

Natural Dreamwork in Context

I have been working with dreams in a serious way for 20 years. During this time, I have explored thousands of dreams (my own and clients) and had the opportunity to learn a variety of approaches. Of all the approaches I have explored, the one that called me home was the one I learned from Rodger Kamenetz, now known as Natural Dreamwork. This is the approach I have found most helpful in my personal dream journey, as well as in my work with clients. To grasp the power of Natural Dreamwork it is helpful to place it in the context of other dreamwork traditions, recognizing both similarities and differences. By providing a selective, broad strokes overview, I hope to give the reader a sense of the unique perspective and value of the Natural Dreamwork approach.

While there are many ways to describe and define a dreamwork tradition, answering the following questions is critical for understanding any given framework: What is a dream? How do dreams heal? What are the most important aspects of the dream? What theoretical assumptions inform the approach to the dream? What is the relationship between the dream and every-day life, the dream and Spirit? What methods should be used in working with dreams? After first defining those elements which are most distinctive to Natural Dreamwork, I will address these questions, relating Natural Dreamwork to other dreamwork traditions.

Five Defining Features of Natural Dreamwork

1. Dreams are a realm of experience, rather than a message to be interpreted. In Natural Dreamwork, we bring dreams to life by experiencing them in body, heart and imagination
2. Dreams are a fusion of multiple elements, not homogeneous statements: imagery and narrative, thinking and feeling, timeless and time-bound.



3. At the heart of the dream, carried by dream imagery, are deep feelings and sacred encounters. These elements are uniquely constructed for the dreamer's healing and growth.
4. ND's primary focus is on dream imagery and the feelings evoked. However, in the process of disentangling dream imagery from the dreamer's narrative, the dream practitioner serves as witness to painful predicaments and historical trauma so that the dreamer is able to let go of old conditioning and perceptual distortions to live and love more fully.
5. In ND Archetypal figures are related to as Other, rather than as parts of ourselves. Sacred Encounters with these figures connect the dreamer to a Divine Source, with or without God, bringing healing and wisdom.

What is a Dream?

Freud viewed the dream as a disguise: the mind's attempt to cover over unpleasant material related to sexuality and aggression. In his view, the goal of the dream was to prevent the dreamer from being disturbed by the churning of the primitive unconscious mind. Jung viewed the unconscious in a much more positive light, calling it 'a vast, even infinite resource, which we tap into in our dreams'. He called the dream, 'A Hidden Door opening into the cosmic night' (cw 10, para 306), a 'spontaneous self-portrayal in symbolic form of the actual situation in the UC'. For Jung the dream was a snapshot, a message more 'objective' than waking life. While Freud and Jung focused on the dream's connection to the unconscious, Fritz Perls, developer of Gestalt viewed the dream as a metaphorical playing out of the dreamer's unresolved life situations, "unfinished business"—whether immediately problematic or ongoing existential dilemmas (Perls, 1969).

Natural Dreamwork views dreams as a realm of experience, rather than a unified story or message. The recorded dream is a blend of timebound and timeless worlds; a blend of primary imagery, and varied responses of the 'dream ego'. At times the dream ego is receptive, in touch with the feelings evoked by the dream, at others the dreamer is reactive, judgmental and/or disconnected. From a Natural Dreamwork perspective, the dream is neither a homogenous 'statement' whose wisdom 'compensates' for one-sided waking consciousness (Jung), nor an entirely separate world (Hillman), or a cauldron of 'primitive drives' (Freud).

Other than Kamenetz few have explicitly addressed the variability of dream consciousness. One exception is Gregory Scott Sparrow, founder of 'Co-Creative Dream Analysis' and The Five Star Method. In line with Kamenetz, he has noted that the outcome of a dream is determined by the *dreamer's response* to the dream encounters and events (imagery) of the dream.

One of the primary distinctions to be made in Natural Dreamwork is between the imagery and narrative components of the dream. From a Natural Dreamwork perspective, narrative aspects of the dream not reflected in actual imagery are usually the result of the dreamer's attempt to attenuate powerful feelings generated by the imagery itself. For example, a dreamer, Chuck, related the following dream, "I am in a chaotic classroom with a bunch of boys. Someone has stolen my Dodgers cap and I don't know what to do about it." When the imagery of the dream was explored, it became clear that the dreamer was without his cap (in life a source of pride and distinction) throughout the dream. The narrative of the stolen cap was an assumption, a deflection from feelings of vulnerability and inadequacy in the company of the boisterous group of boys. While these narratives are useful in understanding the dreamer's history, preoccupations and conditioning, they are secondary to the immersion in the imagery of the dream. The work of the dream is to be with the boys without the 'protection' of his cap and allow feelings of vulnerability to be experienced. This

standpoint leads to important differences in how the dream is worked as well as a difference in perspective regarding what constitutes a dream in practice.

What Constitutes the Dream?

Hillman (Archetypal Jungian) writes that the dream is *whatever is written down*. Andrew Samuels, Author of *Jung and the Post-Jungians* writes that the dream is “Whatever the dream manages to pull into its orbit- including relevant past history, subsequent events, mythological amplifications.” For Samuels, as well as many other practitioners across a spectrum of traditions, whatever sticks to the dream is included in the consideration of the dream. Many, Jung and Freud among them, would posit that this extra material is not only acceptable, but also necessary for correct interpretation of the dream.

Natural Dreamwork takes a sparer, more empirical approach to the question of what constitutes the dream: The dream is what is indicated primarily by the imagery itself. The narrative components of the dream are seen in the context of the dream imagery. Outer events, past history and symbolic meanings are secondary. The primary work of the dream is the experience of the dream, not the interpretation.

How do Dreams Heal?

Many dreamwork traditions focus on interpretation and insight, rather than feeling and experience as the primary source of healing from dreams. A broad variety of interpretive styles are used in dreamwork traditions and are given differing weight depending on the needs of the client and the orientation of the therapist. Dreams may be interpreted *Subjectively*, each part of the dream being a part of the dreamer; *Objectively*, with the dream providing commentary on the dreamer’s outer world situation; as *Transference*, the dream as a reflection of the relationship between the dreamer and the therapist; or *Archetypally*,

addressing themes and universal symbols shared across cultures, often pictured in fairy tale and myth.

In Natural Dreamwork, these interpretive styles are secondary to a focus on the deep feelings and sacred encounters engendered by experience of the dream figures and images. These experiences in themselves generate healing and reconnect us with deeper aspects of ourselves- what many would call Soul. They also connect us with something beyond ourselves- an *Other*- whether Divine, Nature or Primary Imagination does not matter. Healing occurs through experiencing the dream in body, heart and imagination, rather than through interpretation and conceptual understanding. Contemplation of dream imagery - sometimes re-enacting portions of the dream in dreamwork sessions- is the primary vehicle for dream healing.

These experiences bring up wells of feeling that may have been disowned or submerged under defensive reactions. Exploration of the dream allows these feelings to be more fully integrated by the dreamer. Many forms of Dreamwork (Jungian, Gestalt, Neo-Freudian, Existential) share the aim of reclaiming disowned feelings though they may use different language (shadow, unfinished business, drives) to talk about it. In Natural Dreamwork the experience of the feelings themselves (rather than insight and understanding about the feelings) matters most. In addition, Natural Dreamwork distinguishes between primary feelings and secondary emotions- reactions generated as the dreamer attempts to explain, control or distance himself from the intensity of feeling in the dream. In Chuck's dream of being without his baseball cap, his anger is a reaction, part of a story that the cap was stolen. This reaction covers his feelings of vulnerability and inadequacy being with the boys. Without a clear appreciation of the difference between imagery and narrative, feeling and reaction, a practitioner may miss the most vital elements of the dream.

Who are the Figures in our Dreams?

We can never know the true identity of the figures in our dream. At the core each dream is a mystery even if we give the images names or assign them a function on the basis of a theory. But we can observe the behavior of dreamers, the *dream ego* and other dream figures- in individual dreams, across many dreams and among dreamers of different backgrounds- to discover patterns and themes. This empirical, phenomenological approach is the one taken in Natural Dreamwork. It allows the framework of Natural Dreamwork to evolve, as dreams and observations unfold. Natural Dreamwork observations have led to the recognition that certain dream figures behave as Other- more mysterious, greater than the individual- Images to be related to, rather than subsumed in our individual identities. As Shaun McNiff explains in *Art as Medicine: Creating a Therapy of the Imagination*. “The notion that every part of a dream is a part of oneself, as gestalt therapy asserts, results in the loss of the daimonic world... we avoid this egoism by simply regarding dream images as figures that appear within the self- we recognize their intimate relationship to us while protecting them from assimilation. Our sense of image as a partner rather than a part operates within the frame of relationship. One-sided reduction of the image to the person’s past, even to the events of the previous day can be a flight from the present and (from) the cultivation of the new life the images bring”.

This Archetypal approach overlaps in significant ways with Jungian perspectives, as well as the approach of Archetypal Dreamwork developed by Marc Bregman. In Natural Dreamwork the emphasis is on the relationship with the Archetype, rather than the contemplation of the archetype as a symbolic object. The energetic and feeling qualities of the relationship are more important than the amplification of symbolic motifs in myth and culture. There are also some important differences in the use of archetypal nomenclature in Natural Dreamwork. The boy and the girl carry the valence of the dreamer’s soul rather than the figures of Animus and Anima. Dream teachers, both male and female are considered Other rather than

as elements of the dreamer. These distinctions have arisen empirically, from observations of many dreams.

HEALING THROUGH ARCHETYPAL EXPERIENCE/SACRED ENCOUNTER

Whatever the differences in the definition of the Archetypal, Natural Dreamwork and Classical Jungian Dreamwork share the view that the Archetypal Experience is the primary path to healing:

As Jung wrote in letter in 1945, “The main interest of my work is not concerned with the treatment of neurosis but rather with the approach to the numinous. But the fact is that the approach to the numinous is the real therapy and inasmuch as you attain to the numinous experiences, you are released from the curse of pathology. Even the very disease takes on a numinous character.”

Reiterated by Marie-Louise VonFranz in *Psychotherapy* (Shambahala Publications, 1990, p.177.): “This (above citation) cites everything of essential importance about a Jungian analysis. If it is not possible to establish a relationship with the numinous, no cure is possible; the most one can hope for is an improvement in social adjustment. But then, what is left for the analyst to do?”

While *numinous* is not identical to the use of Sacred Encounter in ND, it carries some of the same potency. Like the Sacred Encounter experiences of the numinous evoke deep feeling and connects us with a ‘something’ greater than ourselves. Experiences of the numinous evoke awe, excitement, bliss and rapture as well as more difficult feelings such as fear, trembling, humility and horror. Both the ‘numinous’ and the Sacred Encounter are mysteries that may bewilder the rational mind and are difficult to put into words. Both experiences link us to a sense of the Divine and the *Ground of Soul* (See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*).



Where the Sacred Encounter diverges from the generalities of the numinous is in its specific, relational qualities. In a Jungian framework, the sense of numinous may occur in a recognition of meaning or in the elaboration of a symbol within the psyche of the individual. In contrast, in Natural Dreamwork, the Sacred Encounter requires a relationship with a particular Other as depicted in dream imagery, not an abstract conception. The qualities of these relationships are an important part of the healing. The exploration of these relationships in dreams facilitates growth of the individual's capacity for relationship in waking life.

These ideas- of the sacred encounter, the numinous, the perception of divinity- are still alive in contemporary psychological discourse. As one prominent experimental psychologist, Jonathan Haidt, has written "My research on moral emotions has led me to conclude that the human mind simply does perceive divinity and sacredness-whether or not God exists."

Haidt studied this phenomenon, which he called *Elevation*, for 11 years and concluded that it is an experience distinct from either happiness or admiration. Elevation fills people with feelings of love, trust, and openness and makes them more receptive to new relationships. He interviewed friends, family, students, and found that Elevation, similar to the Greek concept of *Agape*, was accompanied by open, warm, glowing feelings, focused in the chest. Haidt found that even while denying a specific location for the feeling of Elevation, people often pointed to the chest. Haidt believes that elevation/agape is as basic as joy, sadness, fear, anger, disgust, and surprise. It is also, in his view, analogous to mystical experience, as outlined by both William James and Abraham Maslow featuring unity with the universe, transcendence of time/space, joy, difficulty putting experience in words, feelings of change for the better, colors/patterns, ecstasy, fear, awe.

I believe the Natural Dreamwork framework restores the experience of the sacred to modern dreamwork in a manner that is respectful of diverse spiritual and existential traditions, while also congruent with contemporary understanding of human emotion and the primacy of human relationship in psychological health. Natural Dreamwork is empirical. It rests on the facts of the dream- what is seen, heart, felt and acted out. Through the embodied experience of the dream, the dreamer discovers wells of deep feeling that heal- even when the feelings are difficult or unfamiliar. Dream images open the dreamer to new ways of being in relationship and in the world. Natural Dreamwork provides a powerful modality for healing , and may be used with individuals from a variety of backgrounds. While sharing some features in common with other traditions, the Natural Dreamwork approach deserves recognition as a unique and important contributor to the understanding and practice of dream-oriented therapies.

Resources

Books:

The Happiness Hypothesis, Jonathan Haidt

The History of Last Night's Dream, Rodger Kamenetz

Working with Dreams and PTSD Nightmares: 14 approaches for psychotherapists and counselors, Jacquie Lewis, PhD and Stanley Krippner PhD, editors

Art as Medicine: Creating a Therapy of the Imagination, Shaun McNiff

Jung and the Post-Jungians, Andrew Samuels

Articles:

Tracey L. Kahan, Stephen P. LaBerge, *Dreaming and waking: Similarities and differences revisited*. Consciousness and Cognition 20(2011) 494-514



W. Keren Vishny MD MA
kvishny@gmail.com
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<http://thenaturaldream.com/a-huge-man/>

Rodger Kamenetz (2017) *Basho & The Burning Bush: How to approach your dreams barefoot*,

<http://thenaturaldream.com/basho-burning-bush-a-video-essay/>

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**Natural
Dreamwork**
bringing dreams to life...