



Dissonance as the First Cause

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I had just become licensed in 1982, when I received a call from a therapist from North Carolina who wanted to refer a client to me. He had heard about my work with dreams, and thought that I might be able to help a woman who had seen him briefly before relocating to Virginia.

My office was upstairs in our modest home, and clients had to pass through the kitchen to access the stairway. It wasn't the best set-up, but my clients accepted the arrangement without complaint. When Sally and her husband arrived for the first time, they both attended the session. He gave me a brief rundown of her treatment to date. Sally had been seen off and on for several years by Nathan Klein, the nation's foremost expert on depression, and had been flown to New York to receive treatment from him, and to participate in various studies in which the latest antidepressants were being tested. Sally and Mark reported that each medication had brought temporary relief at best before proving to be wholly ineffective. Klein had recently died, and Sally was as depressed as she'd ever been. She admitted that there wasn't a time when she couldn't recall experiencing severe depression. Feeling hopeless, she had tried to commit suicide twice in the past year, the latest being only a couple of months before seeing me for the first time. Her attempt would have been successful if her husband had not miraculously rummaged through her underwear drawer while she was presumably sleeping, and discovered her suicide letter. Unable to rouse her, Don had immediately called for help, and had narrowly saved her from a lethal dose of a tricyclic antidepressant.

Sally had been orphaned by her mother when she was 5. Living two years in the orphanage with her younger brother, Sally was eventually reclaimed by her mother. Then a few years later, she was raped by her alcoholic stepfather. Afraid to tell her mother, Sally kept the painful secret to herself. Then when she was 17, her biological father came back into her life. She was hopeful that she would finally have a parent who would protect her, that is, until he began trying to sexually molest her.

As you might imagine, my initial efforts to help Sally proved futile. She would accommodate my efforts to help her, but she never had much to say, and her mood never wavered from abject hopelessness. She admitted on one occasion that she would jump off a tall

building if she could only find the energy to climb the stairs. However, there were two things that, over time, proved helpful in her treatment. First of all, I showed her respect. Shortly after setting up twice-a-week appointments, I admitted to her that I had been as depressed as she was, that there was a rational basis for her suffering, and that I needed to listen to her, and to learn from her. In response, she brightened visibly, and said, “No one has ever listened to me.”

The second thing that proved invaluable was working with her dreams. No matter how despondent she was, Sally would perk up almost imperceptibly whenever I asked her about her dreams, and would always share her latest dreams no matter how badly she felt. One day, within a couple of months after beginning treatment with me, she shared a dream that provided me with the hope that she would, in time, recover from her lifelong depression.

I have returned home from being away for some time, and my family is having a picnic beside a lake. But when I arrive, no one greets me. I see a platter on a picnic table, on which there is the remains of a large fish. When I go to serve myself, I find that there’s nothing left to eat—only bones. For some reason, I take the platter down to the shore of the nearby lake. I bend down and lay the platter in the water, and as I do, the fish comes to life again. Its colors shimmer in the sunlight, and it swims away.

I have told this simple dream to thousands of people over the years, principally to illustrate what I believe is the most important function of dreaming: to provide an opportunity to resolve a state of inner tension or dissonance by responding to the problem in a new way. Indeed, when it comes to explaining the arousal of dreams, I favor Montague Ullman’s answer, which he introduced in a little-known paper in 1969.

The day residue, reappearing in the dream, confronts the individual either with new and personally significant data or forces a confrontation with heretofore unrecognized unintended consequences of one's own behavior. There follows an exploration in depth with the immediate issue polarizing relevant data from all levels of one's own past in an effort to both explore the implications of the intrusive event and to arrive at a resolution. (Ullman, 1969)

Ullman theorizes that when the ego’s vigilance subsides during sleep, it becomes aware of emergent content that has not been integrated or processed. This “encounter” creates a *dialectical state* — that is, a sense of tension or dissonance between two polarities or positions that, in turn, gives rise to the dream. Rossi similarly describes this initial state of tension as a crisis that promotes the need for a solution. And, as Jesus is purported to have said in the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*, “When the one becomes two, what will you do?” Whether one interprets this encounter as a conflict or division within oneself, or between oneself and the world, the question still remains, How does one resolve the tension or dissonance that “twoness” evokes?

Sometimes a dream will show evidence of a client’s eventual recovery early in the therapeutic process, not because of some conscious breakthrough in the waking life, but because the client possesses the unacknowledged, unconscious resources that will eventually prevail over the emotional distress. Since my approach to dreams—then and now—is to focus principally on

the dreamer's responses as evidence of latent competencies (or conversely, of chronic maladaptive reactions), this dream was a powerfully positive event, in spite of the obvious implications of her initial isolation in the dream, and the lifeless fish which had fed everyone except herself. It would have been easy, from a content-oriented perspective, to focus on the obvious implications of the imagery. But from my perspective, these sources of insight were far less significant than Sally's response, which was near-miraculous in the context of her utter sense of brokenness. Upon hearing the dream, I said, "*Sally, you did a remarkable thing. You took the fish to the water and assisted it in finding new life. No one did that for you! It should tell us that, in time, you will participate in your own recovery.*" Students of Solution-Focused Therapy will recognize the fact that I was seizing upon an "exceptional moment" in the dream in order to leverage Sally into a recognition of her own unacknowledged agency. But more importantly, I believed it.

Sally's dream became the evidence that we both needed that she would eventually recover. It became the centerpiece of hope on an otherwise barren table. Keeping this event in the forefront of our therapeutic work, I reminded her of the dream of the fish again and again over the course of our years of work together. And each time I would remind her, her face would light up just a little bit, in spite of her bleak outlook. And one day, years later, I said goodbye to a woman who had been restored to life by an unyielding commitment to participate in her own recovery.

Sally's dream demonstrates the transformative impact of creative dreamer responses. Of course, most dreams do not end in such glorious fashion, but more often indicate how the dreamer might be responding unproductively to certain unresolved aspects of life. When dreamers present their dreams, they don't often see what could have happened, because they do not reflect on their actions within traditional dream work. Instead, they focus on the imagery—the "symbols" which, according to content-focused dream interpretation, are the carriers of meaning. In contrast, the Co-Creative Paradigm shifts our attention to the dreamer's responses, or lack thereof, as the centerpiece of dreamwork.

Another example of the dreamer's responses comprise the centerpiece in co-creative dream analysis can be seen in the dream of another client—a young woman whom I will call Gayle. My work with Gayle initially revolved around her addiction to cocaine and alcohol, which had been used to mask or medicate an underlying emotional wound originating in childhood. Her initial efforts in therapy were focused on achieving sobriety and maintaining relationships with men that would support a sober lifestyle, even though the virtual absence of a father following her parents' divorce when she was two left her especially vulnerable and dependent in relationships. As a spiritual seeker deeply committed to change, she meditated daily, attended 12-Step meetings religiously, and began to use the counseling relationship to explore her underlying emotional distress stemming from childhood. It turned out that when she was two, her father took up with another woman, and when her mother found out, she suffered fits of rage, and started drinking heavily. As part of her need to punish her husband, Gayle's mom largely prevented him from seeing his daughter for several years. Meanwhile, unable to control herself during bouts of heavy drinking, Gayle's mother would become so enraged by the little girl's crying that she would, on occasion, put a pillow over the girl's head until Gayle nearly blacked out.

Her mother's "suffocating" behavior assumed a variety of forms, and continued through Gayle's adolescence. She would relentlessly pressure Gayle, a gifted dancer, to pursue a career as a ballerina. Gayle was able to gain admission to a prestigious dance school, but she knew that she would never rise to the world-class status that her mother envisioned. Eager to evade her mother's control and disappointment, Gayle resorted to skipping classes, and lying to her mother about her progress.

Our work commenced a few years later when Gayle was a young adult, living on her own and maintaining a job as a waitress. It revolved around helping Gayle set better boundaries with her mother, reestablish a close relationship with her father, and to forge healthy relationships with men. Her transference issues were evident in her dreams, in which she would often dream of being an important part of my life, even part of my family enjoying the felt security of being in my home. Despite maintaining her sobriety, and developing a stable relationship with a man who, in time, wanted to marry her, Gayle could never accept motherhood as a course of her own development: She was deathly afraid of becoming like her mother. Not surprisingly, when she became pregnant two years before entering therapy, she had coldly pursued an abortion without a second thought. However, the experience turned out to be emotionally and physically excruciating. However, no amount of therapy, or the restructuring of her relationships with her mother and father, seemed to resolve her core fear, spawned by her own mother's vicious treatment of her. The last thing she wanted was to give birth to her own child. As it turned out, it was literally the final development in her therapy, as evidenced by a dramatic dream.

I am standing on the shore of Lynnhaven Inlet, outside the restaurant where I work. I look to the right, where the Inlet opens up to the larger Chesapeake Bay, and I see a large wave moving into the inlet, and turning toward me. I see the black exposed back of a whale, which moves directly toward the beach. Somehow, I stand my ground as the head of the whale slides onto the beach and stops a few feet in front of me. The whale turns its head to the side, and looks at me, remaining still for a few intense moments. Its large eye holds me in its gaze, and I remain frozen. Then slowly it pulls away, leaving at my feet a tiny baby whale. Knowing that someone must care for it, I bend down and take it in my arms.

The initial scene of Gayle's dream conveys on a feeling level what can be regarded as Ullman's "first cause" of dreaming—that is, a state of emotional dissonance, whether it is experienced positively or negatively. As the wave appears, one can feel vicariously the dreamer's relative powerlessness in the face of its immensity. The dream interface beautifully coalesces the vast domain of mothering into the grounding metaphor of a whale, which we know to be as nurturing as it is overwhelming. This juxtaposition of dissonant qualities provides an avenue for healing that is too often unavailable to the waking self. It not only exposes her to the unresolved threat of her mother's overwhelming force and Gayle's relative powerlessness as the child, but through its silent presence elicits a new response from her that effectively emancipates her from the core fear of mother/mothering. The whale thus serves as a "contextualizing metaphor," which combines simultaneously the threat of being overwhelmed with the invitation to nurture new life.

Beyond the powerful metaphor of the whale, what is especially remarkable about this dream, and many of the others that we will examine, is Gayle's response to the encounter—her remarkable courage to stand her ground as the whale makes its approach. In the context of Gayle's past trauma, it simply does not make sense that she can do this. But in this singular act of fearlessness, one can see the fruit of years of therapy and recovery work that had fashioned a self strong enough to withstand the presence of the mother's power and regard, and find it within herself. By responding as she did in the dream, Gayle replaced the outer mother, once larger than life and fearful, with her own capacity to bear new life. Within a year of this dream, Gayle gave birth to her own daughter.

When the dreamer begins to understand that the dream comes to offer us an opportunity to respond in a new way to chronic unresolved dilemmas, or to emergent potentials that we have neglected to embrace, the dream work becomes a matter of trouble-shooting dream ego responses, and formulating "ideal" responses to subsequent dreams. This whole endeavor treats the dream as a form of "initiation," in which the dreamer has the opportunity to integrate what's being presented, or to thwart the process of growth by reacting to it in customary ways. When the dreamer begins to embrace the dream as an initiation test, then in effect, the dreamer accepts that the burden of change rests upon one's own actions. As dreamers, we become, as Ghandi once said, "the change that we wish to see in the world."