ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Social Dreaming Workshop

Francesca La Nave

Social Dreaming is an innovative method, discovered during the 1980s by Dr. Gordon Lawrence, former Director of the Tavistock Institute's Department of Human Relations. Social Dreaming proposes that dreams be shared in a social assembly, fostering new thinking through free association and amplification of shared dream narratives (Lawrence 1998, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2011). Ancient societies valued dreams as ordinary sources of information as do some currently existing cultures such as the Australian Aborigines. Conversely, psychoanalysis has understood dreams to be conduits for, and to, unconscious material. Straddling the two positions, Gordon Lawrence developed the collective exchange of dreams into a tool to maximise creative thinking, to research the condition of systems and gain access to organizations' unconscious reservoirs of resources when applied to organizational consultancy.

Structurally, Social Dreaming includes distinct phases among which the first is the Matrix. In this main operative unit, an assembly of people share their dream narratives and their free associations. There then follows a phase of brief, small group conversations named Dream Reflection Dialogue, which is tasked with identifying emergent feelings and leading thematic trends. The concluding work of thematic response, analysis, and synthesis may take different forms, depending on the context and the nature of the project.

The 2013 International Art Therapy Conference held Social Dreaming as one of a number of experiential workshops. The available one and a half hours during each of the three conference mornings allowed time for an Introduction, a Matrix and a Dream Reflective Dialogue. Two conference directors and a student volunteer joined me in the hosting and management of the Matrix. The Social Dreaming workshop proved extremely popular, attracting more than 55 delegates. The question *"What is Art Therapy today?"* guided the Matrix and embedded it within the conference's overarching function of being a listening post, seeking a comprehensive understanding of the shape of contemporary Art Therapy. The Conference offered an Art Therapy Large Group at the end of each day, which provided the Social Dreaming Workshop with a further anchor to the proceedings. In the Art Therapy Large Group, social dreamers had an opportunity to elaborate, visually and interactively, the themes and ideas uttered by the Matrix in correlation to all other themes and ideas exposed through the various components of the conference.

At the beginning of each Matrix, explanations and repetitions of the basic governing rules proved helpful, not only because many had no previous experience of Social Dreaming, but also because, in the context of an Art Therapy conference this transpersonal method of enquiry, focussing always on the dream not on the dreamer, demands mental adjustments. There is a move away from interpretation and analysis of intrapersonal, interpersonal and group phenomena. In the Introduction participants were invited to gain access to the dreams of others as if they were their own, but in order to do so they needed to suspend all analytical activities and swap any interest in personal identities and group dynamics for a focus on the images and the stories contained by the dreams.

Overall, the three Matrices over the three days generated an abundance of dreams in proportion to free associations and amplifications to dreams, with prominent themes of crossbreeding, relations and metamorphoses between human and animal forms present throughout. The theme of jumping and falling from great heights dominated the first day, while those of bodies, human or otherwise, opening and changing, of water gushing and

expanding, grew resonant in the last Matrix just as the conference gathered momentum and the stunning evidence of practice diversity was made explicit through a mounting number of examples.

My memory of the Conference, now six months in the past, is of intense and, at times, overwhelming conflation of intellectual, political, and reflective work. In common with some of the other participants embarking in this Social Dreaming event, I retain a marked sense that it gave us first hand access to the undercurrents of symbolic representation, which connected and interlocked under the surface of our understanding of what the Conference brought to our conscious attention. In line with the meaning of embarking, to go on board, a lasting image that remains of both the Matrix, and the Conference as an undertaking, is that of vessels journeying through different elements, whether they be dreams and free associations, or the unpredictable waters of Art Therapy in the world.

An afterword. Traditionally, Social Dreaming relies on verbal communication. However, a model exists (La Nave 2010) which uses art therapy-informed techniques and image-making as an additional resource for thematic response work. This model provides an additional level of identification and elaboration of unconscious material because image-making sets in motion different processes though related to those active in the Matrix. This model enhances Social Dreaming's creative and multi-sensory modes of exploration, and is helpful as an experiential component of reflective practice, particularly fruitful when used in contexts where the arts occupy a central position in the business of unconscious exploration, both personal and collective.

Francesca La Nave

MA Group & Intercultural Therapy SRATH UKCP

Relevant Reading

Charlotte Beradt and Bruno Bettelheim (14 Nov 1985) *The Third Reich of Dreams: The Nightmares of a Nation,* 1933-39

La Nave, F. (2010) *'Image: Reflections on the treatment of images and dreams in art psychotherapy groups', International Journal of Art Therapy,* June 2010; 15(1): 13-24

Lawrence, W.G. Ed. (2003) *Experiences in Social Dreaming* London Karnac

Lawrence, W.G. (2005) *Introduction to Social Dreaming*   London Karnac

Lawrence, W.G. Ed.(1998) *Social Dreaming @ Work* London Karnac

Lawrence, W.G (2007) *Infinite possibilities of Social Dreaming - in* Lawrence W.G. ed. *Infinite Possibilities of Social Dreaming*   London Karnac

Lohmann, R. I. (2003) *Dream Travellers* **–** Palgrave Macmillan N.Y.