

Dream Appreciation

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Acting is serious pretense. So is dreaming. Regardless of the content, light or heavy, only PLAY can bring us in contact with that content.

ON DREAMS AND ART: PART III

PLAY AS SERIOUS PRETENSE: WHERE ACTORS AND DREAMERS MEET

By MONTAGUE ULLMAN, M.D.

In the last newsletter I laid out the general framework for the analogy between the craft of the actor and that of the dreamer. I want to develop the analogy further based on the concept of PLAY. In what follows I have taken what the actors interviewed at the Actors Studio in New York were in general agreement about, summarized their comments and arranged them in clusters around what I consider to be the seven essential features of PLAY. In the commentary that follows each cluster I attempt to show how closely the contents of that cluster correlate with dream work.

A Pre-Cluster Orientation to What Follows

The actor and the dreamer are making the same voyage but using different vehicles to get to the destination. The source of the energy that drives both vehicles is supplied by our capacity for PLAY. The central feature of acting is that it is a fascinating and rewarding form of adult PLAY. Like the play of children, it is pretense acted out with others in a way that goes beyond pretense.

In both instances, the result is growth and self-realization. All PLAY, whether in childhood or adulthood, involves the elements of innocence, spontaneity, imagination, and purpose or meaning. Acting is serious pretense. So is dreaming. Regardless of the content, light or heavy, only PLAY can bring us in contact with that content. The element of PLAY in acting will emerge as the clusters are developed by the actors. The element of PLAY in dreaming will emerge in the commentary. There is some overlap in the clusters, as there will be in my commentary on their relevance to dream work.

some of the words they have used to describe what they strive for in their work.

- It's speaking from one's heart and soul, not one's intellect.
- It's being totally honest. If it isn't, you can count on the camera to reveal it and for the audience to feel it.
- It's shaving down the performance to a level of absolute purity.
- It has innocence and total involvement, as in the play of children.
- You know when you have arrived at an authentic portrayal of the role.

Commentary

The dreamer is faced with the same paradox as the actor. Let's look at the dream itself as pretense. It

PLAY as Truth

Actors face the task of resolving the paradox of pretense as truth. Here are

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is pretense with a message, a challenge to get at the underlying reality and make it a part of ourselves. We experience the dream as "real" because the pretense embodies something true about ourselves that is there to be discovered.

Those two great geniuses that led us down the "royal road" to the unconscious, Freud and Jung, were both after truths that were there to be revealed. They went about it in different ways with different ideas about where that truth came from. Freud, as a scientist, sought it in the play of opposing forces. Jung, as an artist, was more drawn to its revelatory nature. For one, the dream is a mask to be removed. For the other, the dream is every bit as directly expressive of feelings as the metaphorical imagery created by the poet.

The actor approaches the character to be portrayed with respect and a mastery of craft that enables the character to speak in a true and at times even unpredictable voice to the surprise of the actor. The dreamer also has to approach the dream in a respectful and non-judgmental way if it is to be allowed to speak in its own true voice. For both, craft is involved in giving full citizenship to a creature from another country. For the actor that creature is the character; for the dreamer it is the dream.

PLAY as Creative

The actor creates a character, irrespective of whether that character is or was real or is fictional. That involves not only the externals pertaining to the appearance of the character, but more important,

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what is going on in the inner world of that character. That is the more difficult task. It involves contacting an unconscious domain and retrieving from it "chunks" from within the actor of what lies unseen in that domain but that has to be activated to bring effective depth to the portrayal.

There is no direct way of doing that. It involves the interplay of a number of difficult to define and elusive features such as talent, imagination, empathy and intuition. When they come together in the right proportion, something meaningfully new is created. Of course it's more complicated than this and requires the combined talents of many people to help prepare the setting in which all this can happen. The end point is a creative act that reaches out beyond the actors and touches the lives of others.

Commentary

All of the above holds true for the dreamer. The dream is also pretense in the service of truth in the sense that it is both unreal in its display (it was only a dream!) but very real in what it has to say. A dream

is a creatively crafted scenario that manages to focus so specifically and often quite elegantly on whatever emotional currents are surfacing at that moment in the life of the dreamer. That creativity is inherent in the way we have transformed a primitive imagistic ability that involved internally picturing into a highly versatile symbolic system so in tune with an unconscious domain that plays so important a role in our lives.

In our sleep we are effortlessly doing what artists and poets struggle to do awake. Just as any art form transforms its subject matter, regardless of how seemingly banal, so can the dreamer. To dream is a kind of natural talent and is with us all our lives. We use that talent in combination with our imagination to bring something new and original into our lives.

PLAY as Overcoming Obstacles

Given the opportunity to play, children have no difficulty with playfulness. It's not as easy for us as adults. We may make a fool of ourselves. Let's see what the actor whose work is PLAY is up against.

A danger signal goes up when PLAY is linked to truth. Changes in the status quo result in something new coming into the world. At a personal level change may shake up a carefully constructed social self image of who we think we are and who we think others think we are. Unlike children, adults are at risk when they indulge in the kind of PLAY we are talking about. At the social level truth may, as in the case of a whistle-blower, result in the loss of a job. We all resort to a variety of ways of shielding ourselves from certain truths about ourselves (what psychoanalysts refer to as mechanisms of defense).

Actors face the risk of feeling vulnerable as they try to find a way of bypassing their own ego, their own waking sense of themselves, in order to remain in touch to the fullest degree possible with the character they were portraying. They have to do two things. They have to find a way to overcome their vulnerability and they have to trust their surroundings.

The first requires the

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courage to take risks. The actors spoke of this in many ways, as a leap of faith, as taking a chance, or just jumping in. The second comes with experience. It involves openness to trust, a trust in one's fellow actors, the director and the very many people involved in designing a set and creating an ambience that offered the necessary support. One can only make a dangerous jump if others are there with a safety net. That leap of faith becomes easier as one reaps the rewards. We will come to those in a moment.

Commentary

The dreamer volunteering to share a dream in a dream group is in precisely the same situation as the actor taking on a part. It involves the same feeling of vulnerability and the same openness to trust in others. In sharing a dream the dreamer is mobilizing the courage to jump off a cliff into water without knowing how deep it is and having to rely on others to provide a life-preserver, if necessary.

The dreamer in volunteering to share a dream knows that to do so involves undressing psychically and standing naked before a group, the members of which remain more or less fully clothed. In addition, one has to recast one's thought processes from the linear, objective waking

mode to the nonlinear subjective mode of the dreaming self. No easy task!

Two needs have to be met to accomplish it. The dreamer has to feel safe in disrobing before the others (the Safety Factor) and receive from them the stimulation and help needed (the Discovery Factor) to help the side of the self portrayed in the dream emerge into clear view. The structure of the group process and the way it unfolds are designed to meet these two needs. Trust is generated through the respect the leader and the group members have for the basic fact that only the dreamer has the right key to his or her unconscious domain. All the others can do is to facilitate the search for that key. Substitute director as dream group leader, and co-actors as the co-dreamers in the group, and the parallel nature of the task becomes obvious. It takes others to support the actor or the dreamer in getting the job done. Actors have to master the craft of listening and reacting to the co-actors, and the dreamer has to learn how to be open to and react to the co-dreamers.

Acting and dream work are interactive affairs. A shared emotional field evolves until an end point is reached that feels right for the actor (who hears the word PRINT!) and for the dreamer when he or she ex-

periences an inner "A-HA."

In both instances we are dealing with a field that is powerful yet subtle, a field that marks the successful end of a group effort, a field that is only disrupted by inappropriate intrusion of anyone's irrepresible ego. Since outside of acting and dream work we do not usually communicate with each other at this level of openness and intimacy, it takes time, talent and mastery of craft before the field comes effortlessly into being.

It is no easy matter to dislodge the obstacles our waking egos put in the path of meeting others in this way. Only when the actor or dreamer realizes that the onus of responsibility does not rest completely on his or her shoulders and that they are all engaged in a unique cooperative task

does the feeling of vulnerability dissipate.

PLAY as Healing

What is the definition of healing? The term usually applies to someone who is sick and is in the process of getting well. There is a broader meaning derived from the root of the word itself, its reference to wholeness. In terms of the fullest realization of ourselves, none of us grows up perfect at this stage of our efforts to civilize ourselves. Healing in the sense of becoming more whole is an appropriate term to describe the effort to get in touch with the full range of our resources. It is not easy to dislodge some of them from their hiding place. That's what acting and psychotherapy are all about. Many of the actors interviewed made a point of em-

LEADERSHIP TRAINING PROGRAM

A Leadership Training Workshop in group dream work will take place at Monte's home May 11-13. This experiential three-day workshop will cover the underlying premises and key principles on which Monte's group dream work is based. It will explore in depth the kinds of problems that occur at each stage of the process as well as the technique of leading a group.

Even if you have attended one of Monte's Leadership Workshops before, this can be a helpful way to "fine tune" the process.

DATE: May 11, 12, 13
PLACE: 55 Orlando Ave.
Ardsley, New York 10502

These workshops fill up quickly, so for information or to register call Monte Ullman at: (914) 693-0156.

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phasizing this sense of emotional growth. As Ron Howard put it, "You touch parts of yourself you didn't know you had." If dreams are the "royal road to the unconscious" as Freud put it, then acting is one way of traveling that road.

Commentary

Not much more needs to be said about the analogy of healing between dream work and acting. What Freud meant when he used the term "royal road" was that dream interpretation was the most direct path from point A, where the dreamer was in the waking state, to point B, a deeper understanding of the emotional load we all are carrying as we tread that path. We can increase our pace once light is shed on both the good and the bad of what is going on within us (our capacity for good and evil). As someone well-known once said a long time ago, "The truth shall set you free."

Truth, creativity and the overcoming of obstacles (resistances) are intrinsic to the act of healing through dream work. By giving voice to the characterization

of the self we have created, we unload illusions and expediency and arrive at deeper truths about who we are.

PLAY as Work

I mentioned resistance. The word involves the obstacles that have to be removed in order to get on the right path. The biggest obstacle is our waking ego, our own sense of who we are or who we have to be in our relations with others. This is where craft comes in. Craft provides the tools for overcoming self-imposed obstacles.

Despite the differences between the craft of the actor and that of the dreamer, the end point for both is the same. Actors speak of the importance of:

- Listening and reacting to one's co-actor (or co-actors)
- Having total concentration
- Being in the moment
- Being open to the unpredictable

- Avoiding any judgmental approach to the character

Only with respect for the human essence of the character can the actor do

justice to the role, take risks, and trust in oneself and others to come up with whatever is needed to get the job done. The closer one gets to a total involve-

ment in the role, the more one is left with the feeling that the self simply becomes a channel that allows talent and imagination to do their thing. Actors frequently refer to it as a "gift." Their responsibility is simply to learn how to use it properly.

Commentary

What I have referred to as "obstacles" are for the dreamer the "resistances" I referred to earlier. It's hard to partially anesthetize the waking ego so that it is there, but no longer in control. That ego feels as comfortable and natural as our very skin. Both are what we allow others to see of ourselves. We can't shed our skins but we can modulate the ego to the point where it is no longer running the show. The dreamer faces the same work requirements as the actor. Let's look at them one by one.

Concentration: *The dreamer has to maintain an unwavering focus on all that is going on within himself at a feeling level, some of which is extraordinarily subtle, as the group process plays itself out. To maintain that level of concentration on what is going on "in the moment" requires recognizing and dismissing any irrelevant ego concerns, e.g., "What I have to say will be too embarrassing," "What will they think of me?" or "Am I doing whatever is expected of me?"*

Openness to the Co-Dreamers: *Just as the actor brings spontaneity and openness in reacting to a co-actor, the dreamer has to be open to the help being offered by the co-dreamers as they play out their part in their dialogue with the dreamer. That means using what is given by them, not as intrusive demands, but as possibly helpful instruments with which to explore their own psyche.*

Non-judgmental Attitude: *The dream is not to be judged from the waking state. It is not to be judged at all. It just is. If we recall a dream we are ready to be confronted by it and learn a bit more about ourselves. In other words, regardless of how disturbing the content of a dream may be, it has not been dreamt to make us feel worse but to call something to our attention, so it can be*

Group Process at ASD Conference

Wendy Pannier, Editor of Dream Appreciation, will be conducting a workshop on Montague Ullman's group process at the Association for the Study of Dreams conference in Santa Cruz, California, July 10-15.

For details of the full conference program and registration information, please visit the ASD website, ASDreams.org.

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dealt with more effectively in the future.

Trust: There are two aspects to the kind of trust that has to be generated and maintained in dream work. The first is trust in the fact that the answer to the dream is there in oneself, ready to be found. The second is trust in one's co-dreamers to help one find it. The metaphor I used earlier of the dreamer being in a state of psychic nudity surrounded by others who are fully dressed illustrates the need for both aspects of trust. The dreamer can only see what's going on on the front part of his body. Others, however, can see that something is going on on the back of his body. The dreamer has to trust the fact that the answers are there from the beginning and to trust others in the search for them.

PLAY as Social

Both actors and dreamers need a hate-free zone for the kind of work they do. One can't do brain surgery with a hatchet nor can one venture into deep and sensitive unconscious domains without the cooperation and support of others. Actors talk about the closeness and family feeling that evolves in the course of the production.

Commentary

Dream work involves sharing at so profound a level as to evoke a deep

sense of communion. There is a palpable sense of transcendence as one participates in what can best be described as a common unconscious field. It's the closest I have come to the meaning of the word spirituality.

In their own work ac-

Regardless of how disturbing the content of a dream may be, it has not been dreamt to make us feel worse but to call something to our attention, so it can be dealt with more effectively in the future.

tors note this level of closeness and camaraderie and at least one actor used the term spiritual in describing this feeling. I hesitate to call it love, but that's actually what we are talking about. Love is a powerful force when the conditions are ripe for its appearance. Actors feel something akin to that when they are in a mutually respectful and helpful relation to all concerned. It takes the combined efforts of many talented people in addition to the actor to create a successful scene, and it takes the combined efforts of other dreamers to be there for the dreamer. Judgmental, authoritarian or controlling attitudes have no place in the kind of social milieu essential to either acting or dream work. One can't engage in satisfactory PLAY at any age without everyone enjoying it.

PLAY as Passion

Why PLAY if you are not having fun at it? Actors love their profession. Jack Lemmon talked about passion. He went on to say that to be passionate about one's work and to make a living out of it was an un-

beatable combination. In greater or lesser measure these feelings came through in all of the other actors. When James Lipton asked them, "What work other than acting would you have chosen?" many had to think a bit before coming up with what might be second best. Others felt that there was none.

Commentary

Dream work has the same playful fun-like qual-

ity regardless of how heavy or painful the content of the dream. A dream is a puzzle that one has fun solving regardless of the message. After all, one enjoys a good detective story even though it might be about murder and mayhem. I conduct the dream work in the living room of my house. For those three hours my wife Janet would read in the bedroom at the other end of the house. She was very aware of the peals of laughter periodically breaking through the otherwise quietness of the work. The issue may be grim, but dream work shouldn't be. It should be PLAY in the deepest and most regarding sense of the term.

There is one person I have thus far left out of the picture. In the case of acting it is the director. In the case of the dream group it is the leader.

The Director

Actors seemed almost unanimous in what they de-

In Memoriam

In February Monte lost Janet, his beloved wife of 60 years. Many of us remember Janet not only for her wonderful support of Monte and his work, but also for her incredible warmth and hospitality.

Janet, you will be greatly missed at Monte's dream groups and leadership trainings. We will always remember you with great love and gratitude.

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sired of a director. They wanted respect, help and confidence in the actor's ability to successfully play the role. In return they recognized their own responsibility to the director who was the only one with an overall sense of the movement and the aim of the story and how to get there. The general feeling was that with good casting, the director and actor should be able to collaborate in a way that would bring out the best in both of them. It isn't that criticism should be avoided, but it should occur in the framework of a supportive relationship. It should be one of mutual trust in which mutual creative energies flourish. As one actor put

it, it comes close to love.

Commentary

All of the above apply to the leader of a dream group. Both the director and leader have the responsibility for framing the process so that in the case of the actor there is the freedom to experience the emotional range of the character, and for the dreamer to experience the felt meaning of the dream. Both are aware of the vulnerability of the actor-dreamer and both are responsible to provide the safety and trust needed to take risks and to be of help when the going gets rough. The only significant difference is that although a director may also be an actor in the film

he is directing, he usually is not. However, the leader of a dream group participates in the process in exactly the same way as the other dreamers do. That means he or she has the same option to share a dream as the others do in which case he or she becomes, like Woody

Allen, the script writer, director and actor.

In Part IV the actors will be speaking for themselves. Their remarks will live up the analogy and I hope will provide a broader context in which to pursue dream work.

Dream Appreciation is published quarterly for people interested in working with dreams and the group process developed by Dr. Montague Ullman.

Comments, suggestions, questions and letters are welcome. Contact the Editor, Wendy Pannier, by phone at (610) 925-0758, by fax at (610) 925-0759, or by writing 105 Taylor Lane, Kennett Square, PA 19348. Our e-mail address is dreams@kennett.net.

We encourage you to share this information with others, as long as proper credit is given.

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