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Natural Dreamwork and the Poetic Imagination

Images heal the imagination. This discovery distinguishes the poetry of William Wordsworth. I've witnessed this same healing potency in dream images. In what follows I'm going to give readings of poems and of dreams to show how this healing works.

Since the publication of *The History of Last Night's Dream*, I've spent the past ten years engaged with clients and their dreams in a process of spiritual direction. Some of my students have now become practitioners. We call what we do "natural dreamwork" because our work is grounded in the phenomenology of the dream, especially how images in dreams evoke strong feeling.

My clients provide me dream reports that are usually narratives mixed with interpretation. But in the session I gently try to bring focus back to the images. I don't think the stories we wrap around dreams fit very well. Nor is it all that helpful to interpret dreams. I view a purely intellectual understanding of a given dream as a missed opportunity for a more powerful experience. My first goal in natural dreamwork is to return the dreamer to the feelings images bring. That is where the healing lies. I don't interpret dreams so much as I bring them to life.

I find confirmation for this image-centered approach in Wordsworth's poetry. In the last stanza of "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" he describes concisely how the contemplation of images — in this case daffodils — can lead to psychological relief:

> For oft when on my couch I lie
> In vacant or in pensive mood
> They flash upon that inward eye
> Which is the bliss of solitude:
> And then my heart with pleasure fills
> And dances with the daffodils.

Wordsworth expands on this basic idea in his autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*, which he worked and reworked for forty years. He describes how, after suffering from paralyzing despair, he found healing by returning in memory to "spectacles and sounds to which / I often would repair, and thence would drink / As at a fountain" (Two-Book *Prelude*, 1799).

In *The Prelude* Wordsworth proposes a psychology of the imagination relevant to dreamwork. We could condense it, using one of his book headings: *Imagination, How Impaired and Restored*.[1]

When we are in despair, he is suggesting, we are suffering from impaired imagination. We can no longer imagine alternatives to our current situation; we cannot envision anything new happening for us or within us. But Wordsworth found a cure: he restored his impaired imagination by dwelling on images.

Wordsworth relied primarily on memories, especially memories from childhood. But the same healing comes in contemplating prominent images from our dreams.

In what follows I'll be moving between images from poems and from dreams. I believe poetry and dream are sisters, but I recognize they are not twins. Both are born of an experience of primary imagination (in Coleridge's terms). But most poems undergo a conscious process of revision.

A dream as reported has also been revised, but unconsciously. And we don't have first drafts of dreams to work with, only dream reports that are themselves somewhat garbled accounts. Working from the report, we can only surmise the dream experience in itself, the raw dream — because the phenomenology of dreaming is subtle and difficult to grasp. Time, space, and feeling there do not obey familiar laws. The Spanish phenomenologist Maria Zambrano even suggests that dreams are entirely *privado del tiempo* — lacking in any sense of consecutive time.

Yet most people tell their dreams as stories with incidents that follow on one another as cause and effect. This doesn't really work very well, which is why most dream narratives are seen as weird or bizarre. As we are dreaming, the dream-ego is often busy avoiding images, reinterpreting them, or telling stories about them. Certainly in dreams space-time is distorted and flexible, and feelings and reactions become much more amplified.

The healing potency of images may not survive the unconscious revisions. So in the dream sessions we seek to reimagine the dream with a more conscious focus on felt images. Let me offer an example

and emphasis to felt encounters with imagoes and images. (An imago is simply a personified image; in this dream, Eugene.) We returned to the feelings the dream was trying to offer through its events.

In the session we found a tender feeling when Eugene lifted her arm. But in the dream report, the running narrative circumscribes the same event and frames it as "an answer" to a question. "Where did it all begin?" she asks. And later she writes, "This is where it all began." Here we see narrative and interpretation working together against the image.

But does this story she calls "This is where it all began" actually align with the first event in the dream?

When I asked Mary to focus on the event, to feel Eugene lifting her arm, the dream report's narrative and interpretation readily fell away themselves.

By carefully distinguishing and putting to one side all story and interpretation, the images became more prominent, and the events in the dream can become more unified. This unity is a power of imagination.

As a heuristic, I would say, a dream report is a poem disguised as a story. A greater intensity of feeling comes when the client can turn away even for a moment from a conditioned story, a "same old story" — and instead feel the saliency of the poetic image. The encounter with the image engenders a creative moment, a place where the impaired imagination, at least for a time, has been restored.

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[Admittedly this was not at all how Mary experienced her dream. At first she was much more into her story, "This is where it all began. . . ." Only by going back, looking again, feeling the images, did the story became less prominent, the images more potent.

That revisioning is the essence of how together we might make a dream into a poem.This narrative voiced by the dream-ego reflects in part Mary's waking attempts to fix herself by herself, for example through self-help books. It is vulnerable to be helped by someone else.]

Usually at the end of a session I give the client a homework, an image or event from the dream to dwell on that will carry the feelings we opened. By contemplating the image for just a few moments each day, new dreams would come and we could follow the thread. I wanted to give her a strong homework this time because I knew the story-making would make a comeback.

So I asked her to take those growing magnolia shoots inside her chest, to feel them growing in her heart. I wanted to increase the sense of identifying with the image.

— It feels almost overwhelming there's so much growth.

Can you feel that, too, how overwhelmingly much growth is in the world all around you and you are part of that, too?

— Yeah, I definitely feel something about the roots. There's so much deep behind it pushing all these things. There's more hope than I thought.

I hoped these dream images would be the medicine to offer hope. She found comfort there. And new dreams came.

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More than we realize — because the dream narrative rushes by them or interpretation flattens them, our dreams offer healing images. Wordsworth shows us in his poetry the same healing property of recalling images.[2]

He discovered this healing power out of his need to recover from a profound despair. As a twenty-one-year-old living in Paris, Wordsworth had gotten caught up in the enthusiasm of the French Revolution. And he'd fallen in love with a French woman, Annette Vallon, and had a child with her, Caroline.

Then fell the Reign of Terror, collapsing his faith in ideals, and with it a rupture in his personal life. Finances and politics forced him to return to England. When hostilities broke out, he could not return to Annette and their daughter. Despondent and disillusioned, he turned away from poetry altogether for a time, moving as far from the romantic spirit of his youth as he could. He came to an "utter loss of hope itself / and things to hope for" (*The Prelude*, Book 12, ll. 6–7).

But in time, he found a secret of healing through his practice of dwelling on images. In doing so he opened a new path in English poetry, making his own psyche a subject and meditative introspection a method of composition. All this comes together in his first great meditative poem, usually known for short as "Tintern Abbey" — though it has a longer title: "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798."

Wordsworth carefully describes the "steep and lofty cliffs," the hedgerows and farms, "and wreaths of smoke / Sent up, in silence, from among the trees!" But this renewed immediacy has a failed charm.

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The sight arouses a "sad perplexity." This is wonderfully surprising. We might think after so many years it would give him joy. But what he's seeing doesn't feel as potent as what he's so often remembered.

Since his previous visit, he's dwelt on this landscape, "in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din / Of towns and cities." They produced in him a "tranquil restoration" in times of anguish. Wordsworth likens these images to a medicine "Felt in the blood and felt along the heart," bringing "sensations sweet" in "hours of weariness," and passing "even into my purer mind."

Certainly this seems a positive idea, to dwell in difficult times on other scenes and get some temporary relief. But Wordsworth claims the benefit of such contemplation goes deeper. It moves him to states of mind of "aspect more sublime," states we also arrive at in dreamwork because the contemplation of images leads there. Beyond simple relief or even deeper healing of despair there is a mystical aspect for Wordsworth, where his consciousness could rise to that "blessed mood" where

> with an eye made quiet by the power
> Of harmony and the deep power of joy,
> we see into the life of things.

What does it mean to have "an eye made quiet"? We can get some insight into what Wordsworth means by looking at a remarkable dream from a longtime client, Nancy H, who is herself now a dreamwork practitioner.

> I'm with "Philip" [her husband] and something is about to happen, a gathering of people. I realize I have no flowers in any of our containers and feel so afraid Philip will be disappointed in me. All the containers look so empty and I feel empty. I can feel fear rising into panic. Then I have the feeling of wanting to stop here and wait, so I do and time passes. I see in a place nearby several bunches of flowers with dried twigs and branches circling their stems like bird nests. The flowers shoot up so tall and abundantly, more than enough. I feel amazed and feel the change.

As so often, the initial dream report mixes story-fabrication and event, discourse, and image. So at first we needed to make the separation. The report starts with a vague sense: "Something is about to happen." Is this an event in the dream or just a thought? One test is this: in waking life, generally, if you are giving a party you would probably know it. So I asked about it:

How do you know a party is about to happen?

—I don't.

OK. And is Philip really that way in waking life—where he'd criticize you because the flower containers are empty?

—No, not at all.

So maybe that's a story?

—Maybe that's a story, too.

The party story is definitely not an event. It has no images, no sensual content, no one in the dream to confirm it. It's noticeable that Philip does not speak. It is a fabrication that accurately reflects patterns of story that take place also in her waking life.

The dream-ego believes the party story and further believes she's doing a bad job of preparing for it. So her first view of the flower containers is they have no flowers and it's her fault. Her shame and worry generate an "impaired" imagination. She is not really seeing these containers as they are or what the image might bring her as feeling.

Then she sees again. She sees the containers a second time as an image in themselves. This is wonderful. The containers don't represent a missed obligation. They aren't bound up in a story. They become a feeling. Simply, as she writes, "All the containers look so empty and I feel empty."

Now "I am empty" is not a fun feeling—but it's a realization, a feeling deeper than the reaction of shame. She touches into a note of profound sadness.

This is the first event in the dream.

Once she leaves the story and goes into feeling, more feelings can move through her. (When feelings get stuck they become reactions wrapped in stories.) She goes from "empty" to "afraid" and this seems like real fear—then she reacts into a kind of panic—but she catches herself again—and stops.

This stopping is a second remarkable event in the dream. She just *stops*. She stops reacting. She stops telling stories. Her mind quiets down. And "time passes." Here we gain insight into what Wordsworth might have meant by "an eye made quiet." It's a moment where she can really see "into the life of things." She saw—and felt the empty containers—as a feeling of emptiness—and now, after stopping, she sees and feels the abundant growth of flowers as a fullness. She moves from feeling to feeling with suppleness, from sadness to fear to contemplation. And from contemplation to an abundant joy.

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Nancy H found the healing potency within the dream on her own. The two strong events in the dream, the two strong images, have a relationship: the empty containers, the abundant flowers — the despair and the joy. She passes from one to another by seeing again. From there she moves into a deeper contemplation — she stops the narrative altogether, she stops time. Then feelings can move through her. From this place she sees the abundant flowers — she sees life around her. She sees the life of things.

The deep sense of a dream comes from seeing its structure as a movement of feeling, from image to image, from event to event.

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The event in a dream is very similar to what Wordsworth calls "spots of time" in regard to waking life experiences. These are certain moments that make a deep impression and seem to have dream-like intensity. Quite often the feelings are difficult.

Not every dream is going to be about flowers and not every poem is going to be about daffodils. According to some research, most feelings in dreams are rated as unpleasant or dysphoric. But in the imagination there are no preferred feelings; they are all of a piece. Often a person who has become numb or lives caught up in reactivity needs a strong jolt of feeling to reawaken.

So dreams show us blood and mire, they introduce feelings of revulsion and disgust — we see images that evoke dread and terror and pain. We don't like to have these feelings or dwell on them, so we turn away, but then we also lose the healing they might bring. The sadness in Nancy H's dream is real and existential. The pain in Mary L's dream is felt in the lifting of the thin, child-like arm. Whatever image comes up in a dream, however disturbing or painful, is needed for healing. In true feeling we become more vulnerable and in that vulnerability we can be more receptive and be helped.

Wordsworth also asserts the healing potency of difficult images. In the 1799 *Prelude* he gives several examples from childhood of events that when recalled to memory helped heal his imagination. These events all have a grim or tragic aspect.

He writes of these singular moments:

There are in our existence spots of time
Which with distinct preeminence retain
A fructifying virtue, whence, depressed
By trivial occupations and the round
Of ordinary intercourse, our minds—
Especially the imaginative power—
Are nourished and invisibly repaired . . . [3]

Many "spots of time" center on the child's growing awareness of death. He lost his mother, Ann Cookson, when he was eight and his father, John Wordsworth, died when he was thirteen.

The first "spot of time" describes an incident that probably happened when Wordsworth was nine, though he places it at an earlier age. He describes Lake Esthwaite near Hawkshead School where his father sent him after his mother's death. The young boy comes upon "a heap of garments" left by the lake, but "no one owned them." He watches for half an hour,

meanwhile the calm lake
Grew dark with all the shadows on its breast
And now and then a leaping fish disturbed
The breathless stillness.

The boy's sense of awful anticipation is satisfied on the "succeeding day" when

There came a company, and in their boat
sounded with iron hooks and with long poles,
At length the dead man, 'mid that beauteous scene
Of trees and hills and water, bolt upright
Rose with his ghastly face. (Two-Part *Prelude*, 1799)

The "ghastly face" of the drowned man left a deep impression. In a dream the whole incident would be an "event."

In *The Prelude* Wordsworth carefully traces how images move from waking life impressions into the life of the imagination. The "spots of time" begin as difficult events in the waking world, "accidents," "Distresses and disasters, tragic facts" that "impressed my mind / With images to which in following years / Far other feelings were attached" (Two-Part *Prelude*, First Part, ll. 280–85).

No longer tied to the past, the images take on a life of their own. The impressions from waking life, once they have crossed over and become images in the imagination, are free radicals. They are able to attach themselves to the feelings that are current in the moment. That is, "Far other feelings [are] attached."

We can get a sense of how this works in a dream by going back to the moment in Mary L's dream where Eugene lifted her arm. That event never happened in waking life. By the time she had the pain in her arm in waking life, her ex-husband was long gone, and she had to deal with it herself. The dream takes the memory and places it in an imaginal space where it creates something entirely new. A "far other feeling" attaches itself. Instead of self-help she is being helped, and by feeling into that, she can open to her vulnerability, which is not at all a weakness, but in fact, a potency of feeling.

The events in dreams may derive from memories, but these are only ingredients. Dream events are not memory any more than flour, eggs, and water are cake. The dream makes something new of them. Images take on a new life in the unique, imaginative space-time of the dream.

To receive this possibility of a new feeling more deeply we must learn how to stay with images, especially the difficult ones, to contemplate them long enough for the effect to sink in. This is especially hard when the images come to wake us to our hidden pain.

One of my clients, Nina, presented a dream in which she saw

> a large elk lying on the ground being attacked by another elk; his side is opened up and bloody. There is a large crowd of people watching. A young man is walking back to a waiting car carrying the elk's bloody rack of antlers. I am horrified. From the balcony, I yell, "That's against the law!" (Where I live it's against the law to remove antlers from a national park.)

The event is clear if we focus on feeling and image; it's the wounding of the elk. We can note that in spatial terms Nina is quite far away from the event, standing on a balcony. And she does not take in or acknowledge the event. Instead she focuses on the young man carrying away the antlers. She makes a story out of this deflection, in which she's standing up for the law.

In the session I had to make some effort to persuade her that she was missing what the dream offered. I asked her if she was really the enforcer of national park laws, and she laughed. After she set aside the story a moment and admitted she was overreacting, I returned her to the image of the elk with the huge wound, opened up and bloody, and moved closer to it. I asked her to do what Wordsworth did with the daffodils — gaze and gaze. Then she spontaneously recognized her own pain. Our work moved much deeper into her feelings.

The healing in a dream image (or a dream event) depends on the dreamer really seeing the image. Often in the dream, the dream-ego

distances itself, turns away, fails to notice or dwell on the image. The dream-ego may jump away as Mary did in her dream to a narrative or a thought. The dream-ego may see the image, as Nina did in her dream and then react — making it about anything but her own feelings. Or the dreamer may move in the opposite direction as Nancy did with her second seeing. She came to see an identity: "'The containers are empty and I am empty." This movement of seeing with increasing depth of feeling is part of the healing process, because to identify with an image (or imago) is to be freer from the constriction of the past. It is the place where there's not only a suspension of disbelief but "no irritable reaching after fact or reason." There is a quiet eye, an eye that finds its own life in the life it sees. As story-fabrication and reaction drop away, the encounter with the image fosters a healing of the imagination. Nina, for instance, is freer to imagine herself now as a person who has pain, rather than assuming the persona (which she admitted to) of self-righteously protesting the wrongs of others.

Obviously a poem is free to move from narrative to image cluster, from image to exposition. So might a dream, but the difference is the motivation. The poet is shaping a poem so that thought, narrative, and image enter into a harmony. But, as we've seen, the narratives and interpretations we add to dreams often seek to elude the feelings that the images by themselves would produce.

If in the rush of narration or the rush to interpretation, we bypassed the image even while dreaming, in the session we can now return to the scene and reimagine it and give it more time. In that way the deeper, more potent feelings can emerge.

In looking at dreams together this way, my client and I learn to hew more closely to the actual events in the dream and how they are experienced. We come closer to envisioning the phenomenology of the dream as time, space, and feeling.

As I've noted, people commonly recall their dreams as narrative. That seems a mistake in genre because a dream moves much more on its images and feelings, the way a poem might move.

In the dream examples I've given, it's clear that the narrative structures of "This is where it all began," "My husband will be angry," and "That's against the law" competed with the healing images in the dreams. But in revising together, when the narrative is loosened or deferred, the events can emerge and the images can heal. The dream becomes less like a story and more like a poem.

A dream offers a series of poetic moments — of image events. When contemplated they lead to a deeply creative moment, a way of seeing

into the life of things. The magnolia shoots, the abundant flowers, the wounded elk — are, in fact, natural images that take on "far other feeling" in the unique imaginative space-time-feeling of the dream. What was closed down in the impaired imagination can be reopened. The result of deeply contemplating an image, of seeing it as an identity, leads to a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." It seems no coincidence that this is also Wordsworth's definition of poetry.

Notes

[1]1805 version.

[2]For Wordsworth memory and imagination were separate "faculties" — our current thinking is much more skeptical about that: in the complexity of the brain we can no longer think of memory, imagination, or even perception as entirely separable operations.

[3]1799, Part One, lines 288–94.