The Practical Use of Dreams
And the Human Comedy

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2000

Publisher: James P. Gustafson, M.D. Madison, Wisconsin
I have taken a long time to appreciate two-dimensional space. I did not realize that the one-dimensional space of linear will is just about our entire culture. E.M. Forster (1910) saw it coming long before I did. He saw that the Wilcoxes were going to have their way, in their auto manufacturing, and all the other kinds of manufacturing which followed, including medicine. Everything is now to be fixed, by a focal and conscious mind bent upon its job.

Hardly anyone is left to respond, to attend, to notice, to feel. The Schlegel sisters did that in Forster’s novel. They are beautiful in their attentiveness, but hardly anyone has any time to attend as they did. It takes time to attend to feeling, and to see its objection.

Every night the dream train departs from the station, for those who are willing to see how they actually feel about the day they have lived. The dream will see what is wrong with the day that has been lived, and go to face what is disturbing about it. This is the train into the second dimension which is opposite or orthogonal to the first dimension, described by Freud in 1900.

Freud found that this second dimension was heavily censored to hide its profound opposition to the Establishment. I find it is hardly censored at all a hundred years later. Why is that? It is because hardly anyone is paying attention to its message, so there is no need to censor it.

So the gateway from the train station into the unconscious is wide open a hundred years after Freud. Few go through it, because few are willing to undergo the discipline of paying attention to their own bodies, which cry out every night in dreams. This is a discipline like meditation to stay with painful feeling and see where it takes a person. Shall we go?
To be oriented to this departure is to become open to its beautiful teaching. **Orient** is a very important word, meaning:

1. To cause to face or point towards the east; specifically, to build, as a church, with its longitudinal axis pointing eastward, and its chief altar at the eastern end; also, to set in any certain position in relation to the points of the compass as a map with its east side to the east, north to south, etc., hence to ascertain the bearings of.

2. To set right by adjusting to facts or principles; to put (esp. oneself) into correct position or relation; to acquaint (esp. oneself) with the existing situation.

3. To arrange in order or place so as to show the relations of the parts among themselves.

Thus, the dream in the second dimension orients, by pointing eastward, from the westward direction of man into more and more getting and spending. It points eastward, back to the body, which has been dragged into its daily duties westward.

Dream in two dimensions is a **prepositional** theory of dreams, a motion from the departure gate of the end of the day, to the night of the dream for its reply. If we can follow the motion, we will be oriented. For example, so many patients ask me how they can get out of the assumptions of their family of origin that they be perfect (ly accommodating)? I say that they cannot within their conscious mind, in its character or constant attitude built into a system of responsibilities. But the dream departs every night from this system, at Freud’s famous train
station, to the unconscious, das Unbewusste (Breuer and Freud, 1895, p. 80). In this
unconscious, eastward, is a standpoint which can judge the conscious mind, and the character,
and its system of responsibilities, as absurd. There lies the power to turn the conscious mind
upside down.
Chapter 4. Dream as Comparison or Metaphor.

So many patients seem flat and dull. They only want the negative, namely anxiety and depression, to go away. They thus seem indistinguishable from one another.

In other words, they just want to function. To function is to operate in one dimension, which can be assigned a quantity, like depression from one to ten. An anti-depressant can have a linear effect, such as elevating the depression from three to four.

So soon as I ask a patient when she felt better, I introduce a comparison, as between then and now. A comparison is a two-dimensional space, as between an ideal and a fall from that ideal to something degraded. This is the very mechanism of depression (Bibring, 1956; Gustafson, 1999, Chapter 3). But not every patient is willing to go back to the ideal and feel the contrast to what has been degraded. Contrasts bring out feeling, and the relevant feeling here is of pain.

If the patient can bear the contrast, he or she becomes much more startlingly present. As a particular being, with a particular vision, and a particular history of loss. When I see a patient go from a one-dimensional presentation of being off in functioning, to a two-dimensional presentation of falling from grace, I see a person waking up. He or she will offer turns of phrase or images that I have never heard before. Freire (1970) called these phrases or images “generative language,” insofar as they generate an entire world of a particular being.

The Author’s Dream of His Slides Moistened with Lemon Juice. As I was preparing this chapter, I had an amusing theoretical dream about this transition from one-dimensional fungibility to two-dimensional wakefulness. I dreamt I was moistening slides for a lecture with lemon juice, which opened up green worlds of circularity out of the plane of the slide. Yet it
ruined the slides as property. If I could keep the slides in black and white quantities, I could control the data numerically. If I introduced a patient with a vision, I would have to deal with qualities like color, and their loss.

![Diagram of slides moistened with lemon juice]

Figure 4.1. My Slides Moisten With Lemon Juice.

Of course, this is a dream literally in three dimensions. As Bateson (1972) (discussed in Gustafson, 1997, and Gustafson, 1986) argued, however, you need one more dimension than the
pattern in question in order to see it. The extra dimension gives you a perspective on all the lesser dimensions.

My three-dimensional dream shows a two-dimensional comparison between the vertical plane of the patient’s ideals and the horizontal plane of the patient’s functioning. This is extremely important, because the social world of property pulls and pays only for functioning in its service. Freire (1970) called it a Director Culture, which puts the functioning cog into a “culture of silence.” The horizontal plane computes performances for its machine. The patient is silent in his own right.

The Dream of the Black Ocean Liner. A middle aged woman had to go back to work, because her husband had become ill and could not work. She was depressed. This was very painful, because her idea or ideal was that she could be a stay-at-home mother. She never expected that this would happen to her. She cried telling the resident and I about this particular downfall.

I asked her what she had dreamt about this fall, and she answered very simply. She said she had had a dream of a huge black ship that had suddenly turned over on its side. She thought it amusing, because a ship so huge could never do such a thing.

I asked her to tell me how she knew about huge black ships. She didn’t. She knew what black meant to her, the loss of beautiful color, funerals, death. So what about ships of that size? Oh yes, that took her back to her last vacation in Florida on a cruise ship of that scale. That would have to be her last vacation! Having to work again, there would be no more. Now she cried again at her loss, so sharply contrasted between a beautiful cruise ship and black, funeral ship flipping over on its side.
Still, the dream had its comfort. For her cleverness had made a beautiful metaphor. An entire world had taken a flip. She could laugh at the absurdity of fate and its suddenness.

This is one of the most remarkable capacities of metaphor. It can encompass a huge and sudden and devastating change in a comparison. It can map the non-linearity, or bifurcation of reality, between two regimes or regions that are absolutely discontinuous. For this patient, there was the old world of color and comfort at home // suddenly flipped into the black and funeral world of the mere functioning.

The key transition of the ship rolling over brought to her mind how her cat knocks over vases, toys, and whatever she pleases. Thus, her sudden loss of her world was as if her world were being knocked over by her cat. The cat god was toying with her. This absurdity allowed her to laugh as well as cry. It is said that the gods laugh when they see what happens to human beings.

The Reach of Metaphor

I am tempted to think that two-dimensional metaphors always imply a third dimension as in my dream of the moistening of the slides with lemon juice. For in this patient’s dream there was a standpoint on shore from which she could view the ship upright // then the sudden discontinuity of the ship knocked over. Perhaps, a third dimension is always needed as perspective to map the transition between the other two dimensions or regimes or regions? Perhaps Bateson’s Law of \((n + 1)\) dimensions to map n-dimensional figures (see Gustafson, 1986; reprinted, 1997) is strictly applicable to metaphors in dreams?

I am always being asked by my friends and colleagues how I know if a patient can find some delight in capturing what has happened so painfully by being able to tell the story so well
in the beautiful condensation of a metaphor. If the patient has suffered the sudden loss of a world and even ideal world, at least she can enjoy the storyteller’s distance and wit and mastery that she is so capable of. In one dimension she has lost, in two she has shone in a certain beauty of expression.

Winnicott (1971b) used to say that if a dream could encompass the pain in its story telling, then the patient could probably go into it. But he added several qualifications. One was that he never tried to go to the pain until the patient was ready. Secondly, he did not use dream material that seemed degraded, or without play or symbolic play in it. In the case of Mrs. X (Winnicott, 1971b), he did not use images of rats devouring rotten oranges, and things of that kind, which only threatened to make the patient feel more worthless about herself than she already did. It is as if the metaphor is merely two-dimensional and the patient is lost in crap, rather than having a third dimension to stand outside it, and look down from above with some humor of the divinity.

A few days ago when my nineteen-year-old daughter came back for the first Christmas from college, she was full of that nineteen-year-old self-centeredness that can be difficult for the parents to take. She and her pals had the evening in the hot tub out back that I had constructed out of redwood and fitted with an underwater aluminum stove. None of these nineteen-year-olds bothered to thank me for setting up their beautiful evening.

The Author’s Dream of Being Nineteen Himself. How was I to reach between their condition and mine which seemed worlds apart. Well, I could go back forty years in my dream that night to remember how I was at nineteen. I dreamt I jumped into the sea with a pistol (male) and two green Cokes (female) in my pants’ pockets! Ah, what self-delight one has to have to enter a harsh world!
I think that more complex dreamers of three and four dimensions go back to the crudity of two dimensions when they have to reach across such crude bifurcations as this one. A metaphor thus travels forty years in a single leap. In some sense, they are the more beautiful the farther they can go (Percy, 1975). As Foote (Foote and Percy, 1979) wrote back to Percy,

Its glory is the metaphor....an equating of two very different things whose comparison makes each of them far realer than before. “All flesh is grass” is one of the great statements, reaching well down into our very bones (4 Dec 74).

It is the glory of writing and of dreaming.