

The Developmental Function of Dreaming Mentation: Clinical Implications

James L. Fosshage

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

didn't want to repeat the experience—the choice was that or the American school. I wanted to dance, but it was connected to something so horrible." She reiterated emphatically, "It was the last time I knew what I wanted to do." I noted to myself that Tamara was experiencing herself more as an active agent and less victimized in the ballet story.

Tamara continued, "In the second part of the dream, I know I can do what I needed to do." I reflected, "You're finding your direction and confidence; you can do what you want to do." We were primarily focusing on the experience of the dreamer with which Tamara was affectively resonating in her waking state; and, although we would want further amplification of this theme in her current waking life, I, at this juncture, inquired about her experience of the stallion in the dream. She replied, "Either you or God or some combination. He was very male. I had some responsibility to the horse and its owner. It wasn't mine, but I had to take care of the horse and its owner." I inquired if she could relate to this in her waking life. She responded, "I feel very responsible to Bryan. I'm anxious about coming here [i.e., to the place where she was now living]. I feel I'll have to go back to Bryan. I don't want to sell the house, and for Matthew [her son]. I want to stay here until I know what I want, but it will be undone. Bryan is not the stallion—I don't feel that he can take care of himself." Tamara was experiencing a responsibility to Bryan, who, like the significant persons of her past, she felt could not take care of himself. However, she was realizing in her dreaming mentation that the other person, in this case the stallion, could take care of himself, enabling her to pursue her own direction. As she proceeded to discuss her relationship to Bryan and the frightening ramifications of a possible marital separation, she recounted how during this painfully conflictual time she had initially turned to God for aid but then had rejected his counsel, desiring to take control of her destiny—a waking reflection that corresponded with her increasing sense of control in the dream.

Tamara opened the next session by saying, "I was afraid that you were angry with me. The stallion in the dream is definitely you. Like I have a responsibility to you—like I can't stay where you brought me." I reflected, "You seem to feel that I have an agenda for you for which you have to be responsible." She responded affirmatively, "At times I feel I have to leave everything." Now in the analytic relationship Tamara was reexperiencing that I, too, had an agenda that she must accommodate in order to maintain the necessary selfobject tie. To facilitate the integration of the change in the organizational pattern that had occurred in her dream, I pointed out the difference between

her waking and dreaming states: "So you begin to feel that I, too, have an agenda and to worry about doing enough for me; but in the dream you realize that you don't have to worry about the stallion, that the stallion can take care of himself. Free of that responsibility, you could then proceed to the ballet audition and to your destination." Tamara acknowledged this new development but then replied, at first with a smile implying some perspective, "I feel you do have an agenda. You're still secretly in love with me and you want me to get on with it. . . . But I know this [the separation from her husband] is what I want. I want to leave 'cause I don't want to be where I am—I'd rather find a better relationship. I don't believe I should have what I want. It's not right at the expense of someone else. To want for yourself is wrong and at Bryan's expense is wrong."

Tamara first expressed that my "secret love" for her required her accommodation to *my* agenda, which, in this case, she momentarily felt was to leave her husband—a repetition of the problematic relational pattern. In the fluidity of the moment, however, she quickly moved from this position to one of self-assertion and to *her* agenda, "But I know this is what I want."¹ But then she reexperienced this assertion to be at the other's, namely Bryan's, expense. I felt that Tamara was struggling to determine her direction; but within an intense and needed relationship, particularly needed at this time, she was prone to experience the primary focus as shifting to the other and the other's agenda even though it would be at her expense. This was a pattern that was occurring in both the marital and analytic relationships. At one point in our discussion, we again connected this pattern historically to her relationships with her mother and father wherein she deeply felt a responsibility for them and for their agendas, experiencing that any self-focus detracted from them, was at their expense, and was wrong. The intense conflictual pain and guilt evoked by her contemplation of a marital separation appeared to precipitate a more forceful emergence of this older configuration of accommodation within the transference because of the heightened need for the selfobject tie, the content of which, in this instance, was for her to feel secretly loved by me. All of this understandably impeded the integration of the new developments in the dream. Her dream vision, however, provided a potently imaged nucleus of change that would serve as a foundation for future work and structural change.

¹These were viewed as shifting self-states, namely, from a state of accommodation to one of self-assertion, each in need of recognition, rather than either serving as a defense against the other, a formulation that would implicitly credit one state as more "basic" at the expense of the other.

