



Mandala Consulting's Jung Pages  
by Anthony Wilson

ANALYSING DREAMS: ASSOCIATIONS

In the last article we saw ways to record dreams. If we did nothing but recall and record our dreams as best we could, then we would have done something potentially health-giving, even if we did not understand the dream. In one of the most helpful of Jung's works on dreams is the following verbatim conversation. [1]

**Dr. Binger: Can you dream and derive the benefit of consciousness without understanding the dream? Is it of constructive value?**

**Dr. Jung: To a certain extent. It is the tidal wave that lifts you up, but you are in danger of being swept down with it. If you can cling to a rock and stay up, all right.**

Similarly Jung said...*many things can be effective without being understood. But there is no doubt that we enhance the effect considerably by understanding it, and this is often necessary because the voice of the unconscious so easily goes unheard.* [2]

If we had "understood" our dream straight away, the chances are pretty good that we would have been wrong. Fathoming out the message of the Unconscious is a complicated task which is easy to underestimate. As Mencken puts it, *for every complex problem, there is a solution that is simple, neat and wrong.* [3] Or consider Anderson's wise and witty words, *I have yet to see any problem, however complicated, which, when you have looked at it in the right way, did not become still more complicated.* [4] Another reason why we would probably be wrong is that often our dreams tell us something that we do not want to know. We resist and are attracted to a more palatable meaning. We often overestimate the extent of our self knowledge. It is a very human failing.

Jung wasn't fooling us, or being falsely modest, when he said that he had no idea what a dream meant when he first heard it. Just as when we practice Active Listening skills, withholding evaluation and judgment is essential in dream analysis. In another of his exchanges with Dr. Binger in his Dream Analysis seminars, Jung agreed with Dr Binger that one needed to understand the dream elements. Binger suggested this task was like *making a garden out of a jungle*; and again Jung agreed. [5] (However, as Freud wryly observed, *Analogies prove nothing, that is quite true, but they can make one feel more at home.* [6])

One of the hazards of being any kind of Jungian is to be presented with dreams and asked what they mean. It's understandable that people want to know what their dreams mean, and what their value is, but, dealing with products of the Unconscious psyche is like handling high voltage electricity; something to be done with extreme caution and care. Sometimes people ask such questions in a social setting, and the temptation is to do a "party trick" (and display some of your hubris.) There are also the smart ones who want to trip you up. They say to your Shadow, "Come on! Show us what you can do!"

Jung realized early in life that the message of the Unconscious is not always welcome. When an old man he wrote in his memoirs, *still today, I am lonely, because I know, and must speak of, things that others do not know and, for the most part, by no means wish to know.* [7] So you might have to consider if the person really does want to hear the message. Maybe their dream is inviting them to confront their Shadow, or to stop being greedy, or being vain or to grow up. Do you tell them, while eating canapés or sipping cocktails? In front of their friends? If you felt that they were just testing you, your Shadow may want to lash out and hit them between the eyes with the truth of their dream's message. Therein lies great danger. Knowledge of depth psychology is one thing, the maturity to use it well in entirely another.

Sometimes helping someone to understand their dream may point to an unrecognized existing or potential sickness. Even in a therapeutic situation, this requires careful professional judgment and experience. Always one must be careful and respectful in handling other people's dreams. This person is not in your care.

Freud observed that you don't analyze psychosis. Jung writes of a medical doctor, a respectable, controlled and somewhat constrained individual, who came to see him for analysis. Jung told him to come back for his next appointment with a dream. The patient said he didn't dream and Jung told him, "You will."

Jung believed that initial dreams, those occurring at the start of an analysis, were a helpful guide to the Analyst. He said that initial dreams *often bring to light the essential aetiological factor in the most unmistakable way* [8] and sometimes a *prognosis as well.* [9]

On his next visit this patient told Jung of a dream he had just had where he was standing outside a beautiful, tasteful house. The house had a fine façade. He admired the building for a few moments and then went inside. The hall was well appointed with fine fittings, fabrics and furniture. However, as he went further into the house it became shabbier and shabbier. Eventually he entered a small dingy room, in the very centre of the house where there was a crying child smearing itself with its own excrement. [10]

Jung recognized immediately the latent psychosis, symbolized by the child. I surmise that the house's façade represented the picture that the patient presented to the world. While the hall (the Ego, I suggest) was smart and tidy, the deeper into the interior of the house one went (the Unconscious) the shabbier it became. Jung knew that analysis might actually bring this latent psychosis to life. He had written that in general the unconscious psyche is best left alone. He told the patient that he did not need Analysis and that he must live well and pay attention to his way of life. Then he sent him on his way. Jung's view was that this man's psychosis was being kept under control and that Analysis would activate it.

### A Way to Conceptualize the Structure of the Dream

Dream structures vary, but many follow a pattern which Jung says is not unlike a classical Greek drama. *The essential content of the dream action...is a sort of finely attuned compensation of the one-sidedness, errors, deviations, or other shortcomings of the conscious attitude.* [11]

PHASES	Examples taken from several dreams
<p><b>The First Phase:</b> Exposition: the scenario, the people involved, and often the inner situation of the dreamer <b>A Statement of Place, which tells us where the action is taking place</b> <b>Introduction to the characters</b> <b>A Statement about a Protagonist, or the "dream ego"</b> <b>Sometimes there are Statements of Time</b></p>	<p>I was in a street. It was an avenue. I was in a large building like a hotel. I was walking with my friend X in a city park. At a crossing we suddenly ran into Mrs. Y. I was sitting with Father and Mother in a train compartment I was in uniform with many of my comrades.</p>
<p><b>The Second Phase:</b> Development of the Plot <b>The situation becomes more complicated</b> <b>Tension develops because one does not know what will happen next</b></p>	<p>In the distance a car appeared, which approached rapidly. It was being driven unsteadily, and I thought the driver must be drunk. Mrs. Y seemed to be very excited and wanted to whisper something to me hurriedly, which my friend X was obviously not intended to hear</p>
<p><b>The Third Phase:</b> Climax, Culmination or <i>Peripeteia</i> <b>Something decisive happens, or</b> <b>Something changes completely</b></p>	<p>Suddenly I was in the car and seemed to be myself the drunken driver. Only I was not drunk, but strangely insecure and as if without a steering wheel, I could no longer control the fast moving car and crashed into a wall. Suddenly Mrs. Y turned deathly pale and fell to the ground</p>
<p><b>The Fourth Phase:</b> Solution or Result of the Dream-work or <i>Lysis</i> <b>The final situation</b></p>	<p>I saw the front of the car was smashed. It was a strange car that I did not know. I myself was unhurt. I thought with some uneasiness of my responsibility.</p>

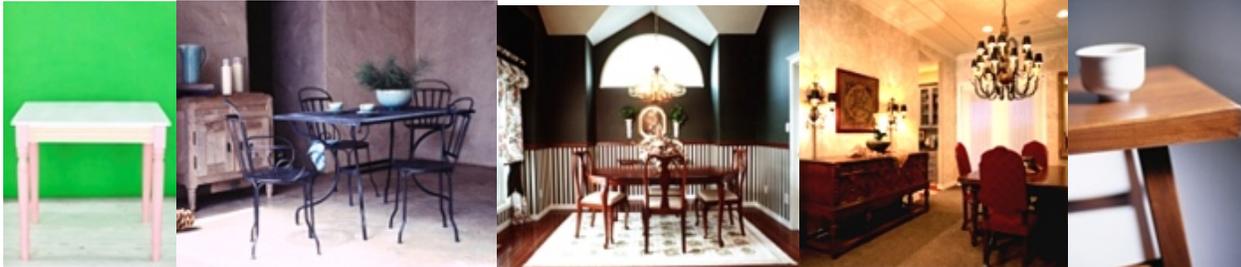
## The solution “sought” by the dreamer

We thought that Mrs. Y was dead, but it was evidently only a feint. My friend X cried out, “I must fetch a doctor.”

*Adapted from C G Jung(1945/48), On the Nature of Dreams, CW8*

### Associations and Amplification

Dreams are products of the Unconscious psyche...*a fragment of involuntary psychic activity, just conscious enough to be reproducible in the waking state* [12] Dreams have a personal content and are, mostly, subjective. Every element of the dream has a personal meaning and relationship to the dreamer. Suppose one were to dream of a table, one might imagine that “table” has the same meaning for everyone. Consider, for a moment, if each of these pictures conveys the same meaning to you.



These are different styles of tables in different contexts. You may have liked one table more than another. One picture might have suggested happy family meals to you. Or perhaps not....maybe being taught your table manners and humiliated at the dining table by a cruel mother was a painful and unpleasant experience for you.

Jung gives this example of a table

*...the very one at which his father sat when he refused the dreamer all further financial help and threw him out of the house as a good-for-nothing. The polished surface of this table stares at him as a symbol of his catastrophic worthlessness in his daytime consciousness as well as in his dreams at night.* [13]



Clearly this “table” meant something very specific to Jung’s dreamer. Strong feelings were very much associated with it. Therefore, if you have a book or a magazine article that you’ve cut out which tells you what dreaming about a table means it really isn’t much use to you to piece together what your dream means.

Let’s take another example. In more general terms, a cat might be to you

- something warm and cuddly, that you love to caress,
- something to avoid like plague because it will make you sneeze,
- an altogether nasty little piece of work; an efficient, merciless and savage killing machine of birds, mice and geckos,
- something that is not half as much of a companion as a dog,
- something only little girls like,
- something your brother threw at you and it scratched your chest as it landed,
- or something that you don’t even notice.

There is the oft-quoted example of a pile of manure in a dream. It can mean something potentially valuable and useful to a farmer, but something to be removed as quickly and completely as possible if it’s on your lounge carpet and you have guests coming to dinner in fifteen minutes.

As well as the context and mood of the dream, personal associations to the elements and motifs, therefore, are indispensable to fathoming the dream's meaning. A motif in my dream can have a very different meaning from the same motif in your dream, as in the example of the table or the cat.

The ways of getting to your associations takes time and dedication. It is natural for you to try to resist the true meaning. That is why someone else will often see meanings in my dream that I don't see. Maybe when they suggest these meanings I reject them. This alone is another reason to make you pause when experience those seemingly trivial, "tell-me-what-my-dream-means-o-you-clever-person-you" moments. Are you really going to there and then collect all of the dreamer's personal associations? If you do not, your "interpretation" of the dream is little better than an intuitive guess. You may be right, but what if you are wrong? You may do harm. As we have seen before, even if you are correct in your interpretation, giving "feedback" it a skill and serious responsibility.

### Methods of Association

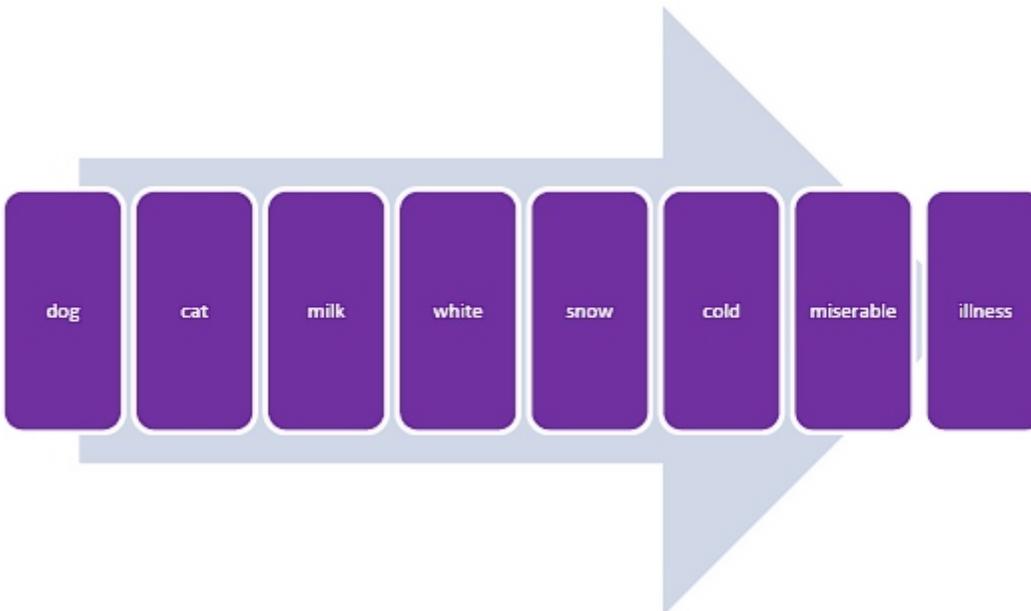
The first step is to try to collect as many possible associations to every motif in your dream. There are two well known types of associations: Free Association and Controlled Association. Association, according to Andrews et al., is *the spontaneous linkage of ideas, perceptions, images, fantasies according to certain personal and psychological themes, motifs, similarities, oppositions or causalities*. [14] Sharp has a definition more focused on Jungian dreamwork. He says association is *a spontaneous flow of interconnected thoughts and images around a specific idea, often determined by unconscious connections. Personal associations to images in dreams, together with amplification, are an important step in their interpretation*. [15]

If you have ever taken part in a brainstorming session you will immediately grasp the idea of the Free Association method of associating. My summary of the rules of brainstorming are

- Judgment must be suspended
- No criticism of own or other people's ideas
- No evaluation of others' ideas
- Everything said by others is acceptable.

In Freudian analysis the patient is encouraged to obey the "basic rule"; she tells the Analyst whatever comes into her mind. Anna Freud said that candor was the first rule of analysis. The patient must report her thoughts without reservation and make no attempt to concentrate.

Free Association is not recommended for analyzing dreams. It will undoubtedly help you to discover complexes, but it will not usually help you to understand the meaning of a particular element from your dream. Think of Free Association as a chain. Here is an example. Let's say the person dreamed about a dog.



### **Free Association**

As you can see, each association is based on the previous one. Each link in the chain has a relationship to the one before and the one after. Two questions spring to mind which deem this method an unsatisfactory way to find the meaning of your dream. Does the last on in our chain have anything to do with the first? When do we stop? Like to infinite number of

monkeys typing away for an infinitely long time, they will eventually write the complete works of William Shakespeare. By Free Association we will uncover all our complexes, but it may take a very long time. It also may not help to understand this particular dream.

The preferred method of associating, when trying to make sense of your dreams is Controlled Association. Think of it more as responses radiating from a single stimulus word, like petals of a flower.



## **Controlled Association**

### **How to Associate**

All dreamwork, even listening to other people's dreams, tends to tire me and make me feel lethargic. Writing these articles on dreams and dreamwork too induced these feelings of fatigue in me. Rather than fight them, I feel it is better to pace myself and limit myself to only an hour or so or work on this article at any one time.

Dreamwork has an essential evanescent quality about it. It is very ephemeral and so needs capturing before it evaporates. For that reason, just as you should write down your dreams as soon as possible, so too, you must write down your associations. You could audiotape them and transcribe them later, or get someone else to write them down, but whatever you do, record them, or they will be lost to you.

My way of associating is to sit with a pen and paper, relax, try to empty my mind of thoughts (stilling the crazy mind as they say in Zen) take each dream image one at a time and write it in the centre of my paper. Then I say the word to myself and write down the first thing that comes to mind at about one o'clock on my page. Then I say the stimulus word again and try to focus my attention back on the word and write down whatever comes to my mind at two o'clock. And so on. The pattern is:

- Original Stimulus
- Response #1
- Original Stimulus
- Response #2
- Original Stimulus
- Response #3

And so on.

At each step I try to forget my response word. I try to make many fresh associations, each response independent of the one which preceded it. I keep going until I can't do any more. It doesn't matter if there are repetitions. In fact, that may show to me that I have not tried to edit my thoughts.

The next step, when I have exhausted, for the time being, my associations is to go through them one at a time and repeat them to myself. As I do so I try to practice awareness. I pay attention to my reactions to each word. Maybe most of the words will not produce much response. What I am looking for in myself is Affect.

Affect is like strong emotion. However, affect is fixed to ideas, whereas emotions are independent of ideas. Affect brings along with it a physical reaction and a disturbance in thinking. I might typically, notice my breathing suddenly speeding up or my heart racing. I might feel joy, or fear, or excitement, or remorse, or regret, or sexual attraction, or disgust.

What I'm looking for is what Jung calls the "Aha!" moment. Suddenly, and unequivocally I know that this is what the dream motif means to me. I may not like what it means, I may recoil from it. The very idea may be tacky to me, something I don't like to admit to myself, let alone anyone else. So that is the response that I underline or circle. That is THE one. If other words give similar reactions then I underline them too.

### Beginning Interpretation

I have my dream story, described as best I can and I have a list of "aha" or key words which tell me what I associate each element of my dream. I can now begin my attempt to derive meaning from my dream. It is often better to also try to amplify the dream symbols at this stage. (See the next article for Amplification).

I begin my interpretation, piecing together each element in the big jigsaw puzzle. I have the context of my dream and I have my key associations. Some general associations may help me too. Having said one ought not to use "dream dictionaries", or as Jung calls them "*vulgar little dream books*" [16] here are some elements of dreams that have a cultural, universal or collective context.

Suppose for example, I dreamed I was attending a social function in a suit of armour, while everyone else is normally dressed. Clothing often represents Persona or outer skin or appearance. It is the barrier between me and the world. It can tell others my tastes, my style and my perhaps my mood. A suit of armour might suggest I was well defended, unable to feel the soft touch of others, unable to feel what I touched. If I shook your hand in my iron glove I might crush it, the human warmth in your handshake would be lost to me.

Likewise, if my mother were to be in my dream, does she stand for my relationship with my mother, or maybe for the Archetypal mother? Dream interpretation is full of perhaps's and maybes. It could be this, or it could be that. One stumbles along with various permutations. Sometimes one interpretation hits the spot. Maybe I react strongly to it, with affect. If it produces a "NO, definitely not!" reaction in me then maybe that is the one to probe.

Dreams often compensate, so must be understood in the context of what is going on for me now. How is my life progressing – or is it stagnating?

### Amplification

In the next article we will look at Amplification – *a method of association based on the comparative study of mythology, religion and fairy tales, used in the interpretation of images in dreams and drawings.* [17] Amplification involves the use of myths, historical and cultural parallels to make ample the metaphorical content of dream symbolism [18].

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[1] C G Jung, *The Seminars; Volume One, Dream Analysis: notes of the seminar given in 1928-30*, page 225 edited by William Maguire, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London

[2] *On the Nature of Dreams*, CW8

[3] H L Mencken, source unknown

[4] Paul Anderson, *New Scientist*, September 25, 1969

[5] C G Jung, *The Seminars; Volume One, Dream Analysis: notes of the seminar given in 1928-30*, page 225 edited by William Maguire, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London

[6] Freud, S. (1932) *New Introductory Letters on Psychoanalysis*, The Hogarth Press

[7] C G Jung (1961) *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* ed. Aniela Jaffé, Pantheon Books, New York

[8] *The Practical use of Dream Analysis* CW16 para 296

[9] Op.cit para 305

[10] Sorry, I cannot recall where I read this in Jung. I may also have got some of the details incorrect. I will put the citation in future editions.

[11] *On the Nature of Dreams* CW8

[12] Ibid

[13] Ibid

[14] Samuels, A., Shorter, B., and Plaut, F. (1986) *A Critical Dictionary of Jungian Analysis* Routledge and Kegan Paul

[15] *On the Nature of Dreams*, CW8

[16] Ibid

[17] Sharp, D (1991) *C G Jung Lexicon: a primer of terms and concepts*, Inner City Books, Toronto

[18] Samuels, A., Shorter, B., and Plaut, F. (1986) *A Critical Dictionary of Jungian Analysis* Routledge and Kegan Paul