

Communicative Function of Dreams in the Therapeutic Process

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SUMMARY

Sleep is not a loss of consciousness, but an altered state of consciousness. What appears in the dream is preconscious and ready to move into consciousness. This material may be manifested also during free association. The difference between free association and REM dreaming is that the preconscious material is presented in response to internal and/or external stimuli in a more coherent form during free associations, whereas during a REM dream, the material of daily experiences and perceptions that are fragmented in the preconscious are recombined in a less coherent form. The material that cannot be easily expressed during free association in the wakeful state, due to inner or external inhibition, appear in dreams and thus, find an easier way of expression. The dreams of patients who have difficulty directly expressing their thoughts, feelings, and experiences serve as a useful means of communication during the initial stage of therapy and provide valuable analytic material to help the progress of the psychoanalytic treatment. This phenomenon is described with a case presentation.

The very inhibited patient who could not openly express her life experiences, emotions, and conflicts found it easier to report her dreams at the beginning of the therapeutic process. Through the material presented from these dreams, it became possible to open the path to direct verbal communication, to work through her problems, and to monitor the progress of the therapeutic process.

Key Words: Dreams, communication, psychoanalytic therapy

INTRODUCTION

All physiological incidents of an organism have a function. As neuropsychophysiological incidents, dreams have their own functions. The occurrence of dreams, which accompanies humans for a lifetime, has at times evoked anxiety and sometimes been a consolidating support. From time to time, dreams function as mediators in uttering wishes and thoughts that are hard to explain in real life and have supportive functions. In ancient times, when a decision was to be taken, it was quite a widespread custom among people from all social levels to go to sleep and dream about the matter before taking a decision. The dream and its interpretation were very often in accordance with the person's actual intentions and orientation to action and freed him from being directly responsible for the action.

When we look from this perspective, we see that dreams have undertaken a function since those times. After the 19th century, we see efforts to scientifically explain the psychological and neurophysiologic formation mechanisms and functions of dreams. Suggesting that Freud (1900) was the most important contributor on the issue would not be an understatement. Psychoanalytical interpretations of dreams continue to be an essential tool in psychoanalysis.

With the aid of data from neurophysiologic research, explanations regarding dreams develop in a more efficient way.

Today, we know that sleep is not absence of consciousness, but an altered state of consciousness. What appears in dreams, in fact, is material from the preconscious. As a matter of fact, this material first surfaces during free association. The difference is that a more subtle presentation of perceptions occurs during REM dreams and morning dreams than in free associations during consciousness. Thinking includes detachment, disintegration, and reintegration. During conscious free associations, this appears and is presented in an orderly sequence. However, as blockage (censor), due to the superego or other conditions, is more effective in conscious thought, the material appears either in a changed fashion by activating various defense mechanisms of the ego (symptom formation), or stays concealed.

Research conducted with subliminally induced stimuli showed that splitting, blocking, sliding, and pasting related to perceptions of experiences is also evident in conscious free associations and are not limited only to dreams (Leuschner, 2000a; Leuschner et al., 1992, 1994, 1999, 2000b; Pötzl, 1917). As Fischer (1960, 1988) suggested, dream work starts during the day. Perceptions gathered during consciousness is processed in the preconscious and become “scraps of the day”, which will be used in dreams.

Blocked material is neither unconscious nor repressed. It is hidden in the consciousness of the day and can be remembered. Yet, its wholeness is broken up into pieces that remain divided, in other words, sliced and their heads snapped off, in a horizontal line. There, there are also components of other material which stay in a similar way. When internal or external stimuli activate and make the hidden material remembered, scraps of the day from various perceptions unite in a new composition and make up the peculiar, not immediately understandable appearances in the dream. However, material from conscious experiences can be remembered in dreams. When scraps of feelings which were not real but related with wishes, worries or anxieties are added to the scraps of the events experienced in real life, the picture appearing in the dream provide the means of interpre-

tations which, in the former times, were used by clairvoyeurs as source of income. Nevertheless, these are a function of the psychic device and can be considered as one of the defense mechanisms supporting the existence of the individual.

In recent years, the value of dreams in psychotherapy, especially in psychoanalysis, has been stressed once again (Mancia 1999, Grenell 2004). This article aimed to highlight (with the use of a case presentation) the communicative function of dreams in the psychoanalytical interaction and that dreams make it easier for the patient to express emotions related to their experiences, which leads to enhanced verbal expression. The article does not include the technical characteristics of the treatment or psychoanalytical dream theories.

Dreams are an easier way of expressing thoughts and feelings for patients who have difficulties due to internal or external censors. Every culture believes that dreams are not purposeful, but are visions that form involuntarily. Etymologically, the word “dream” indicates this characteristic.

About 40–45 years ago, when the great majority of our population was not yet sufficiently familiar with the concept of psychoanalysis and behaved timidly at the onset of the treatment, it proved to be useful to begin the therapeutic relationship by letting them report their dreams. The verbal communication started in this way would open the path to further progress of the therapeutic interaction. It had thus been possible to apply analytically oriented psychotherapies, or even psychoanalysis, to patients with very low educational levels and strictly inhibited behavior patterns, who generally would be considered unsuitable for analytical treatment. Therefore, patients who cannot easily express their emotions verbally should not immediately be considered to be alexithmic persons, according to the criteria presented by the authors of “alexithymia”. The capacity of these people to express their emotions and the best way of approach to make them express their emotions should be investigated thoroughly before using this diagnosis.

Also for those patients who have some basic knowledge of psychoanalysis and who voluntarily

Note: 1. The words “dream” in English and “Traum” in German have their roots in the old German word “draugma”, which means “misleading picture”. The word “rêve” in French comes from the Latin word “vagus”, which means “baseless, empty”, and the word “rüya” in Turkish comes from the Arabic word “rüyet”, which means “seeing.” All these words point out that the dream is not formed by its creator, but shown to him.
2. The names in this case presentation were changed and are not related to the identities of real people in the story.

seek psychoanalytic treatment, dreams have a beneficial function in overcoming the initial shyness. Expressing some intimate issues via dreams is easier. The patients can define their emotions and experiences more directly and participate in their analyses as the therapy advances with successful effects. Then, the mediation of dreams is not required as often and the dreams are presented with their analyses and interpretations.

This is illustrated by the case that follows

Case: A 24-year-old, small-structured, plain looking woman made an appointment for herself and came to see me at my private psychiatric practice. She stated that her husband did not pay enough attention to her and she felt sad and distressed due to her suspicions about her husband's infidelity. She was the younger of two girls from a higher middle-class family. She said she graduated from a French high school, which is well known for its quality, and got married at an early age (19 years) after her father died. Her husband is an engineer who works as a contractor. She has a 4 year old son from this marriage.

Despite all efforts, additional information could not be obtained to add to limited demographic information she offered, which was gathered with difficulty by asking every item. The session ended after giving her some advice concerning her marital problems.

Eleven years later, this woman (whom we will call Emel) applied again, saying that she wanted a psychoanalytical treatment. In the mean-time, her husband (whom we will call Erol) was killed in a traffic accident. She was very distressed and her self-esteem was very low. She wanted to find her identity and gain her self-confidence. Although she was alone when she came for the first time 11 years ago, this time a young man accompanied her. This man (whom we will call Semih) had gained the trust of her husband, had been working him for years and knew all the details of his work. He had supported her in organizing issues related to money and closing her husband's business. She could not go anywhere when this man was not present. He was her only friend and the only person she could talk to. Her only family was her mother and sister. Her sister is 4 years older than her. Her son was now 13 years old and still needed protection. Her mother is a simple, but very good woman, who takes on every burden without protest. She

had been the sole shelter for her since her childhood. She was not very close with her father who was a harsh man and had always criticized her. He preferred her sister to Emel.

The sister was both a very successful student and a girl who satisfied her father's expectations. The patient was the troublesome child in the family and lazy in school. Moreover, as the youngest child of the family, her father did not pay her much attention; he rather ignored or scolded her. It was only her mother who showed her affection and protected her. She said that she trusted her sister very much, believed that she is very intelligent and always followed her advice. She did not have any other friends or a social life.

In the beginning of the psychoanalysis, she frequently said she was confused and did not know what to say. First of all, she gave information about her life with her husband. When her father died, her sister was about to finish high school. As soon as she finished the school, she married via a matchmaker the son of a wealthy family. At the time, Emel was in the last year of high school. As the pressure of her father disappeared, she started to be socially active and met Erol who was a student at university then. As soon as he graduated, they got married. Erol was a very clever, ambitious engineer, who had cared for her very much. Erol had big projects, executed them with success and earned a lot of money in a short time. In the beginning they were happy and Emel was going to his office and doing drawings. After a few years when their child was born, Emel remained at home all the time. At this time, Erol's business expanded even more. When Erol started to drink much and come home late with excuses related to his job, there began intense quarrels and sometimes fights between them. The severity of these fights increased with time, but Erol did not want to lose his wife and always found a way to make peace after each fight. Erol provided her with a lot of money and whenever she got into any trouble he found a way to solve it and save her. He was famous for his intellect and talents, but according to Emel, he did not develop himself properly in other aspects, he only developed himself in his work. One day she learned that Erol had an affair with another woman and she was deeply hurt. She started to hate Erol. When she considered separation, her sister said as he was rich and provided her a lot of money it would be very wrong to divorce.

She could not find the courage to leave him due to financial reasons. Their problems grew bigger. As he was drinking until the morning and driving drunkenly home she was expecting an accident at any moment and wished him to be dead when she was very angry; sometimes told this to him.

One early morning, after they again had a fierce quarrel the day before, she learned from a telephone call that Erol had died in a car accident. As his body was severely destructed and deformed, it was not shown to her. Emel was stiff as if frozen up and felt very bad in the beginning. Some time later, in order to free her from her depressive state and guilt feelings, her sister showed her the newspaper writing about the accident. There she learned that on that evening Erol was drinking in a restaurant in company of that particular woman he had a relation with and another friend. As the woman left the table to go and crossed the street, Erol tried to run after her and was hit by a car. The accident was on the headlines of several newspapers. Semih, who worked with Erol, knew all the details, but never told Emel things that would disturb her. He was a loyal supporter for her. Her husband too had trusted Semih very much. As their son was very young at the time, the management of her husband's fortune passed to Emel. She thought to open a business in order to keep herself busy. The trustworthy Semih would work there and they would run the business together. After a while, she did open the business and started running it with Semih. Semih was indeed a very honest person. He had liked Erol very much and had always been loyal to him. Now he showed the same loyalty to Emel. However, after a short while following Erol's death, a sexually charged close relationship was formed between Emel and Semih. Nobody in their social or family environment knew about it and even if they did, they pretended not to know. Semih was accepted by them as a trustable good friend of the family, left behind from Erol.

After this information about her real life, Emel could not pass on to dialogues that would be useful as analytical material. She only brought up the daily events and got stuck beyond them. On the other hand, she had lots of dreams. In every session she spontaneously reported one or more dreams. These dreams provided material which could later be used more leisurely in the analysis. At the same time, they were slowly opening the doors to the deeper layers of her self. During one of the initial

sessions she told that in her dream she had seen herself swimming in the sewer. In her conversations, she either voiced out her anger at Semih or talked about the injustices she suffered from her husband. She was very angry with her husband and by repeatedly telling his bad conducts she was in a way trying to free herself from guilt feelings. Having a sexual relationship with her husband's employee disturbed her. She tried to rationalize this by reflecting it as revenge upon her husband. Yet, on the other hand, she found Semih less worthy and less qualified than her husband whereupon she frequently criticized and scolded him. (The dream "swimming in the sewer" created the opportunity to discuss this issue.) Deep inside, she was not able to realize the death of her husband. A complicated grief process was going on. During this period, she brought quite a number of dreams that indicated her ambivalence between her husband and Semih as well as her other complicated conflicts.

According to their sequence, some of the dreams are given below

1. "We are married with Semih and lying together in bed. There is someone standing at the end of the bed. Semih says "Don't look!", I say, "I am not afraid, I shall look". When I look, I see Erol standing there." [She saw this dream one week before the anniversary of Erol's death.]

2. "I see a man in my dream. He changes. Once he is Semih, once he becomes Erol. It is not clear who he is".

3. "I and my sister, we used to sleep in a room next to the bedroom of our parents. There was a glass-paneled door between the two rooms. I see these rooms in my dream. The door between them is open. The rooms are empty; there is no furniture in them except for one bed in each room. Erol is lying on my father's bed. I am lying on the other bed. A woman comes and pours detergent on the floor." [This dream opened a door to start discussing oedipal conflicts.].

4. "There is a family meeting. My mother, my sister, my sister-in-law and my mother-in-law will be coming to judge us because Erol and I are not getting along well with each other. Erol is both dead and alive. I look from the window and see my sister and my sister-in-law coming together. In fact, they never come together. My sister's husband is sitting before me. Erol was a great demagogue. He started to talk defending himself. Everybody

was listening to him. I could not say anything, got angry and left the room saying, "God damn you!", but at that point I thought 'I should take all the properties upon myself'."

5. "There is an occasion to travel. Semih says, "Come on, let's go at once!" As if it will be possible as soon as we step out of the door. I say "No, not now. I have responsibilities". There is also someone else whose face I cannot distinguish, but it is someone whom I esteem very much. He too says, "I also can't go at the moment". Then I say, "I can't go now. I don't even have money with me". I tell Semih, "Semih, you should have taken a Visa card." Then, upon Semih's insistence, the third person gets convinced and goes away, saying "Never mind, I am going". I don't go. As I don't go, Semih also doesn't go." [The third person was probably Erol. He went away leaving Emel and Semih to each other, in other words, he withdrew himself from between them. In this dream, also Semih's meager financial means is expressed. As Emel planned to set up a business after Erol's death and wanted to have Semih to work there, Semih did not take another job and waited. During this time, Emel paid him his wages.].

6. "I am talking with Erol. He knows about my relation with Semih and finds it normal. I ask, "He has a friend, did you tell him?" He says, "No, I didn't tell him. I also don't want everybody to learn it."

7. "My sister and Semih are in a room, talking with each other in the corner. It seems as if there is an emotional closeness between them. I get very jealous. For an instant Semih reminded me of Erol, then of my father, but all the time, I knew that it was Semih.

8. "There is a four-year-old boy with an undistinguishable shadow, like the silhouette of a grown-up man, standing by him. They tell me "get rid of this child, destroy him, press him down, cow him!" I cannot bring myself to do it, but they insist, saying, "You must do it, otherwise the child will be bad like that shadow standing near him." Then I hit the child repeatedly on the ground. After I look at him, I see that nothing has happened to him."

9. "As I was in high school, there lived a girl in the house across the street. We were in the same class for one year. I did not have a particular friendship with her. She was a lazy pupil and one or two years later she left the school. She had no

father; presumably she was an illegitimate child. Her mother was said to be a loose person of doubtful morality. I saw this girl in my dream. She was very sad; I was very sad too. I said to her, "Fusun, do you know, Erol died."

10. "In my dream, Erol, I and Semih are sitting side by side on a couch."

In this selection of dreams from the many dreams the patient brought during the first eight months of therapy, all the events which she could not directly verbalize were presented almost without symbolization. The patient was wandering in a triangle between Erol, Semih and her father. The oedipal conflicts lying far deeper were tried to be solved within this triangle in a vicious cycle where the conflicts with one was being transferred to the other. The father came from a well-rooted landowner family of the province. He was a well-educated, cultivated, well-to-do and respected businessman. He was an authoritative person who paid great attention to keeping the family in appropriate order. He was the source of security and pillar of the family, but Emel could never get the warm affection and attention she expected from him. Instead, she was frequently criticized and thus could not develop her self-confidence. Soon after her father's death, she married Erol who had esteemed and ran after her lovingly. Erol was a powerful man like her father, provided her with social and financial security. Besides that, he loved her and she believed to find in him the love she could not get from her father. This seemed to come true at the beginning of their marriage. While she was working with him at his office, helping to make the drawings, she had started to gain her self-confidence. Yet soon afterwards, Erol too betrayed and disappointed her. On the other hand, Semih, who entered her life after Erol's death, offered her an unconditional love and loyalty, but when compared with the other two men, he was, in other aspects, much weaker. The money that made Erol so powerful was now in her hands, but very often she felt the lack of Erol's intelligence. Earlier her sister and later Erol were in her eyes the most intelligent persons with whom she could never compete. Nevertheless, Erol belonged to her. She had challenged her inferiority in the family with him. Also her sister's husband came from a well-known, wealthy family and was a very good man, but Erol was much more intelligent and had risen to success in his business with his own efforts and creativity. With Erol's death,

Emel was freed from the unhappiness he caused her, but she missed the support of his power; that now increased her anxiety. Inside her, she could not accept his death. Every time she got faced with a problem, she tried to find a solution by thinking what Erol would have done in such a situation. In fact, Emel was not at all an unintelligent person. She was trying to cover up the gaps of her school education by continuously reading books and she was quite successful in this. That Semih was an intellectual person, who read much helped her a great deal in this respect. This quality of Semih was superior to Erol. Another significant person in Emel's life was her son. She coddled him, wanted him to have, to do and to be the best of everything. On the other hand, she quite often quarreled with him and would sometimes be very stubborn with her demands. The child was the product of an unhappy marriage. She had desired to have the child, but the collaboration with her husband at his office and the happy communication between them ended after the child's birth. She sometimes had aggressive feelings against the child, but was able to quickly suppress them. She wanted him to be successful and intelligent like his father, but, at the same time, feared that he would inherit also the bad aspects of his father's character. As all these items were being discussed and worked through by means of the material offered with the dreams, Emel gradually began to develop her Self and become liberated. She now started to advance on the way of freeing herself from the pressure of her sister and the inferiority feelings she felt before her. Now, she was ready to accept Erol as dead. So, in the dream, she told her school friend that Erol was dead. But why that school friend? She was never a close friend of hers, but she was a lazy pupil, that means, she was less successful than Emel. Moreover, this girl did not have a father. Emel was not able to get the affection she needed from her father, but this girl was in an even worse situation, she had no father. Moreover, her mother was a loose, immoral woman. Erol had an affair with such a woman and got killed while running after her.

About 6-7 months after the therapy began, Emel's mother got sick. It turned out to be a lymphoma. Despite treatment efforts, 6 months later she died. After her mother's death, whenever she was faced with financial problems, Erol appeared again once or twice in the dreams. Afterwards there came no more dreams of that kind. In the last dream, Erol was seen sitting on a couch together

with Emel and Semih. That is, a realistic balance between the past and present was finally established.

In the following phases of the treatment process, Emel was able to directly speak out without need for using the dreams. She could now spontaneously analyze and interpret her dreams. She was progressing on the way of gaining her self-confidence. During this time, she revealed that she had lied at the beginning as she said she had graduated from the said French high school. She had never gone to that school, but to another French school of a lower level. She was freeing herself from being the inferior person in the competition with her sister. This became apparent both in her dreams and in her actual life. Symbolic elements were now more significant in the dream material.

11. "We are in a summerhouse, it rains heavily. My sister and I are going out, but I have only one single shoe. I say, "All right, I won't wear the single shoe, I'll go barefoot" and go out like that. The ground is very muddy; I get plunged in the mud up till my knees. Then, suddenly, I am in the school with my sister. It is a place like a monastery. There are nuns wandering around. Looks like our French school. One of the nuns come to us, I say, "Ah, she is Sister Margot!", then she appears to be the Mother (directress of the school). She says, "What are you doing here?" We both stammer and cannot talk French properly, but my sister cannot talk at all."

Now, Emel has reached the same level as her sister. She is no more inferior to her, but even more courageous than her. She throws out the single shoe from her foot and goes out in the rain barefooted. That is, she has the power to appear with her own self and identity. Until now, she had felt herself incomplete (with only half a pair of shoes), in other words, as a half person. Before the teachers of their former school, her sister cannot talk French, not even as much as Emel. In reality, the sister was the best pupil of that school and Emel was inferior to her both at school and at home in the family.

In those days, Emel reported that her sister too wanted to undergo psychoanalysis and desired to come to me. It turned out that now her sister was taking Emel as a model, or imitating her and wanting her support. That meant that the sister was either not such a powerful, indestructible person as Emel envisaged, or she had supported her feeling

of power by having her sister Emel as the weaker person. This feeling started to shake down as Emel started to attain power. Emel offered to give one of her sessions to her sister. In those days, she had the following dream:

12. "I am in a room with my mother. Also my sister is there, but she is not in the room. We shall go to a wedding. There is a very beautiful black nightdress belonging to my sister. My sister has worn it many times, and says, "You can wear it from now on". I have a lot of dresses but they are lying all mixed up. My mother says, "Your sister is going to wear the black dress". Then I start searching my white dress to wear."

Emel has started to get out of the darkness, to free herself from the pressures, to develop her personality and self-confidence further. She no more needs to wear her sister's old clothes. During the year in between, her development had progressed positively. Also her grief is now ending (She will not wear the black but will wear the white dress). Analytical material started to appear easily, transference issues could be discussed and transference analysis could be made.

13. "I saw you in my dream. I come here, but it is not this room. It is something like a living room. There are two guest women in the room. You treat me also like a guest. I say, "I saw a dream" and start telling you my dream. Those two women in

the room are not your friends, but you treat them also as friends and chat with them. They are not your equals, they may be servants or someone like that, but you treat them as equals". After telling this dream she said "Your attitude in the analysis has changed. Before, you appeared to me as too authoritative, like my Superego. Now, I feel more at ease."

With these words, she said just after telling her dream, she made also the interpretation of her dream. That is, she is no more the self-unconfident, frightened, inferior person before the analyst. Anyhow, the analyst does not look down upon other people; she treats them equally, takes them to her living room and chats with them. Emel feels that she does not have to be timid anymore; she can enter the company of other people and chat with them even if they are strangers.

The communication with the patient which, during the first months was mostly via the dreams, advanced positively and turned into verbal expression of emotions that enabled an easy reveal and working through of analytical material which finally could be made spontaneously also by the patient herself. After about 3 years when the patient gained her self-confidence, began to build up a satisfactory social milieu, led her private and business life with success, the therapy was ended.

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