

A synthesis of dream interpretation techniques

In this final chapter I shall summarize some of the dream techniques that I have found most useful in interpreting dreams. I will also give numerous examples of my dream interpretation experiences from the classroom, dream workshops (e.g. Coolidge, 1999), and from therapy sessions.

Principle 1: Dreams form a hierarchy of unfinished business.

Perls suggested that our psychological issues formed a hierarchy of unfinished business. Because I believe, like Freud, Jung, and Perls, that dreams contain elements of our past, present, and future, I think dreams have the potential to reveal deep secrets, repressed thoughts and problems, and issues on the edges of consciousness. I suggest listening very carefully to a person's dream. I strongly suggest not asking too many informational or logical questions about the individual's dream story. Take the dream at face value. However, I do recommend actively forming hypotheses about what unfinished business the dream story could contain. Your goal should be to bring forth some unfinished business to consciousness. As Freud said, where id was, ego shall be. Awareness, per se, is thought to be curative. From Perls' perspective, you should help dreamers become aware and re-own fragmented parts of their personalities.

Dream example 1: Duke, the neglected dog

A divorced woman in her forties shared this recurring dream: 'I had a Rottweiler named Duke and about five years ago I had to give him away because we were moving. He went to a very good home but I felt bad about it. About a year ago I started having this dream, which I've since had about five times. In the dream, I've forgotten I've had him [forgotten I still own him]. It dawned on me that I haven't fed him or watered him for weeks...'

At that very point I interrupted her. To me, the neglected dog was too compelling.

'Become Duke,' I said. She paused and looked at me, then away.

'Duke would say...' she started to say, and I interrupted again.

'No, no,' I said. 'You become Duke.'

'I love you anyway,' she said in a flat, monotone voice.

'Say it with more meaning,' I said.

'Without crying?' she asked, and she turned her head away with tears welling up in her eyes.

'Why did you cry?' I asked. 'What did that make you think about?'

As she regained her composure, she said, 'I grew up in a very legalistic family.'

I thought the choice of the word 'legalistic' was very intriguing, and I asked her about it. She said she was raised by her stepfather who she said was 'very unforgiving' and conditional. When I probed her about the latter description she said that he set up conditions which she felt obliged to follow, such as maintaining a weight he set for her, all A grades at school, etc. She said it was 'hell' living with him. And then she very quickly freely associated to what she described as another 'hellish' situation with her former husband who cheated on her.

At this point, she made the connection that saying 'I love you anyway' when she became Duke might be a message from her unconscious self to her conscious self. She pondered, without any additional questions or comments from me, whether she had truly begun to forgive herself for feeling so bad about her stepfather's unloving harshness and her ex-husband's cheating ways.

Principle 2: People have a tendency to avoid and alienate the holes in their personalities despite their compensating need for wholeness. Watch for these holes in dreams.

Perls also pointed out that this tendency to dissociate and disown even occurs physically. Rather than saying, 'I am fingers,' we say, 'I have fingers.' It may also be considered a western phenomenon to locate the center of consciousness in our heads, which no doubt contributes to our dissociative tendencies. Easterners, particularly the Chinese and Japanese, are much more likely to ascribe the center of consciousness near the navel. In fact, one of the reasons that Buddha statues have big bellies is not only the connotation of health and wellbeing but also because Buddha possesses a belly-centered consciousness. One time on a river trip with my brother, I stood relaxed and contemplative on the banks of an oak tree-lined river, meditating on its pristine beauty. My brother came up and poked my belly and said unpoetically, 'You're getting a gut.' I countered, 'Ah, it is not a gut. I have belly-centered consciousness.'

Another sign of this dissociative process occurs when we say, 'I have a backache.' I once did a clinical internship in a campus counseling center. A fellow I saw for the first time said that he had been sent over from the medical center because:

'I have headaches.'

'When did they send you over,' I asked.

'A year ago,' he replied.

Immediately, I thought this fellow was guarded, distrusting of therapy and ambivalent. These hypotheses were also supported by his body language and general demeanor. The situation required some risky measures. I trusted that on some intuitive level, if I could show him some value of therapy, he might return. After all, although he took a year to get here, he was here. I decided to take the risk. The next thing I said to him was:

'Say: I am a headache.'

He said, 'What?' with some degree of skepticism.

I said, 'You told me you have headaches. I said tell it to me this way: I am a headache, instead of saying: I have a headache.'

He paused, looked at me, and said meekly, 'I am a headache.'

I said, 'Say it again but louder.'

I was getting anxious. I could feel it building. Would this work? Yet he said it again, and so I pressed him once more to say it like he really meant it.

Finally he said forcefully, 'I AM A HEADACHE. I AM A HEADACHE.' And then he added softly and sadly, 'I am a headache to myself.'

'How?' I asked. And therapy proceeded semi-smoothly for a full college quarter as we discussed his various self-defeating behaviors.

I had used Perls' techniques for making the patient take responsibility for dissociation and making the patient amplify a statement forcefully and meaningfully. I was also amazed that I had taken such risks in therapy, following my readings of Perls but also following my intuition. Moreover, we had arrived at a major unfinished issue for this fellow without a review of his family history, or even his dreams! Thus, we return to my original thesis statement and add to it.

We have a psychological tendency to complete tasks. Anxiety arises when we fail to complete them. As Perls noted we operate on a continuum of awareness, and the most important unfinished business eventually emerges into awareness. Perls also thought that we had hundreds of these unfinished issues that arrange themselves hierarchically. So we have a number one piece of unfinished business, a number two, etc. I point out to my classes that, no doubt, some issues sometimes take over number one but on a temporary basis: for example, when we worry about paying a certain bill, or studying for a test, etc. However, these issues come and go relatively quickly. I think Perls was referring to issues that would average number one over a long period of time. When I am listening to people's dreams, I have noticed that some issues tend to be in most people's hierarchy. For example, issues about death are common, not feeling the love of a parent, independence-dependence issues, etc.

Perls uses dreams to bring out the unfinished business. He achieves this by listening carefully to not only what the patient says, but also how they say it, their body language, and the melody of their entire demeanor. He said:

So how do we proceed in Gestalt Therapy? We have a very simple means to get the patient to find out what his own missing potential is. Namely, the patient uses me, the therapist, as a projection screen, and he expects of me exactly what he can't mobilize in himself. And in this process, we make the peculiar discovery that no one of us is complete, that every one has holes in his personality.

Now these missing holes are always visible. They are always there in the patient's projection onto the therapist... Then the therapist must provide the opportunity, the situation in which the person can grow. And the means is that we frustrate the patient in such a way that he is forced to develop his own potential. We apply enough skillful frustration so that the patient is forced to find his own way, discover his own possibilities, his own potential, and discover that what he expects from the therapist, he can do just as well himself.

So what we are trying to do in therapy is step-by-step to *re-own* the disowned parts of the personality until the person becomes strong enough to facilitate his own growth, to learn to understand where are the holes, what are the symptoms of the holes. And the symptoms of the holes are always indicated by one word; *avoidance*.

(Perls, 1969a; p. 36-8)

Now we have come to a major irony. Like Perls I do believe that dreams reveal our major unfinished businesses. However, in the strictest sense, *I do not interpret dreams and neither did Perls!* He wrote:

...we don't interpret dreams. We do something much more interesting with them. Instead of analyzing and further cutting up the dream, we want to bring it to life... Instead of telling the dream as if it were a story in the past, act it out in the present, so that it becomes a part of yourself, so that you are really involved.

If you understand what you can do with dreams, you can do a tremendous lot for yourself on your own. Just take any old dream or dream fragment, it doesn't matter. As long as a dream is remembered, it is still alive and available, and it still contains an unfinished, unassimilated situation. When we are working on dreams, we usually take only a small little bit from the dream, because you can get so much from even a little bit.

(Perls, 1969a; p. 68-9)

So the irony is that dreams are simply a vehicle to get at unfinished business. I do not care about the logic of the dream. I do not care to hear about endless dream characters, and story shifts. People are frequently disappointed when I do not let them finish telling me their long and boring dreams. I stop them as soon as I hear (and intuit) some interesting, provocative, compelling, or curious feature in the dream. At that point, I have the person become that object or

person. Most of the time, I favor inanimate objects over people because most dreamers write scripts for the people in their dreams all too easily. Perls urged his dreamers to:

...write a script...ham it up. Really *become* that thing – whatever it is in a dream – *become* it. Use your magic. Turn into that ugly frog or whatever is there – the dead thing, the live thing, the demon – and stop thinking. Lose your mind and come to your senses. Every little bit is a piece of the jigsaw puzzle, which together will make up a much larger whole – a much stronger, happier, more completely *real* personality.

(Perls, 1969a; p. 69)

Jung, even earlier than Perls, wrote about this dissociative process, the usefulness of dreams in reclaiming the unconscious, and the wholeness that results:

In this respect, dream symbols are the essential message carriers from the instinctive to the rational parts of the human mind, and their interpretation enriches the poverty of consciousness so that it learns to understand again the forgotten language of the instincts.

(Jung, 1968; p. 52)

Principle 3: Have the dreamer become part of the dream and write a script. I favor inanimate objects over animate objects in the dream.

When I have chosen the object I want the dreamer to become, I say to them: ‘Become that object. What would it say if it could talk to you?’ Sometimes, at this point, people stare at me incredulously. ‘What do you mean?’ they ask.

‘Become the object,’ I repeat. ‘Pretend you are an actor or actress. Make it talk. Make it say something to you.’

Here I sometimes get from the dreamer, ‘It would say...’ And I stop them immediately. ‘No. Become the object. Don’t talk in the third person. Start with, ‘I am... I feel...’

I would estimate that about 90% of the time, the dreamer will successfully generate some statement. Typically it is very short, maybe five to seven words. I have had two recent dreamers produce two words and three words respectively. Yet in both cases, the dreamers and I were satisfied that we had indeed discovered major unfinished issues.

Dream example 2: Take us out

The three-word example came from a 21-year-old former GI who was returning to college. He came to my office after a general psychology lecture. He said that

I had mentioned in class the dream about loss of teeth. He said that this dream was a recurrent one for him for the past four years. I asked him to describe the dream, and he said he had it at least once a week. He said that he usually wipes his mouth with the back of his wrist, and groups of his teeth, likes twos and threes will be on his wrist amidst blood.

‘Become the teeth,’ I said. ‘What would they say to you?’

‘Become the teeth?’ he asked politely.

I nodded.

‘Take us out,’ he said. I was fascinated.

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| Principle 4: Listen carefully to the language of the dreamer. |
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I caution you, at this point, because I had a traumatic experience with a girl in the eighth grade over what she supposedly had said. I paraphrased what I thought she said to someone else. That someone told her what I said she had said. She found me in the hallway and gave me a tongue-lashing I have not forgotten. Suffice to say, do not attempt to paraphrase. Simply memorize, as best you can, by repeating out loud whatever the person says. In this case, I repeated, ‘Take us out?’ and he nodded.

Before proceeding any farther, however, I follow Perls’ example of trying to enliven the statement, trying to make the dreamer own it, or trying to make the dreamer show some emotional involvement. So I said:

‘Say it again but louder.’

‘Take us out,’ he said, virtually repeating the monotone way he first had said it.

‘Say it again but mean it!’ I said forcefully.

‘TAKE US OUT,’ he said loudly but still flatly, but I decided I had done enough skillful frustration for the present. I did not wish to ruin the rapport.

I said, ‘What does that make you think about in your life?’

He paused reflectively. I kept myself stifled, enduring the pregnant silence.

‘Nothing,’ he said. I waited another slow pregnant moment.

I broke the silence but I recommend that you wait as long as necessary for the dreamer to say something first. I said:

‘Who might you say that to in your life? Take us out!’

‘No one,’ he said softly after another long wait.

I think a bad hypothesis is better than no hypothesis so I said:

‘Do you have a sibling?’ I thought, perhaps, because the teeth in his dream were in twos and threes, that perhaps they symbolized siblings.

‘Yes, a brother,’ he said.

‘Would you say that to your parents?’ Here, I was thinking that maybe he and his brother were too sheltered, and he wanted his parents to take them to the movies, on vacation, etc.

‘No,’ he said animatedly. ‘I love my parents.’

I suddenly realized I had misunderstood his phrase. To him, 'Take us out,' meant something bad. So I asked him. Indeed, he said it meant to get rid of something, like wipe it out.

'Let's take it as a message to yourself,' I said. 'Make your teeth, in groups of twos and threes, talk to you and say, 'Take us out!' What might that mean to you?'

He paused again. 'I think I know,' he said.

'What?' I asked gently.

'There's parts of me I don't like. I'd like to get rid of some things.'

'Like what?' I said.

'I'm an introvert. I wish I could just change that. Take it out.'

'Well, I think that's one of the meanings of your dream,' I said.

Next, I tested whether he thought that this issue was an important one for him (high in his hierarchy). He agreed without hesitation.

It is important to point out a difference between Freud and Perls on this point. If a dreamer said no to this question, in other words, saying that this was not a very important issue for them, Perls would accept it. Perhaps, the therapist was simply wrong, Perls reasoned. It is possible, of course, despite our good intuitions and our best hypotheses. Freud would probably have taken the 'no' as a sign of unconscious resistance (or even of denial and conscious resistance) to the truth of the hypothesis. What if you still feel your interpretation is correct but the person is denying it? Perls said it is possible that you are right but it is not yet time for the dreamer to admit it. Be patient.

Principle 5: Everything in the dream is a projected aspect of the dreamer. However, unfinished psychological issues can be raised by having a person create a script with anything. This technique can be used with people who say they do not dream.

Virtually everyone dreams. People who swear that they do not dream come into the sleep lab, have electrodes attached to their heads, go to sleep, go into REM sleep, and then they are awakened. Invariably they smile. I tried this twice in graduate school with friends. Why do they smile? Because they were dreaming, and they swore to me they did not, yet I got them to admit they were dreaming vividly.

So the issue appears to be that some people do not remember their dreams. The solution is simple. Simply becoming aware about dreams seems to help people to remember. When I worked in the sleep lab, I would go home, and I would have dreams I was working in the sleep lab and monitoring people's sleep on the EEG. Some people find that if you put a pad of paper and a pencil beside your bed before you go to sleep, it seems to help the memory for dreams. Also, encourage those who say they do not remember their dreams to write down their dreams before getting out of bed. It is well known that dreams are forgotten

quickly upon awakening. If you are sleeping with another person and you both awaken at the same time, telling each other your dreams is another good mnemonic technique.

Dream example 3: Gone fishing

A woman about 35 years old was in my Principles of Counseling class at the university. We covered a section on dream interpretation in psychotherapy. She told me she never remembered a dream.

‘Never?’ I asked.

‘Never,’ she said firmly.

‘Not a bit, not a fragment, not a childhood dream, a nightmare, nothing?’ I asked incredulously.

‘Nothing,’ she said in what seemed like a sinister way.

‘Well,’ I said cockily. ‘Put some paper and a pencil beside your bed before you go to sleep. When you awaken try to remember something about your dreams. Anything. And do not go to the bathroom first. The dream will fade quickly if you do.’

We met five days a week. So the next day, I looked forward to my success. Everyone was given the homework to bring in a dream – recent, recurring, a nightmare, or any remembered dream fragment. As soon as we assembled, I looked right at her.

‘So?’ I said.

‘Nothing,’ she smiled.

‘Did you put a pencil and paper beside your bed?’ I asked.

‘No,’ she said, ‘because I knew it wouldn’t work.’

I made a face of incredulity. The class giggled.

‘Humor me,’ I said, pretending to be weak with frustration. ‘Try it!’ I added.

The next day in class, she came in with a sheepish look.

‘I don’t believe it,’ she said. ‘I don’t remember dreaming, but when I woke up I found that some time during the night I had written this, and she handed me a sheet of paper with two words on it: ‘Gone fishing.’ The class eagerly awaited my interpretation.

‘I think this could be a message to yourself,’ I said. ‘What does it make you think about?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said appearing truly perplexed.

‘Think about your unfinished business,’ I said (we had already covered Perls and Gestalt Therapy so she was familiar with the language). ‘What could the message mean?’ I added.

She paused and pondered and then she lit up like a light bulb.

‘Oh, I know,’ she said. ‘I need a vacation.’

I remained quiet. Something was welling up inside her. Her voice became more confident.

'I am a single mother with three kids. I'm trying to go through this masters program. I get no help whatsoever from my ex, his parents, or my parents. I have to be the responsible one for everything, every minute of the day and night. Just once, I'd like to put up a sign that says, 'Gone fishing.'

'Do you think that this is an issue for you that you'd benefit by sharing in therapy?' I asked.

'Of course,' she said. 'It's my biggest issue.'

Note that I try to assess how well I have hit the person's hierarchy of unfinished business. I have given examples where I have succeeded. On occasion, I do miss. Either the dreamer tells me it is an issue but they do not feel it a very important one, or they tell me they do not feel it is an issue at all. The latter circumstance is rare, however. It simply is not hard to generate some topic for therapy with this dream technique.

Most of the time, the technique works so easily that I am reminded of Jung's warning:

This episode [a colleague's free association] opened my eyes to the fact that it was not necessary to use a dream as the point of departure for the process of 'free association' if one wished to discover the complexes of a patient. It showed me that one can reach the center directly from any point of the compass. One could begin from Cyrillic letters, from meditations upon a crystal ball, a prayer wheel, or a modern painting or even casual conversation about some trivial event. The dream was no more and no less useful in this respect than any other starting point. Nevertheless, dreams have a particular significance, even though they often arise from an emotional upset in which the habitual complexes are also involved. [The habitual complexes are the tender spots of the psyche, which react most quickly to an external stimulus or disturbance.] That is why free association can lead one from any dream to the critical secret thoughts.

At this point...it might reasonably follow that dreams have some special and more significant function of their own... I therefore began to consider whether one should pay more attention to the actual form and content of a dream, rather than allowing 'free association' to lead one off through a train of ideas to complexes that could easily be reached by other means.

(Jung, 1968; p. 27-8)

I would argue with Jung on three counts. First, I admit that the dream techniques I am using appear to involve free association. However, it is not clear to me that the material I end up discussing with the dreamer could have been reached by any other means. Second, with very few exceptions, I am always using the dream to direct my inquiry. I am not using a crystal ball. I am using a dream. Jung himself proposed that the dreams should direct therapy. The techniques I am using do just that. Third, even if all that I am reaching are 'habitual complexes,' I do

not feel that is a simple feat. Patients enter therapy with conscious and unconscious resistances and lifetimes of dissociations and alienation. If, in the space of only five minutes, my patient and I are discussing something that, by their own admission, is an important topic (high in their hierarchy of unfinished business) who am I or who is Jung to disagree!

In fact, Jung himself said that dream symbols are, by definition, hidden, vague, and ultimately unknowable. I think one could err, much more readily, in the opposite direction, by wasting the patient's time turning a dream over and over again. Jung even stated that dreams should be accepted as facts, and dreams are specific expressions of the unconscious. If a woman tells me that her dream told her to go fishing, then I am not about to argue with her or the wisdom of her dream interpretation. In fact, delaying that message would be absurd.

Dream example 4: No dream, no time

In dream seminars where I lecture for a single session, if someone says that they do not dream, I do not have the luxury of sending them home to sleep beside a pencil and paper. This is where I make my single exception to trying to reach the hierarchy of unfinished business by way of a dream. In a general psychology class, for example, a woman about 25 years old, who had raised her hand, said she never remembered a dream or even a fragment.

I said, 'Imagine when you wake up and there's this dream that you don't remember in your room. What would that dream say to you as you are lying in bed.'

'Why don't you remember me?' she said.

'What would you say back to the dream?' I asked.

'You're not important. You don't matter,' she said with a sudden kind of sad realization in her voice.

'You thought of something in your hierarchy?' I asked gently.

'Yes,' she said, and I pressed no further. I thanked her for being so brave in front of the class.

Dream example 5: Don't eat here!

In another recent dream seminar, in front of community college students, I asked the class for a recurring dream. The first person to volunteer was a 28-year-old woman who said she dreamt repeatedly of a hostage situation at a fast food restaurant. She told me the dream that simply and quickly. I was forced to think quickly and thought she could either become a hostage or the restaurant. Because I always prefer inanimate objects, I told her to become the restaurant.

'You want me to become the restaurant?' she asked with doubt.

'Yes. Just like an actress. Become the restaurant. What would you say?'

'I'd say, don't eat here.'

The class laughed.

Because I had already given the class at least a one-hour or more introduction to sleep, dreams, and Perls' idea about unfinished business in dreams, I asked them to generate possibilities for unfinished business in her statement.

'She doesn't like fast food,' said someone.

'She doesn't like restaurants,' said another.

I was disappointed because I felt these suggestions were simply manifest meanings. 'No,' I said, 'think big unfinished issues. Life issues.'

A man about 40 years old sitting in the back raised his hand and said, 'Maybe she doesn't like living here. Maybe food is like a connection to a place. Like sustenance. Maybe she'd like to move and eat. I mean like live somewhere else.'

'OK,' I said. 'That's better. Don't just sit there. Think. A bad idea is better than no idea. Are there any other ideas?'

'Stop,' said the woman with the dream. 'That's it,' she said, shaking her head with firm resignation. 'I don't want to live here,' she added. But before she could continue, I thanked her for sharing with us.

Dream example 6: Don't take me

A 40-year-old female acquaintance recently approached me with a dream. She was currently going through a divorce and had two young children.

'I dreamt that my husband came to my house with a pick-up truck, and he was towing a cement mixer, and three large big things,' she said.

'Become the three large big things,' I said, because I'm attracted to inanimate objects in dreams and the bizarre. 'What would they say?' I said.

'Like what?' she said.

Listening and remembering carefully to exactly how she phrased it, I repeated, 'What would the three large big things say if they could speak?' I said.

She paused. When people pause anything over about three seconds, I remind them not to think too hard. I encourage them to say just what first comes up. She had paused more than three seconds, so I said, 'Don't think too much. What would they say?'

'Don't take me,' she said with life and meaning behind it so I did not ask her to repeat it. She said it with real feeling.

'What does that make you think about in your life?' I asked.

'Oh, my kids. They hate going with their father. And I feel so guilty.'

'In what way?' I asked.

'Oh, they don't want to go with him. At the same time, it's not just that they'd rather stay with me. They'd rather have us get back together but that's just not gonna happen. I can't tell them that.'

'Well, that's what I think one of your dream meanings might be,' I said.

'What about the feeling I had in the dream that after he visits me with these vehicles, he's gonna leave my house empty? I think it means I feel like he's cleaning me out,' she added somewhat questioningly.

I affirmed the meaning she gave to her dream without hesitation, agreeing with Jung that it is her dream, her life, her interpretation. However, I did feel that she might ultimately benefit by becoming conscious of how her children's fantasies about reconciliation were on a collision course with her future plans.

Dream example 7: Move me

A 27-year-old female, newly married, undergraduate came to my office for a dream interpretation session. She said she started college at 17 years old, had attended three different colleges, and was now in her tenth year of college studies. She said in her dream she was in an old house in a bad part of town with lots of old cars strewn about. She said her niece was in front of the house, and the niece was excited because Sam (the co-ed's ex-husband) was coming to visit. Next, she said, a large man came up and was collecting money. She said that she told him they (she and her niece) did not have any money. Behind the house, she said she then spied a kitten sitting really still.

At that point, I said, 'Become the kitten. What would the kitten say to you?' 'Move me, get me out of here,' she said, and giggled.

I said, 'What does that make you think about? You giggled.'

She said without hesitation, 'My family. They drive me crazy.'

I immediately thought about Hartmann's theory that dreams contextualize emotions. In this dream, I thought about her car metaphor (old cars strewn about) and even the subtle statement of, 'they *drive* me crazy.' But my intuition told me that this was perhaps the manifest meaning of the dream, in part because her association between the kitten and her family came so easily. So I returned to her original dream statement.

'Say what the kitten said again,' I said.

She said, 'Move me and get me out of here.'

I said, 'What does that make you think about in your present life?'

She paused and said, 'I don't know.' She then paused again looking thoughtful. After a pause of about 20 to 30 seconds, she said, 'I hold myself back.'

'How?' I asked.

'In so many ways,' she said. 'I make all kinds of excuses so I won't meet new people. I keep myself full of anxiety. I make things up to block myself from doing new things. I really believe in spirits and possibilities but I hold myself back.'

She paused again and then said, 'I've been thinking about this for a while. I use to blame my parents for delaying me in school and holding me back but I realize I am the one holding myself back.'

I then told her that dreams probably have many meanings but that I found it meaningful that after only about five minutes in my office, we were talking about her holding herself back. I told her I just could not believe that was random or by accident. I told her that she probably had just been given a letter from herself to herself (like the sixteenth-century dream interpreter Almorì) and that she was now fulfilling her responsibility (like the twenty-first century sleep expert

Hartmann) by examining the meanings of her dream. I also told her that it is common for psychologists to believe that awareness, per se, may be curative, and I also explained that her awareness of these issues would undoubtedly help her in her journey to finish school and stop holding herself back from new people and things that she wanted to do.

Dream example 8: Stuck in time and place

Liz [not her real name] is a 21-year-old daughter of one of my neighbor's friends. She had heard about my dream work and wanted to try it out. We sat outside on my front porch and she began right away without any prompting.

'This dream is really long so cut me off,' she said. 'I start by going to a large building. I run into a tour guide, an older man, and he introduces himself as my tour guide. First, we go into a room with one giant fan and several smaller fans in the walls. All of the fans are frozen with ice on them.'

I stopped her.

'Become the frozen fans. What would they say to you?'

'Stuck in time or place,' she said, with little hesitation.

'What does that phrase mean to you?' I asked.

'I'm not moving,' she said.

'What do you mean?' I asked.

'I feel like I've already spent too much time in school. I've changed majors three times. I wish I could go back in time five years. I could even deal with my family better.'

I said, 'How?'

'I've got nine siblings. There have always been these alliances between the siblings. It's like we need to form alliances to defend ourselves from the other siblings and from our parents. But I never did. I'm on the outside. So they call me asking me to fix things for them and to help them. But they are all stubborn. They all live in the past. They are all stuck in their ways. I'm the only one in school right now. My issue with all of them is their rigidity. But it worries me, and I keep things in. I don't make other people help me like they do. I think I should be able to fix my own problems. But I'm perfectionistic too so I have a lot to live up to.'

She kept on talking freely. I nodded and gave her nonverbal support. After a few minutes, she seemed to wind down. I reinforced her search for her own identity outside of being one of ten children. And I told her a bit of my dream ideas. I also told her that at 21 years old, she actually had not spent that much time in school and to go easier on herself in that regard. She left rather happily.

Dream example 9: Some dreams are wish-fulfilling

One of my research assistants came to me with a dream she wanted interpreted. She is 25 years old and engaged to be married. She said she dreamt that her

fiancé's mother was sick and died from cancer. She said in reality she's 'healthy as a horse.'

This seemed like a classic mother-in-law issue, so I raised the possibility with her that the dream might conceal a hidden wish, but this is how I deflected resistance at the outset:

'Freud said *all* dreams are wish-fulfilling but I don't believe that. But I do believe some dreams are wish-fulfilling, and I have a feeling this might be one of them. Is there some way you would like to be rid of your future mother-in-law?' I said.

'I really like her. She talks a ton but she's generous, loving, and has a great heart,' she said.

'How might it be nice to be rid of her?' I asked again.

'I guess I'd like to show his side of the family that I can be strong like her. I can plan things just like her. She's a wedding planner...' she said, as I interrupted.

'As a profession?' I asked.

'Yes, she's a professional wedding planner, and she's planned this huge reception for our wedding, and I don't want a huge reception. She's also planned a huge wedding, which we don't really want but we'll do it for her, but we don't want both a huge wedding and huge reception. Yet she keeps telling me it's my day, it's my day.'

'And then you dream that she dies,' I said. 'Why are dreams so mysterious?' I asked facetiously, and we both laughed.

As I review my own techniques, I think back to what Carl Jung said about dream interpretation. Learn as much as you can about dream interpretation and then forget it. I know that I eclectically choose among the various ideas of Freud, Jung, Perls, and others. I choose what seems to fit the occasion. I rely heavily on my intuition. I try to remember that there's no single hidden meaning every time. I won't always be successful. I won't always have a very satisfied person leave my office. But I do recognize that it's fairly easy to hit some issue or unfinished business in a dream. And very often, I do have people leave my office who believe that I have raised a singularly important piece of unfinished business. I usually reinforce the notion that awareness, per se, is curative, and advise them to seek professional help if they ever feel overwhelmed, and I tell them I can refer them to someone really good if they feel they ever need it.

In this dream, my intuition immediately suggested the classic Freudian wish-fulfilling dream notion, and it appeared to work. She was able to voice some conscious concerns that she said she had shared with no one other than her future husband. I also told her that, by voicing those concerns through her dreams and by sharing them, she had not actually settled her issues with her future mother-in-law but she was on the road to settling them. I told her I believed that she was now, at least theoretically, less likely to have an accident involving her mother-in-law where her mother-in-law would be hurt. Again, we laughed.

Dream example 10: I can help

A man in his early thirties shared this dream in one of my dream workshops. He first told us that he had trained as a nurse in the army and had returned to college to get his prerequisites for dental school. He then told us that this dream recurred with great regularity when he was younger (less than 15 years old) but that he occasionally still had it. In his dream, he was on Gilligan's Island with the regular cast. He said Santa Claus' sleigh with Santa's toy bag inside would suddenly land in the midst of the group. He said that was essentially the whole dream.

'Become Santa's toy bag,' I said.

'I can help,' he said rather quietly and because of, in part, the ambient noise of the large group, and also my feeling that he was reluctant to say it loudly, I said:

'Louder!'

He said, 'I CAN HELP!'

I said, 'How does that fit your life?'

Without pausing, he almost sheepishly said: 'It's my life's theme.'

'How?' I asked.

Without hesitation, he related that since very early on in his family, he took on the role of a helper. He then made it his profession, first becoming a medical technician and then joining the army and becoming a nurse. He then said it was a role that he did not always cherish.

'Can you think of ways it has been both a blessing and a curse?' I asked.

He said, 'Easily.'

And I suggested to the participants of the dream workshop that this is where therapy might begin, that is, it begins with his recognition that helping others has been both beneficial to him but that it appears he now has some idea that the role might have also been at some psychological cost.

Principle 6: Listen carefully and be patient.

A dear colleague of mine, and friend for over two decades, said he would write a quote for the cover of my dream book. It would say: 'This is a good book but the techniques only work for Fred.' As many times as he has seen me use the technique successfully, he says he fails miserably. I've heard him try it a couple of times in my presence. I think he does not pause long enough after he asks them to think about what their dream script statement makes them think of in their lives. If you knew this wonderful fellow, you would see the irony, because he is famous for his long and thoughtful pauses. So I encourage you to be patient.

Aristotle reflected, nearly 2400 years ago, on what it takes to be an interpreter of dreams. He wrote:

The most skillful interpreter of dreams is he who has the faculty of observing resemblances. Anyone may interpret dreams which are vivid and plain. But speaking of 'resemblances,' I mean that dream presentations are analogous to the forms reflected in water, as indeed we have already stated. In the latter case, if the motion in the water be great, the reflexion has no semblance to its original nor do the forms resemble the real objects. Skillful indeed, would he be in interpreting such reflexions who could rapidly discern, and at a glance comprehend, the scattered and distorted fragments of such forms, so as to perceive that one of them represents a man, or a horse, or anything whatever. Accordingly, in the other case also, in a similar way, some such thing as this [blurred image] is all that a dream amounts to; for the internal movement effaces the clearness of the dream.

(Aristotle, 1952c; p. 709)

I think that the skillful interpreter of dreams is one who listens carefully and is patient. I think there is a wonderful metaphor for dream interpretation in the book *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse (1951) (which Perls also mentions in *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim*). Vasudeva, the ferryman, tells the hero of the story, Siddhartha, to listen to the river (which may be a metaphor for a dream):

'You will learn it,' said Vasudeva, 'but not from me. The river has taught me to listen; you will learn from it, too. The river knows everything; one can learn everything from it. You have already learned from the river that it is good to strive downwards, to sink, to seek the depths. The rich and distinguished Siddhartha will become a rower; Siddhartha the learned Brahmin will become a ferryman. You have also learned this from the river. You will learn the other thing, too.'

After a long pause, Siddhartha said: 'What other thing, Vasudeva?'

Vasudeva rose. 'It has grown late,' he said, 'let us go to bed. I cannot tell you what the other thing is, my friend. You will find out, perhaps you already know. I am not a learned man; I do not know how to talk or think. I only know how to listen and be devout; otherwise I have learned nothing. If I could talk and teach, I would perhaps be a teacher, but as it is I am only a ferryman and it is my task to take people across this river. I have taken thousands of people across and to all of them my river has been nothing but a hindrance on their journey...however, amongst the thousands there have been a few, four or five, to whom the river was not an obstacle. They have heard its voice and listened to it, and the river has become holy to them, as it has to me. Let us now go to bed, Siddhartha.'

(Hesse, 1951; p. 68)

In summary, I suggest that you try to feel comfortable with even a small success. Do not worry too much about trying to solve all of other people's major

unfinished issues. Try, instead, to help the dreamer understand a small part. As Perls wrote:

And if you understand the meaning of each time you identify with some bit of the dream, each time you translate an *it* into an *I*, you increase in vitality and in your potential...you get, let's say, a ten-thousandth of your potential back, and it will accumulate. Each time you can integrate something it gives you a better platform, where again you can facilitate your development, your integration.

(Perls, 1969a; p. 71)

Summary

- 1 Dreams form a hierarchy of unfinished business.
- 2 People have a tendency to avoid and alienate the holes in their personalities despite their compensating need for wholeness. Watch for these holes in dreams.
- 3 Have the dreamer become part of the dream and write a script. I favor inanimate objects over animate objects in the dream.
- 4 Listen carefully to the language of the dreamer.
- 5 Everything in the dream is a projected aspect of the dreamer. However, unfinished psychological issues can be raised by having a person create a script with anything. This technique can also be used with people who say they do not dream.
- 6 Listen carefully and be patient.