



Cinderella Comes to the Ball

*Group Dreamwork Animates
Complementary Cancer Care*

by Tallulah Lyons

Many of us who appreciate the healing aspects of group dreamwork may be surprised to learn that dreamwork has not played a big role in the growing field of complementary medicine - therapeutic practices that enhance conventional medical treatment. Like Cinderella, group dreamwork has been an often-ignored stepchild, uninvited to official celebrations of the mind-body-spirit movement. Only a few words have been written about dreamwork in the best selling books on complementary cancer care. Although the number of conferences and workshops on comprehensive treatment approaches has increased, there have been few presentations on dreamwork. Each year, patients can find a growing number of treatment centers where complementary approaches are integrated with conventional biomedical therapies. Yet seldom has dreamwork been an option.

Now, at last, Cinderella is coming to the ball. One of the fairy godmothers who extends the invitation is the Wellness Community, a cancer support community with over twenty facilities across the country. The Wellness Community offers free of charge to cancer patients and their families an extensive program of hope, learning and support. There are weekly support groups, educational presentations, and weekly classes in stress management, yoga, T'ai Chi, meditation and art. And now dreamwork!

Group dreamwork facilitates and animates all the major goals of a cancer support community. A diagnosis of cancer often triggers re-evaluation of every aspect of one's life. The crisis jump-starts a reordering of priorities. Dreams can guide this reordering process. All dreams, especially our nightmares, spotlight the areas of our lives where unity of mind, body, spirit is forgotten

Tallulah Lyons facilitates weekly dreamwork at the Wellness Community, located near and affiliated with Northside Hospital. She is certified in dreamwork through the Haden Institute. She is a passionate advocate for dreamwork in two arenas: the mind-body-spirit movement and the movement for dreamwork as a spiritual path. Her book, *Dream Prayers: Dreamwork as a Spiritual Path*, will be released this month.

and is in need of re-membering and repair. Dreams show us critical issues and evoke the emotional complexes that are most in need of transformation.

The characters who perform nightly in our dream dramas are symbolic personifications of parts of ourselves that have fallen into the dark regions of the unconscious. These lost aspects of personality operate autonomously and without our conscious awareness. For the good of us all - but especially cancer patients - dreams introduce us to the "hidden stressors within". These hidden perceptual and emotional dynamics contribute to chronic stress and add to the suppression of the immune system. A major goal of dreamwork is to help us to acknowledge the existence of the excluded and forgotten parts of ourselves, to get to know them, and to somehow integrate into our conscious lives the lost energies that they represent.

In the supportive container of a dream group, we can look at our dreams as works of art that have been carefully designed to show us where we are blocked from the fullness of life and relationship. Like all forms of art, dreams use the language of symbol and metaphor. The images of our dreams symbolize our limited perceptions, limiting attitudes, and habitual, reactive patterns of behavior. They symbolize worn out constructs of the conscious ego that no longer serve our journey into wholeness. Our dream images and experiences also show us the deepest needs and longings of our souls that are wanting and waiting to be actualized. Through dreams we meet up with all our potentials, both positive and negative. Dreamwork gives us a place in the imaginal realm to allow these unconscious energies to be transformed and to be released in new forms of creative expression.

A dream group becomes a special kind of support group where participants get to know one another from the inside out. Clinical studies show that cancer patients who participate in support groups report not only an improved quality of life, but many also live longer. In a dream group, the focus on dreams keeps the group centered and grounded in the inner world where we connect with forces that urge us toward wholeness and toward unity of mind, body, spirit. The focus on dreams keeps the group open to the deep resources of this life-promoting realm.

In a dream group we hear a lot of laughter. Laughter enhances the functioning of the immune system. Many dreams seem ridiculous on the surface even when the emotions they bring may be very disturbing. When dreams are read aloud, members of the group often laugh. It is as if our dreams poke fun at our limited outlooks and self-defeating behaviors. They invite us to "lighten up" and to enjoy new ways of being and doing. The group is a supportive container for daring to accept this invitation.

Maximum functioning of the immune system is dependent on the free flow of emotional expression. Many cancer patients have a very hard time expressing anger and other "negative" emotions. When any emotion is denied or repressed, immune functioning is inhibited. Feelings of isolation, helplessness, hopelessness, and loss of control are particularly taxing. Dreamwork provides a place in the imaginal realm where we find creative new ways for expressing all emotions. A dream group becomes a special setting where feelings of hopelessness and isola-

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tion transform in the direction of hope, intimacy and deep bonding. As we share dreams over a period of time, feelings of helplessness and lack of control are transformed into experiences of connection, meaning, purpose and direction.

Visualization techniques for cancer treatment were developed in the 1970's and continue to be a popular form of complementary cancer therapy. (Stephanie and O. Carl Simon-ton, Jeanne Achterberg, et.al.) Patients are taught deep relaxation techniques. After reaching a deeply relaxed state, they are taught to engage in visualizations that are designed to reduce pain and decrease the side effects of treatment. For example: A patient may imagine a chemotherapy treatment as an infusion of glowing, healing energy that enlivens an innate healing mechanism and brings transformation to all parts of the body. Another patient may imagine radiation treatment as bombardment and penetration of healing pellets. Many patients create an imaginal supportive guide, a companion who strengthens them throughout the treatment process.

A guided visualization is intended to be a total sensory experience. Cancer patients are taught to create visualizations in which they use all the major senses: seeing, hearing, tasting and feeling. The brain processes imaginal experience in the same way it processes actual experience. Perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and emotions are expressed as biochemical change all the way down to the cellular level of the immune system. (Candace Pert, *Molecules of Emotion*) A dream experience that evolves through long-term dreamwork becomes particularly powerful content for healing visualizations. Because dreams reveal emotionally charged complexes that are in the greatest need of transformation, the images of dreams carry exceptionally powerful potential as healing energy.

A dream group participant dreamed about a giant polar bear who showed up at an elegant party where the dreamer was a guest. The dreamer was very frightened by the bear and woke up in a cold sweat. For over a year, the dreamer worked with the dream. She wrote about her feelings about the bear in her dream journal. She read books and articles about polar bears. In art class she drew and painted the bear. Using Jung's technique of active imagination, she had several conversations with the bear. She began to collect small replicas of polar bears. A crystal polar bear candle holder became the centerpiece of her home altar. She visualized her bear during yoga class and began to pay attention to the movement of "bear energy" in her body.

For this dreamer, the giant polar bear gradually became a powerful symbol of transformed fear. It became a symbol of courage to proceed into the harsh, cold regions of the unknown. It be-



Kay Nielsen - illustration for *East of the Sun and West of the Moon*, 1913

came her symbol for survival and for the will to live. Bear is now a trusted guide in her visualizations. Bear accompanies her to lab tests and doctors' appointments. Dreamwork with the polar bear demonstrates that as we work with dreams over time, both the images and the emotional complexes they symbolize transform. We know through clinical research that these changes correspond to changes in every part of the body, including the immune system.

In a dream group, we hope to integrate the insight and energy from our dreams into conscious life and to turn these gifts into creative expression. Like the polar bear dreamer, participants in a cancer support community have close-at-hand opportunities to take their dreamwork into yoga, T'ai Chi, art, meditation, and stress management classes. These classes are pathways for connecting with deep inner resources. They become pathways for embodying and expressing the gifts of the dream.

For many people, cancer is a turning point. Dreams help to clarify new directions as they lead deeper and deeper into experiences of relatedness, meaning, creativity, and mystery. Dreams lead to a growing sense of wholeness; and group dreamwork becomes a process of sharing a journey toward true healing and new life ■