

# Jung and the Case of the Returning Dream

by Pete Williams

*One should not interpret one's own dreams. Dreams generally point to our blind spot. **They never tell us what we already know.** They tell us what we don't know.* (Marie-Louise von Franz, 1988)

*The main function of the dream is to communicate something to you that you don't know, something that lives in the unconscious. **Your dream will not waste your time by telling you what you already know.*** (Robert Johnson, 1986)

Many of us who refer to ourselves as Jungians became of age in a post-Jungian era in which this was the *Gospel* as articulated by the above two *Disciples*—“**the dream will never tell us what we already know.**” It’s a premise so fundamental to depth psychology that it is hard to question. After all, if we buy into the notion that the dream is “the royal road to the unconscious,” then it just makes sense that the dream will naturally confine itself to matters unknown to consciousness. The whole point of listening to our dreams, to working to understand them, interpret them, unravel their mysterious messages, is to continually broaden our personality by integrating into our awareness what was previously unknown—becoming more conscious and whole.

So, that’s how it’s supposed to work; we take the dream, unpack its message and the unconscious moves on to other matters. That’s what I’ve been trained to believe and trust just as most of us have. However, my experience is that it doesn’t always work the way Johnson and von Franz say it should. In my work with individuals and in my dream groups, the dream we’re so sure we’ve properly unpacked circles right back to us and that can feel profoundly frustrating not to mention humiliating. Our tendency, of course, is to assume it’s because we simply have not gotten to the deeper truth the unconscious is offering up. And indeed, that’s often the case. But, I’ve also wondered if there’s not something more subtle sometimes going on.

In a recent re-visiting of Jung’s essay, “The Personal and the Collective Unconscious” (Vol. 7), I was most intrigued to read of Jung’s encounter with this perplexing phenomenon of the “returning dream” and how he ultimately came to understand its meaning. I think the conclusions he drew from his experience offer very helpful insight into the subtle explanations for the “returning dream.”

It was around 1910 and Jung’s relationship with Freud was

still healthy and intact. Jung had been working for some time with a young woman who he describes as being stuck in a father complex, “the patient’s peculiar relationship to her father stood in her way.” In reality, her relationship with her father had been a very good one and it was upon his sudden death that the neurotic symptoms that had brought her to Jung first appeared. Jung quickly recognized that his patient was caught in a conflict between her need to extricate herself from her emotional entanglement with her father and her seeming inability to form a healing emotional connection with a “suitable man.” Jung describes the analysis:

In the course of treatment the patient transfers the father-*imago* to the doctor, thus making him, in a sense, the father, and in the sense that he is *not* the father, also making him a substitute for the man she cannot find. The doctor therefore becomes both a father and a kind of lover—in other words, an object of conflict. In him, the opposites are united, and for this reason he stands for a quasi-ideal solution for the conflict. (Vol. 7, paragraph 206)

As the analysis wore on, this father/lover transference to Jung grew stronger. In his discussion of the case, Jung credits Freud with recognizing that, while such a positive transference can be “a healing factor of first-rate importance,” and represents the possibility of a cure, it is far from being the cure itself. Jung knew he had to find a way to help his patient withdraw her projections onto him and resolve the transference, but he had begun to feel the case may be hopeless. Jung told himself that “there must be a clear and respectable way out of this impasse . . . Since I never imagined I was blessed with that *sound common sense* which always knows exactly what to do . . . I suggested we turn to that sphere of the psyche uncontaminated by our *superior wisdom* and that meant her dreams.” (Vo. 7, paragraph 209)

With the focus of the analysis now on the dreams, Jung notes that the great majority of them involved two main characters—“the dreamer herself and the doctor” (Jung). Sometimes the “doctor” figure resembled her father, sometimes Jung himself and at other times a figure of supernatural size or authority. Jung then recounts the following dream:

*Her father (who in reality was of small stature) was standing with her on a hill that was covered with wheat fields. She was quite tiny beside him, and he seemed to her like a giant. He lifted her up from the ground and held her in his arms like a little child. As the wind swept off the wheat fields, he rocked her in his arms.*

Given the extent to which his patient’s transference to him had been consciously acknowledged in the course of their work together, Jung found himself shocked and perplexed by this dream: “From this dream, I above all got the impression that her unconscious was holding unshakably to the idea of my being the father-lover, so that the fatal tie we were trying to undo appeared to be doubly strengthened” (paragraph 212). He further noticed that, for the most part, her dreams offered images of the father-lover that seemed over-sized and with a supernatural, fantastical or “divine,” quality to them.

---

**Pete Williams, Ph.D.**, is a Jungian Analyst in private practice in Atlanta. He obtained his PhD in Depth Psychology from Pacifica Graduate Institute in 2004. He is a member of the Inter-Regional Society of Jungian Analysts where he did his analytic training. He is also a member of the Georgia Association of Jungian Analysts and serves on the teaching faculty at the Inter-Regional Memphis-Atlanta training seminar.

It's at this point in the treatment that Jung began to realize that he had missed something significant in the analysis. He began to suspect that the patient's transference, which remained so thoroughly resistant to his analysis, had what he called a "wholly fantastic character" to it. Here's how he described coming to this conclusion:

As I turned the dreams over and over in my mind, there dawned on me another possibility. I said to myself: it cannot be denied that the dreams continue to speak in the same old metaphors with which our conversations have made the patient as well as myself sickeningly familiar. But the patient has an undoubted understanding of her transference fantasy. She knows that I appear to her as a semi-divine father-lover, and she can, at least intellectually, distinguish this from my factual reality. *Therefore, the dreams are obviously reiterating the conscious standpoint minus the conscious criticism, which they completely ignore. They reiterate the conscious contents, not in toto, but insist on the fantastic standpoint as opposed to "sound common sense."* (Jung, Vol. 7, paragraph 213)

In the struggle to understand why his patient's dreams were so stubbornly persistent in the re-submission of material he felt had already been brought to consciousness, Jung identifies and names for us two critical phenomenon which so often confound us in the course of working with our dreams: the seductive tendency to impose upon the dream our "conscious criticism," which I take to mean some degree of moral judgment; and the great difficulty of truly un-mooring ourselves from the ego-perspective and fully entering into the world of the "fantastic standpoint"—seeing and thinking from the perspective of the unconscious.

To the first point, in realizing that the dreams were "reiterating the conscious standpoint minus the conscious criticism," I believe Jung is acknowledging the unconscious's rejection of any interpretation through the lens of the moral perspective. He's offering, I believe, an important caveat to all of us who work with our dreams—when it comes to matters of the psyche, we have to be careful not to confuse our moral viewpoint with the dreams' ethical intent. The moral attitude, when imposed upon the dream, derives from the fantasy of bringing the unconscious into alignment with personal or collective "values" thereby allowing a reading of the dream to maintain consistency with what feels "right" or "correct." Whereas the notion of the ethical attitude or intent of the dream rests in the fact that the dream will always "tell it like it is" with no concern for the ego's "preference." The brutal honesty of the unconscious lays bare our complexes and biases often leaving us feeling exposed and vulnerable. Understandably, we tend to turn away from the heat of such honesty, but Jung's point is that the unconscious will simply not tolerate such avoidance. In this case, the dreamer's unconscious was relentless in its insistence that Jung relinquish his determination to address and "cure" what he considered to be the problematic nature of the transference. In other words, the dreams kept telling him what he thought he already knew because her unconscious was rejecting Jung's attempt to judge and pathologize the transference.

The other bit of wisdom Jung gleaned from his experience is that the dreams he was working with "insist on the fantastic

standpoint as opposed to good common sense." Similar to the natural impulse to impose some measure of moral or value judgment upon the dream, we can often find ourselves caught in a resistance to the dreams seemingly illogical, nonsensical or preposterous presentation. As Jung himself acknowledges, we are easily seduced by our desire to "figure it out," to "make sense" of the dream in order to avoid the discomfort of standing in the place of suspended knowing. The unconscious, however, will remain **insistent** that we enter into its landscape and will resist any attempt to drag it into our terrain of "good common sense." The dream will insist that we approach it with at least one foot planted squarely in the realm of the fantastic and nonsensical and it will keep coming back until we comply with that demand. At one point Jung muses, "I began to wonder if perhaps the unconscious could never be reached by understanding at all."

And so, this case Jung has shared with us is rich with good counsel and advice regarding the ways in which we approach our dreams. In particular, those dreams that seem to just not want to go away and allow us to move on. Marie Louise von Franz says, "Our dreams are the nightly letters our unconscious writes to us" (1988). It's our responsibility to open them up and read them but when we do, we need to remember to put on our mad-hatters cap and check our sense of the ways things "ought" to be at the door because when we enter into our dreamland, we're not in Kansas anymore!

## Pan's Time

by Grace Barr

Delicate twig bundles woven into top branches  
quiver and sway in the warming air.  
Buds explode on skeletal limbs.  
Birds telegraph their ardor *staccato voce*.  
The time is manifest,  
Wordsworth's ecstatic time,  
"the something evermore about to be."

Spring!

Henry bolts from the comfort  
of the velvet wing chair near the fireplace  
where he sleeps away winter mornings.  
Called onto the sunlit terrace,  
stirred by a pipe's high whistle,  
enchanted by a primitive summons,  
he noses the screen door.

March!

I follow my puppy outside,  
remove my socks  
freeing my cloistered feet,  
allow the sun to warm my pale toes,  
fall under Pan's spell.  
I've been inside a long time,  
too comfortable, too civilized.