

Working (and playing) with Dreams



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Preface

I first published *Working and Playing with Dreams* in 1995 as a component of my Teaching Clinical Psychology website at Rider University, with its second edition appearing on the True Center Publishing website in 2014. This pdf edition was published in the Collected Works of John Suler (johnsuler.com) in 2024.

Over the 40 years I taught psychology, the ideas in this manual served well in helping me and my students understand dreams, a topic that they always found fascinating. This fact alone testifies to the intuitive attraction we all feel towards the dream world and our need to understand its relevance in our "real" lives.

Because photography has been a life-long interest for me, as well as a focus of my research, I have included my photographs in this edition as a way to supplement the ideas about dreams as a form of imagery.

~ Working (and playing) with Dreams ~

Every dream has many layers of meaning. Every object, person, and situation in a dream has something to say. So take your time in trying to understand your dreams. Think of them as something to EXPLORE. You have to look at a dream from different angles, walk around in it for a while, work and play with it. Then its many meanings will begin to reveal themselves.

Try not to give into the pressure to "interpret" a dream. If you put yourself or others on the spot to "tell me what it means" you are adopting an unproductive attitude about working with dreams. It's not a game of Jeopardy or a multiple choice test where there's a right or wrong answer. Working with a dream is more like playing with it - the kind of play that involves creativity, imagination, and a willingness to experiment. It also requires patience! The more you experiment with these techniques, the more you will learn from them.

<i>Free association</i>	<i>The problem and its solutions</i>
<i>Free writing</i>	<i>Anxiety and fear</i>
<i>Mental images</i>	<i>Your place in the dream</i>
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<i>Dream intangibles</i>	<i>The dream collage</i>
<i>Dream connections</i>	<i>Dream homework</i>
<i>Exaggerate / Reverse</i>	<i>Remembering dreams</i>

~ A Dream's Worth ~

Free Association

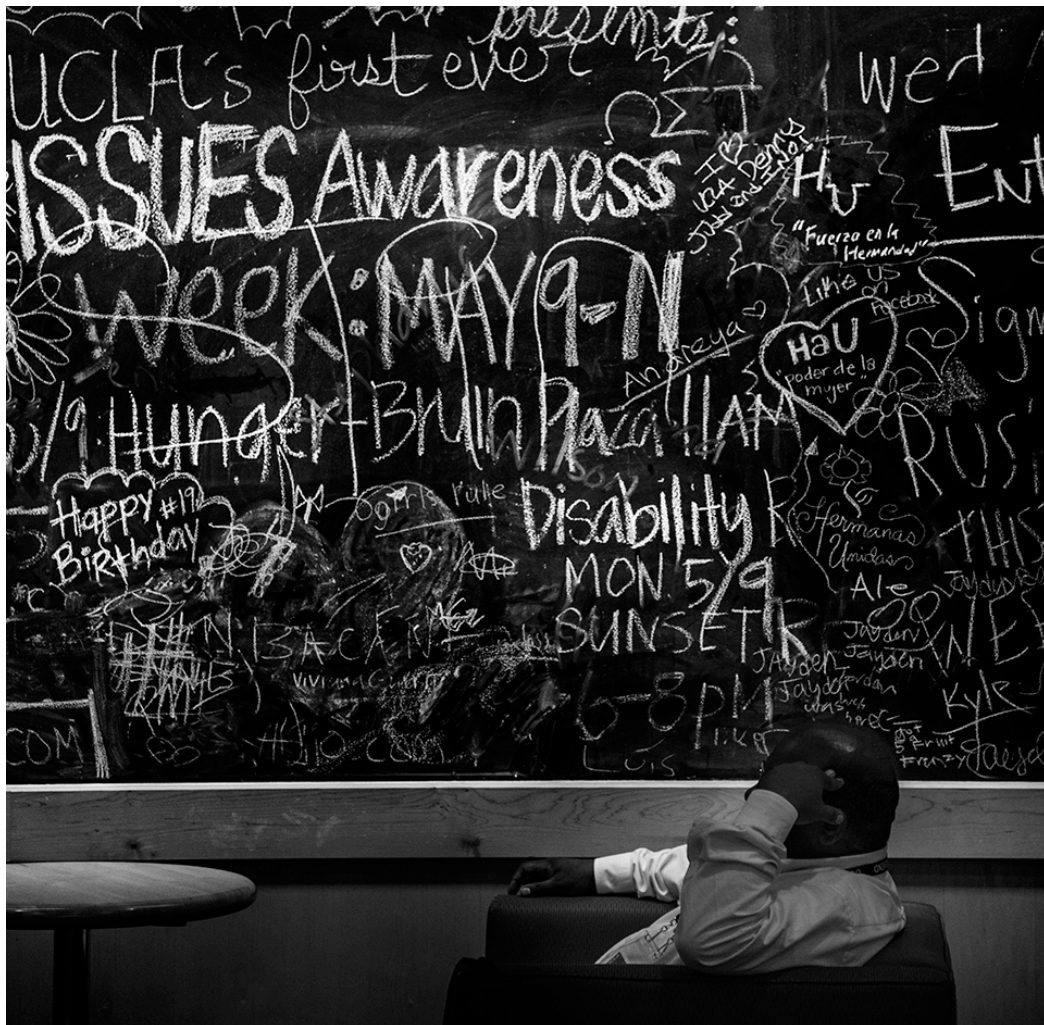
To unpack the various meanings of a dream, take each object, person, situation, etc. and free associate to them, one at a time. What does it remind you of? What comes to mind when you think of that element of the dream? Let your imagination go. Let your attention wander. Come up with as many associations as possible. Do this in your head, or talk out loud. If you let yourself go with this, something will come up - a memory, an idea, a feeling. It may not tell you "the meaning" of the dream, but it will give you pieces to the puzzle.

When using any of these techniques, if something makes you too comfortable, then stop.



Free Writing

Write down or type out a stream of consciousness reaction to your dream. Start anywhere and just keep writing whatever comes to mind. Don't censor or edit anything out. It's like free associating onto a piece of paper. Record as much as you can of what you are thinking and feeling. If you get stuck, simply write "I'm stuck, I'm stuck..." over and over again until a new association comes up. Then keep writing. Or write down each element of the dream and then a stream of consciousness reaction to each one. Compare what you wrote for the different elements. Look for similarities and patterns. Hold onto these writings and go back to them later on. Days or weeks later you may see something that you missed the first time around.

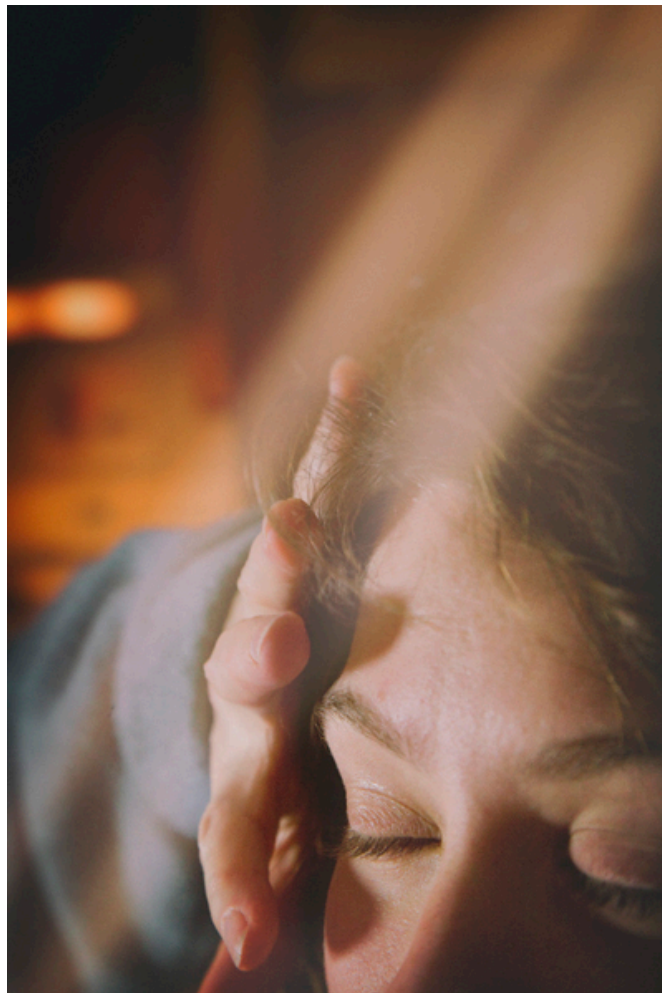


Mental Images

Images are pictures or sensations in your imagination, in your "mind's eye" - similar to dreams. Use them to explore a dream. For example, close your eyes and free associate to the various elements of your dream by letting pictures or sensations flow through your imagination. Let your imagination go. Don't try to control what you see or experience. Let everything move on its own. Stay with this and something important will come up.

Pay attention to sensations in your body that you experience during a dream, or while working on it. What do they tell you about the dream?

Another technique is to RELIVE the dream in your imagination. Close your eyes, start at the beginning of the dream, and re-experience it as vividly as you can. Then replay the dream again, only this time let your imagination go. Let your imagination add to and change the dream in any way it wants. This can lead you to important insights.



Dialogues

Create a conversation between you and the dream, or between two elements of the dream. If you dreamed about driving a car through a forest, write down on a piece of paper a conversation between you and the car (or the forest). What would you say to the car? What would the car say back to you? Don't try to over-control the conversation. Let it be as spontaneous as possible. Stay with the dialogue and let it progress. Or create a conversation between the car and the forest. What would they say to each other?

Another possibility is to carry out this conversation LIVE. Set up two chairs. Sit in one chair and put the car into the other. Talk to the car. Then switch chairs and talk back to yourself. Keep switching back and forth. Let the conversation progress. Be spontaneous and honest. Sounds crazy, but this technique can produce some startling insights.



Dream Enactment

If you are in an adventurous move, get together some friends and reenact the dream as if it were a play. Assign roles to people. People can also be objects in the dream. First replay the dream as it actually occurred. Then do it again and let people improvise in their roles. Experiment with the play, with you as the "director." This is a powerful technique with often unpredictable results.



Day Residue

People, things, or events from the previous day that get incorporated into a dream appear there for a reason. That day residue touched off ideas, feelings, and memories in the unconscious. Examining your thoughts and feelings about these events from the day will help you understand the dream and why it is "commenting" on these events. What do these events remind you of? Have these sorts of things happened before in your life?

You know you're onto something with any of these techniques when you have that "AHA!" experience, like a light bulb popping.



Dream Intangibles

There is a tendency to focus just on objects, events, and people in a dream. But there is more to the dream than that. Consider also:

Feeling tone: What is the primary feeling in the dream. What does it remind you of in your life? Does the feeling tone change at different points in the dream? Why might that be? The most simple but often most effective technique for understanding a dream is to ask, "What feeling did the dream create?"

Colors: How are colors used in the dream? What feelings and meanings might be associated with them? What do the colors remind you of?

Time and space: How are time and space used in the dream? What feelings do these create? Is the dream communicating an idea by how it uses time and space?

Missing and vague parts: What parts of the dream are vague or unclear? Is something missing that should be there? These might be the points where dream censorship by the ego is at its strongest. Focus on these parts. There's something important going on there. Use free association and the other techniques described above to fill in the gaps. If there is a vague part to the dream, try to catch whatever details you can. For example, if you can't remember a person in the dream, can you remember what they were wearing, the color of their eyes, the color of their hair, how they talked or behaved? Who does this remind you of?



Dream Connections

Dreams often are connected to each other in their meanings. Look for similar patterns or themes across your dreams. Are they progressing or changing somehow over time? This might indicate something about YOU and your life that is changing over time.

Pay particular attention to *recurring dreams*. They point to a persistent theme or issue in your life. They may indicate some "unfinished business" in your life. How are the recurring dreams similar to each other? Different? Are they changing over time? What might this say about how you are changing?



Exaggerate / Reverse

Remember that the unconscious thinking that produces a dream is unusual and illogical by conscious standards. Things can mean exactly the opposite of what they seem. Something you fear in the dream may be something you unconsciously wish. Things may contradict each other, which might indicate a conflict in which you have contradictory feelings about something.

All of these techniques work best if you are spontaneous and free wheeling. Let your imagination go. Don't try to force or over-control the process. Be honest. Don't censor ideas.

Try **EXAGGERATING** some important aspect of the dream. In your mind, in writing, or in a dream enactment, amplify the feeling, action, or situation in the dream. Take it to the limit. Make the situation as intense as possible. Where does this take you?

Try **REVERSING** the important elements in the dream. Turn them into the opposite feelings, behaviors, or characteristics. Does this ring any bells? How does it change the meaning of the dream?



The Problem and Its Solutions

A dream may be showing you a problem or issue that needs to be resolved. It may be showing you how you are reacting to the problem. It may even be suggesting a solution. For each dream, ask yourself, "What is the problem? How am I reacting to it? Is the dream suggesting a solution or that something about me and my life that needs to change?"



Anxiety and Fear

Anxiety in a dream usually indicates a point where important, perhaps threatening ideas are surfacing from the unconscious. The anxiety is a signal. Pay close attention to these anxiety dreams. Nightmares that wake you up indicate the surfacing of something particularly powerful. In these cases, the mind can only think of one way to deal with the situation - ESCAPE!



Your Place in the Dream

You may be able to find yourself in various places in the dream. The most obvious place is the "dream-ego," as Jung called it. This dream-ego is the person who is having the experiences that make up the dream. Usually the dream-ego does not know he/she is dreaming, unless it is a lucid dream.

Examine this dream-ego carefully. Even though you may experience this ego as yourself, the person in the dream may be behaving and feeling in very different ways than you normally would. Compare yourself to this person in the dream. How are you the same? Different? Is this person in the dream some hidden part of you - some part you wish for, need, or fear?

Other people in the dream may represent important people in your life, how they actually are, how you wish them to be, how you fear they might be.

Or other figures in the dream may represent hidden parts of yourself, the way you wish you could be, the way you used to be, parts you try to deny, your hidden potentials, something that is missing in your personality, etc. Some dream researchers even believe that everything in the dream – every person, object, and event – represents a hidden part of you.

Jung would say that you should always look for what the dream is trying to teach you about your SPIRITUAL self.



Applying Mythology

Jung would say that every dream has its roots in mythology. Your dream and the situations in your life that it depicts are a reliving of issues that are universal to all humans. Are there any particular mythical tales that come to your mind? Does one or two stand out? That says something about you.

Find a good book on mythology, hopefully one that can tell you more about the myth you recalled. Find other stories that contain people or events similar to those in your dream. The mythical story will give you insights into your dream and how it relates to universal human struggles and triumphs.



Working with Impasses

At some point in working on a dream you will get stuck. This is an impasse, a barrier. It means you have to take a different perspective on the dream. You have to reorganize your thinking. Immerse yourself into that stuckness. Stay with it, examine it, free associate to it, and eventually you will be able to break through to a new level of understanding. If you're REALLY stuck and frustrated, you may have to set the dream aside and come back to it later. Let it percolate in the back of your mind. Look at other dreams. They might be able to help you make that breakthrough.

Don't underestimate how "deep" a dream may be, even if it seems silly or simple. When you think that you are all finished working with a dream, think again. There is probably more there.



A Little Help from Your Friends

It often helps quite a bit to get someone else's perspective on your dream. Tell your dream to a friend or family member, someone who knows you pretty well. With their help, try using some of the dream techniques described in these pages. Here are some other tips:

GROUP DREAMING: In the presence of one or several friends (or when working in a group dedicated to exploring dreams), close your eyes and describe your dream in the first person and in the present tense. Tell it, from beginning to end, as if it's a story. With their eyes also closed, everyone quietly listens to your dream and tries to imagine it in their mind as you walk them through it. Afterwards, they can describe to you the reactions they had to your dream.

Remember that your dream was created by your mind. Other people can help you explore it, but that's all. Listen to their feedback, take what makes sense, and leave the rest. Ultimately, YOU are the expert on what your dream means.

"IF THIS WERE MY DREAM..." - As a general rule, you can only make guesses about what someone else's dream means. It's quite easy for you to project your own personal meanings into it. Try using your subjective reactions to help your friend. What if your friend's dream WAS your dream! What would you think and feel about it? What would you be thinking and feeling if you were the people or even the things inside the dream? Tell your friend about your personal reactions. It might help your friend understand their dream.



The Dream Collage

In a group with fellow dreamers or on your own, create a dream collage. On a chalkboard or on a large posterboard, jot down words or phrases about your dreams. Feel free to be creative in how you record these ideas. Pick an interesting spot for each item. Add arrows, boxes, patterns, drawings, doodles, colors, whatever you like. Be as spontaneous as possible. If working in a group, people can suggest ideas about things to add to the collage. The collage could be about one person's dream, or it could be a synthesis of people's dreams.

Some items about the dream that you can add to the collage might include:

- the people, places, animals, objects
- the important activities, actions, or events
- the emotions expressed
- quotes from things said in the dream
- how you would describe the dream ego
- the names of important people in your life
- important past or current events in your life

Afterwards, step back to take a look at the completed collage. Do any interesting patterns emerge? Is there meaning to how the different items are placed next to, above, below each other? What is written large, small, faintly, boldly? Do there seem to be distinct sections, centers, boundaries in the collage?



Dream Homework

Do some research on a dream that you want to understand better. That homework falls into two categories: getting background information and experiential research. If you dreamed about being in Hawaii, read about Hawaii. If you dreamed about wearing a red hat with a big feather, try actually wearing such a hat to see how it feels.



~ How to Remember Dreams ~

Invite, Don't Hunt

Your dreams can be elusive. Try not to think of a dream as something to be hunted, captured, or controlled. If you do, it will be like trying to catch your own shadow. The faster you run, the faster it moves away from you. INVITE dreams to come to you, rather than pursuing them. Try to think of them as a friend or an ally who is willing to teach you something if you allow and encourage them to do so. Try to cultivate this attitude of "inviting" and "welcoming" your dreams.

Plant a Seed

Before going to sleep, tell yourself that you are going to dream. Keep a positive, inviting attitude. Think about and write down (1) the important issues that are on your mind for that day, and, (2) the kinds of things you would like to dream about. Read over what you wrote. Keep those ideas in the back of your mind as you fall asleep. Don't analyze or think too deeply about it, just hold it lightly in your mind.

Reflect Upon the Dream

When you wake up from a dream (in the middle of the night or in the morning), lie still for a moment and turn your mind inward toward the memory of it. Invite the various pieces of the dream to come back to you. Be patient. It may take time for the different parts of the dream to surface and come together. Even if only fragments return to your mind, that's OK. Try not to strain in your attempts to remember. Let your mind be light and easy. Allow the dream pieces to surface on their own. Gently repeating the dream over and over in your mind may allow new pieces to surface.

Write Everything Down in Rough Notes

After you've reflected on the dream and seem to recall as much of it as you can, write down everything you remember. Don't trust your memory. You sometimes may think "Oh, I'll definitely remember this dream! It was crazy!" But there's a very good chance that you won't. Dreams are elusive. Have paper and a pen ready by your bedside. Maybe even keep a flashlight next to your bed too (so the light won't disturb others). Use an audio recording device, if possible. Whatever method you choose, record the following types of information:

- anything you can remember about the dream itself, even if only fragments
- small details in the dream, even if they seem insignificant
- the feelings or sensations you experienced during the dream
- events from your life that come to mind when you think about the dream (even if you're not sure how those events are relevant)
- the thoughts that were on your mind when you were falling asleep
- any other thoughts, feelings, memories, or sensations that arise as you reflect on the dream

If you can only remember fragments of a dream, write those down without worrying about how to put them in order. Don't worry too much about the grammar, spelling, or logical flow of what you write in these rough notes. These notes in fact may be a kind of free association.

Your Dream Journal

Keeping an ongoing dream journal can be a good way to stimulate your recall of your dreams. The more attention you pay to your dreams, the more your dream life will open up to you. Whereas the rough notes are your immediate, off the cuff reactions to your dreams, the journal can be a place for more in-depth, systematic thinking and exploring. Use the rough notes as fuel or a springboard for ideas that you investigate in the journal. You may also use the journal to try out these various techniques for working with a dream.

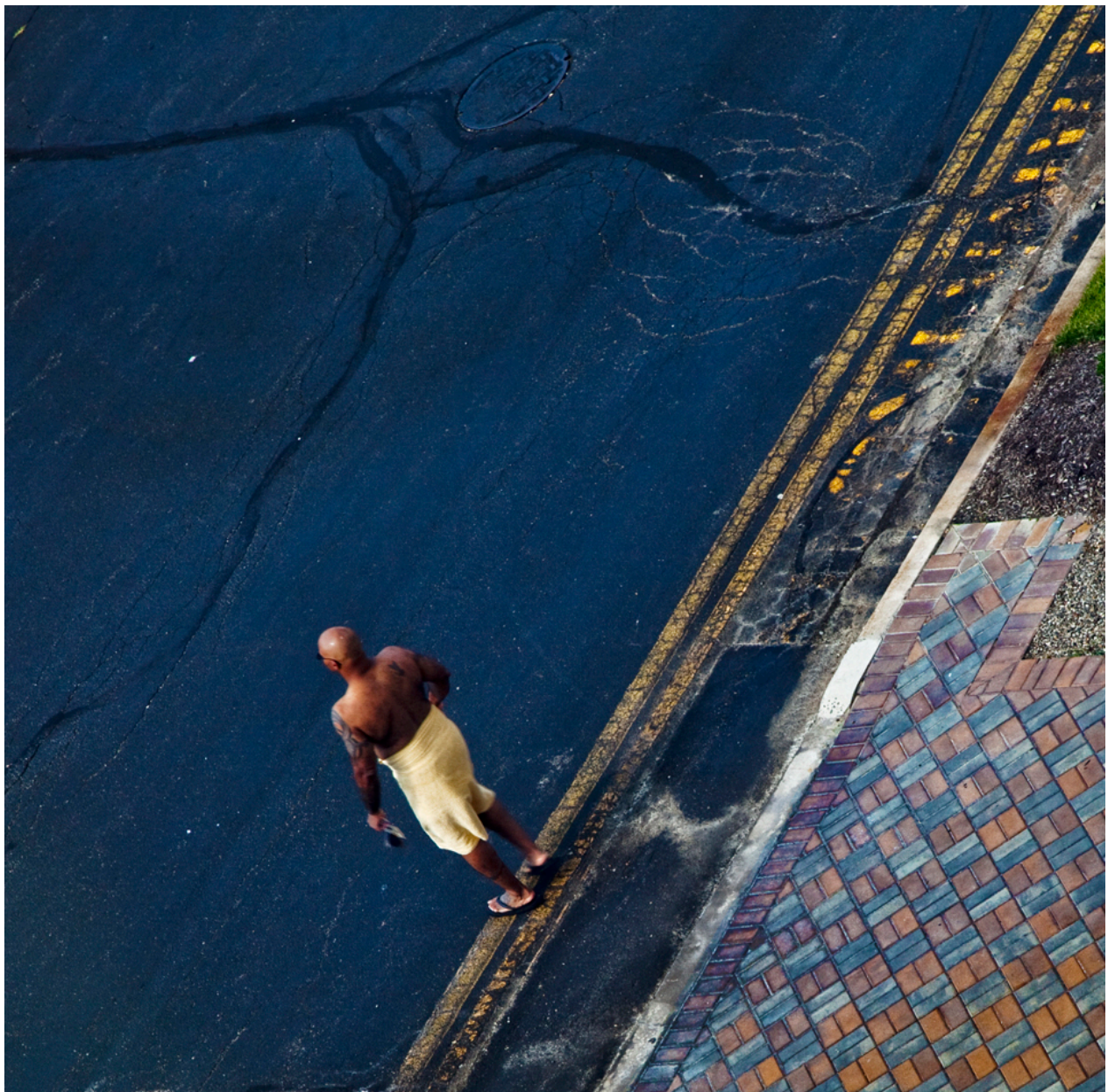
Daytime Dreams

Sometimes the memory of a dream will spontaneously pop into your mind during the day. Try to write it down as soon as possible. Also write down what you were thinking about, where you were, and what you were doing when the dream came to you. All of this information might be clues to the dream's meaning.

If you find yourself daydreaming or fantasizing during the day, treat those reveries as if they were dreams. Write down what you were thinking about, as well as where you were, what was happening to you, and what thoughts, feelings, or events might have triggered the fantasy. Daydreams in many ways are similar to dreams. Exploring them can enhance your understanding of the dreams you have when sleeping. Exploring them could help open up your dream life.

Be Patient and Optimistic

You will go through periods when you just can't remember dreams, or only recall small fragments. That's OK! Be patient. Try to remain optimistic and inviting. Don't dwell on frustration or "failure." In your rough notes and journal, describe any your thoughts, feelings, and sensations you do have upon awakening in the morning. What things **do** you remember about your sleep? Consider your thoughts and feelings about not being able to recall dreams. Explore those thoughts and feelings with curiosity and acceptance.



~ A Dream's Worth ~

A picture is worth a thousand words. You've heard it so many times that it sounds trite. But a picture really is worth a thousand words. And if a dream is a special kind of picture, how much is IT worth? Maybe more? What about very simple pictures and very simple dreams? Perhaps they are worth a little bit less than complex, elaborate ones.

Or are they?

In my psychotherapy course one day, I presented my undergraduate students with these questions. "Here's a very simple dream from a psychotherapy client I worked with years ago. I won't tell you anything about the client. I'll just tell you his dream, and then let's see what we can discover about him by exploring it. Here's the dream:"

I was wearing a white shirt and a purple tie.

The students just stared at me, expecting more to come. "No," I explained, "that's it. That's the dream. Now let's start to explore it."

I then led them through a group process of free associating to the dream, much like I describe here in *Working and Playing with Dreams*. Just let your imagination go. Take every element of the dream and let your mind wander through it. Whatever comes to mind. Don't censor anything, that's important. There is no right or wrong. It can be a fun, playful exercise - although the results sometimes may be serious and powerful. Freud thought that free association bypasses the defenses of rational, logical thinking and unlocks deeper realms within the unconscious. It opens one up to fantasy, symbolism, and emotion, the very place from which dreams arise.

Here is a list of some of the associations the students came up with. For the purpose of this article I've organized them somewhat, whereas during the actual exercise the ideas surface in a much more free-wheeling stream of consciousness:



<i>Purple</i>	royalty, bruises, choking, holding one's breath, grief, a combination of blue and pink, goes well with black, The Color of Purple
<i>Tie</i>	formal attire, going to work, phallic symbol, tied up, being tied to something, chokes the neck, confining
<i>Purple tie</i>	unconventional, stands out, rebellious, showing off
<i>White</i>	clean, pure, unstained, "good," light
<i>Shirt</i>	the top part, covered up, tucked in, stuffed shirt, where are the pants?
<i>White shirt</i>	conventional, boring, going to work, going to church, corporate America
<i>White shirt & purple tie</i>	unusual combination, contradictory combination, unconventional, tie really stands out
<i>Depletion</i>	there's nobody else in the dream, it's so static, there's nothing happening, where are the feelings?

After we finish this free associating, I then describe the client to the class.

At the time Dan had the dream, he was 23 years old. I would describe him as a quiet, held-back person who was very confined (the tie) in how he talked, behaved, and felt towards others. Put bluntly, people found him rather boring to be with (white shirt). His emotional and interpersonal life were choked (the tie). He had almost no friends and felt little connection to his family (the tie again). Other than going to his tedious job (white shirt) as a low level technician for a computer company, essentially nothing was happening in his static, uneventful life (depletion).

Dan was also very limited in understanding anything but the most surface, top-level (shirt) characteristics of his personality. Although outwardly conventional in how he dressed and acted at his job (white shirt), secretly he felt rebellious against authority (purple tie on white shirt) and generally superior (purple) to most people. He liked to think of himself as a political activist who firmly believed in the rights of abused (purple) people and felt more tied to them than anyone else. Comparing outside to inside, he was a bit of a contradiction (white shirt on purple tie).

None of these issues is what consciously drove him to therapy. What he most desperately needed to discuss and resolve was the fact that he was homosexual (purple tie). He didn't know whether he wanted to come out of the closet or not (the tie). Part of him wanted to let everyone know, to even show off and parade the fact that he was gay (purple tie on white shirt), to escape the feeling that his identity was being restrained and choked (more tie). His rebellious, unconventional side liked that idea. He sometimes did indeed bravely experiment with revealing his gay identity by wearing a purple triangle, which to him symbolized being homosexual (a combination of pink and blue).

Another side of him (purple tie versus white shirt) was afraid to come out. He sometimes felt dirty, tainted, sick, for being gay. That part of him wanted to be somehow cleansed and redeemed (white shirt). Part of the problem was that sex in general was a very unpleasant issue for him. When he was young he had had surgery on his genitals. He still felt insecure and "bruised" (purple) down there. He was so conflicted about sex that I sometimes wondered if he had been sexually abused as a child (purple tie? suffocating tie?).

A dream, even a simple one, is worth at least a thousand words. Freud thought that there was no limit to how much you could analyze a dream. You can always go further into the symbols, the links of associations, the memories that generate it. At some deep unconscious level, any dream fans out into the infinite horizon of emotion and thought that constitute the individual psyche, that even transcends the individual psyche and constitutes us all.

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