The Dialogue of Dreams - Part I

By Sam Vaknin

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Are dreams a source of reliable divination? Generations upon generations seem to have thought so. They incubated dreams by travelling afar, by fasting and by engaging in all other manners of self deprivation or intoxication. With the exception of this highly dubious role, dreams do seem to have three important functions:

To process repressed emotions (wishes, in Freud's speech) and other mental content which was suppressed and stored in the unconscious.
To order, classify and, generally, to pigeonhole conscious experiences of the day or days preceding the dreaming ("day residues"). A partial overlap with the former function is inevitable: some sensory input is immediately relegated to the darker and dimmer kingdoms of the subconscious and unconscious without being consciously processed at all.
To "stay in touch" with the outside world. External sensory input is interpreted by the dream and represented in its unique language of symbols and disjunction. Research has shown this to be a rare event, independent of the timing of the stimuli: during sleep or immediately prior to it. Still, when it does happen, it seems that even when the interpretation is dead wrong – the substantial information is preserved. A collapsing bedpost (as in Maury's famous dream) will become a French guillotine, for instance. The message conserved: there is physical danger to the neck and head.
All three functions are part of a much larger one:

The continuous adjustment of the model one has of one's self and of one's place in the world – to the incessant stream of sensory (external) input and of mental (internal) input. This "model modification" is carried out through an intricate, symbol laden, dialogue between the dreamer and himself. It probably also has therapeutic side benefits. It would be an over-simplification to say that the dream carries messages (even if we were to limit it to correspondence with one's self). The dream does not seem to be in a position of privileged knowledge. The dream functions more like a good friend would: listening, advising, sharing experiences, providing access to remote territories of the mind, putting events in perspective and in proportion and provoking. It, thus, induces relaxation and acceptance and a better functioning of the "client". It does so, mostly, by analysing discrepancies and incompatibilities. No wonder that it is mostly associated with bad emotions (anger, hurt, fear). This also happens in the course of successful psychotherapy. Defences are gradually dismantled and a new, more functional, view of the world is established. This is a painful and frightening process. This function of the dream is more in line with Jung's view of dreams as "compensatory". The previous three

functions are "complementary" and, therefore, Freudian.

It would seem that we are all constantly engaged in maintenance, in preserving that which exists and inventing new strategies for coping. We are all in constant psychotherapy, administered by ourselves, day and night. Dreaming is just the awareness of this on-going process and its symbolic content. We are more susceptible, vulnerable, and open to dialogue while we sleep. The dissonance between how we regard ourselves, and what we really are and between our model of the world and reality – this dissonance is so enormous that it calls for a (continuous) routine of evaluation, mending and re-invention. Otherwise, the whole edifice might crumble. The delicate balance between we, the dreamers, and the world might be shattered, leaving us defenceless and dysfunctional.

To be effective, dreams must come equipped with the key to their interpretation. We all seem to possess an intuitive copy of just such a key, uniquely tailored to our needs, to our data and to our circumstances. This Areiocritica helps us to decipher the true and motivating meaning of the dialogue. This is one reason why dreaming is discontinuous: time must be given to interpret and to assimilate the new model. Four to six sessions take place every night. A session missed will be held the night after. If a person is prevented from dreaming on a permanent basis, he will become irritated, then neurotic and then psychotic. In other words: his model of himself and of the world will no longer be usable. It will be out of synch. It will represent both reality and the non-dreamer wrongly. Put more succinctly: it seems that the famous "reality test" (used in psychology to set apart the "functioning, normal" individuals from those who are not) is maintained by dreaming. It fast deteriorates when dreaming is impossible. This link between the correct apprehension of reality (reality model), psychosis and dreaming has yet to be explored in depth. A few predictions can be made, though:

The dream mechanisms and/or dream contents of psychotics must be substantially different and distinguished from ours. Their dreams must be "dysfunctional", unable to tackle the unpleasant, bad emotional residue of coping with reality. Their dialogue must be disturbed. They must be represented rigidly in their dreams. Reality must not be present in them not at all.
Most of the dreams, most of the time must deal with mundane matters. Their content must not be exotic, surrealist, extraordinary. They must be chained to the dreamer's realities, his (daily) problems, people that he knows, situations that he encountered or is likely to encounter, dilemmas that he is facing and conflicts that he would have liked resolved. This, indeed, is the case. Unfortunately, this is heavily disguised by the symbol language of the dream and by the disjointed, disjunctive, dissociative manner in which it proceeds. But a clear separation must be made between subject matter (mostly mundane and "dull", relevant to the dreamer's life) and the script or mechanism (colourful symbols, discontinuity of space, time and purposeful action).
The dreamer must be the main protagonist of his dreams, the hero of his dreamy narratives. This, overwhelmingly, is the case: dreams are egocentric. They are concerned mostly with the "patient" and use other figures, settings, locales, situations to cater to his needs, to reconstruct his reality test and to adapt it to the new input from outside and from within.
If dreams are mechanisms, which adapt the model of the world and the reality test to daily inputs – we should find a difference between dreamers and dreams in different

societies and cultures. The more "information heavy" the culture, the more the dreamer is bombarded with messages and data – the fiercer should the dream activity be. Every external datum likely generates a shower of internal data. Dreamers in the West should engage in a qualitatively different type of dreaming. We will elaborate on this as we continue. Suffice it to say, at this stage, that dreams in information-cluttered societies will employ more symbols, will weave them more intricately and the dreams will be much more erratic and discontinuous. As a result, dreamers in information-rich societies will never mistake a dream for reality. They will never confuse the two. In information poor cultures (where most of the daily inputs are internal) – such confusion will arise very often and even be enshrined in religion or in the prevailing theories regarding the world. Anthropology confirms that this, indeed, is the case. In information poor societies dreams are less symbolic, less erratic, more continuous, more "real" and the dreamers often tend to fuse the two (dream and reality) into a whole and act upon it.
To complete their mission successfully (adaptation to the world using the model of reality modified by them) – dreams must make themselves felt. They must interact with the dreamer's real world, with his behaviour in it, with his moods that bring his behaviour about, in short: with his whole mental apparatus. Dreams seem to do just this: they are remembered in half the cases. Results are, probably, achieved without need for cognitive, conscious processing, in the other, unremembered, or disremembered cases. They greatly influence the immediate mood after awakening. They are discussed, interpreted, force people to think and re-think. They are dynamos of (internal and external) dialogue long after they have faded into the recesses of the mind. Sometimes they directly influence actions and many people firmly believe in the quality of the advice provided by them. In this sense, dreams are an inseparable part of reality. In many celebrated cases they even induced works of art or inventions or scientific discoveries (all adaptations of old, defunct, reality models of the dreamers). In numerous documented cases, dreams tackled, head on, issues that bothered the dreamers during their waking hours.
How does this theory fit with the hard facts?

(continued)

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Writing Good Dialogue.

By Nicole Murphy

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There's nothing that kills a scene like hackneyed dialogue. Just stop and think about the average B-Grade Hollywood Movie. Sure, at times the plot is bad and the characterisation woeful but most of the time, what stops it from being a good movie is the dialogue. Cringe-worthy dialogue.

So, how do you write good dialogue? There are a number of factors and the most important one is: don't try too hard. Not every thing out of a character's mouth has to be scintilating. Sometimes, the best dialogue comes about because it's so simple and normal. So relax.

You need to let your characters speak. If they are highly educated, they will probably speak with great grammar and have a high vocabulary. If they left school at fourteen and have worked for five years in the local abottoir, their language is likely to be more colourful. If your character is a chatterbox, let them ramble. If they are the strong and silent type, let them be silent. Don't force words into their mouths and don't try to make them conform to your own views of good communication.

Good dialogue flows. The characters react to what another character has said. For example:

"I went to the show the other day."

"Really? Was it any good?"

"Not bad. The dogs were cute but the cows were too noisy."

"I was talking to George the other day."

Huh? How did talk about the show bring George into the conversation? To make it flow, it needs something more like:

"I went to the show the other day."

"Really? Was it any good?"

"Not bad. The dogs were cute but the cows were too noisy."

"Speaking of dogs, I was talking to George the other day..."

If you aren't sure if your dialogue flows, the classic way to test it is to read it aloud. You'll hear any problems, just like you do in the bad Hollywood movies. Better still, get

your family and friends to act it out for you. It gets them involved in your writing and you can stand back and really observe and listen to what is going on.

The other thing dialogue needs is connection to the action of the story. Stop and think about the conversations you have. They are always related somehow to the action of your day, whether it's a conversation you're having as you catch the bus to work or a conversation with a work colleague or catching up with your partner at the end of the day.

Keep the dialogue connected to the characters, the setting and the plot by surrounding it with action. The example above is quite bland. But surround it with action and it comes alive.

Carrie sat down, opened the sugar packet and sprinkled it in her tea and then stirred it. "I went to the show the other day."

"Really?" Sophie took a long sip of her coffee. "Was it any good?"

Carrie shrugged. "Not bad. The dogs were cute but the cows were too noisy." She poured milk into her tea.

Sophie put her coffee cup down and leant forward, eyes sparkling. "Speaking of dogs, I was talking to George the other day..."

Now the dialogue seems real, because we can picture the characters and their setting. We also get an idea of how they're feeling. Carrie's shrug tells us the show didn't really thrill her. Sophie's sparkling eyes tell us she's got something exciting to say.

So spend a bit of time developing your dialogue, and your stories will be much more successful.

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