

**Dreams in search of a dreamer**  
**Concepts, praxis and potentials of social dreaming.**

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**Opening the field**

We are talking about dreams, so let's start with an image: A field.



A metaphor – perhaps - for today. Synchronistically, we have a similar image as the graphic for this conference. These images were selected quite independently. Or were they? What have we jointly tuned in to here?

If I stay with my image, associations come to mind. It's a field in Shropshire, cultivated for centuries. Captured when lying fallow, when the soil gets time for rest and renewal. A place where - a thousand years ago – men in chain mail tramped across this turf, bringing a new Norman overlord to claim his fiefdom, and build an imposing castle nearby - the last occasion when Britain itself was conquered and colonised by military force. I think of lines from the 23rd Psalm, learnt in childhood: 'The Lord is my shepherd, he maketh me to lie down in green pastures...'. Peace and conflict co-existing. Ying and Yang, light and darkness, each containing the seed of the other. And on, to *Field of Dreams*, an old movie, where Kevin Costner hears a voice in a cornfield, saying 'If you build it, he will come...' – meaning the legendary baseball player Shoeless Joe Jackson.

So our Kevin sets to work and creates a baseball pitch, right there, in that field. And he comes, of course - Shoeless Joe Jackson. An entire baseball team comes, in what ends up being a moving parable on father/son relationships – or a shedload of corn, depending on how you view it.

And if we were in a room together, I could now ask you to come up with your own associations to my Shropshire field. We could pool our resources. We would probably find considerable variety, and surprising consistency. And as we let these images swirl around, and followed the trail of further images, further associations, which they in turn led us to, some images in particular might emerge that resonate, speak to the moment, to the theme of this conference which has brought us together – survival and development, exploring our internal and external landscapes.

There's another reason for starting with this image. I've been reading '*Fields in Dreams*' - a paper by anthropologist Charles Stewart, about the island of Naxos in Greece. The image of a field came up there, in dreams of the community Stewart was living with - dreams that occurred in a time of anxiety for the dreamer, whether for their own health or that of a child or close relative.

In their fields, the Naxos dreamers met the *Panagía* – the Virgin Mary – or some other saintly person - and either healing resulted, or they got some reassurance that the illness did not mean death. Stewart suggests: for these dreamers, the image of a field signifies the prospect of revelation and of relief from anxiety and distress:

*'The dreamer awakens to a different perspective on life, accomplished by placement in a wide, open space... The field is not itself the solution, but rather is the ground on which a resolution may occur. The field situates the dreamer in a new space for relating to experience; it erases the former relation of intractability.'*  
(Stewart 2013, p.312-3)

I suggest it's a field of this kind which we hope to open up here - which the conference graphic is evoking. A space where we can find new perspectives on the issues we're facing, however intractable they seem.

### **Dream-sharing**

But how can we summon the inspirational and healing energies we need, when we don't have the ready access of a Naxos islander to the Panagía, or of Kevin Costner to Shoeless Joe Jackson? I suggest there's a resource available to us all - what I call the dreaming mind – and that sharing our dreams in one way or another enables us to access that resource collaboratively, through what is effectively a form of joined-up thinking.

The Naxos dreams Stewart describes were not experienced in isolation. The dreamers often shared them with others in the community, particularly among women.

*'The perennial appearance of fields in dreams of anxiety and suffering could, according to the anthropology of experience, be understood as the result of cultural motifs available through oral and literate traditions that began with the Old and New Testaments.'*

'The Lord is my shepherd, he maketh me to lie down in green pastures.'

*'These motifs are reworked at the local, neighborhood level by women who listen to each other's narratives of pónos, grace, and illumination, and then perennially draw on these themes as they rise to confront, express, and encompass their own personal or family misfortunes.'* (Stewart 2013, p.314)

In other words, through sharing a dream with others, the dreamers receive an empathic and containing response to their distress, and can locate it - earth it - in a shared cultural context. It's not therapy as we know it, but we may recognise the dynamics involved.

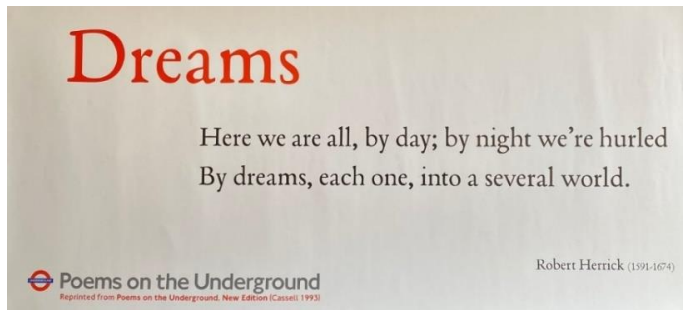
I've shared this vignette, because it helps me make an important point about social dreaming, the practice I'm here to talk about. It's not something weird or outlandish. It's the kind of thing which occurs naturally across the world, and has for millennia – the meaningful sharing of dreams in community.

So what's special about social dreaming? There's one more step I must ask you to take, as we move into my particular field. Sharing dreams may be about more than supporting a dreamer in distress. Sometimes it's the wider community that has the problem – that is itself in distress.

The basic idea with social dreaming is that our dreams may speak of the social realities we are embedded in - as families, as groups, as communities, as cultures, as humans of this planet – much as they speak of the inner life of a dreamer.

### **The social dimension of dreams**

This idea would come as no surprise in any of the traditional dream cultures of the world – whether historic or contemporary - in Africa, Asia, Oceania, in North and Central and South America. I have to say, on a future occasion, I would love to hear authentic voices from those traditions speak for themselves at an event like this. I can only speak for the 20th to 21<sup>st</sup> century Western culture in which I've been embedded for most of my life. And in this Western world I'm intrigued – surprised – dismayed – by the resistance I meet to the idea that our dreams can have a social dimension. It challenges a notion that is deeply entrenched.



I was on the London Underground, 30 years ago, when I saw these lines by Robert Herrick, nestling among the adverts in my compartment. At the time I was in a Jungian analysis, regularly engaged in the interpretation of my dreams. I saw them as Herrick did, as exclusive manifestations of my inner world. 10 years later, my first experiences of social dreaming left me questioning this assumption that our dreams are, by definition, ‘several.’

The anthropologist Irving Hallowell suggests:

*‘The culturally defined attitude towards dreams which we find among different peoples is often a direct clue to the basic premises of their worldview.’* (Hallowell 1966, p.273)

So what does it say about us, that our Western culture maintains such a narrow perspective on dreams - that we insist dreams are essentially intrapsychic (to the extent that we allow them any significance at all)? Is this a reflection of the individualistic way we see ourselves in relation to the world? That mindset has given us many advantages, but the shadow is also there, in our relentless self-centredness.

Whatever. We are unusual in maintaining that dreams are about the dreamer, to the exclusion of other frames of reference. Robin Sheriff, co-editor of the recently published *New Directions in the Anthropology of Dreaming*, observes:

*‘Recent work confirms that contemporary hegemonic Western ontologies are virtually alone in their (historically recent) assumption that dreaming is a purely intra-psychic phenomenon.’* (Sheriff 2021, p.37)

And in case we kid ourselves that there is something superior about this singularity of ours, Sheriff also observes:

*‘Local dream-related ontologies, rather than simply being an object of anthropological analysis, offer, in many cases, more perspicacious conceptualizations of dreaming than are found in western science.’* (Sheriff 2021, p 37).

Clearly, we have much to learn. *New Directions* gives us papers on the dream cultures of the Asabano in Papua New Guinea, the Tzotzil Maya in Mexico, Muslim dreamers in Egypt, and Tibetan dream yoga, along with

research on dream-work in contemporary Europe and USA, and an illuminating survey of the history of Western anthropologies of dreaming.

Sheriff's co-editor, Jeanette Mageo, argues that the collection as a whole shows how:

*'Dreaming does similar work for us collectively as it does for people individually, helping people to learn, remember and change by integrating daily experience within larger cultural structures that may falter in a particular life confrontation or historical moment – particularly, perhaps, this new global historical moment.'* (Mageo 2021, p.7)

So I'm asking you to accept as a premise today, not simply that dreams may reflect social realities, but that they may have something to offer us collectively – may help us learn, remember, change and above all think creatively about the issues concerning us – at a time when many of us feel our own cultural structures are faltering.

If we can now move forward on that basis, we're faced with an urgent question: yes, but how? Or rather, two questions: How do we do it – how do we access the social dimension of our dreaming? And how does it help – how does it make a difference?

In this connection, I hope it's clear by now, I'm not suggesting there's anything extraordinary about social dreaming. On the contrary, in many parts of the world it would seem totally ordinary. And I'm not suggesting it's the only way or the best way of accessing the potentials of dream-sharing. It's one way, and it's the one that has worked for me.

### **Social dreaming as praxis**

Social dreaming was conceived in the 1980's by W Gordon Lawrence, a group-relations consultant at London's Tavistock Institute.

Lawrence had begun to feel that dreams coming up in the groups he was involved with were sometimes about more than conventional approaches allowed for – they were not just about the dreamer, and not just reflecting dynamics within a group. They seemed to reach beyond that.

He was inspired by ethnographic material of the kind I've referred to, and inspired also by Jung's realisation that a wave of terrifying, apocalyptic dreams he had in the months before the outbreak of World War 1 reflected his unconscious resonance with what was happening in the collective:

*'Now my task was clear. I had to understand what had happened and to what extent my own experience coincided with that of mankind in general.'* (Jung, 1963, p.200).

Lawrence observed:

*'If any justification is needed for listening to the messages of one's visions and dreams, it's there in Jung's experiences.'* (Lawrence 1998, p.15)

Then Lawrence found a remarkable book, *The Third Reich of Dreams*, by Charlotte Beradt - a journalist, living in Nazi Germany in the 1930's. Beradt collected and persuaded her friends to collect notes on the dreams of ordinary people, more than 300 people altogether. She took these notes with her, hidden in the spines of books, when she escaped from Germany in 1939, and published this material almost 30 years later - an indication of just how long it took for her to process the traumatic experience these dreams articulated.

The opening pages signal what is to come:

*'Three days after Hitler seized power in Germany, a certain Herr S, a man of about sixty and owner of a middle-sized factory, dreamed he had been crushed, even though no one had actually laid a hand on him...'* (Beradt 1966, p.5)

The dream in question involved a humiliating encounter for Herr S with Goebbels, Hitler's notorious Minister of Propaganda. Herr S struggles to give Goebbels a Nazi salute, which Goebbels rejects disdainfully, saying *'I don't want your salute.'*:

*'This dream haunted the manufacturer and recurred again and again, each time with new humiliating details. "The effort of lifting my arm was so great that sweat poured down my face like tears..."*  
*'On one occasion his dream imagery was devastatingly clear... while struggling to lift his arm, (Herr S's) back – his backbone – breaks.'* (Beradt 1966, pp.5-8)

Startling images like this do not simply reflect the experience of one person under totalitarian rule. They speak to the experience of many at that time. 90 years later, they still speak powerfully to us. I suspect many of you listening now could instantly share an association or visceral reaction to these images – not least in relation to the issues of power and oppression which currently so preoccupy us.

With inspirations of this kind, Lawrence came up with the concept of a 'social dream':

*'Just as Bion postulated that there are thoughts in search of a thinker, so there may be dreams in search of a dreamer.'* (Lawrence 1998, p.138)

In other words. Lawrence was proposing that we are not just instigators, in our dreams, we can also be receivers – tuning in to the zeitgeist. Social dreaming was the practice he developed for exploring this potential. I see it as a praxis - not a theory, but an idea embodied in action.

Outlining what this praxis involves, I have to emphasise that partly because social dreaming is still a relatively young discipline, and partly because of its inherently anarchic nature – its capacity to challenge and de-stabilise existing patterns of thought – an inherent property of dreams themselves, we might say - there is currently no established orthodoxy for social dreaming. No clearly right or wrong way of doing it. What I'm presenting here is my basic toolkit, what I regard as core. A different practitioner might present it differently.

Let's take it in 3 stages: Setting, Matrix, and Processing.

## **Setting**

To start with, it's helpful to have a quiet space, free from interruption, though I have done social dreaming across a breakfast table in a hotel restaurant. What's essential is for us to be able to focus on the task.

Equally essential, as with any deeper process, is a pre-established time frame for the session. This is usually an hour or more for the matrix, with further time for processing afterwards. What we will have on the next couple of days at this conference is very truncated, 45 minutes altogether, so it will be more of a taster experience. (If there's a call for it, we can organise a fuller session at a later date.)

More unusual is the customary seating arrangement. Here's the layout for a session I did at Tate Modern, in 2017:



Lawrence talked of what he called a snowflake pattern. I think more in terms of a flower, the chairs arranged in irregular concentric circles, ensuring that in no one is in anyone else's direct eyeline.

There's no magic in this particular layout. With a very small group, or in a confined space, it may not be practical. Working online during the past year, we've had to be even more flexible. But the sense is important. I want everyone to feel they're in their own space, and yet held in the group as a whole.

## **Matrix**

The matrix is the heart of social dreaming. And what defines the matrix for me – distinguishes it from other forms of dream sharing - is the task. I usually state this clearly at the outset – even when working with seasoned practitioners. It feels performative as much as descriptive, in the way it opens up for us a different kind of space – a field of dreams. Formulations vary. It's not a mantra. I usually put it as simply as I can:

*'Our task is to share dreams, and our associations to each other's dreams, making connections where possible.'*

This may be accompanied by a few words of introduction, as a bridge into the matrix, including the statement of a clear taboo:

*'One thing we are not here to do is interpret the dreams for their dreamers.'*

It's hard to describe how freeing this prohibition can be – how safe it makes the matrix. If I share a dream on this basis, I'm not putting myself in the spotlight, for my dream to be objectified, and for me to be analysed as to what's it about. I'm offering something to others, for them to relate to as they wish, just as an artist does, when they put a painting or novel or song into the public domain. In my introduction, I often spell this out, encouraging participants to focus specifically on their responses to the dreams they hear, whether these responses come as an image, a thought, a memory, a gut reaction, or even – as is frequently the case – another dream.

The revelation which social dreaming brings is that we do not dream alone. Inevitably, our dreams come in a personal idiom, and they may well deserve analysis elsewhere on an intra-psychic basis. But to discover in a matrix how my dreams may speak to you and how your dreams may resonate with mine can be profoundly moving. It certainly was in my case – enough to set me off on this odyssey I've had with social dreaming, through the past 20 years.

There are other factors conducive to making the matrix a safer space. A rule of confidentiality, of course. Not an absolute rule, because one of the aims with social dreaming is to generate material which may be of relevance in other contexts – contributing to a wider discourse. The rule we usually follow is that we do not divulge personal or identifying details



when sharing material elsewhere, and we never name the source. It simply comes ‘from the matrix.’

And it helps that social dreaming is not a dialectical process. There’s no attempt to achieve a consensus on the significance of any image or dream – no win-or-lose in terms of thoughts and images in circulation. We aim to widen and open up the field, not close it down or narrow the focus. As Lawrence puts it:

*‘In the matrix a multiverse of meanings can co-exist... Once a dream is offered there can be as many associations as there are people in the room – and that’s a lot of associations.’* (Lawrence 1998, p.31)

There remains one form of interpretation which may be appropriate. It can be made equally by me as host or by any other participant. Those of you who work psychoanalytically may wonder, where would we find the transference in social dreaming? The answer is, in relation to the matrix and the dreams. I’m indebted to Judit Szekacs for this useful observation (Szekacs 2003.)

For example, at a training workshop in 2019, some participants voiced concerns that their dreams were not significant enough to share. When dream-images of garbage began surfacing in the matrix, I said:

*‘I hope we will receive as many rubbish dreams here as possible.’*

Immediately two people offered dreams in quick succession. They said later, they had found this a helpful intervention.

More dramatically, soon after the London bombings of 2005, someone said that on the evening before our matrix, walking down the street, they saw fragments from a broken bottle on the pavement. They were concerned these jagged shards might hurt someone. I said:

*‘I wonder whether someone here has a dream they are concerned about sharing, in case it might hurt us.’*

Immediately someone shared a visceral dream of body parts, mounted as installations in an art gallery, which twitched and began to move. Gruesome, yes, but it was what we needed to release a flow of associations in relation to the carnage caused by the bombings – the bodies dismembered by the explosions - which we had read about and been deeply affected by, but were finding it difficult to talk about.

As we know from our consulting rooms, the speed and spontaneity of a response – that quick release of energy - is often an indication that we’ve hit the mark. But it’s never guaranteed. On other occasions, a similar intervention will fall flat. Then I have to shut up and wait, till the eddying currents of the matrix bring a fresh image to the surface.

By now you will have gathered that the matrix is a space for free association. In this we follow Freud, who stressed the importance in a session of not holding back any idea or image on the grounds that it is disagreeable, nonsensical, unimportant, or irrelevant – or, with social dreaming - we might add – on the grounds that it seems simply personal.

On the other hand, I often emphasise that social dreaming does not claim to be a therapeutic process as such. It's up to participants to take responsibility for their level of participation. If a dream or association is too raw for a participant to feel ready to share it - ready to hear how others respond to it – there's no pressure on them to speak. They can wait, till they feel comfortable opening up – or they can save their dreams and responses, for exploration elsewhere.

### **Authority in the matrix**

I regard hosting – or facilitating a matrix - as a function, not a status. I'm there to do a job – establish the setting, structure the time, state the task, and so on. But my dreams or associations or the connections I make – if I share them - carry no more weight than those of other participants. They all go into the mix. Or do they?

Julian Manley, a psychosocial researcher, is emphatic about the essential democracy of the matrix. In a recent publication – *Social Dreaming: Philosophy, Research, Theory and Practice* - which he co-edited with organisational consultant Susan Long - Manley says the matrix works:

*'... through the unfettered, unguided expression of dreams and associations of participants in the matrix, a space devoid of the authority of a leader (the host for example), who deliberately plays down any leadership role that might be expected of her in another configuration... Instead the dreams and associations are self-organising and create their own collages of potential meaning, a meaning that is constantly shifting, nevertheless, through connections that are intuitively made through a sense of their relative intensities of affect.'* (Manley 2019, p.33-4)

These observations have been criticised by Jungian analyst George Taxidis, in a review of Manley and Long's book. Taxidis finds Manley's statement that the matrix is a space devoid of a leader's authority '*remarkable*'. In his review, Taxidis focuses on issues of power and authority. He highlights a comment made by Manley on material from a matrix held in the context of the Muslim community in England. A dreamer dreamed of '*ducking away from the cops.*' (Manley 2019, p.32). Manley says this is:

*'clearly not primarily a story about escaping the police, but rather an expression of complex affect: the fear that is felt in a situation that should be designed for its opposite, the reduction and control or containment of fear (what cops should do).'*' (Manley 2019, p.34).

Taxidis argues:

*'Is this not an expression of authority to pronounce what the dream is "clearly not" about? Does this not go against the idea that no one reading of a dream is more valid than another?'* (Taxidis 2020)

I have to admit, Manley is a friend, and I contributed to his book. Taxidis is also a friend. He and I together started a monthly Queer social dreaming session for LGBTQ+ participants, still running after 5 years. I have skin in the game here.

To be fair to Manley, his comment is made reflectively, after the event. There's nothing to suggest it was made in the matrix. Manley is committed to developing social dreaming as a research methodology, and is well aware how difficult it is, when analysing material from a matrix, to reach conclusions representative of all participants (see Manley 2018, pp. 7-10).

And it's easy to see why Manley relates this particular dream of *'ducking away from the cops'* to a wider social issue, the deep mistrust of the police felt among minority ethnic groups. Isn't that what social dreaming is about – tuning in to wider social references?

But Taxidis has a point. The dreamer may well have been speaking from experience, and for them, that experience may well have been the primary significance of the dream. Thinking of Herr S, for example - the image of his back breaking while he struggles to give a Nazi salute may speak for a whole society, but he's the one giving voice to it. In a matrix, such an image needs to be acknowledged, perhaps with an empathic gut reaction - 'That feels unbearable' – before making wider generalisations.

Beyond that – I agree with Taxidis, Whatever low profile I try to maintain as a host, I will be seen as a figure with some authority, and that may affect how my contributions are received. The matrix is not a space where interpersonal dynamics can be explored, but they can be afterwards, during the processing. And they are food for thought, when I'm reflecting later how a session went, with a view to doing the next one better.

Why speak at all? Lawrence seems to have recognised that a host's voice may have a disproportionate impact. I'm told he had a 'rule of thumb', not to open his mouth in a matrix until a few dreams had been shared. Hold the frame, stick to the task, trust the process - 'Authority lies in the matrix' remains a guiding principle, even if it can't encapsulate the full reality.

## **Processing and new thoughts**

And where does all this work in the matrix take us? Lawrence used to add to his definition of the task for the matrix that we share our dreams and associations so as to generate new thoughts. I focus more consciously on this aspect during the next stage, the processing.

Once the matrix is closed, there's a marked shift. We may take a short break to underline this, or rearrange the seating. But what we are shifting to is less well defined – in social dreaming circles - than our task in the matrix. I call it processing. Others call it a Dream Reflection Dialogue, or Creative Role Synthesis. Whatever the names, there is a general consensus now that we need space after the matrix, to reflect on our experience and see what we can make of it – bridging out.

The form and duration of this processing will depend on the context in which we are meeting. It may involve 10 minutes of shared reflection, which is all we will have time for tomorrow, and that may well be enough, as our processing can continue throughout the day. Or it may involve a sustained brainstorming session with flip charts, to capture the thinking as it unfolds and formulate possible applications.

To get things going, I usually invite participants to share images from the matrix that still resonate for them, or any strong affect they are left with. And I invite them to start linking these images, these feelings, along with anything else from the matrix that comes to mind – linking them with the context in which we have met.

At a conference like this, for example, we have the themes of the conference to relate to. For a working group, it will be the project we are involved with. For a professional body it will be the common ground of our practice. And we can start making wider links with the world we live in, tuning in to the zeitgeist. Through this sifting and linking, new thoughts can emerge. If we find we are simply 'rearranging our prejudices', as the saying goes, then we're missing something.

The outcomes may be clearest with a working group, where a solution to problems we are engaged with - or at least some identifiable action points - may emerge – just as we know dreams may free up our creative response to issues we are engaged with at an individual level.

At a conference like this, social dreaming may help us generate images and connect with feelings that give colour to presentations we hear from the podium, illuminating undercurrents in relation to the themes we are pursuing. I hope we'll see examples of this over the next couple of days,

when those who've been in the matrices make connections with what comes up elsewhere, in their groups or the plenary sessions.

Sometimes the new thinking is less obvious. A few years ago, I spent a weekend with a group of actors devising a piece of theatre. They invited me to contribute a social dreaming session to their process of research and development. We had a lively matrix, and in the processing afterwards, they made many useful connections.

The big surprise for us all was when they returned to their project the next day. They were really sparking – sizzling with spontaneous creativity. They felt this was a direct result of the dream-work we had done.

At this level, I suggest, social dreaming can be understood as a complementary activity. For those who run with Ian McGilchrist's ideas on the complementary functions of our right and left brains (McGilchrist 2009), social dreaming can be seen as giving a voice to right brain functioning, particularly helpful where left brain functioning alone is not enough – when we need radically new thoughts, and new ways of thinking, to free up whatever logjam we're stuck in.

### **Stripping off and jumping in**

An illustration of how freeing this process can be comes from the Tate project I referred to earlier.

In 2017, Tate Modern commissioned artist Romain Mader to create an edition of their community newspaper for local residents. Mader wanted to focus on dreams, so I was brought in to facilitate some dream-sharing. We had a series of matrix and processing sessions, along with parallel art activity sessions, both in Tate Modern and elsewhere in Rotherhithe. Express consent was obtained for Mader to use the material that was generated, with participants given the right to redact anything they felt was too personal.



One of our sessions was in a disused print works. After the matrix and some processing, participants were let loose to express themselves on sheets torn from rolls of discarded newsprint lying around. It was deeply moving. Everyone was working quietly and intently, filling spaces left by others, connecting with what was already there, going from sheet to sheet. Then we brought the sheets together:



sessions of processing. Baglioni's paper describes the subtle dialogue which evolved between participants, with a detail I can't reproduce here. But the dream material alone conveys the shifts that took place.

From the first matrix of the first workshop:

*'In the middle of the street I see a black cat. It is dead; a large amount of blood has come out of its mouth. I recognise it as my cat. I feel an unbearable pain and wake up.'* (Baglioni 2010, p151)

From the fourth and last matrix of that first workshop:

*'A strange cat, red and blue and possibly sick and contagious visits the room of two sisters during the night engendering, at first sight, panic and efforts to avoid contact. Eventually it conquers some space under the covers, close to the dreamer. The intimate contact, in turn, allows the dreamer to appreciate some other features of the cat, for example its softness and warmth, its fragility, and its sociable nature. Her emotional reaction changes...'* (Baglioni 2010, p160)

Here's another pairing. From the first matrix of the first workshop:

*'I am walking along a road lined with trees and I am looking for something, but I don't know what. Eventually I reach a lake; the water is dark and muddy. I put my hand in it without seeing, touch something and pull it out. It is a person. I don't remember her face.'* (Baglioni 2010, p153).

And from the last matrix of the second workshop, the final dream of the programme:

*'There is a group of people all dressed up for an important meeting. The journey to reach the meeting place is long and difficult; their clothes become muddy and ragged. They get to a pond of clear water, undress completely and jump in. They come out rested, put back on their rags and start off – but in another direction.'* (Baglioni 2010, p.166)

Comments afterwards from participants highlight how sensitised, refreshed and enlivened they felt, and how they had bonded as a team.

Such responses chime with a note I had recently, from Suni Perera - a GP friend of mine. In 2011, Perera asked me to contribute a social dreaming session to a residential workshop she was running (with others), for experienced GP leaders involved in training novice GP's. She offered this reflection:

*'social dreaming for GP educationalists...  
Initially the dreams shared were of personal dreams symbolising disasters and distress. Soon there was a recognition, almost an echo,*

*held within the dreams, of the suffering and intolerable pain they faced in clinical work. This led to discussion of how we create boundaries and separate ourselves from the distress we see in our daily work How do we model or teach this?’ (Perera 2021)*

We see here how social dreaming can clarify action points for a working group. But what I’m getting to is this. More recently, at Perera’s request, I began hosting social dreaming sessions for a group of friends, meeting occasionally. Others in the group are also GP’s, practicing or retired. When Covid hit us, Perera was left reeling. How might she honour her own fears, while providing leadership and supervision for 50+ trainee GP’s working on the front line?

Perera and I agreed a matrix might help. We convened the group. This was in April 2020, four weeks into the first lockdown, so naturally we met online. It was a powerful session. There were pervasive images of water, initially uncontrollable, overwhelming. We were battling with confusion, disorientation. Blank pages, where’s the script? What’s natural/unnatural? Stark primary colours – red, black, blue, white. Things began taking shape. Blue scrubs, white masks – nothing changes who I am. A green wall, a sense of spring, renewal, the rhythms of nature. Shifting viewpoints. A new tenderness felt for someone usually seen as irritating. The water becomes cleansing. The blank pages suggest possibilities for a new start. Someone who usually feels outside the plot now feels included. There’s much to be thankful for. Washing our hands repeatedly has become the new normal for us, but in many parts of the world they have no running water at all...

A year later, Perera writes:

*I asked (you) to convene this dream matrix, partly as a response to the confusion, unfamiliarity and fear of what Covid might mean. I had nothing to help me navigate the early days of the Covid crisis as a medic. Social dreaming gave me a means of finding my way or was it our way, together. Sharing the dreams which surfaced and our responses to them, giving voice to the confusion and distress we were all experiencing, following the stream of images which unfolded, I found my base-line by being with others in their dreams – a freeing process. I was feeling and thinking again. Rather than fearing the Not knowing, we could share the ‘not knowing’ in our dreams, this settled me and felt like a kind of knowing. I was left feeling encouraged, enlivened and strengthened,’ (Perera 2021)*

## **Intimacy and community**

Perera’s comments point to another dimension of social dreaming. Towards the end of a matrix, or in the processing, participants often voice a deep gratitude. Gratitude for what? Partly, I suggest, it’s the generosity



of social dreaming, the sense of a general pooling of resources, along with a sense that though much is given, nothing is lost. My dream remains my dream after I've shared it. Now it's enriched and amplified by the responses and associations it's met with.

But there's more to it. Lawrence continually emphasised the point of the matrix was - for him - to generate new thoughts. For me, social dreaming can also generate a surprising intimacy and trust. I suggest this has a value in itself. It seems any form of communal dream sharing can do it, if we start with a safe-enough space.

Returning to Herr S, the man whose dreams showed his spirit being crushed by the tyranny of Nazism, so movingly described by Charlotte Beradt - I've often wondered, what difference would it have made for Herr S, and the other dreamers Beradt refers to, if they had been able to share their dreams? An answer came when I found another study, by historian Irina Paperno, of dreams in Russia, in the late 1930's - the time of the Stalinist terror.

Paperno's equivalent of Herr S is a factory-worker, Andrei Arzhilovsky. He noted dreams in his diary, including this one for 18 December 1936:

*'A small room, simple and ordinary. Stalin is drunk as a skunk, as they say. There are only men in the room, and just two of us peasants, me and one other guy with a black beard. Without a word (Stalin) knocks the guy with the black beard down, covers him with a sheet and rapes him brutally. "I am next," I think in despair...'* (Paperno 2009, p.167)

Arzhilovsky's dream was prophetic. In 1937, he was arrested by the NKVD. A week later he was shot. His diary was used as evidence of his counter-revolutionary views. Passages including his dreams were underlined in red ink by his NKVD interrogator.

How terrifying – to live in a world where our dreams may be used in evidence against us. But what a testimonial, to the power of a dreaming mind to bear witness to truth – the systematic violation of the individual in a society under dictatorship. Arzhilovsky wrote:

*Dreams too are a fact.'* (Paperno 2009, p.166)

Meanwhile, Paperno describes how elsewhere, a group of Soviet writers, including the celebrated poet Anna Akhmatova, were sharing their dreams in correspondence, responding to each other with associations and imaginative connections:

*'Sharing their dreams (and discovering they dreamed similar dreams, or dreamed of one another), these people gained a sense of connection, intimacy, and significance that served as protection,*

*however precarious, from the social environment that threatened them with annihilation.’ (Paperno 2009, p.193)*

It seems that sharing our dreams in a circle of trust can help us mediate between the perils of totalitarian thinking on the one hand – where the individual counts for nothing - and of self-centred individualism on the other – where there is no such thing as society. Somewhere in between, I suggest, those of us who are not obsessed with power and control, or battered into mindless conformity, or consumed by our own self-interest, yearn for a sense of community - a place where I can be me in relation to you as you, and we as us can embrace the wider world, in all its pain and delight, complexity and unpredictability – an open field.

## **Conclusion**

*‘The field is not itself the solution, but rather is the ground on which a resolution may occur.’*

And social dreaming is not the solution, but rather gives us a ground from which to access together the wealth of our dreaming minds: to contain and articulate our shared anxieties and distress, meaning that we need not suffer, we need not grieve alone; to free up our imaginations and creative potential, not just in what we think but in how we think; to bond and hearten us, as we rise to meet the daunting challenges that confront us, and reach for a vision of what might lie beyond. The dreaming mind in community is a timeless resource. For our survival and development, in our internal and external landscapes - we live in a time, I suggest, when we need to muster every resource we’ve got.

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