

The Developmental Function of Dreaming Mentation: Clinical Implications

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All too typically, the dream has been viewed as a product, an object to be examined from a waking perspective. Thus, from the vantage point of the classical model, dreaming deviations from the waking state are typically not viewed as directly revelatory of the subjective state, but as defensive phenomena or as intricate, complex, disguised wish-fulfillments and conflicts pertaining to those wishes. Consequently, Greenson, as I have discussed in detail elsewhere (Fosshage, 1987a), viewed the progressive elements in Mr. M's dream that contributed to his emergence from a depressed state as solely defensive wish-fulfillments because they did not correspond with the patient's prevailing waking state of depression. Within the classical model the posited ubiquity of defensive operations in the formation of dreams and the correspondent manifest-latent content distinction has, through endless translations of dream imagery, cast upon dreams a waking bias that often precludes an in-depth understanding of the dreaming experience itself.

A reported dream is a waking memory of a mental process that occurred during sleep. Just as Kohut (1959) more clearly formulated for us the importance of perceiving from within the patient's subjective frame of reference, we also need to understand the dream from within the dreamer's experiential frame of reference. Viewing dreaming as a mental process positions us more empathically to appreciate the multiple functions and complexity of the dreamer's efforts. From this vantage point, I have proposed a revised psycho-

analytic model of the psychological function of dreams. Essential features of this model are as follows (for a detailed presentation see Fosshage, 1983, 1987a; Fosshage and Loew, 1987): 1) Primary process is redefined as imagistic mentation that serves "an over-all integrative and synthetic function" (Fosshage, 1983, p. 689). 2) The supraordinate function of dreaming mentation is the development, maintenance (regulation), and restoration of psychic processes and organization. More specifically, dreaming mentation may function to envision and, therefore, develop and consolidate emergent psychological configurations, such as changes in self and object images. Dreaming may contribute to the momentary resolution of intrapsychic conflict either through the restoration of primary organizational patterns or through a creative and newly emergent reorganization. And dreaming may contribute to the regulation of self-esteem, as well as sexual, aggressive, and other processes wherein wish-fulfillment (instead of a discharge or defensive operation) is viewed as a regulatory process. 3) The manifest-latent content distinction that posits the ubiquitous operation of defensive functioning in dream formation is eschewed and, in turn, the reported dream is referred to as the *dream content that may or may not involve defensive operations*; 4) Dreaming mentation, like waking mentation, *varies in clarity, significance, and functional success*.

Some of the technical implications of this revised model are summarized as follows (for a more complete explication, see Fosshage, 1983, 1987a, b; Fosshage and Loew, 1987): 1) The foremost task is to illuminate as fully as possible the *experience* of the dreamer within the dream, not just the reporter's waking reaction to the dream, and to be particularly alert to similarities and differences between dreaming and waking organizations. 2) "Dream figures and images are typically seen not as the product of disguise, but rather as poignant organizational nodal points for particular affective reactions or thematic experiences" (Fosshage, 1987b, p. 31). Accordingly, rather than translating these images to overcome their disguise, we need to elucidate their specific meanings and use within the dream language. 3) "... in contrast to the common assumption that the analyst is always, at least latently, in the dream; with the revised model the analyst is never *assumed* to be present in the dream unless he or she actually appears (or unless the dreamer, of course, directly connects the dream image to the analyst). However, because the primary organizational patterns structure both dreams as well as the transference relationship, the analytic discussion, *without requiring* translation of dream images, can focus in accordance with the patient's associations

on the particular organizational pattern as it emerges in the dream as well as in the transference" (Fosshage, 1987a, p. 165; see Hoffman, 1983, and Stolorow and Lachmann, 1984/85, for a reconceptualization of transference). 4) Rather than repeatedly requesting the patient to associate to single elements of the dream, isolated from the context of the dream, which tends to disrupt and fragment the dreamer's experience of the dream, we need generally to comprehend the series of images, as if they were words constituting a sentence, and the overall dream drama, like sentences forming a story. And 5) because dreaming mentation provides an overall organizing function, it is crucially important to make use of these mental processes with all our patients regardless of the severity of disturbance.

Because dreaming occurs when stimuli from, and immediate reactions (including correspondent defensive maneuvers) to, the external world are minimized, developmental strivings and correspondent incremental developmental steps are frequently operative and apparent in the dreaming experience. The conceptualization of the developmental function of dreaming within the revised psychoanalytic model enables us to recognize and utilize the dream's developmental increments to further their consolidation.

The following clinical example illustrates the developmental function of dreaming.

CASE ILLUSTRATION

At the time the following dream was reported, the patient, whom I will call Tamara, had been in psychoanalysis for almost two years.

At the beginning of treatment, Tamara was 28 years old, married for several years, and the mother of a young son. She complained of prolonged periods of intense depression, hopelessness, and despair, which reportedly had been exacerbated in a recent previous three-year analysis. She struck me as highly intelligent and articulate, naturally attractive, and, in spite of her depression and wariness, emotionally available and desperately searching for help.

Tamara had been raised in a large family with, reportedly, a very successful, powerful, explosively tyrannical, and vulnerable father and a religiously intense mother, who had developed a severe paranoid disturbance during the middle parts of Tamara's childhood. Tamara's feeling of emotional abandonment by her mother was telescoped in an early memory from the age of three, when she was hospitalized for an unknown physical illness and was not visited by mother for three days, engendering a deep distrust. Tamara's father

had selected her as his special one, turning to her for responsiveness to his particular needs in what Tamara now termed a "self-interested love." She came from a deeply religious background and at times experienced intense visions of God, envisioning, particularly during stressful times, an idealized figure to whom she could turn for guidance.

An intense connection was quickly formed in the analytic relationship with marked idealizing and mirroring components. It was on the basis of these components, as well as the management of the subsequent inevitable, and at times severe, ruptures that new hope emerged, and the depression gradually lifted as Tamara began to consolidate a more positive and cohesive sense of self in conjunction with a sense of the other as a reliably caring person. Synchronous with this development was a gradual reemergence, and a more direct expression, of her needs and desires that resulted both in her return to graduate school and a growing awareness of and objection to, from her vantage point; her husband's lack of responsiveness, depression, and negativity. Whereas previously she had often submitted to his angry scapegoating of her, which resulted in a self-depletion as well as a self-protective withdrawal and which, in turn, exacerbated the problematic marital interaction (for example, her withdrawal would further irritate her husband), she now began, often quite angrily, to assert herself. She started painfully to question the basis of her marriage; she realized that she had married her husband partially to accommodate her mother's wishes. For three or four months prior to the following dream, Tamara more directly confronted her husband, mobilizing him to seek treatment. Intense marital conflict persisted and culminated, just prior to the dream, in a brief physical separation, which she initiated to give herself time "to think."

The session began with Tamara relating the dream. The dream reveals the structural changes occurring through the employment of an idealized transference. As will become evident, I viewed this as an idealized selfobject transference, primarily motivated by developmental need and striving, because of its self-enhancing quality (in contrast to an idealized transference either serving a defensive function or emerging as a repetitive relational pattern, both of which ultimately would be self-limiting or self-depleting).

I will first present the dream and some of the detailed notes from this and the next day's session, and then I will summarize the dream's primary meaning, function, and linkage to her waking life. My discussion will be limited to the major themes. The dream was as follows:

I was driving in a car with Bryan [her husband] and mother. The car had broken down. Bryan was trying to repair it, but without success. I wasn't sure where we were going, but I had to be somewhere. I got out of the car and left them with the car. I found a horse stable and I went inside and there was this wonderful stallion, strong and intelligent, but it belonged to someone else. But I decided that I would borrow it and it was okay to do that. I got on this horse and continued on my way. A lot of the riding was on the freeway with lots of traffic, and the cars were at a standstill. But with this horse, it didn't make any difference. I rode very quickly through this traffic—galloping the whole way and the horse knew the way. I didn't have to control the horse and we arrived within two hours. And when I got there, I got off the horse.

And then this strange thing occurred to me—I would have to return the horse and I would lose all the ground I had made. It was a strange moment to have these two things occurring at the same time. But some man who was there said, "Don't worry about it. The horse can go back on his own; he knows his way back." So I just let the horse go. I knew it was a smart horse and it would be okay.

I was at a ballet audition—that was my destination. It was an audition to join a ballet company. And I was in the building and in a room next to a room where the auditions were being held. I could hear people on the other side of the wall warming up. I felt very confident that I was going to audition well and be accepted into the company. But then I had a wave of doubt that swept across me and said, "How can I think I'll be accepted when I haven't danced in 10 or 11 years?" I said it to a man who was with me. He said to me or I said to him, "That's okay. I'm sure I can do it still," and a feeling of total confidence came back.

Tamara expressed her good feelings about the dream. She then referred to the first part, in which "some sense of responsibility undoes my going forward; and, if I can trust that everything will be all right, then I can keep going forward." She then continued, "The last thing [referring to ballet dancing] I knew I wanted to do, not because of Mother and not because of God." Tamara had previously described a traumatic occurrence when she was eleven. She had felt utterly humiliated when her mother failed to provide her with the appropriate ballet clothes and she had to dance in old socks at an audition for a well-known ballet school in a foreign country. She now added, "I didn't tell you about the incident when I was humiliated, but I was accepted. The reason I didn't go was that during the previous year, the [foreign] teacher didn't accept the fact that I couldn't speak the language and gave me assignments I just couldn't do. I felt terribly humiliated. When I was accepted at the conservatory, I had to study in [the foreign language] and dance there, but I

To summarize the dream: Tamara was in a car with her husband and mother and the car had broken down. Tamara was unsure where they were going, but, feeling an internal impetus to be somewhere, she left the car and her husband and mother to seek another way. She found a stallion² and, even though "... it belonged to someone else... I decided that I would borrow it and it was okay to do that ... possibly relating to her initial disappointment in finding out that her analyst was married (which she had learned from the referral source). Nevertheless, "I got on this horse and continued on my way." She was able to use the analyst and the analysis to move through the impasse in her life ("the cars were at a standstill").

Upon arrival, the dreamer became concerned about returning the horse and thus reverse her progress—a prominent sense of the other's requiring caretaking at her expense, which had been a dominant theme in her life. A man reassures her that the stallion "knows his way back and can go back on his own," a new experience that enables her to proceed to her destination. This new recognition that the stallion can take care of himself enables her to move from a responsible and caretaking position at the expense of herself to a rediscovery of her vital internal direction. Tamara arrives at her destination. Gaining strength and confidence with the aid of a supportive and less idealized man (whom she also associated to the analyst, although "he was younger and more peerlike"), she prepares to audition again (a return to a poignant time in memory when development was derailed) and to rectify imagistically what had been in the past, at a time when she was too fragile, a humiliating defeat resulting in the loss of her direction. *This new (momentary) realization that the stallion can take care of himself, the rediscovery of her internal direction, and the consolidation of her confidence are the developmental movements furthered through the dreaming mental process.*³

The dream is remarkable in its clarity and in its sweeping imagistic portrayal of the emergent and ongoing changes in her experience of herself, the analyst, and the analytic relationship. Utilizing her analytic experience, she is now able to envision, at least momentarily, an idealized stallion to transport her through a congested impasse, a resolution of the transference theme of accommodation, a rediscovery

² I later learned that horses had been an important part of Tamara's childhood, illuminating further the selection and meaning of the stallion image.

³ Note also that these themes and developments are apparent in the dream content itself and do not require invoking the concept of disguise or the translation of dream images. Accordingly, the meanings and affective potency of the particular images, for example, a stallion, can be more fully appreciated and elucidated. The transference is easily addressed in this instance through the patient's direct associations.

ery of her internal direction, and an increasing capacity, aided by the image of a supportive man, for regulating her confidence. At the end of the dream she begins to take over this latter function as she says, "He said to me or I said to him, 'That's okay. I'm sure I can do it still,' and a feeling of total confidence came back."⁴

Tamara's initial clarity about the new realization in the dream—"some sense of responsibility undoes my going forward; and, if I can trust that everything will be all right, then I can keep going forward"—was confounded and difficult to integrate in the wake of her most conflictual immediate life situation and her more familiar waking patterns of organization. Our task, however, is not to abnegate those important momentary developments emergent in the dream, which do not necessarily correspond with the waking state, by rendering them merely a defensive disguise of waking "reality," but to use these developmental movements, which dreaming mentation is so well positioned to promote, to further within the psychoanalytic arena the person's developmental course.

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⁴The shift in pronouns is a graphic illustration of the shift from the use of the idealized other to an increased reliance on oneself to provide these regulatory functions.