

DREAMTIME

MAGAZINE



Victoria Rabinowe, Return, acrylic on canvas, 38" x 38"

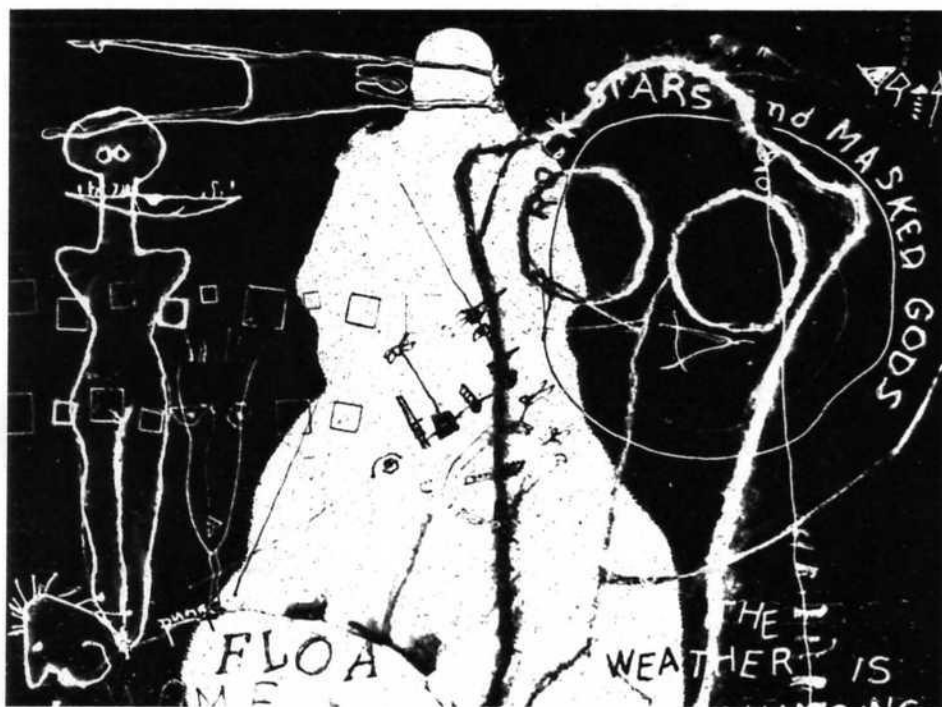
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- Brenda Mallon
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DREAM PORTRAYAL

MICHAEL TAPPAN

*To understand the structure of dreaming we turn to drama...
The unconscious produces drama, poetic fictions; it is theater.*

—JAMES HILLMAN (HEALING FICTION)



Victoria Rabinowe, *Rock Stars and Masked Gods*, drawing and painting (layered and collaged in Photoshop)

their instincts, Jeremy Taylor's method of dream analysis called "Projective Dreamwork" is used at the outset of searching for any dream's meaning. Taylor's style of group dreamwork breaks down hierarchical strategies of group leadership that can sometimes arise and stifle individual participation in dream analysis. We find too that his method of requiring participants to acknowledge their judgments and projections concerning a stated dream—that is, analyzing the dream's meaning as if the dream was the analyst's—leads to an empathic relationship to the dream and to the dreamer. This allows individuals to more easily "take on" parts of a dream that some of the participants will be later asked to portray.

Discussion of the dream is initiated with the dreamer's telling of their dream in the present tense. This adds to the perception of the dream's immediacy both for the dreamer and the dreamer's audience.

The dream's analysis is begun with participants asking the dreamer for any clarifications, the dreamer's associations with any aspects of the dream, or the emotional content of any part of the dream. Comments concerning the dream's meaning are

allows participants to interact with dream characters, symbols and motifs in an intellectual as well as an emotive manner.

Dream Portrayal creates a community of dreamers who assist each other in discovering the meaning of dreams by first using a method of rational analysis and then physically recreating and then re-entering the dream. Because dream enactment requires a cooperative effort between and among participants, and because creativity is best fostered in an equalitarian atmosphere where participants can trust

Intellectual understanding and somatic expression, when combined in dream analysis, leads to more deeply understood comprehensions of the nature and meaning of one's dreams. Because of this, we are using a method of dream analysis we are calling "Dream Portrayal" that uses theatrical techniques combined with group projective dreamwork. This method of dream analysis acknowledges that both the psyche and the soma are powerful aspects of human understanding. This dual approach

personalized with a variant of the phrase, "If this were my dream this (symbol, character or situation) would mean this. . . ." In this way dream analysis becomes an avenue for self-discovery not only for the dreamer but for those who analyze the dream.

Enactments are carried out when there is identified some sense of a particularly resonant or powerful part of the dream. The dreamer or any other member of the group may ask to see a portion of the dream acted out. And it is always the dreamer's choice as to their level of participation. The dreamer may be a character or an object in the dream, may be the observer of the dream as he/she initially experienced it—or may wish to coach from the sidelines

The Props

We bring to the dream group a small suitcase of yards of colorful cloth and scarves that are used as props. Some of the cloths are simple primary colors, but others are metallic flecked gold and silver, shimmering blues, blacks and floral reds. We find that these materials are intuitively used to "dress up" the symbols that occur in the dream. We have seen the scarves used as angel wings, gowns, turbans, rivers and water, animal skin and crowns.

The dreamer describes the dream fragment and sets up the scene. The dreamer may play a part in the dream or ask someone in the group to play the part of the dreamer. The dreamer also chooses group members to play other dream characters.

The dream fragment has a life and power of its own. And though some dreamers report a sense of *Déjà vu* as they initially set the scene of the dream, once the action begins there is a sense of physical involvement that pushes the dreamed scene into new (or newly recognized) emotional or physical territory.

Asking the Right Questions

As facilitators of the dream work we attempt to keep the overall integrity of the dream consistent with the dreamer's sense of "rightness" or truth. We have found that the most effective method to do this is to ask questions of the dreamer or the role players during the acting of the dream.

For example, in a dream group one evening, a woman told a dream in which there was turmoil in the form of gang members and thugs in the streets. In the same dream she met a young male lover who presented her with a white object that she said might be a piece of clothing that was in a box. The dreamer reported that her dream was "chaotic," though the young lover gave her a sense of joy and fulfillment.

There were other aspects of the dream, but to many of those who were assisting the dreamer in its meaning, the most powerful part of the dream was when the lover presented her with the white piece of clothing.

The dreamer chose a woman to play the part of the lover, and another woman to play the part of the dreamer. The dreamer didn't choose a white or light colored cloth to be presented to her by the lover. The dreamer instead chose a bright gold piece of cloth that the dreamer said "looked more like what I saw."

She chose for the surrogate dreamer a multicolored yellow and brown spotted piece of fabric that looked like leopard skin. She wrapped that around the dreamer's waist and draped a purple piece of cloth around her shoulders.

When the dream fragment was enacted the "male lover" faced the "dreamer" and reverently presented her with the gold material. The lover stated without prompting, "I'd like you to have this." The lover placed the material into the surrogate dreamer's hands.

I asked if the material was out of its box.

"Oh yes!" she said. "It's a beautiful scarf."

She held the material by draping it over her hands. She was asked if the material belonged somewhere. She hesitated and then said, "It belongs on an altar or something."

She looked around and gently placed the cloth onto the seat of a nearby chair. She stepped back. "That doesn't look like an altar," she said. "It looks more like a throne."

"For who?" I asked.

And with a look of dawning acknowl-

edgement she said with some surprise, "It's for me!"

"Well", I said, "if this were my dream I'd sit on that throne. Is that what you would like to do?"

The defining moment of the dream portrayal came when the surrogate dreamer sat in the throne. She at first sat carefully and tentatively. Someone in the group pulled the remaining gold material over her shoulders. She smiled and sat more upright. Another participant in the group acknowledged her now regal appearance and said, "Queen of Africa!" (The dreamer is a long-time member of the dream group. She is a vibrant grandmother who has recently retired. For many months the group has followed her progress in joining the Peace Corps. She was recently accepted and has requested her placement be in Africa)

"How would the queen of Africa sit on a throne?" I asked. She smiled broadly and sat more upright. As she did so she appeared to take ownership of the role she was now playing. She was draped in gold, purple and two yards of cloth that looked like animal fur. She seemed to exude a sense of authority. There was a palpable emotional shift in the scene. I reflexively bowed to her. Some in the group clapped and cheered what appeared like a new and stronger sense of "self."

After the scene ended and we moved back into our chairs to discuss the dream, the conversation concerned how delighted both the dreamer and woman who played the dreamer felt to take possession of the dream lover's gift. That gift was the celebration of a powerful selfhood that was unperturbed by the "chaos" in her dream and in her life.

The Dreamer's Choice of Dress

We have found it very important for the dreamer to choose the colors of the props and the ways they are used. For example, one evening in a dream group a woman reported a dream in which she described a "menacing male figure" who stared at her during a scene in her dream. My silent inclination was to gather pieces of material and shroud the dream figure in a dark cape. But when the dreamer

was asked to choose material for the threatening male figure, she grabbed a bright yellow piece of cloth and draped it over his torso, and then placed a smaller purple cloth festooned with gold moons and stars over his shoulders.

My co-facilitator turned and whispered to me, "Look at that. She's created a wizard!" Indeed, what the dreamer referred to as the "menacing male figure" looked absolutely magical. And though in the ensuing dream reenactment the figure was frightening for the dreamer, to others in the scene the figure became an object of focus and curiosity.

As the dream portrayal unfolded, the dreamer was too frightened of the "menacing figure" to approach him. But the dreamer agreed that another male figure in the dream could go ask the menacing figure why he was standing in her dream. When asked, the "menacing character" stated, "I'm the observer. I just stand and see. I don't have any judgment."

The dreamer seemed taken aback, and then said with recognition, "That's me. I'm the seer. I've always been clairvoyant. I can sometimes see things that are going to happen. I'm the seer, but I've always been afraid of that power."

Playing the Bad-Guy

Sometimes "menacing figures" in dreams are not transformed when acted out. They simply "are what they are." To play the villainous figure in someone's dream can sometimes be as upsetting for the person playing the part as it is for the dreamer. To play the part well, we must acknowledge our own potential for corruption.

In one weekend workshop a young man was asked to play the part of a male school principal who disparaged the angel wings on a doll made by the dreamer. The dreamer said that in her dream the school principal seemed smaller than normal and disrespectfully paraded the angel wings around in front of a school audience at an assembly.

In the reenactment the young man playing the principal lifted a scarf from the outstretched arms of a young woman who was playing the dream figure of an angel. He got down on his knees and

waddled across the floor. In his outstretched hand he held the crushed piece of "angel wing" material. We had moved two chairs to the center of the circle and the dreamer sat in one of them as if she were sitting in the assembly audience. The young man playing the principal at first seemed to take delight in the role. There was laughter. But after a few more seconds the scene appeared more tragic. The woman who once had angel wings stood alone without her wings. And the dreamed school principal began to appear more demonic as he scooted across the floor trailing the angel wings in his fist. The dreamer stopped laughing.

I asked the dreamer, "Does that man deserve your angel wings?"

The dreamer answered, "No!" Silence followed. And the young man playing the part of the principal jumped to his feet and related his sudden despair of playing the role.

The discussion following the reenactment addressed the issue of just what masculine force or figure in the dreamer's life had taken possession of the youthful and luminous qualities associated with angels. The discussion also centered on how we all "give up" our most pristine spiritual proclivities to institutions like the American school system. At another level of discussion was the observation of our own inclinations to deny our own spiritual possibilities and those same possibilities in others.

Having done this kind of theater in the past, I know first hand the anguish of playing the villainous role of a dream character in someone's enactment of a dream. However, I also know that when a negative figure arises in a dream, to genuinely play that part is to present to the dreamer the most powerful object of confrontation possible from which to learn. There is an emotional price to pay, though, for the role player. When facilitating "Dream Portrayal" I now bring smudge sticks to perform a ritualistic cleansing of those who play the roles of another's perception of evil. The other co-facilitator of the Dream Portrayal workshop is a teacher of Yoga. She assists others in ancient yogic postures and movements to help them let go of the

injurious potentials they have touched in themselves.

The Ally

By honoring dreams, we come to understand what it is we've neglected by trying to live only in a material world. We come to understand our journey in life by realizing that our sense of connectedness in our waking world is proportional to our relationship with the motifs, characters and struggles that we find in the realm of dreams (Some, p. 197). We not only dream about the possibility of joy, we dream about the powers hidden in everyday life—the disavowed and the unrepresented. In dreams we slip out of an ordinary reality to come face-to-face with a world that if recovered can make us whole.

To find wholeness we must struggle with the riddles of the psyche and tease out meaning from an enigmatic and non-rational world. Everything is possible in its realm. And the quickest way to understand these possibilities is to recognize those forces in a dream that are the most helpful to the dreamer.

Allies are those forces that assist us toward health and wholeness. In mythology and legend, in sacred narrative and dreams, allies are portrayed as objects and characters that rescue us from the disaster of inaction, overreaction, adversity and confusion. They appear as if by magic.

In dream portrayal allies are the yet unrecognized but projected characteristics of the dreamer. Allies represent the wise you, the ecstatic you and the brave you. Because these characteristics tend to be unrecognized or denied by the dreamer, they often first appear as shadow characters: the perverted you, the mad you, the rebel you. In all manifestations, the ally holds a necessary truth. They are the key to future renewal.

We have dealt with the ally's energy from our earliest childhood, where the ally's power is either encouraged or driven underground. A child's exuberance, for example, can either be encouraged and channeled by perceptive adults, or extinguished by those who label it "bad behavior." When the ally's energy is encouraged, the ally models enthusiasm as a positive

quality in a dream. When the ally's energy is driven underground, enthusiasm comes to the dreamer in the negative form of the "misbehaved child." To take this a step further, one's ally may appear as a god or a demon. And that is why in so many mythological motifs, the imperative is to wrestle with or engage with those things from which we run, for they just might offer us the very force we once lost and now must recover if we are to survive.

In the earlier example of the woman who dreamed of the menacing male character, her unrecognized ally was another male figure that came to the aid of an injured and partially blind woman. When the menacing male character became an object of focus in the Dream Portrayal, I asked if the dreamer felt safe enough to ask him who he was. She responded, "Oh no! I couldn't do that!"

"What do you want to do?" I asked.

"Go home," she said. "Go to my room."

I pointed to the woman playing the male rescuer. "This guy seems pretty brave," I said. "I trust him. Would you feel comfortable having him go meet that guy?"

"Yes!" she said without hesitation.

"Ask him," I said.

She turned to the rescuer and asked, "Would you ask that guy who he is?"

"I will," he said. And the actor stood from kneeling over the injured woman, marched over to the character and shouted, "Just who are you?"

At that instant, the scarf we had placed over the partially blind woman's face to represent her inability to see fell to the floor. The bravery of her ally to engage the menacing male character was the key to the dreamer's insight. In discussions that followed the Dream Portrayal, the actor playing the injured, blind woman stated that the confrontation with the menacing male figure made her "want" to see. The dreamer stated that the confrontation with the menacing character enabled her to understand that she *was* the (clairvoyant) seer.

Because the landscape of the dream is expanded to include all participants in Dream Portrayal, allies can also be chosen

from the audience. If the dreamer faces a threatening figure for which they fear contact or feel they need protection, the facilitator can ask the dreamer if they see anyone in the audience who they feel could protect them. The dreamer will most often project onto another the qualities for which they need so that they may continue interaction in the dream. I've seen allies become a walking shield between the dreamer and a threatening dream figure until some meaning is discovered. I've seen allies assist someone through a dream by holding their hand and becoming a companion on their journey. I've seen allies whisper into the dreamer's ear, "You can do it!" And indeed they do.

Some Thoughts, Some Biases, Some Concerns

Dream Portrayal creates a community of dreamers who assist each other in physically recreating and then re-entering a dream. By doing this the dreamer's perception of the dream moves from an intellectual knowing to an emotionally and physically felt understanding. Experiential understanding and intellectual knowing go hand in hand. Bringing the physicality of dream portrayal to the intellectual analysis of dreams enriches the power and impact of both

In the discussions that follow dream portrayal there is an increased sense of personal investment. Participants have truly "taken part" in the dream and conversation becomes more animated. Participants have reported that the experience felt "visceral" and "organic." Other comments concern themselves with the participant's recognition that the dreamer's symbols are more deeply understood.

My experience with Dream Portrayal has taught me that in assisting the forward movement of a dream reenactment, any movement of the dreamer toward a dream symbol or dream character will reap emotional dividends. By their very nature, in ways both subtle and alarming, dreams ask us nightly to confront the strange, the hated, the loved and the enigmatic. In that confrontation is the heroic journey with deeds perhaps as simple and yet as profound as reaching out for the gift of a

dream lover, turning to face those we think are menacing us in our dreams, or shouting "No!" to nightmarish persons who have stolen our spiritual innocence.

The post-Jungian James Hillman suggests we read dreams as dramas. He posits his viewpoint in the form of this hypothesis:

"If the dream is psychic nature per se, unconditioned, primary, and the psychic nature can show a dramatic structure, then the nature of the mind is poetic." (Hillman, p. 36)

Art in any of its forms may then be the best representation of the truth and essence of what it means to be human. All art with which we resonate changes us. We finish good books, leave theaters, museums and film houses with a deeper sense of humanity, fresh eyes to see the world and a growing understanding of life's potentials and threats. In all cases, art enlivens. And so also do dreams. In their poetic structure is the language of art and the unconscious, the root of human being.

Only the dreamer can say with certainty the meaning of the images in their dreams (Taylor, p. 11). And because those images are the psychic language of humanity, the meanings they evoke in others are likely to ring true also for the dreamer. However, the meaning of a dream image can also be wildly divergent from the meaning that others recognize. With Dream Portrayal we as facilitators must take care to advance the action of the expressed dream in ways that are meaningful and consistent with the emotional truth of the dreamer.

The theatrical art form itself, with a "director" managing the action, lends itself to the possibility of hijacking the dream to conform to the facilitator's reality. We have found this possibility can be blunted by directing the action in the form of questions to the dreamer. We can ask, for example, the associations the dreamer has with a dream character. We can ask about the emotional charge that a situation or a dream character has for the dreamer. We can ask how the

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Dream Portrayal—

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dreamer perceives the dream world in which they find themselves. In this way a certain lay of the dream landscape tends to take shape and action will spring from that reality. We are constantly surprised and amazed at the theatrical actions that follow. In fact, the more surprised and amazed we are with what occurs in Dream Portrayal, the more we're convinced of its psychic truth for the

dreamer. We have learned to trust the process.

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