

# DREAM PSYCHOHISTORY

Lee Irwin, FRC, PhD

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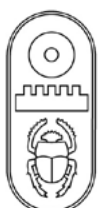
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Dreams can evolve and change over time, over multiple decades, for anyone who gives serious attention and study to their dreaming life. The psychohistory of dreaming, as in my own case, is dynamic, situational, and I believe, developmental through consistent self-analysis. What this implies is that dreams and dreaming are not static or simply recurrent or only mapped to a limited "immediate" surface causality. This is why I emphasize an existential-phenomenological approach and emphasize the importance of making the choice to give dreams the attention they deserve without prejudice based on collective bias. The existential aspect requires living in "good faith" with regards to dreaming, that is to live authentically though commitment and engaged choice to value and understand the process of dreaming and dreams, and not by "bad faith" (Flynn 2013) or by shallow conformity to social norms that marginalize dreams, reduce dreams to biological or material processes, or by advocating a professional, skeptical stance as a "detached observer" or scientific



rationalist. To understand dreams means to bring conscious attention to the dreaming process and to experience and value dreaming, subjectively and experientially, as an authentic expression of the human condition. It means genuinely valuing the dream and placing the dream into a meaningful context based on a disciplined practice of dream recording, with phenomenological characteristics, as well as content narrative, and to resist the interpretive impulse to imagine that a particular summary meaning can somehow account for all that the dream reveals. Taking the dream and dreaming seriously "as it appears" means allowing each dream to manifest its unique value and significance, over time, without immediately contextualizing that meaning in the service of a specific metatheory or present need. That does not mean we should not theorize but suggests instead that whatever we theorize should arise on the basis of careful, engaged dreaming by the theorist, over time, in order to get at the existential core of the dreaming process. The phenomenological approach is to take a "neutral but engaged





Dream Vision, Albrecht Dürer (1525). *The bottom half of the piece describes the artist's apocalyptic dream.*

stance” toward the dream and dreaming; “neutral but engaged” does not mean a detached attitude, but instead a directly committed attitude of interest and affirmation that values, at the outset, the dream and dreaming process in the context of world-embeddedness (Zahavi 2018; Moustakas 1990). By “existential core” I mean the ways in which dreams impact, change, modify, inspire, or terrorize an individual, impacting his or her lived-world.

The dreaming impact, often very subtle, reflects the emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic attitudes that can shape the waking state, made notable through careful, conscious attention. This implies mental training, a disciplined practice of engaged observation that fosters an alert sensitivity to subtle effects, changes, and psychomental, emotive processes related to dreaming states and contents. To that end, I note that at the same time I started to record dreams (late 1960s) I also took up the practice, on my own, of meditation which I have continued on a regular basis for over 50 years. While my practice has gone through many stages, I would describe it generally as the cultivation of “quiet mind” – that

is of a tranquil, slow breathing, self-aware state capable of deep concentration and subtle attention to psychic influences, changes, or shifts leading to, at times, very deep states of meditative calm. In no case does this suggest any loss of awareness or attention, to either outer activities or inner changes; but in all cases, mind is generally less reactive while also highly observant.

Existentially speaking, dreaming is a historical process, a contextual, adaptive, responsive activity in which the dreaming agent is inevitably immersed in aging, social and cultural change, notable historic events, our world embeddedness, and all the contextual influences of family, work, play, and leisure. Life is not static, but in process, placing the conscious agent into a variety of diverse contexts all of which can and do impact the dreaming process. By “world-embeddedness” I mean that the individual dreamer’s dreaming mentality is shaped by and inseparable from its intimate connections with the actual lived world in which he or she is immersed. Dreams are not simply “inner” or “subjective” but much more intersubjective, forming responsive relationships and reactions with or to others in on-going life-events. Further, that process reflects an overall

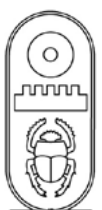
dynamic based on the developmental (or regressive) trajectory of a given life-pattern, what I term the personal psychohistory of our subjective, intersubjective, and transsubjective encounters. By “life-pattern” I am referring to the sustaining dynamics of identity development and transformation, not to any one fixed pattern but to a dynamic gestalt whose structural components are capable of change, realignment, and new patterns of thought, insight, or realization. In turn, this engages the problem of identity, the personhood of the individual as it forms, develops, or declines in the maturation process. There is no consistent theory of “self” that can be applied to the developmental process that also maps across the diverse terrains of interdisciplinary studies. There are a multitude of theories on the nature of self (Gallagher 2011) or personhood and few of these are linked to dreams or dreaming; most identity concepts focus on what I call the “conscious self” – that is, on everyday states and conditions of mind describable by the experiencing individual. But the “self” in a wholistic sense is much more complex and multifaceted and I take a multiperspectual view that self is a shifting identity process, centered on the conscious self but also consisting of other self-aspects (Nasser 2019: 76–77). Having published a book-length work on this topic (Irwin 2019), I will summarize very briefly my view.

For me, the “self” cannot be reduced to only conscious awareness but must also include other aspects of identity that includes the conscious self as that aspect of the right-now awareness in the immediate present; the rhetorical self (the narratives and stories I tell about who I am, usually in relation to others, my conscious social biography); the epistemic self (the undercurrent or “subconscious” or subliminal influences that shape mentality, including dreams, visions, and

paranormal aspects); the cosmological self as those aspects of identity shaped by belief or ideas concerning the multidimensional structures of shared cosmic life; the communal self in terms of how we connect with others (and how they see us), our group, family, work relations; and the transpersonal self whose experiential encounters map to spiritual and possibly religious views of existence that are transcendent, that is as a “ground of being” or unitary experience. All these aspects are formative in the construction of personhood, where my “self” is a dynamic process punctuated by interludes of activity, quiet, sleep, and interactions with others, shifting my lived identity based on context – father, husband, friend, ally, co-worker, antagonist, day-dreamer, or creative visionary and social activist. The self is the “who I am” in any given context, as in sleep and dreaming, or in social interaction or self-reflection, that shapes my mentality. Not as a fixed personality, but as an active agent in diverse situational circumstances; a continuity in identity capable of change, redirection, and new possible identity formations. The concept of “self” encompasses all of this



The Dream of Jacob, *Nicolas Dipre (1500)*.





as well as a metaphysical perspective whose ontological depths bring the possibility of creative, transformative change into play regardless of the difficulty or oppressive nature of any given social or historical context (Irwin 2019).

For me, the self or person, is mutable, a constant capable of change, a series of recognizable musical notes (self-aspects) capable of new combinations, new melodies, new moods of expression, new flats and sharps, added or subtracted. The self is not simply a routine of psychophysical habits, though without doubt habit plays a role, but more a vital life-source fundamentally adaptive and responsive to circumstances. The psychohistory of the individual then is a dynamic historical record of diverse factors in which dreaming is a core expression of the circumstantial present, as well as a harbinger of what is to come and what has been, sometimes, long ago. That is, dreaming is both temporal and transtemporal; it reflects our current situation but recontextualizes that situation by displacing the dreaming self into other times, places, pasts, and futures, in order to highlight or emphasize a circumstance, a pattern, a potential or a problem

of the lived present, spontaneously illustrated by dreaming encounters. Such a psychohistory is not simply individual, but also intersubjective, reflecting our relationships with others; transphysical insofar as we encounter non-physical others (dreams of the dead, spirits, ghosts, angels, deities, and so on); and ontological insofar as dreams challenge us to change, adapt, and respond creatively to existential challenges, both personal and collective.

The developmental arc, insofar as it can be identified as a creative process of growth and maturation, has its ups and downs; development is not a simple, slow uphill progression but one filled with detours, dead ends, mistakes, difficult relations, sudden calamity, or surprise, happy events shifting to unexpected outcomes and sometime precipitous conclusions. The Dineh (Navajo) have a teaching about this, concerning the “pollen path,” or life-path of the individual (Campbell 2002). The path is drawn as a long, horizontal curvy uphill and downhill line often with a short line extending from each hilltop and from the bottom of each downhill curve. These short lines represent getting off the pollen path, taking a turn that leads to a dead end whereas return to the pollen path requires



*A detail from The Dream of Joseph, George de La Tour (ca.1645).*



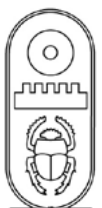
The Sleeping Gypsy, *Henri Rousseau* (1897).

ceremony, purification, and rededication to right principles. The path proceeds by cycles, by seasons of growth and times of lying fallow; only through sustained balance, rest and renewal, harmony and beauty can the individual reach long life, maturity, and happiness (Farella 1996, 153–187). We can expect the psychohistory of dreaming to reflect the changing and challenging circumstances we face; dreaming goes in cycles, reflecting dead ends and successes, not just in complement to our current lived-circumstances, but also in terms of our life issues, deeper struggles, aspirations, primary intentions, and unhealed wounds or the consequential outcomes of our good or bad choices. Such a psychohistory may not map to just one lifetime, but possibly to other lives, as sometimes revealed in past life dreams, regression sessions, or déjà vu encounters.

The assimilation of dream experience into waking life is another challenge where dreams may seem to matter more in some circumstances, particularly times of crisis, loss, or challenge and less important in times of stability or routine or complacent living. Or maybe, our awareness of dreams disappears in the simple buzz and frenzy of over-committed activities and obligations.

Also, the process of integration of dream experience, particularly of states, may have its own biopsychic rhythms by which transformations in consciousness reach new thresholds of perceptions. This reminds me of a Sufi teaching on spiritual growth, the seeker may expect to undergo periods of “expansion” (*bast*) or “contraction” (*qubd*) in the development of mystical awareness (Gulen 2011). As the seeker comes into greater ontological contact, greater immersion in transpersonal states, the consequences of that immersion depend upon the maturity and development of the individual. At times, there is an expansive sense of participation and at other times, a contraction into a distinctive sense of individuation with less awareness of the deeper ontological ground. For example, consider the following dream:

I am in a desert culture, Arabic-Islamic, somewhere in the Middle East. I am with a friend who wants me to meet a person he believes has unique skills or ability, someone who can demonstrate the power of the drum. We are outside, it is late afternoon, and we are in a small gully with hard-packed earth and a light covering of sand. A man is seated behind an old,



empty fifty-gallon oil drum that shows only the top third (the rest is buried in the ground). He is dressed in desert robes with a cloth wrapped around his head. He is in his fifties, swarthy, prominent facial features, somewhat heavysset – strong, compassionate, focused.

I sit on the ground to one side while my friend stands facing me beside the drum. The drummer begins to play a very intense, driving Arabic rhythm. He chants a Sufi prayer while he plays. My friend is deeply affected by the music and demonstrates *salat* (traditional prayer) to me. As he stands and bends his arms, palm outward at shoulder level, his eyes roll up into his head in an entranced manner. He then performs the bowing and kneeling part of the prayer in this entranced state. He then stands up again and repeats these movements several times. His movements are attuned to the drumming and chanting; he is entranced by the experience. I am detached but intensely interested in the music. The prayers seem excessive and more an expression of an unindividuated, traditional pattern – a heightened state that subordinates individual awareness to a collective religious action.

I sit closer to the drummer who looks at me in a positive and confirming manner. I am thinking that there is no need to be identified with the collective act, but only to

open oneself inwardly to the power of the chant. He begins to drum and chant again. Very powerful. I am going into a deeply altered state, a form of *bast* (expansion), opening to greater and greater awareness, seated in an unmoving, cross-legged posture, my hands clasped loosely in my lap. I am amazed at the complexity of the rhythm and the invocative power of the chant. The

drummer and I seem to be “expanding” together. My field of perception is merging into greater and greater awareness of an underlying Unity, a total field encompassing all aspects of reality. The drumming stops and I experience *qabd* (contraction) to a normal but very open state. Another Arab appears, dark and hawk-nosed, holding a brass wire object bent into a roughly rectangular form with various other wires. The drummer says to him: “We were going into the One.”

He says it with some surprise as it is unusual because I am a westerner (non-Muslim).

I lie on my back on the drum which has become a low table. The man with the wire passes it over my chest. As I was going into the One a deep sorrow and sadness welled up within me, from my heart, the Wound of the Divine. I am feeling that pain, it inhibits me in some way from going entirely into the One. The man with the wire is able to use it to draw out the pain and sorrow. I feel it being removed from my heart; it is a painful, healing process.



The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters,  
*Francisco Goya, (ca. 1798).*



He does this several times, not all the pain is removed but a very significant degree is taken away. I am profoundly grateful to the healer.

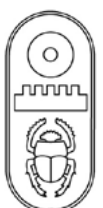
This dream captures in vivid imagery and a stark, high contrast setting, a transformative process that has several very different aspects. First, there is an induction into an altered state, represented through drumming. I have attended numerous drumming events, including Native American, Hindu, and Sufi drumming, and such drumming has a powerful, mind altering impact.

Research shows clearly that drumming is a key means for inducing altered states (and possible biological changes) as a central feature of many shamanic traditions associated with this very ancient practice (Kjellgren and Eriksson 2010; Flor-Henry, Shapiro, and Sombrun 2017). Secondly, obligatory prayer, as an altered state is observed but not as a participatory event, allowing for a critical perspective on altered states through traditional forms of prayer; third, there is an ontological content indicated by reference to “going into the One” symbolizing a unitary state as a goal of the transformative process.

Further, there is a qualitative change in state from a listening, participant observer to an immersive condition in which the sound and rhythm induces a more open, expansive awareness, a state of connection with others in the dream and with an alternate dimension associated with Unity and Oneness. When the drumming stops there is a sudden shift, a collapse into a more contracted state not closed to the One but less aware of its scope and magnitude. The healing of the heart represents a shift in existential attention – from an expansive sense of unity blocked by an equal or possibly more powerful feeling state. The Wound of the Divine is an existential mark, a metonym, not just a trace, but a vivid lived-sense of suffering on a collective basis, not just human but animal and other as well. The wire suggests “grounding” as in a ground wire, something that displaces an electrical discharge into the earth in order to not burn out or overload a circuit. The burden of sorrow is a directly felt sense of the pain of others, an empathic attunement to suffering, that inhibits a more expansive participation in a deeper shared unity. The message seems clear, expansion



Flower Clouds, *Odilon Redon* (1903).





Dickens' Dream, *Robert William Buss* (1875).

has its limits, and the incorporation of a more unitary perception requires healing of the internalized wound (the heart) of shared sorrow and pain – manifest though ignorance and the violent, harmful actions of others. Subsequently, the rhythms of expansion and contraction are a normalizing part of the dream cycles through which deeper healing can occur. The psychohistory of each individual will have its own contractive and expansive aspects and learning to negotiate both conditions and the transitive states between is part of the overall maturation process....

What is intended, by the dream or dreaming, is unique to the individual but is also shared in phenomenal structures of similar states and contents. Dreams are unique but not utterly unique, inevitably our intersubjective relatedness results in common themes, images, motifs, archetypes and symbolism, as well as nightmares and fears, that reveal dreaming as a recognizable phenomenal context shared across many cultures and historical periods. Psychohistory is not simply subjective but is also a socially shared context, marked by eras, ages, epochs, and

identifiable cultural periods and attitudes impacting sensitive dreamers across a wide horizon of differences. Mass events – war, terrorism, poverty, economic collapse, disease, death, racism, or a multitude of radical changes – are all carried in the dreaming context, shared among dreamers, and epitomized by shifts in dreaming for many participants (Hartmann and Brezler 2008). Psychohistory is complex, not reducible to individual experience and not separable from individual experience; the existential context of self-other-world characterizes the embodied circumstance in which dreams virtually create possibilities open to enactment or assimilation through attention to dreaming. Heuristic inquiry is not limited to the subjective content only but must also engage the discovery of meaning in its social, cultural, and spiritual influences as shared by a multitude of dreamers, some from quite other cultural or historical contexts (Irwin 2008).

The phenomenological task is to identify, in a lived sense, the connectedness of dreaming across cultural and historical boundaries in ways that are meaningful and valuable to the dreamer. The heuristic task is to interpret the intersubjective network





The Dream, Pablo Picasso (1932).

of relations without devaluing the explicit content of the dream as it impacts the lived world of the dreamer. The interpretive task is to enhance the dreaming content as a shared co-determination, not simply an expression of isolated subjective experience (Irwin 1994). Psychohistory is not passive, but interactive, reflexive of all my relations and intimately expressive of our individual and collective lived, world choices. Dreams prompt alterity and challenge the status quo; they undermine collective attitudes – dreaming opens multiple pathways and what we choose, enact, and embody is the memorable history of our psychic life (Irwin 2022).

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