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Circling, Dreaming, Aging

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This article explores some of the values and meanings of dreams through the life cycle, especially in later life when problems of physical decline require another return towards the unconscious to deal with aspects of vulnerability and issues in the mother complex still impeding relations between the ego and Self as the dreamer cycles towards a death of the physical body.

Old men ought to be explorers
Here or there does not matter
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion
Through the dark cold and the empty desolation,
The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters
Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my end is my beginning.

—T. S. Eliot[1]

One evening when I was in training to become a Jungian analyst, I went to a teaching by Trungpa Rinpoche, a Tibetan teacher in the West. Standing with him after his talk, I asked him how dreams are treated in Tibet. He shot me his fierce gaze and said very softly, "The same as waking experience." I laughed with delight because the reply cut so beautifully through categories we tend to separate. It underscored my growing sense of the vast matrix of life—what Jung called the *unus mundus*. Trungpa's words supported my growing need to live what I then called the *symbolic life*.

Through all our years, dreams weave imagery between experiences we discriminate as *unconscious* or *conscious* and between realms we label as *personal, symbolic*, or *spiritual*. Yet in the crossings between these seemingly separate categories of experience, we *can* live creatively all of our years.

That encounter gives me now, 40 years later, the beginnings of a response to the topic of dreams in relation to aging. I would echo Rinpoche: Dreams of aging and those we dream in our aging process are the same as dreams and waking experience in any phase of life. Through all our years, dreams weave imagery between experiences we discriminate as *unconscious* or *conscious* and between realms we label as *personal*, *symbolic*, or *spiritual*. Yet in the crossings between these seemingly separate categories of experience, we *can* live creatively all of our years. And we are aging all of our years as well—emerging, living, and dying as best we can through the shifting relationships we encounter to co-create our lives from childhood through antiquity. As ever-individuating followers of Jung, we have learned to acknowledge how dreams accompany and often guide us. And when we work with them in our aging years, we are continually reminded that they accompany our circling back to make the great return, linking our beginning and our end.

In a wonderful late work, Norwegian poet Olav Hauge (2008) asks his anima, the woman artist he married when he was 65, to weave his dreams as the all-purpose carpet that can serve basic needs in this world and take him to the next:

> Weave a carpet for me, Bodil,
> weave it from dreams and visions,
> weave it out of wind,
> so that I, like a Bedouin, can
> roll it out when I pray,
> pull it around me
> when I sleep,
> and then every morning cry out,
> "Table set yourself!"

Weave it
for a cape in cold weather,
and a sail
for my boat!
One day I will sit down on the carpet
and sail away on it
to another world. (p. 125)[2]

In clients who are aging, as Hauge is in this poem, the carpet of woven dreams and visions serves to creatively address basic life issues in this world while also creating a familiar comfort that will be available for the inevitable processes of leaving it.

I remember at age 36, entering my third attempt at analysis, I heard a stark dream pronouncement that "thirty-seven is the age of dying." I had already outlived the year at which I expected to die when I had thought about it in childhood, but this statement was part of a long dream that separated me from my earlier roles and identity as the child of my parental complexes and set the course of my life. There were deaths in that year, a painful and releasing series of them—of identities with a career, a marriage, the familiar sense of myself as a responsible daughter of the patriarchy in a body I could take for granted. Ideals I could never measure up to began to fall away, leaving me dependent on dream mentation and creative work to provide new perspectives, new life meanings. Now nearing 80, I have the habit of attending to these processes to access the unconscious, and I also seek ego-dissolving experiences in meditative practices and long, silent retreats.

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Indeed many of us have worked with spiritual practices from our younger years that have given us a taste of what lies beyond ordinary, daily consciousness. We may have gone through initiatory stages that have already allowed us "to die before [we] die." There is one meditation, discovered by several of my clients, that involves looking into a mirror initially to discover generous kinship with the person reflected in it. Then, slightly shifting the practice, the meditator comes to acknowledge that permanent, "true identity" does not exist.

Rather than building ego, in aging, too, we are no longer completely inside ourselves facing the mirror, nor outside, trying to forget the inner

because it is now often in pain. And yet we are both. The boundaries between inside and out soften and shift, and if we are fortunate, we are more comfortably able to reach for a different identity that is beyond both. Jung called this the *Self*.

This does not mean that through the long process of aging, we do not continue to learn and seek new experiences, but we do it from a new perspective that is less concerned with building up our treasure than with spreading it from a storehouse whose doors are open. Our ego is less bounded, less defended, more permeable. As Jean Amery (1994) puts it:

> The aging . . . come more and more to a wordless ego, partly becoming time through the past gathered up by memories of mind and body, and partly becoming . . . more and more reduced [from] whatever was earlier world, as part and portion of our ego, [now] shrinks with and through the withering body; [so that] it becomes the clear negation of ourselves. . . . [Thus] we are forced to start thinking of ourselves as beyond the basic propositions of logic. (pp. 34–35)

He goes on:

> That old creature [in the mirror] is not me as I feel myself. [Yet I am] an ego, dissociated in the suffering of aging, dissociated into a body that feels not me, but yet suffers the changing [consciousness] of aging. [This creates] a sense that a lived ego, a true identity does not exist. (p. 50)

In spite of years of my own work to discover/create a consciousness permeable to the Self, I am still continually surprised. After hip surgery, as I was hobbling down the street, a jovial invitation from an elderly, disabled man to "join the cane brigade" still came to me with a shock. It served as both a dubious welcome into a new community that knew about suffering bodies and a shaming rebuke to my now delusional and unfortunately still habitual, social identity as a fully active, ageless person. The day's discomforting ambiguity was followed by a dream that I was climbing down steep and weathered steps, where it was easy to get splinters, to a small dock where a canoe was moored. I saw that it held a beautiful wooden paddle resting on the gunnel. On waking I felt bemused chagrin, realizing that my narcissistic pride was again chastened. I needed another descent down weathered, aging steps to be able to "paddle my own canoe," remembering the phrase as a much earlier slogan of individuation. I was grateful for all my earlier work towards

the *opus*. And I thought about Helen Luke's (1987) beautiful exposition of Odysseus's oar, which he planted with a sacrifice to Poseidon in a landlocked community as inspiration for future generations.

A clinical example comes to mind in sharp contrast: A childlike, fragile, but elegantly preserved 67-year-old woman came into analysis because she wanted to win back her husband, for whom she had long ago served as secretary when helping to start what became a successful business. The couple enjoyed a full and glamorous social life, and she was admired for her charity work. Currently, however, she had discovered that her husband was involved with a younger woman. Suspicious that this was not the first time, she felt frantic, especially since he would not discuss his plans with her. Therapy was to have one, predetermined goal: restoration of her persona identity. But her dreams would not cooperate.

Two months into our work, she dreamed that she needed to make a descent. The dream begins on a sunny beach in Rhode Island. Dressed for cocktails, she makes her way, kicking off her dressy shoes and carrying them. Boulders blockade her comfortable path, and she sees that the path forward leads through a narrow cave. As she begins to descend into it, she discovers that strange writing appears on the wall, and she flees back the way she has come.

Her associations to the beach were to memories of early vacations in the Caribbean with her husband. Rhode Island called up stately mansions and the capitol, Providence. The writing, however, was "spooky and terrifying"; she sensed it would force her to confront something she did not want to see. And she was convinced that the only thing she did not want to see was the end of her marriage.

I was reminded of the dream she'd had before entering therapy. In it she was about to leave on a cruise liner, the *Queen Elizabeth 2* (QE2), for a voyage, but saw her husband in a phone booth talking to someone. She began to run back down the gangplank, hoping to reach him through a crowd that suddenly appeared. In that first session we had talked about her panic at the prospect of losing her marriage and having to travel through the rest of her life bereft of the social identity she had worked so hard to claim and with which she was identified. She could not yet articulate what she projected on her husband. And she was afraid to begin to explore the roots of her feelings of inadequacy and need. After her second dream about the writing on the wall, her fear erupted into desperation. She did not want to consider her inappropriate costume for beach walking or alternative perspectives on exploration. She sensed that work with her dreams only foretold the disaster she consciously dreaded, and she decided to terminate therapy "for the time being because it's too painful to have to look." My urgings that she try to find

the courage to stay met fierce resistance, and she left the session with polite promises to call soon. I knew her dreams foretold a hard fate, and I held her in memory.

Ten months after she walked out, she phoned from a hospital to tell me that she was having a series of treatments for ovarian cancer. She was comforted that her husband came every other day, was always cheerful, and maybe had even left his girlfriend. But although she felt reassured that the treatments were going well, she wanted to see me. Synchronously, the afternoon I visited, her doctor came into the room and confronted her with the reality that there was no further chemotherapy available. Our work then was to try to reconcile her to a feared aging process that she had curtailed with estrogen therapy and a youthful lifestyle. We had sessions in hospice, and she managed to reconcile with an estranged daughter whom she had envied. I could do nothing for her except to be present, listen, and sometimes give her foot massages, which her daughter then learned to do.

Years later I discovered in the Book of Daniel more of the amplification for the writing on the wall in her dream. It appeared when Belshazzar was feasting and praising his ancestral idols with wine, drunk from the golden goblets his father had stolen from the temple. The mysterious handwriting foretold not only the end of the whole Babylonian empire but also the imminent death of the king.

More often the dreams of those of us who are consciously and less fearfully aging bring images of dying, such as Hauge's image of sailing away on a carpet. Von Franz (1986) has written that death can appear as a change of clothing, the crossing of a body of water, the end of the day or fruiting season, the meeting with a long dead friend or relative, the destruction of a vital animal, the falling of a tree, the extinguishing of light, or the stopping clock. Jacques Brel sings that "Death waits behind the door like a lover."

Dreams heralding a change of physical state or view across the threshold of transformation are usually paired with others reminding the dreamer of tasks still to be accomplished.

However, dreams in aging and the ways we work with them are similar with clients who are aging and with younger analysands confronting earlier forms of transformation, whether through life stages, illness, or other initiatory ego deaths we meet along the way. Exploring the images, the emotions they arouse, their reality in the dreamer's lived

experience, and their impact on the dreamer's defenses, complexes, sense of identity, and relationships to others and the Self is crucial at any time. Thus dream appreciation and integration are similar if we are working with the aging or with analysands in their twenties and thirties who have already known the horrors of early traumata or been through war and must dare to struggle with the fears of death that they have already lived through, dissociated from, and must come to experience consciously in order to be able to thrive through each new step of the continual aging process. The dream work helps to enable profound shifts in the individual's sensed identity and relatedness to the Self.

Not surprisingly, as long as the dreamer is developing and aging past midlife consciously, dreams heralding a change of physical state or view across the threshold of transformation are usually paired with others reminding the dreamer of tasks still to be accomplished. The work left undone may include disidentifying from defensive patterns and complexes established in childhood and again flourishing as the body-ego weakens and its stress revives early misaligned attachment bonds that need further work. Not surprisingly at the end, Great Mother as womb and focus of attachment and socialization shifts towards the Great Mother as tomb. At both extremes we are provided with important opportunities to discover the limits of our powers and what and how we love.

In aging, the weakness and pangs of aching joints, the faltering heart and footstep easily link the dreamer to states of early childhood. They bring vulnerability into consciousness along with deep, archetypal emotions that spread out from under weakened ego defenses and allow the replay of early issues and complexes, so that they can be worked again in therapy. Both male and female clients are thus granted another turn around the spiral of development to encounter unfinished business within the psyche.

In his second year of analysis, an accomplished, 83-year-old research scientist dreamt the following:

> I receive a phone call telling me I am to be given an award in Helsinki. But I cannot go just yet.
> The setting shifted:
> I am standing outside my childhood home, where a school friend, who has been three-times divorced and may now be dead, reminds me to bring flowers to my wife.

He associated Helsinki to a well-known, beloved, and long-deceased mentor and felt glad to reconnect imaginally with this warm, supportive father figure. He also wondered if "Hel" referred to the Norse goddess of the

underworld, who, he told me, "gives room and board to those who die when they are old and sick." Feeling so kindly towards her realm, he felt the dream both validated his life and foretold a gentle and postponed death that would give him time to finish another project. He wondered if he was to bring flowers to Hel and began to contemplate what that would mean.

In the second dream he associated the school friend with qualities that dismiss relational problems, preferring to divorce and seek another partner. The friend represented a shadow figure in his own psyche, a womanizing tendency. He would not bring flowers to an old, familiar wife, but move on to the next, as the dreamer himself had done by thinking that the flowers might be for the underworld goddess rather than for his personal companion. His misconstruction of the dream itself indicated that there was an active complex at work.

Reluctantly, he began to consider why his own life partner might need flowers. He began to verbalize his irritation with her for continuing to work part time while he felt increasingly disabled and dissatisfied with the caretakers she had arranged for him. Exploring the emerging anger, he recalled his childhood and memories of waiting for his mother to return from her long hours at work while a maid kept a neglectful and often punitive eye on him. He had "forgiven" his mother and skimmed over the anguish of the negative maternal complex throughout his life with intellectual defenses and a workaholism that had brought him professional honors. But in the face of death, his dreams reminded him of unfinished business in the earliest phase of mother–child dynamics. These still needed his attention.

He was puzzled, for he had read Jung and Erik Erikson and knew about the ending of the heroic ego's journey as turning over the fruits to support and teach the next generation. He had worked on these issues when he struggled with his decision to retire and pass on his lab to a younger colleague. Then he had dreamt that he was playing chess with his grandson, and, surprisingly, the boy won. He thought at first that he had let him win, a generous gesture of one still in control. But, in returning to the dream image, he realized he did not merely allow the youngster's triumph, he had played his hardest and now had to accept defeat. His love for the boy supported humility and the value of natural diminishment. He mused then about trees dying to make room for new growth.

Accepting that loss of heroic agency was, however, a prelude to a deeper need for working with issues that often lie under driven achievement. These do not entail the ego's heroic defense against insecurity but enable wrestling with secret shame and the profound loss of having been deprived of—and hence feeling unworthy of—secure attachment in his matrix. His dream about flowers for his wife brought it to consciousness as an irritable

rejection of the negative mother, who had neglected him for her work. He felt he was entitled to the comfort and attention he could not have asked for earlier, but now felt poignantly because he was able to reexperience emotions of dependency aroused by his weakening and sore body and in his analytic relationship. He was angry that his wife was not addressing his needs adequately. He began to see that he equated her with his hard-working mother, and his own weakness no longer allowed him to protect her with the gallantry he had learned and lived by.

Not surprisingly, in the grip of the neglectful mother complex, he began to split his attentions as the womanizing dream shadow had done. He began to equate his analyst with an idealized, bountiful, good caretaker and his wife with a stingy, rejective one. The problem is primal, an aspect of Kleinian infant dynamics, and in its working out, not restricted to any age. This successful scientist had not been able to address it earlier by finding a figure who could consciously hold the opposites with him. He might have avoided it altogether had he worked analytically with a man, for the father's blessing might have come directly to support his connection to the Self as he aged. With a woman analyst, he had to confront the limits of his idealizing, as both his dreams and I pointed out his inability to hold the opposites that were still manifest in his psyche because the early maternal anima had not been an adequate vessel of his wholeness.

A series of dreams showed him images of aggression he could no longer turn into personal achievement. He began to realize that the longings for intimacy he had experienced through his years were linked to lustful sexuality, which now he could no longer claim. Mourning its diminishment, he felt primal needs for relatedness. He dreamt of a homeless boy he had to befriend and carry. Then in one dream a mountain guide morphed into a young child who identified herself as his wife's beloved grandmother. He wept as he discovered an image of ancestral and archetypal care that could compassionately hold him and his partner.

His wife wrote me that the night before he died at age 91, he had a dream of walking with her and her grandmother towards a shining, suddenly opened gate.

A woman in her late eighties, with many years of analytic work and remarkably compassionate insight into others, also still needed to return to issues impeding the last phases of her individuation. Her career had been curtailed by the "glass ceiling" over women's professional work, so she suffered a societally induced sense of inadequacy made worse by her internalization of her mother's curtailed ambition and secret envy. My client had many dreams that prepared her for what lay ahead and loosened old issues, "hardwired" as she put it, into her mother complex. She began to paint but often felt that

her joy in the work was spoiled because it would never be good enough for a gallery show. Ego needs for unavailable support from the negative mother complex spilled into her creative process and made her work tight. She persevered, however. Slowly her dreams showed her the ways she still sought external validation for her creative work. She began to look at how she held herself in old inhibitory patterns of politeness that also cramped her creativity. In association to a dream of tennis, she remembered that she had been taught "never to let a man know she could beat him." The bindings that society had placed around her vibrant energy had warped her sense of her own style and value. Then she had a series of dreams of dancing—in a fair in Italy, in a parade on Spring Street. To manifest their energy, her paintings, too, began to dance.

She painted her dream images: carefully swirling colors of herself dancing under blowing trees, with friends "now on the other side," with her childhood cat and long-dead husband. She began a series called "dark radiance," sparked by NASA photographs of galaxies in outer space. She found herself fascinated with "dark matter." She began to email pictures of her paintings to friends. When she needed a walker because her legs faltered, she carried her paint box under the seat. As her body failed, she said: "I have to go dancing into death as I do now more and more in my painting, not caring about how anyone else likes it or me or my faltering steps and artistic tumbles. That's all part of the dance. Maybe I'll dance across. I do it now in my dreams and oils."

She felt she was finishing the ancestral work she had to do, "freeing a line of disparaged and disparaging women." "It's never too late to begin," she told me, "but I had to be pushed by my dreams and your taking them so seriously. . . . Who knows what's next? A black hole, perhaps, to transport me into another universe." She was echoing the use of Hauge's dream carpet. Her vision of the black hole reminded me of a poem by Peggy Brooks, called "Salute to no where."

What do I want?
I can't see into
the black hole
inside me
to find out.

What I am
hurts.
I'm tired of it.
I want to know
what will be.

But all I can see is
what was
and that black hole.[3]

Von Franz (1986) called the black hole an image of "a threshold that exists in nature [as] an event horizon . . . formed around a star, within which nothing can be observed. [Thus] the star moves out of our time . . . and disappears from our observation, although 'it is still there'" (p. 154).

These stories point towards the aging person's need for dreams as a way to see into the wondrous and once fearful dimensions that beckon so intensely as we reach our ego's limits. Beyond consciousness and memory, our dreams open the darkness for us throughout all the decades of our aging, linking our comings and goings. They remain portals towards the vast matrix in which we circle and through which we pass.

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NOTES

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2. "The Carpet," reprinted from The *Dream We Carry: Selected and Last Poems of Olav H. Hauge*. Copyright © 2008 Robert Bly. Reprinted with his permission.
3. "Salute to no where" by Peggy Brooks, reprinted with her permission. From unpublished collection *Dream Walking*.

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