

DREAMWORK

dreamwork: a form of dream analysis, developed by Fritz Perls, in which the therapist asks the clients to enact their dreams in the following way: The individual is asked to “be the dream,” to retell it in the first person and in the present tense, as if experiencing it in the here and now. (“I am walking down a road by a field. There is a fence between the road and the field.”) He is asked to play each element in the dream, speaking from its perspective, whether it be a person, place or thing. (“I’m tired. I’m dragging myself slowly down the road,” “I am the road. People step on me. I hate that.” “I am the fence by the side of the road. My job is to keep people in their place,” “I am the field, a beautiful place in which to run and feel free.”) The client is encouraged to enact this in a vivid and dramatic way, with not only verbal, but also visceral, sensory, and emotional involvement. The process may include a dialogue between two conflicting parts of the dream (“I want to run in the field, but the fence keeps me out,”) or between himself and something missing from the dream. (“I want to run, but I have no feet. What happened to you, feet?”)

The dreamer, not the therapist, is expected to interpret the dream. Any interpretation by the therapist is considered an interruption of the dreamer’s direct experience and may distract him from his own sense of the meaning of the dream.

The therapeutic goal of gestalt dreamwork is to help the client become aware of, identify with, and re-own alienated parts of his personality or body (e.g. the “fence” holding him back, or his lack of “feet”). Ideally, these parts are then integrated so that the person becomes more whole.

Discussion:

Perls saw the images in dreams as projections of disowned parts of the individual, as reflections of a fragmented self. Repetitive dreams bring up unfinished situations. Their reappearance reminds the dreamer of their need for completion and closure. Nightmares reflect the parts of our selves that we most hate or fear. Forgotten dreams can be dialogued with to find out why they keep themselves from us. (Clarkson & Mackewn, 1993, pp. 120-5)

Gestalt dreamwork differs in significant ways from other approaches to dream interpretation:

- Dream images have been seen as *symbols* in a “*secret code*,” where each image has one fixed meaning that can be looked up in an established key. Some symbols are fairly universal, while others may vary according to local cultural, folkloristic, or religious traditions. This “decoding” of dreams from an external source is generally not considered useful for Gestalt therapy, where the client’s experience of the meaning of the dream is thought to provide the most valid understanding.

- **Freud** saw dreams in terms of “*wish fulfillment*,” for the satisfaction of instinctual drives or for the resolution of conflicts between those instincts and social demands. Patients were asked to freely associate their thoughts, feelings, and memories to the dreams. From this information Freud interpreted the dream for the patient, who remained passive in the process. Under the manifest dream material, Freud would find the latent unconscious or repressed meaning, which was assumed to be inaccessible to the dreamer. Working in the context of the sexually repressed Victorian era, Freud tended to interpret images in a sexual way, seeing a snake as a phallic symbol, or a key in a keyhole as sexual intercourse.

- **Jung** introduced to dream analysis the idea of *archetypes from the personal or collective unconscious*. Archetypes are primordial inherited forms of imagination in the psyche, motifs found in dreams, folklore, religion, and mythology among all people throughout the ages. They include the Male and Female, God and the Devil, Goddess and Witch, the Hero, Lover, Shadow, and more. In Jungian dreamwork, there is a dialogue between the self and these archetypal images, which often

represent opposing polarities within the self. In addition, they bring the perspective that these experiences and ways of being are universal for all mankind.

Gestalt theorists, aside from Perls, have brought other perspectives to Gestalt dreamwork:

From found that a dream may be an attempt to undo a *retroreflection* that occurred during a recent therapy session. The dreamer may be saying something to *himself* that he would not or could not say *to the therapist*. (in Rosenfeld, 1978/1988, pp. 39-40)

Andrews, Clark, and Zinker expanded dreamwork into a *group experience*, in the tradition of psychodrama. Participants take on and act out the roles of different parts of a person's dream. (Andrews, et al., 1988, Zinker, 1971/1992)

Grey integrates the *Jungian perspective* into gestalt dreamwork. She sees archetypes as universal figures coming into the dream images from the larger field of the personal or collective unconscious. Thus, they would originally not be a part, or at least not an aware part, of the self. This differs from Perls' claim that all images arise from within the self. Through the Jungian methodology of Active Imagination, the self dialogues with the archetypal figures in the dream. This is congruent with Perls' use of dialogue between the parts of a dream. The difference in the Jungian approach, with its focus on opposites, is that the dialogue could be between the self and the "not-self." Like Perls' dialogues with "missing parts" of the self, this experience can expand the client's awareness of other possible ways of being. (2005, pp. 207-215)

Wollants emphasizes the *whole situation* of the dream, differing from Perls and From, who focus on the parts of the dream. He sees both as forgetting "to give priority to the dream as a whole," "The overall story of the dream becomes less important that way.... "The *totality* of the dream informs the elements. ...the dream *is* a situation, ...a story, ...a movement..." (see Wollants quotations below) (in Parlett, 2005, pp. 99-101)

Illustrative Quotations:

- **Perls:** "Freud called the dream 'the royal road to the unconscious.' I believe that it is really the royal road to *integration*." (1966b, p. 204)

- **Perls:** "The dream is...a message of yourself to yourself, ... every part, every situation in the dream is a creation of the dreamer himself. Of course some of the pieces come from memory or reality, but...what makes the dreamer pick out this specific piece? No choice in the dream is coincidental. ...Every aspect of it is a part of the dreamer ...that, to some extent, is disowned and projected onto other objects. What does projection mean? That we have disowned, alienated certain parts of our selves and put them out into the world rather than having them available as our own potential. ...therefore we must be left with holes, with emptiness." (1966, p. 27) "In dreams we find the holes in the personality. We find the person has no eyes, or has no soul; one has no genitals; another no legs to stand on. Whatever is missing in the dream is missing in this person's existence. The dream directly points out these avoidances to being whole." (Baumgardner & Perls 1975, p. 120)

"Let me warn you, there's only one great mistake you can make. That is to interpret. If you start interpreting, you're lost. You make an intellectual Freudian game of it, and at best you will be filing away some very interesting insights into some intellectual filing cabinet. And make sure nothing real happens." (1973, p. 181) In working with a dream, I avoid any interpretation. I leave this to the patient since I believe he knows more about himself than I can possibly know. ...The more you refrain from interfering and telling the patient what he is like or what he feels like, the more chance you give him to discover himself and not to be misled by your concepts and projections." (1966, p. 27)

- **Perls:** "My favorite example is this: A patient dreams he is leaving my office and goes to Central Park, and he goes across the bridle path, into the Park. So I ask him, 'Now play the bridle

path.’ He answers indignantly, ‘*What?* And let everybody shit and crap on me?’ You see, he really got the identification. ...only by really playing can you get the full identification, and the identification is the counteraction to the *alienation*. *Alienation* means ‘That’s not me, that’s something else, something strange, something not belonging to me.’ And often you encounter quite a bit of resistance against playing this alienated part. You don’t want to re-own, take back, those parts of yourself, which you have pushed out of your personality. (1969a, pp. 120-121)

- **John Enright:** “The first time I ever saw [Fritz] do dream work...was very touching. ...this gray-haired, somewhat depressed 55-year-old psychologist had had a dream about seeing some friends off at a railroad station. Fritz had him go through the dream as himself, as the friends, and as the railroad train. None of it seemed to produce much. The Fritz said, ‘Be the station.’

‘What do you mean ‘be the station?’

‘Just describe the station, only keep saying ‘I.’

‘Well, I’m old and dilapidated, not very well cared for, and actually out of date. Please just come and go and use me and pay no attention to me.’ And he started to cry.” (in Gaines, 1979, 135)

- **Andrews, Clark, and Zinker:** “Gestalt dreamwork requires the dreamer [to] become involved with his or her senses and body. Thoughts occurring without visceral involvement will leave a client intellectually engaged but unchanged.” (1988, p. 16)

- **Zinker:** “Perls did think of the dream in theatrical language. He spoke of the ‘characters’ on the ‘stage’ of the person’s existence. He had the dreamer ‘play’ the different ‘parts’ in his ‘production.’ ” (1971/1992, p. 77)

- **Zinker** (on dreams as a group experience): “...once the individual ‘played out’ his...dream and came in touch with himself in it, the whole group would take parts in the drama and actively participate in it. Thus, if the dream contained a rundown house, a crippled boy, his parents, and a station wagon, members of the group would pick roles that would seem relevant to their own lives. The dreamer helps the group understand his characters and the therapist facilitates the production of the dream as a dramatic acting experience for the whole group. ...People exchange roles, ...try out different interpretations of the dream’s content, ...spontaneously introducing variations in its process and modifying the outcome of the action.”

“The dreamer, the original creator of the ‘play,’ is not lost in the process; he can watch the drama or the nightmare or the fulfillment of a wish take concrete shape in front of him. He can move in and change the action. He can take over one of the roles and demonstrate it in detail. He can experiment with different outcomes: the crippled boy can become transformed into superman or a sadistic torturer...” (1971/1992, pp. 77-79)

- **Wollants:** “Someone is beginning to tell a dream, for example, ‘I am going out of your office and going to the park.’ And the therapist interrupts to say, ‘Be the park.’ But he doesn’t know yet what the rest of the story is – he doesn’t hear it. What happens when he is in the park? And what is he encountering? Perls wasn’t interested in the whole story.” (in Parlett, 2005, p. 100)

- **Wollants:** Little Red Riding Hood: “You are dreaming that you cannot avoid the wolf and that you are eaten by the wolf. What is the wolf? The wolf is what you are encountering at that moment in your life. The wolf might be overwork, stress, divorce, feeling depressed, grieving, loss – the wolf can be anything, but he is crossing your path in the wood, the wood that is your life. It is very simple to work with. It’s coming to what the dream is saying without any projecting or interpretation.

The situation presents itself. If we dream that the hunter comes along afterwards and kills the wolf and saves me, this is then a new, supportive situation.” (in Parlett, 2005, p. 99)

Last Update: 12/16/12

Stephanie Sabar, MSW, LCSW
Website: stephaniesabar.com