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Awakening to Dreams

LOUIS HAGOOD

ABSTRACT: The author recounts how shamanic dream incubation and lucid dreaming aided both his psychic healing in therapy and his physical healing of cancer through dream journeying in the imaginal. The imaginal is the realm of spirit and soul to the shaman, the unconscious to Freud, the archetypes of the collective unconscious to Jung, and transitional space between the “me” and “not-me” to Winnicott.

KEY WORDS: dreaming; Freud; Jung; Winnicott; shamanism; healing; psychoanalysis.

I attended the 2000 Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of Dreams in Washington because of the Mythic Journey Workshop sessions spread over the four days of the conference. Being a Joseph Campbell groupie when younger, I had trained in psychoanalysis to follow my bliss in the second half of life and felt that the Mythic Journey Workshop would combine Campbell and dreamwork. What I was not prepared for was the steady, rhythmic shamanistic drumming as I approached the workshop session. The mythic journey was more shamanistic than heroic and presented me with something totally new.

The sessions were designed to “disengage the imaginative mind from the rational mind,” which is exactly what the drumming did to me. I tightened my grip on my rational mind when the drummer in a feathered headband began slowly and gradually accelerating the beat while the attendees sat in a circle and visualized a dream image. The image I chose became too menacing as the beat picked up, so I focused on the comforting face of my analyst to soothe my growing anxiety.

Before leaving the workshop for the night, we were asked to stand and move to the drum around the circle, expressing ourselves as the spirit moved us while selecting a dream-incubation stone from the altar in the center. The stone was to be held in our left hand, our receiving side, as we slept that night.

Later I collapsed into bed clutching my smooth, coffee-colored stone, and as soon as I closed my eyes I was bombarded by violent hypnagogic imagery. I knew it would be a rough ride and held on tight. Soon the imagery organized

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into a dream of running along a path above a beach, arms and legs churning but feet not touching the ground as if I were flying. A powerful black man pursues me, faster than I, and I know he will catch me. He seizes me from behind and forces me off the trail, down onto the beach toward the water. I struggle but realize that my resistance will result in my anal rape there in the sand.

Freud would interpret my dream as an eruption of id impulse from behind me, due to the drumming, of course, that overwhelms me and drags me down to the waters of the unconscious. Jung would identify the black man as my shadow archetype, emerging from the unconscious to compensate for my lack of groundedness. The sea to Jung would not only represent the collective unconscious but the all-inclusive Self. Shamanistic practitioners would consider the experience an initiation of my ungrounded rational mind into the imaginal sea—an awakening to the imaginal, to dreams.

What is this imaginal sea? The unconscious to Freud was the repressed memory and desire, both libidinous and aggressive. Jung included the collective archetypes, our mythological heritage, with the repressed in the unconscious, the most significant archetype being the Self, of which the ego is but a small player. To shamanistic practitioners, the imaginal is a reality that parallels the concrete, the realm of soul. The imaginal is inhabited not by memory but by spirits of both the past and the future, outside of concrete time and space. We have a dream body that navigates the imaginal as our physical occupies the concrete. To the philosophers, the parallel worlds are the phenomenal and the numinous. The imaginal to Winnicott is the transitional space between me and not-me, the area of play and creativity—of dream. Therefore, the sea is the transitional space between the concrete earth and the spiritual sky.

In Winnicott's terminology, the dream is a conflict of duality, a trauma of otherness. The me running along the trail, feet not touching the earth is arrested by the not-me and dragged, kicking towards the transitional space of the sea where the conflict can be transformed into play. Through this transformation the false self flight along the trail, the manic escape, can encounter the true self in what appears to be a threat. Such is play in transitional space, in the imaginal, in dream.

In the closing session of the Mythic Journey Workshop, we were to present our myth or dream of return from our journey to the group. After more dancing to the drum, I introduced myself as Odysseus washing up onto the beach of Ithaka, home from his long journey on the sea and his encounter with the imaginal inhabitants he found there. There was much play, both aggressive and libidinous, with the inhabitants of the imaginal sea, that allowed Odysseus to return home awake to his true self, wiser than the warrior king who left for Troy.

What does it mean to be awake? The Buddha was awake. Tibetan dream yoga begins with the premise that life is a dream, both waking and sleeping, in which we seek consciousness in both states. Lucid living and lucid dreaming,

or awakening to the dream of life. Shamanistic initiations are an awakening to the imaginal realm that surrounds the concrete like the endless sea. Tibetan dream yoga is itself a shamanistic practice as is dream journeying like Odysseus's long voyage. In the Tibetan tradition, death to the concrete begins the dream journey to the imaginal realm of the bardos, and the goal is to remain awake throughout.

When I returned home to New York from the convention in Washington, I had a number of dying dreams. Our business was in crisis and our daughter was leaving for freshman year of college, so I considered the dreams symbolic. Before our daughter left, I dreamed of walking towards the sunset through a planted field to paint. I am concerned about the men following me, but there is no incident at the end of the field. I turn my back on the sunset and set up my easel facing the field.

In Washington, my flight along the beach trail is arrested by the powerful black man, and now my progress toward the sunset is stalked by threatening men, until I turn my back on the vista to paint. Both the ungroundedness in Washington and the pursuit of the sunset could be negations of life that has become threatening. The black man forces me down to the water, and I turn my back on the sunset to paint the planted field, correcting my life-negating course. I set up my easel facing not only the planted field but also those threatening men. You don't get one without the other. Later that same night I saw myself draped backwards between the horns of a bull standing upright on its hind legs. On the horns of a dilemma, so to speak. The day following the dreams, my back went out.

My wake-up calls from the imaginal continue! Death is a dream journey, but not when it is an escape from the trials of life, and not until our work in the concrete is done. I need to wake up to the living dream before considering the beyond. The imaginal is available now in the sea in Washington and in the planted field. I am reminded of the Buddhistic tradition of turning your back on enlightenment and turning towards life and suffering humanity, your own suffering included.

Once again, Freud would be interested in the threatening men behind me in the field. At least there is no incident this time, but they are still there, if I only turn and look, and paint them even. And there is impulse to spare in the bull standing upright, holding me backwards between his horns. The raging bull as well as potent. There is the repressed again, waiting to be faced without escape. Jung would consider the threatening men shadow figures, similar to Freud's repressed, but, in his system, opportunities to reconcile the opposites of spirit and life force. Winnicott's me and not-me play within the transitional space of dream and the imaginal. In imaginal space, the bull is an archetypal figure as well, not only repressed personal impulse, but also the mythological roles of the bull in fertility and sacrifice, an agrarian tradition appropriate to the planted field that I turn to and set up to paint.

In agrarian mythology, fertility and sacrifice, the bull itself, are related to death and rebirth. The imaginal is an immortal realm from which the concrete is manifest in birth and to which the concrete returns at death to be reborn again. The cycle of the seasons follow death and rebirth in the agrarian tradition and in its gods, Adonis and Christ, as does the course of the sun in its daily cycle. Therefore, my sunset at the end of a planted field is as archetypal as the more imposing bull standing upright. But the planted field is concrete and alive while the sunset is an abstraction, pure imaginal. There will be time enough for the imaginal after the sun finally sets; in the meantime, paint the field! Besides, in art all is imaginal, just as in dreams.

Before the next Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of Dreams, I was diagnosed with a low-grade prostate cancer, which added a new insight into the Washington dream with its threatened anal rape and the dying dreams afterwards, including the sunset and upright bull dreams just presented. After all, I was draped between the bull's horns backwards, balanced on the small of my back, which went out the following day, in the vicinity of my prostate gland.

The prostate gland is in the vicinity of the first chakra as well, which would explain my lack of groundedness as I ran along the beach trail, feet not touching the ground, in the Washington dream. A blockage in the first chakra would correspond with Freud's repressed impulse and Jung's shadow archetype eruption. When my Chinese doctor gave me herbal medication for my blocked chi or vital energy flow, I was reminded of the water that the powerful black was dragging me down to in the Washington dream.

Before leaving for Santa Cruz for the ASD Conference, I dreamed of returning to a college parking lot to retrieve the red Triumph Spitfire sports car that I had back in college and drove to New York with my wife after we were married. In the dream, the car looked good, only some signs of rust after all the years. I got in, but before turning the key, I feared that the old gasoline may have corroded the engine and cause engine lock or an explosion. I worked on the dream in therapy as an image of disease, old gas corroding my prostate, Freud's repressed impulse and Jung's shadow forces. Gasoline was also a good metaphor for my chi energy that needed boosting with Chinese herbs. And red is the color associated with the first chakra.

At the morning dream-sharing group at the Santa Cruz Conference, I worked on the Spitfire dream further and got helpful feedback from the group. The men identified with the passion, power and sex as well as the aging body, while the women had more poetic responses. One recalled the gleam in her father's eye when he saw a red Corvette like the one he drove in his youth. Another remembered running out of gas in Europe when her husband left her. A third recalled her first car, a red Thunderbird that had belonged to a cancer victim. The young woman had treated the car with "tender love and care" in memory of the previous owner. It was then that I told the group about my

prostate cancer, and they were not surprised after getting into the dream themselves. The car had become the group's, and they shared in its mortality.

The group experience allowed me to get into the body feelings of the car and engine, to appreciate the threat of engine lock or an explosion. The cancer felt like a result of that threat, and the group made it more real to me, more alive and less intellectual. Marc Barasch, the former editor of *New Age Magazine*, gave an address on healing dreams based on his experiences with thyroid cancer, and I realized that the Spitfire was my healing dream.

Healing dreams are part of the shamanistic tradition as is dream journeying and initiatory rites. The early Greek philosophers were shamanistic practitioners that included dream healing through the God Asklepios. Those seeking healing dreams would journey to temples of Asklepios to sleep in sacred dormitories and incubate their dreams, not unlike I in my journey to Santa Cruz, sleeping in the dormitory of the University there and working with my healing dream. The power of visualization in combatting cancer is well known, and when the imagery comes from a God, the imaginal or the unconscious, the power is amplified.

At the Asklepiion center of Epidauros in Greece, the dream incubation was reinforced with Greek tragedy, complete with choras and catharsis. Enactment was a vital part of the experience as was the shared human condition. I had shared my human condition with the morning dream-sharing group and had been enriched by their response, what remained was enactment. Each year, the ASD Conference finale is the Dream Ball where attendees wear costumes that illustrate a dream and party into the night. I had left Washington before the Ball the year before, but was determined to enact my healing dream at Santa Cruz. Fortunately, I had brought the red shirt that my wife had just given me for our wedding anniversary, commemorating our trip north in the red Triumph Spitfire, so I had the beginnings of a costume. There were face painters available before the Ball, and I had a red "T" painted on my forehead and red flames on my cheeks. Then I searched the garbage and found a cardboard box for Red Tail Ale with a red hawk to wear around my waist where the old gas was corroding my prostate.

All who wanted to describe their dreams in front of the revelers at the Ball were welcome, so I stepped to the microphone and described the car that I had gone back to college to retrieve, and then made the sound of a revving engine, which was an amplified roar in the speakers behind me as I shifted gears and raced away from the mike. Then the Red Tail Ale box got a workout on the dance floor as I retrieved the old dance steps from college as well as the old car. I danced with the dream-sharing group members who appreciated my enactment and retrieval. One with red finger and toe nails, who confided to me that she was a "spitfire" herself, gave me a red rose from her costume.

Back home in New York I incubated more healing dreams of the Triumph Spitfire with the rose given to me by the female spitfire on the dance floor at Santa Cruz. In one dream I receive the key to the car and in another I start it

up and drive away from the dormitories of the college campus. Then came a dream set at a foreign resort. It's my final night there and I go from nightspot to nightspot, eating and drinking, dancing with women and hugging the men, just as I did at the Dream Ball in Santa Cruz. There is a vision of "heart sutra" and a sacred elephant. I go outside where there are some threatening men, bite one of their fingers and try to fly away but lift off dragging the man with his finger in my mouth. As I ascend, the other man flies with me, and I begin teaching him to fly. We do skydiving maneuvers, then soar higher to do more.

The threatening men are always there, waiting for me to turn from the sunset or leave the revels of the spiritual Dream Ball complete with healing heart sutra and sacred elephant. But just as I set up to paint them in the planted field in the earlier dream, this time I don't fly away and escape them but teach them to fly, and to play as I rediscovered at the Dream Ball. The finger that I bite is an interesting connection with the impulse or shadow energies represented but a connection nonetheless. I am engaging them rather than being engaged by the powerful black man in Washington. There has been progress if I am teaching the blocked energies how to soar, and the elephant is an animal of the first chakra where my energy was blocked.

There was not only threatening men waiting for me after the last night revels; I had a radioactive-seed implant scheduled to treat my prostate cancer the week before 9/11 and the World Trade Center attack. The image of the planted field took on new significance as a healing dream of seed implants, but the trauma of the experience was reinforced by the 9/11 tragedy. To heal both traumas, I decided to go to Sven Doehner's Day of the Dead dream-sharing retreat in Oaxaca, Mexico. Marc Barasch had sought out an indigenous healer in Mexico and local healers were to participate in the dream sharing in Oaxaca and be available for individual healings.

The retreat was at Sven's hacienda in the sacred valley of Monte Alban, which my wife and I had explored 30 years earlier. It was like going back to college to get my Triumph Spitfire. Sven's dream-sharing approach is for the group to reenter a dream hypnagogically as in Jung's active imagination, intensifying the bodily sensations and "cooking" them alchemically in the retort of the group. The goal is to free blocked or channeling diffuse impulse, especially opposing impulses. Blocked impulse would be earth or body bound, while diffuse would be air-borne, intellectually or spiritually. The alchemical retort of the group is transitional space between body and mind, earth and air, like the water in my Washington dream, a medium of flow vs. being stuck or all over the place. Yet another imaginal space, but a living, human space.

In the first dream I shared with the group there is a primitive shower with a pull chain which I don't use. I go out into the hall in my terry cloth bathrobe where my father passes me with his eyes closed as if he doesn't want to wake up, and he's wearing a robe like mine. The night before I had placed his watch chain on the altar for dead loved ones who may visit us during the Day of the Dead, and it served its purpose well. But my father was no more engaged with

me in death than he had been in life. Some in the group wept for me but I remained dry-eyed until someone said, "Pull the chain!" referring to the primitive shower. Once again I was resisting the water, blocking the flow.

The next night I dreamed of two college friends in a dorm room. The larger of the two learns that his father doesn't love him and acts out self-destructively with alcohol and cars, then dances dangerously on the balcony ledge until he falls. The smaller reluctantly goes to his assistance, taking him in his arms down on the ground. The larger one gets the smaller in a rageful grip until the smaller reassures him, "I can help you." Next the smaller jumps down from the balcony himself, lands safely on his legs and joins the larger who is waiting with a guitar to make music together.

In sharing the dream I felt the rageful grip and the joy of making music, opposing impulses in the alchemical method. It reminded me of teaching the threatening men to fly in the dream after Santa Cruz. The acknowledgment, "I can help you," allows the two to make music together rather than act out self-destructively, to live with their impulses and not die. "The tomb is empty," one of the local healer said, cryptically.

At the end of the week in Oaxaca I had a healing session with the curandero who made the cryptic observation. He felt my prostate cancer was a lower back problem, and I told him the dream image of being draped backwards between the bull's horns and my back going out afterwards. He said I had undigested anger down there and gave me a *limpio* or cleansing with sacred water blown from his mouth onto my heart and the back of my neck, and sent me back to New York with baths and pills and a medicine pouch which I carry in my pocket as I write.

On returning home from Oaxaca, I had water dreams, healing dreams until my annual physical exam in the spring of the next year when everything was back to normal with my prostate. The *limpio* and water dreams had digested the anger that the curandero had intuited. He was part of our dream-sharing group and got the information from my father visitation and the rageful grip of the dream friend whose father didn't love him.

Gradually, over the months I approached then entered the water, which contained first snakes, then a female lion, finally friendly porpoises. I dreamed of "Flouristan" on the Caribbean, who is freed with the prisoners in Beethoven's *Fidelio*, or Flow-ristan in my imagined realm. Florence and its river became Flow-rence as I stopped swimming against the river current, reverse directions and go with the flow.

Before the next ASD Annual Conference in Boston, I dreamed that I can swim underwater like a fish. I'm in a swimming pool looking up at the swimmers on the surface. Occasionally I break the surface with my hand, like a porpoise fin, to let them know that I'm with them. It was like teaching the threatening men to fly in the dream after Santa Cruz. Then I heard the words, "It's the medium that matters." The water is the medium or the connection between myself and the others, Winnicott's transitional space between the me

and the not-me, where play is finally possible. Perhaps this is what the powerful black man had in mind as he wrestled me down to the beach in the Washington dream. When I shared the dream in the morning dream-sharing group at the Boston Conference, it was as if water was the medium of the group as we sat in a circle and shared the imaginal. I could feel the emotions and images in my body through the medium, in the flow of the imaginal.

At the evening Shamanic Dream Ceremony we were given quartz crystals to incubate answers to questions. As we danced around the circle to the drum as our crystals were blessed, I was skeptical. I associated crystals with superficial New Age practices. We chose our crystals as we had our incubation stones at the Mythic Journey Workshop in Washington, which had resulted in the eruption of the black man on the beach, so I maintained a willing suspension of disbelief and sat down for the guided visualization in which we wound up at an underground spring to ask our crystal a question to be answered in our dreams that night. Out of nowhere came my question: "How can I be faithful?" Then I repeated it slowly, "How can I be faith-full?" Full of faith as our dream-sharing group was full of water. It's the medium that matters.

Back in my dormitory room, I held my crystal in my left hand and asked the question three times before holding it under my pillow and closing my eyes. Just as in Washington, I was immediately bombarded by hypnagogic images, but this time there were words included in the assault. Where were these words coming from? I wondered in my liminal state. First I heard "the 1:30 bus" and I recalled that I had signed up for the bus trip to the Field of Dreams, an Indian dig where dreams had led anthropologists to major finds. The next morning I checked the departure time of the bus. It left at 1:30. Then I heard the words "white light," which reminded me of the light in my crystal and of enlightenment. Waking up to white light. Next I heard "don't talk," and stilled my racing mind for more answers to my question. Then I heard "filling stations."

The year before in Santa Cruz, my dream of retrieving my red Triumph Spitfire with the old gas was my first healing dream. Now I'm told by whomever that to be faith-full I must be a filling station, providing gas for myself and others. I thought of stations of the cross; filling stations are service stations. Recovery programs and spiritual disciplines emphasize selfless service to be faith-full. In case I didn't get it, there were images of the red Triumph Spitfire as well.

Then came the only dream of the night as I drifted off to sleep after the onslaught of hypnagogic answers to my question. I am on a low dock on the beach with a wet, naked woman pressed against my back. I can feel her belly in the small of my back and feel her breasts on my upper back. She feels wonderful, but I wonder if I'm being faithful. Regardless, the sea was rewarding me for making it my medium. The imaginal had offered me a wet mermaid to press against my lower back, where the Bull had held me before the cancer diagnosis, and where the black man in the Washington dream had

threatened to violate me if I resisted the water. Of course, I was being faithful and my faith was being rewarded.

Then I saw the face of a woman my age dying of cancer back in New York. Later I learned that she died that day, the day I dreamed her. Finally I saw the image of a pond with a surface so calm that it was impossible to tell if the brilliant blue was from the reflected sky or the pond itself. The blue was dotted with small white clouds. The sky had met the water. In the imaginal there is neither one nor two.

At 1:30 the next afternoon, I went to find the bus to the Field of Dreams. The leaders of the crystal ceremony the night before joined us to perform a ceremony of atonement with the Indians and their land. I learned that the site was a quarry for stones used in Indian ceremonies thousands of years ago. Quartz was one of the stones, and, fortunately, I had brought along my quartz crystal. When we arrived, we gathered in a circle and were given rose petals to offer to the land while the drum played. As we walked the site, dropping petals on the land we had defiled, I discovered a large outgrowth of granite and remembered being told that granite contained quartz. I took my crystal out of my pocket, out of the medicine pouch given me by the curandero in Oaxaca, and held it over the granite. When I felt a slight magnetic pull, I knew the purpose of the words "the 1:30 bus" from the night before.

At the site's museum, I shopped for items for my costume for the Dream Ball that night. Like the past year in Santa Cruz, I waited until before the Ball to decide on the dream that I would enact and put together a costume. In Santa Cruz, I was the red Triumph Spitfire with old gas; this year I would be a filling station. I found some red Indian Stick-on tattoos for my face at the museum, and had the same red shirt from the past year. For the filling station pump hose I used a red rubber tube that I used to exercise my sore shoulders. Once again I stood at the microphone at the Ball and explained my costume, then danced away the night, pausing occasionally to fill up anyone who needed gas.

When my analyst was on summer vacation, I wanted to work on conscious or lucid dreaming. The crystal answers were mostly in a hypnagogic, liminal state, and I felt the next step in the imaginal realm was conscious dreaming, not just words and images. Again, shamanistic soul or dream journeying appealed to me at the annual ASD Conference and I wanted to cultivate the practice. I had been unable to do so until then, but I wanted to try. I read everything I could and asked my crystal, "How can I dream consciously?" The response was an image of the house with the interior courtyard where I lived in Old San Juan, Puerto Rico, a truly imaginal place, and the backyard of my childhood covered in grass clippings like after a heavy rain had floated them up, washed up by the imaginal. So I decided to let it flow, and in a few weeks I had my first lucid moment, in which I realized I was dreaming while in the dream and everything suddenly becomes far more alive and sensational. It lasted only a moment because it is so intense and, at first, overwhelming.

Besides, it had taken me years to get into the water that the powerful black man in Washington dragged me down to. The imaginal can be overwhelming.

In my next lucid dream I am in my childhood home as I had for over 10 years of dreams in analysis, but for the first time I leave! I haul my stuff behind me in some kind of tractor, out of the driveway and into the street out front of the house. I see some black boys in the street and say, "I'm dreaming," twice and, once again, everybody becomes more intense and alive. The boys pass me without incident, and I decide to use the street as a runway to take off in my tractor and fly. It is a difficult and belabored takeoff, but I do clear the ground and rise above my neighborhood. The technique of saying, "I'm dreaming" is practiced daily while awake whenever a target event occurs. I practiced this technique whenever what I experienced while awake was in my own imagination, like anxiety or over-excitement, psychic reality vs. the concrete. Therefore, when I felt threatened by the boys in the street, I recognized the anxiety and took responsibility for the psychic reality, the imaginal. I could acknowledge the imaginal consciously while both awake and asleep and take responsibility for it. Otherwise I never would have had the courage to finally leave my childhood dream home after all those years of analysis. The month before I had dreamed that the ocean was now close to my childhood home when in fact it is 20 miles away. With the imaginal so close I could finally leave home. Perhaps that is the reason that grass clippings were washed up on the lawn in the backyard in the dream response to my "How can I dream consciously?" crystal question.

Lucid dreaming is awakening to dream, to the waking and sleeping dream, to the imaginal that includes both. It is our egos that awake from the illusion of our duality, our separateness and isolation, our conflict with others. I see threatening males all the time, but its only a dream that I awaken from. As Jung would say, I take back my projections of my vitality onto threatening men and my creativity onto mermaids and realize that it is all a dream. Taking responsibility and control in lucid dreaming is taking back all the power the ego has given away. With that power, I was finally able to leave my childhood dream home and face the threatening street males and even fly a little with all my baggage after years of dreamwork in therapy and ASD conferences.

At the end of spring I had attended a summer solstice celebration that called the time a "culmination." When I looked back over the past four years, I had to agree. From my encounter with the powerful black man wrestling me down to the imaginal sea in Washington, to my dream of leaving my childhood home, I had become familiar with the imaginal and not so isolated and threatened in the concrete. At the same time, I had healed my energy blockage that had resulted in a cancer and had opened to the flow, trusting my impulse, unconscious, the imaginal or whatever. Winnicott considered the flow "creative chaos," and I asked my crystal what was creative chaos. I saw images of surf

and flood waters, then the wet ground under a beach house with an opening to the light.

I had a culmination dream in which I am standing on a dock out in the water with the terry cloth robe that I and my father wore in the Oaxaca visitation dream. I take it off and jump naked into the water. I see huge fish in the supports under the dock, but they are vegetarians and no threat. I see men walking on the bottom with weighted shoes and SCUBA gear, and realize that I am breathing underwater without equipment. I had just turned 60 in 2004, and my father had died of cancer in his early sixties. He was as defended and resistant as I, preferring to escape into his head as I did. We traveled in the same robes. After four years of dreamwork, I took off the robe and plunged, naked, into the imaginal where finally I needed no equipment to breathe underwater.