

Dream Portrayal: Raising the Curtain By Irene Clurman

"I'll let you be in my dream if I can be in yours."

Bob Dylan's immortal invitation sums up the spirit of Dream Portrayal workshops, where participants literally walk into each other's dreams. The journey involves sight, sound, touch and movement, and its purpose is to decode the healing messages hidden in our nighttime narratives.

The adventure begins when dreamers form a circle with co-facilitator Mike Tappan and me, and a group member chosen at random recounts a dream. A brief discussion allows the group to clarify details and offer possible interpretations. The dreamer-as-director then picks a cast and spontaneously creates costumes and settings from bolts of cloth. Once participants are dressed as dream figures, the proceedings move out of the everyday and into a place where magic happens.

Any elements in the dream - animals, insects, celebrities, tribal elders, trees, automobiles, monsters and curtains separating this world from the next - can be embodied and invited to interact with other elements. The dreamer directs the action and decides whether to play a part or simply observe. As the portrayal progresses, characters can switch roles to experience the dream from new angles.

The actors don't just talk. If need be, they sing or scream, jump or dance, hide or crawl. One young woman's dream inspired her to do cartwheels around the room. Afterward, her eyes shone from the joy of bringing latent dream energy into the physical realm. Everyone present vicariously shared her liberation.

The fabrics, along with props such as masks, add nonverbal clues which assist the group in exploring the dreams. The swimming pool in one dream seemed incidental until the dreamer bypassed blue cloth to fashion a pool from gold brocade. That led the group to recall archetypal associations with water, because gold in a dream points to where the dreamer's treasure lies.

Making sure everyone feels safe is crucial. Mike and I forego playing parts so we can monitor what's happening and provide support. During discussions, we remind participants to use the "if it were my dream" format popularized by dream work teacher and author Jeremy Taylor.

Prefacing comments with "if it were my dream" helps the speaker avoid such pronouncements as, "this dream shows that you have problems with ..." In addition, starting with "if it were my dream" gives every speaker the chance to benefit from his or her projections by owning them.

It's always dreamer's choice as to what happens in the portrayals, and no one ever is pushed to do something which feels uncomfortable. Most participants have no acting experience, yet everyone somehow manages to be spot-on when in character. These transformations grow out of an instinctive appreciation for the collective importance of dreams, as well as from the mysterious power of the dream world itself.

To honor this power, we approach the work as a sacred ritual rather than as a performance. Mike focuses the group using a singing bowl at the beginning of each dream, and I lead simple yoga-inspired movements at the end to help people integrate the dream's wisdom into their bodies.

Because dreams shine light on issues from the unconscious, exploring dreams can reveal personal information the dreamer wasn't expecting to share. The dreamer's vulnerability increases exponentially when we move from discussion into portrayal. It's one thing to talk about a nightmare monster and another to face the beast in a waking life dream circle.

Mike and I have seen dreamers refuse to go near a frightening figure, even if it's really only a friend wearing a mask. In such instances, we encourage the dreamer to enlist an ally from among the other characters and to engage the scary figure in conversation to find out what message it might be carrying. The monster inevitably offers insights which radically alter everyone's understanding of the dream in profound and positive ways.

Sometimes actors retreat into verbal analysis because talking is easier than feeling. One scene ground to a halt while characters talked about the disruptive teenagers in the dream. When Mike and I suggested that the people playing the teens embody their characters instead of describing them, the actors immediately began chuckling, poking each other and making fun of onlookers.

At this point, a group member watching from the sidelines begged to join in, saying, "I never had a chance to be an adolescent." When the teen rebels welcomed her, she donned a goofy hat and gleefully became part of the mischief-making. After observing this interaction, the dreamer realized that the "bad kids" she was trying to control in the dream represented a healthy wildness missing in her own waking life.

At the end of a portrayal, we ask each actor to release his or her role by saying, "I am no longer the (gorilla, truck, whatever). I am (the actor's own name)." We don't want anyone to take gorilla energy home, as a physical stance or a personality trait! After particularly intense dreams, we burn sage wands to clear the energy before each person departs.

Whether participants play roles or just act as witnesses, dream enactments can trigger visceral responses. In a safe and supportive environment, these responses can be both heart-opening and life-changing.

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About the Author

Based in Colorado, Irene Clurman has led Dream Portrayal workshops with Mike Tappan in the U.S. and Canada. They are both graduates of Jeremy Taylor's Marin Institute for Projective Dream Work, and their web site is www.dreamportrayal.com.