. There were basically two prescientific ways of interpreting dreams. The first method was to take the content of the dream as a whole and to interpret its meaning in another context. An example given by Freud and cited by Ullman and Zimmerman (1983) is the Old Testament story of Joseph dreaming that his brothers' sheaves of corn bowed down before Joseph's sheaf. The brothers took this as a sign that one day Joseph would be King over them. The second method was to use a 'cipher', whereby every image in the dream was looked up in a dream book. The ancient Greeks also interpreted dreams as messages from the Gods, particularly with healing functions. The ancient Greeks were not the only people to experience miraculous cures in dreams. The ancient Hebrews, Indians, Chinese, Japanese and Muslims all practised dream incubation; this was a practice whereby people would pray and ask for God or the Gods to send a message via a dream that would provide the answer to a problem or suggest the cure for an illness. Most religious theorists today would not regard dreams as literally expressing the voice of God. A less literal and more

contemporary religious viewpoint is represented by the work of Sanford (1968), who believes that it is the creative element in dreams which is divine. He is more concerned with the divine at work in the human soul rather than with elaborate creedal formulations.

Even though we do not believe that dreams are literally messages from the Gods, we do believe it is possible to learn a lot about creative dreaming from ancient dreamers, who used their dreams in special ways to gain answers to their questions or to obtain cures from sickness. In her book, *Creative Dreaming*, Garfield (1974) explains that it is not necessary to believe in a special God or go to a sacred place to employ dream incubation. She states that the main essentials are to find a place where you feel peaceful, clearly to formulate your intention for a desired dream and to relax your body, concentrating on and visualizing your desired dream. (More detailed instructions in dream incubation will be given later in this book.) Clearly, the element of self-suggestion is important and can be as powerful as external suggestions like hypnosis. So one important thing we can learn from the ancients is that it is possible to induce healthful images into our dreams. We believe that changes in dreams may change our waking attitudes which, in turn, may well affect our emotional and even physical well-being. Other ideas inherited from ancient dreamers are that dreams are prophetic, that they can foretell the future, but a detailed discussion of this is not within the scope of this book.

Native Americans

While we do not have space (or expertise) to document the countless cultural uses of dreams, we should like to give special attention to certain Native American tribes which assigned special importance in their lives to dreams. The ways that Native American cultures used dreams varied: often dreams were a part of the religious systems and provided a way for the dreamer to contact supernatural spirits and gain power from them. In consequence dreams were also often a part of the social system with a special status and role assigned to the dream interpreter. Dreams were almost universally used to predict the future, with rituals to get rid of bad dreams or to encourage good ones. They were sometimes used to manage psychological problems, a kind of early psychotherapy, in which dreams revealed wishes or indicated that certain rituals should be applied. Garfield (1974) documents these ideas more fully and suggests that we can learn from the Native Americans that, if we regard our dreams as important in our lives, we will receive and remember valuable dreams. She also suggests

that our dreams will become more relevant to waking life if they are valued and used. Another important Native American concept is that of the value of obtaining 'dream friends'. The American Indians encouraged offers of friendship in dreams from 'spirit guardians'. Garfield suggests that all friendly gestures in dreams should be accepted and appreciated. In the Senoi culture, which has been described by Garfield as well as Stewart (1969), dream interpretation represented the focal activity of day-to-day living. According to these writers, the Senoi, a tribe living in Malaysia, have achieved a high degree of internal and interpersonal integration on the basis of the communal analysis of dreams. They have pioneered and developed this as a method of psycho-social exploration. More reference will be made later in the book to Senoi techniques and their ways of working with nightmares.

Medieval religion

The coming of Christianity did not significantly alter ancient dream theories until around 300–400 AD, when Jerome, a church father and a contemporary of Augustine, had particularly tortured and troubled dreams and warned against false dreams and the possibility of demonic influence. Dreams then became associated almost exclusively with witchcraft and those who paid attention to them were regarded as superstitious. Dream theories did not undergo much development through the following centuries, since the belief was encouraged that dreams were not from God and must be ignored. This view was strongly reinforced by the medieval Church, which was the dominant authority on thought and behaviour. The word of God had been given to the church and ordinary people did not need God to speak to them through dreams; those who made such claims were viewed suspiciously or condemned. Certainly, it appears that wise people would not have talked about their dreams in the Middle Ages. Rycroft discusses reasons for this devaluation of dreams and considers that it is only within the twentieth century 'that dreams have aroused serious scientific interest and have been regarded as being as deserving of investigation as the shared objective world we perceive when awake' (1981: 1). He argues that prior to this time dreams, as subjective phenomena, were regarded as inherently resistant to the scientific method, at least as generally understood.

Twentieth century dreamwork

All modern dream workers consider that Freud's work, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900, reprinted 1976), marks a crucial turning point in the history of the study of dreams. In the next chapter we