

Significant Dreams: Repositioning the Self Narrative

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In this article the authors argue that the study of the ongoing significance of significant dreams necessarily goes beyond quantitative methods for analyzing dream content to a qualitative study of how the dream experience influences the dreamer's meaning-making processes. A set of concepts from narrative psychology is introduced as being potentially valuable in this regard. A case study is presented to illustrate how the significant dream may serve as a catalyst for repositioning the dreamer's self narrative relative to a cultural master narrative.

KEY WORDS: Significant dreams, highly memorable dreams, self narratives, narrative psychology, archetypal psychology

A growing number of scholars and researchers (e. g. Adams, 2003; Barrett, 2001; Bulkeley, 1995; Busink & Kuiken, 1996; Hunt, 1989; Knudson, 2001, 2003; Krippner, Bogzaran, & de Carvalho, 2002; Kuiken & Sikora, 1993) have taken up the challenge implicit in Jung's (1974) provocative assertion that big or significant dreams "are often remembered for a lifetime" and moreover that they may "prove to be the richest jewel in the treasure-house of psychic experience" (p. 76). In one of the most recent contributions to the literature on significant dreams, Bulkeley (2006) argued that progress in dream research will need to combine knowledge of dream form with detailed information about dream content. Bulkeley presents a revision of the Good Fortune Scale of Hall and Van de Castle's (1966) content analysis scoring system. His analysis provides evidence, consistent with previous research, that some dreams involve exceptionally vivid, emotionally evocative imagery that is frequently characterized as "bizarre" or "otherworldly." His revised Good Fortune Scale enhances the ability of dream content researchers to contribute to the study of "big" dreams.

Although we are in complete agreement with Bulkeley's arguments, we also find them incomplete. The study of both dream form and dream content deepens our understanding of the first of Jung's claims, namely that some dreams are highly memorable. It is not clear, however, that the study of dream form and content speaks to Jung's additional assertion that a particular dream may prove extraordi-

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narily valuable to the dreamer in on-going ways. “Highly memorable” dreams may have lasting influence on or value to the individuals who dream them, and it would be an obvious precondition for ongoing dream significance that “significant” dreams be remembered. Dreamers, however, do not experience all memorable dreams as highly significant. Significance implies that a particular dream experience has shaped the individual dreamer’s meaning-making processes in some important or powerful way. It follows that inquiry into the ongoing significance of significant dreams cannot rely on methods that decontextualize the dream text from the life experience of the individual dreamer. This suggests the need for methods appropriate to the careful study of the individual’s life experience in cultural context.

It should be emphasized that we are arguing for an approach that is in addition to the content analytic approach presented by Bulkeley, not in opposition to it. The approaches answer different questions about dream significance and are complementary to one another, a point we return to in the discussion below.

In the following, we introduce a set of concepts drawn from the narrative psychology literature through which to read a set of dreams reported by research participants as their “most significant” dream. We then present one example in detail to further illustrate the promise of this approach.

CONCEPTS FROM NARRATIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Personal narratives are an increasing focus of psychological inquiry (e.g., Bruner, 1986, 1990; McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2001; Polkinghorne, 1988; Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992). Personal stories are not just a way of telling someone (or oneself) about the events in one’s life; they are the means by which identities are fashioned. Identity, whatever else we may say about it, is a narrative. As discussed by McAdams (1996, 1999, 2003), identity takes the form of a story, with setting, scenes, characters, plot, and themes. Through adolescence and early adulthood in particular, individuals reconstruct their personal past, experience the present, and anticipate the future in terms of an internalized and evolving self-story, an integrative narrative of self (MacIntyre, 1981). Although rooted in autobiographical facts, life stories go beyond those facts as individuals selectively appropriate aspects of their experience and imaginatively construe both the past and the future to construct stories that make sense to them and to their audiences. At the same time, these stories vivify and integrate life and make it more or less meaningful. This dynamic, evolving life story is a key component of the individuality of that particular person, situated in a particular family and among particular friends and acquaintances, and living in a particular sociohistorical moment.

A central feature of this narrative or autobiographical self is what may be called the “self-defining memory.” As described by Thorne and McLean (2003), self-defining memories are particularly vivid, emotional, and familiar, reflecting the individual’s most important concerns (p. 169). Such memories play a major role in accounts of how the individual came to be the person he or she currently is. Not only do such memories play a role in the development of the self narrative but also they are important in communicating that narrative to others.

Thorne and McLean distinguish between what they term the *event narrative* and the *telling narrative*, and this distinction leads in turn to the important concept

of narrative *positioning*. An event narrative consists of the literal, concrete facts of the original event. Thorne and McLean provide the following example:

[Event narrative] When my father informed me that my uncle had died, we were working on a school science project. He answered the phone, told me that his brother had died, and that we should finish up the science project. Even though I was not close to my uncle, my tears streamed. My father told me that the long suffering from cancer was over, and that I shouldn't feel sad. Then he asked me to hold a flashlight so we could finish the science project. (p. 170)

Thorne and McLean argue that the point of this particular story, the way in which it was self-defining for the teller, is not immediately clear from this event narrative. One method they offer for getting to the point of such a story is to ask individuals not only to describe a self-defining event but also to describe a specific episode in which they told the event to someone else. Thorne and McLean call this the telling narrative. Here is their example corresponding to the event narrative above:

[Telling narrative] I told my friend [Joe], because we were comparing our distant relationships. I told him that I can't take news like that with such a stoic nature. Joe felt the same way I did, and we concluded that we were different than our fathers. (p. 171)

As Thorne and McLean phrase it, this telling narrative reveals that the memory was self-defining for the teller in the sense that it positioned him as rejecting his father's stoicism, a position he found he had in common with his friend.

Positioning is then defined by Thorne and McLean as "the social and emotional stances that individuals take vis-à-vis real or imagined others," that is, "a dynamic rendition of the more static concept of role" (p. 171). As illustrated by the example above, positioning can be said to convey the point of the self-defining memory.

This then leads to the definition of *master narratives*, which according to these two authors may be understood as "culturally valued positions." In the story, the father's stance that one should face tragedy or loss with a stoic attitude is an example of such a master narrative. As described by Thorne and McLean, "master narratives function as cultural standards against which community members feel compelled to position their personal experience" (p. 171). Such narratives go beyond simply being regarded as socially acceptable ways to experience the world; they are propounded by persons in positions of authority and enforced in both obvious and subtle ways. Members of a culture "make sense" of their experience via such master narratives, and even when individual tellers resist the master narrative, their very resistance acknowledges the existence and authority of the particular master narrative that requires them to justify their alternative position.

A significant limitation of this approach, acknowledged by Thorne and McLean, is that there is no standard list of the master narratives for this or any other culture. Specific to the traumatic event narratives collected from adolescents, these authors described three types or categories of positioning that were identifiable in their data. The first, a tough position, reflects what these authors call a "John Wayne" discourse. In contrast, a position of care and concern for others was categorized as a "Florence Nightingale" narrative. Finally, Thorne and McLean identified a "vulnerable" position focused on one's own fear, sadness, and/or helplessness in the face of traumatic events. Thorne and McLean go on to illustrate

the usefulness of these categories for understanding ways adolescents make sense of traumatic events.

MASTER NARRATIVES AND POSITIONING IN SIGNIFICANT DREAMS

We approached a set of significant dreams with the concepts of master narrative and personal positioning in mind. Our first step was to read a set of dreams that women had presented as their most significant dream (see Knudson, 2001; Knudson & Minier, 1999). Our goal was to determine whether in a particular dream we could reach consensus about a master narrative apparent in the text. In approaching the set of dreams, we considered several factors that might influence our dialogue. The first was the power differential between the first author, a faculty member, and the other two authors, both graduate students. Second, the first author had done all of the interviews with participants at the time the dreams were contributed to the research project; and as a result the first author had a richer perspective on each of the participants as individuals. Finally, the first author was male, and all of the participants were female. Both the second and the third authors are women. It was decided that the second and third authors would each read a dream separately. Each would record one or more cultural narratives she saw reflected in the dream. Then all three authors would meet for a dialogue with each junior author presenting her findings from the dream and the senior author acting as a consultant. What we found was that despite of minor differences in phrasing, there was never any significant disagreement and only rarely minor disagreement regarding the master narrative(s) at work in a dream. For example, we were able to readily identify in these dreams culturally familiar ideas such as

Women should not be angry.

Women should not be sexual.

Women should put others' needs before their own.

Women should value romance over independence.

Women should value being protected over independence.

Women should rely on others (parents, husband, tradition) for moral guidance.

Not every dream in the set reflected one of these ideas, and our agenda was not to build a comprehensive list of such ideas. We, of course, recognized that our method for identifying master narratives needed refinement, but we decided not to pursue that work at this point. The reason was that our attention was drawn immediately and consistently to how often a particular dream seemed to have implications for how the dreamer positioned herself relative to the master narrative we had identified in the dream. In the following, by way of illustration, we turn to one such dreamer and her dream. Because the dream is presented in its entirety, readers will be able to judge for themselves whether the cultural master narrative that the research group identified is indeed apparent in the dream.

At the time of the research interview, the dreamer, Linda, was a woman in her late 40s. Linda's real name is used here with her permission. The dream had

occurred 4 or perhaps 5 years previously. Linda stated that she remembered the dream vividly. She had not titled the dream; for reasons that will be clear below, we have given it a title here. The dream is as follows.

A Woman Needs a Man Like a Fish Needs a Bicycle

Sylvia came to visit me and a bunch of her friends stopped by. The house was full of people talking and laughing. I loved it and said this was the way it should be.

Somehow it changed, and Dick and I were in a large house, fairly empty of furniture and uncluttered. It was his parents' house. Dick's father was sitting solemnly in a chair and he said for us to fix ourselves a cup of coffee. Dick and I left, and we were riding through Oxford in a bright red antique car, a convertible that Dick had just bought. We were in an alley, and there were other cars parked around it. He asked me if I wanted to drive it. I did but when I put the brakes on it wouldn't stop. It gently bumped another car. Dick and the man that owned the car came over to assess the damage. I felt bad and guilty, and I was afraid Dick didn't have insurance. The man said, "No damage done." I asked Dick if he was going to drive in the parade that was about to start. He said, "Do you mind?" I said, "No, I thought that's why you bought the car." I told him I'd take a walk and catch the parade later, maybe. I started down the alley and two women were so glad to see me and gave me hugs and asked how I was getting along—one was Alice P. It made me feel good.

I remember I was walking down—it's *unclear*—like a country road, and the sky was fairly gray. I don't remember—it wasn't sunny, there was foliage—but it was a very gray day. And I'm walking along, and I see the red bicycle coming up from behind; and I turn around, and as it gets closer I see there's a woman on the bike. And she's. . . I remember her black hair and her red jacket. And as she gets closer. . . she has like a very determined look on her face. I don't. . . at first I assumed that she was angry, and then I thought maybe it was pointed at me and I thought, "Well, I don't know this person." And she got closer and closer, and it looked like she was coming right at me. So I stopped walking, and she started circling me with her bike. And I remember. . . she kept going faster and faster around me, and I just stood there looking at this person, trying to figure out what was going on. I. . . I didn't have any fear, I. . . just curiosity. And all of a sudden the bicycle stopped, and she struck a pose. And she held her arms out like this (gestures) with her hands gracefully reaching for the sky, and she had four arms on each side of her with. . . she had on this bright red jacket, and the bottom half of her body turned out to be a fish tail, because I remember seeing the shiny scales, and it was also red. If I can recollect. . . I. . . I'm pretty sure she was all in red, but she had this. . . really black hair, and it was all braided tightly to her head. She was light complected, and. . . and then she had on these red gloves. And she struck that pose, and it was a beautiful sight. I complimented her on her artistry and creativity. And then she just started to vibrate, and vibrate, and vibrate faster and faster. And I remember I felt this energy field of this vibration getting closer to me, and I felt like I was kind of being sucked in; and I began to vibrate with her.

And then all of a sudden, I woke up. I was shaking all over, like vibrated.

Linda described her immediate reaction to this dream as one of amazement. She said that she had been accustomed to having dreams in which she was in trouble or was a victim. For instance, she reported a recurrent dream in which she was in bed with her husband. A group of dangerous men broke into her house and were coming toward the bedroom to assault her. The presence of her husband gave her no sense of safety, and she would typically wake from the dream in a panic. She described the dangerous men as "predators." In the research team's discussion, we identified the idea of "woman as victim" as a cultural master narrative. This master narrative was apparent in Linda's significant dream when she could not get the car

brakes to work and bumps another car but then waits for the men to make a judgment about the damage done.

Of importance, however, Linda did not focus on these early scenes. Instead, she reported that upon awakening from the significant dream she immediately identified with the woman on the bicycle, describing that woman as a stronger part of herself. Indeed, several days after the dream Linda had her hair braided like the woman's hair in the dream. Subsequent to having her hair braided, she reported a change in her dreams. As she put it, she began to dream of being a rescuer rather than a victim. For example, Linda said, "one dream that followed was when Dick was riding in a car with two other men. They drove the car into a lake. As the car sank to the bottom, trapping all four men, I dove in and pulled them all out, one by one, thinking how stupid of them to drive into the lake."

Other changes also followed from Linda's identification with the powerful woman in the dream. She mentioned that after getting her hair braided, she bought a bicycle and painted it red. She began to wear red make-up and wear more red clothes. She also met a woman who "strikingly resembled" the woman in the dream. Linda began a friendship with the woman that became an important resource in her transition to independence. At the same time, Linda enrolled in a university course to resume work toward a degree. She had entered that university as an 18-year-old honors student but dropped out after the first semester. It would eventually take her 10 years as a part-time student to complete her degree.

Some other details of the dreamer's life provide a context for understanding the dreamer's reactions. At the time of our interview, Linda was living on her own for the first time in her life. She had divorced her husband of 30 years only 6 months before our interview. Linda discussed her separation and subsequent divorce in terms of "rescuing" herself. She spoke with considerable emotion about how terrified she was in her first several months of living alone. She was resolved to leave a marriage that was "suffocating" but still unable to escape the feeling of being a victim. In that context, the dream seemed to catalyze Linda's reimagining of herself as a capable, independent woman. In the spirit of her account, the interviewer suggested that an appropriate title for the dream might be the feminist mantra "A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle." Linda laughed and said, "That's it exactly!"

THE SIGNIFICANT DREAM AS CATALYST FOR REPOSITIONING

As already noted, in our initial exploration of significant dreams through the lens provided by narrative psychology, we quickly were able to identify a number of well-known, highly gendered master narratives for women. What intrigued us more, however, was our growing impression as we read through the various accounts that dream significance was not merely a matter of the framing of the dream in terms of one of these master narratives. Instead, as powerfully illustrated by Linda's account, some significant dreams seem to offer an opportunity, catalyst, and inspiration for the dreamer to "reposition herself" relative to a master narrative. In Linda's case, this involved a move from the position of victim to one of rescuer, including self-rescuer.

The process by which Linda repositioned herself from victim to rescuer can be understood by considering what Hillman (1983) has referred to as “healing fiction.” For Hillman, healing begins when “we move out of the audience and onto the stage of the psyche, become characters in a fiction, and as the drama intensifies, the catharsis occurs” (p. 38). Linda was free to participate in the drama and to play the role of a character quite different from her familiar role of the victim. By experimenting with the role of a different character (the powerful woman on the bicycle), she was able to re-vision or re-narrate a new fiction for her life story. The victim role previously had trapped her into a rigid scripting of her life narrative. Ultimately, through spontaneous and playful experimentation, she could improvise under the framework of rescuer and be “purged from attachments to literal destinies” (Hillman, 1983, p. 38). Linda’s willingness to enter into the drama of the dream and to play the role of a different character facilitated her repositioning; however, it was the dream itself that served as the catalyst.

The thesis that significant dreams motivate or animate personal repositioning is more modest than arguments earlier advanced by Jung and by Bulkeley, though it resonates with both. Jung’s (1974) argument, in his essay “On the Nature of Dreams,” was that significant dreams express a part of the personality that has not yet come fully into existence but is still in the process of becoming. Bulkeley (1994), drawing on the work of Lakoff, Ricoeur, Browning, and others, discussed what he called “root metaphor dreams.” He defined “root metaphors” as those expressing ultimate existential concerns and providing life-orienting religious meanings. Clearly in one sense, Linda’s dream involved realizing or owning what she termed a “stronger part” of herself. Equally obviously, the dream played a role in a significant reorientation of her life, and although she did not explicitly attribute a religious significance to her dream, she did acknowledge in the interview that the woman on the bicycle might be interpreted in a spiritual way.

The narrative approach and particularly the idea of positioning may add to our understanding of the on-going significance of significant dreams. That Linda’s dream is significant certainly would be revealed by content analytic methods. For example, K. Bulkeley (personal communication, April 27, 2006), in an informal coding of Linda’s significant dream, found evidence for all of the content features his new approach links with dream significance, particularly of a “mystical” variety. These include, according to Bulkeley, “good fortunes, vivid colors, perceptual intensity, positive emotions, a powerful non-human character with whom the dreamer has friendly interactions, sudden shifts/ruptures in the narrative, feelings of confusion/epistemological uncertainty, character metamorphosis, and strong carry-over effects.” What the narrative approach adds, beyond the fact that Linda’s dream is significant, is an understanding of how it is significant in on-going ways.

What we encourage is more exploration of the dynamic linkage between the unique particulars of personal experience and the cultural forms through which and in reaction to which such experience is constructed. Hillman’s understanding of the dream, argued over a series of essays on dream imagery (e.g., Hillman, 1977, 1978, 1979) is that the dream may be understood as a scene, a context into which we enter and in turn by which we are embraced. In this sense, the significant dream may be

seen as a stage for playful improvisations in which the narrative self of the dreamer may be repositioned, re-narrated, and transformed.

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