

Dialoguing with Dreams in Existential Art Therapy

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Abstract

This article presents a theoretical and methodological framework for interactive dialogue and analysis of dream images in existential art therapy. In this phenomenological-existential approach, the client and art therapist are regarded as equal partners with respect to sharing in the process of creation and discovery of meaning (Frankl, 1955, 1969; Moon, 1995; Moustakas, 1994; Yalom, 1980). A brief outline of principles that underlie the processes of existential art therapy and dream analysis is provided. These principles guide the development of relationships between art therapists and clients, and with visual artworks depicting dream images. The procedures involved in interacting with dream imagery as presented in this article offer a depth-oriented technique that can be utilized in both brief focal therapy and in ongoing therapeutic relationships.

Introduction

A number of years ago, as part of my doctoral studies, I participated in a training seminar in dream interpretation taught by Dr. Clarke Moustakas. As the session progressed, I found myself inspired by Moustakas' ideas and methods and I began to imagine ways to integrate these into my art therapy practice. Near the end of the seminar, I shared with Dr. Moustakas a preliminary outline for a model of engagement with dreams that integrated art making and existential art therapy principles with his phenomenological-existential approach to dream interpretation. Moustakas' generous and enthusiastic support of my art-based expansion of his methods was very gratifying and I hope that by sharing this process with the larger art community I can, in a small way, honor his work and repay his kindness.

As a general rule, I do not support directed procedures in art therapy practice and I abhor formulaic systems of interpretation. Alas, most rules are made to be broken, and this article surely is an exception to my objections to prescribed methods of interacting with clients and their artworks. I am making this exception to my own rule because the process I describe below has been so helpful to the people whose dreams have been an interactive part of their art therapy with me. I have used this phenomenological-

existential framework for engaging with dreams in my work with graduate art therapy students in techniques courses, colleagues in professional workshops, and a number of clients in both private practice and in a psychiatric hospital. In each instance, the dreamers have reported that the process was quite useful to them. Typically, they state that the process helped them to clarify significant issues in their lives and to develop specific plans of action in response to understanding the messages their dream images presented. I offer this article as another tool for art therapists to use in the service of their clients.

Tenets of Existential Art Therapy

Existential art therapy is a journey of self-discovery that is shared by the client and the art therapist. The travel is often difficult, painful, frightening, and almost always uncomfortable and anxiety-producing (Moon, 1995). The purpose of the pilgrimage is to discover and/or create meaning in the life of the client (Frankl, 1953). The search for meaning is aided by the art therapist's capacity to attend to the client as the journey unfolds (Moon, 1995). Through the processes of interacting with and analyzing dream images, the existential art therapist attends to the dreamer by *doing with*, *being open to*, and *honoring* the dreamer's struggles (Moon, 1995). Underlying the therapeutic techniques outlined below are three premises that guide the existential art therapist's interactions with the dreamer/artist and the artworks that portray the content of the dream. These are: (a) the dream is what it is; there are no hidden meanings, (b) the art therapist focuses on the manifest content of the images of the dream and the client's artwork, and (c) the art therapist refrains from making interpretive comments.

Transcendence and Dream Imagery

Frankl (1953) posited that only the individual person is able to discover and create meaning in his or her life and that, paradoxically, meaning can only be found in the context of relationship to others. Artworks that are based on dream images offer the art therapist a unique portal through which to connect with the inner lives of clients. As clients work with dream imagery in the context of art therapy, they simultaneously create meaningful personal symbols and potentially intimate interactions with the art therapist.

There are few common occurrences in human existence that evoke more fascination than dreams. People are captivated, charmed, disturbed, elated, and sometimes terrified by the things they see and do in their dreams. When

Editor's note: Bruce Moon, PhD, ATR-BC, LPC, is Professor and Chair of the Art Therapy Department at Mount Mary College, Milwaukee, WI. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to moonb@mtmary.edu. The author is indebted to the groundbreaking work of Clarke Moustakas (1994) whose phenomenological-existential model of dream interpretation serves as the foundation upon which the existential art therapy dream dialogue technique is built.

the subject of dreams comes up in conversation, I cannot recall ever hearing anyone describe their dreams as boring. Dreams have the power to summon up memories of events long past, strip away pretenses of the present, and offer prescient glimpses into the future. The dreamer often comes face to face with the extremes of delight and dread as inner themes of depravity and goodness are given form in metaphoric images and storylines. Sometimes in dreams we are paralyzed, wordless, and flabbergasted. Sometimes we raise our arm-wings and soar. We murder, make love, move mountains, and run like the wind. "In no other way does transcendence of our boundaries occur so vividly, so convincingly, so passionately" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 79). At no time in wakeful life are we as empowered to break through our limitations as when we dream. Our dreams urge us to let go, to begin again, to find fresh ways of coping, and to consider new ways to resolve old conflicts.

In reference to dream images, McNiff (1992) wrote, "They are themselves art works, soul's dramatizations that help, guide, and extend consciousness" (p. 132). Perhaps no other psychic vehicle has the power to transport people so directly into their primary needs, motivations, fears, hopes, wishes, or desires. This is why paintings, drawings, and sculptures that are based on dream images are such a potent resource for art therapists. Although dreams can often be mysterious and baffling, illogical and confusing, they are still a compelling source of wisdom. They have something to say, something to teach; they want something from us, and they want us to pay attention to them.

It is possible to catch glimpses of the multiple meanings of dreams, to listen to what they have to say, to understand and be directed by them. However, this cannot be accomplished through narrow systems of interpretation like those presented in the dream analysis books one often sees for sale in grocery store checkout lines. These "cook-book" guides to self-analysis constrict the possibilities for meaningful dialogue with dream images by proposing fixed and specific meanings for each particular image. If we really want to understand our dreams or the dreams of another, we must grapple with the multiple potential meanings that dreams offer. A dream's meanings may change over time and the dreamer must be open to all possibilities. The structure of the interactive process described in this article is prescriptive but with the caveat that there is no prescribed formula for the interpretation of imagery offered. In existential art therapy, all interpretations of artworks are left to the client. The art therapist refrains entirely from interpreting the client's artwork or dream content.

Moustakas' Existential Model of Interpretation of Dreams

Moustakas (1994a) developed his phenomenological approach to understanding and interpreting dreams over many years. It involves five processes that provide a systematic approach to dream analysis that follows a method known as phenomenological reduction. These are: (a) incubating and recording the dream; (b) determining the "horizons" of the dream, which is a process of assigning

equal value to each element; (c) clustering the horizons and deriving themes; (d) determining the existential *a priori* or pre-existing concerns expressed in the themes; and (e) developing a course of action. Moustakas theorized that dreams are made up of a number of phenomena or horizons: "The phenomena are the manifest qualities, feelings, thoughts, visions, situations, people and events. Each phenomenon of the dream is a horizon of the dreamer. The horizons point to concerns, situations, and relationships in the dreamer's waking life" (p. 118).

The horizons of a dream are focal points that stand out and inspire the dreamer to make associations that Moustakas terms "amplifications," which, upon reflection, lead the dreamer to determinations of meaning. Clustering or combining the horizons and amplifications is a process that connects the core thematic issues of the dream to the waking life of the dreamer.

Moustakas asserted that analysis of a dream through the phenomenological-existential model serves two important functions: (a) to disclose the meaning of the dream by associations to waking life, and (b) to note possibilities for the future (p. 123). "In the process of obtaining an understanding of the dream, meanings are derived that point to new directions for self-fulfillment and well-being" (p. 123).

The model of working with and analyzing dreams that I have adapted is an artistic expansion of the phenomenological-existential model that Moustakas developed. While closely aligned with Moustakas' method, my method is distinguished by its attention to the creation of, and engagement with, visual artwork(s) that emerge from the dream. As McNiff noted, "dreams speak through visual imagery, environments, movements, and feelings as well as words" (p. 128). For many people the act of making art speaks more eloquently and much louder than words. When working from an existential art therapy perspective, it is important to regard dream imagery as having intimate, animate and autonomous qualities. This means that dream images stand for themselves and not as symbolic masks of something else, following the principle that "nothing is hidden or latent" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 112). When treated as autonomous entities, each image in the dream exists for itself and has many possible meanings and multiple levels of importance to the dreamer.

The Process of Engaging with Dreams in Existential Art Therapy

In working with dream images in existential art therapy, the art therapist's initial task is to foster an atmosphere of receptivity and attentiveness within the therapy milieu. The initial responsibilities of the client are twofold: to create an artwork portraying the dream and to create a written record of the dream.

The first step of the phenomenological-existential art therapy dream dialogue and analysis is to create an image of the dream. Depending on the artistic media used and its inherent time demands, the creation of the dream image can be done during or prior to the therapy session. It is important to note that dreamers often report very complex

dreams consisting of many images. Sometimes such complicated dreams can seem too overwhelming to express in art. In such instances, the art therapist may suggest that the client choose one specific image or scene to portray. This instruction is based on the premise that whatever needs to be expressed at a particular time will be expressed (D. Jones, personal communication, April 15, 2005).

When the client has completed the image of the dream the artwork is placed between the client (or dreamer) and art therapist. Depending upon the form of the particular art piece, it may be put on an easel, taped to the wall, set on the floor, or placed on a table. Throughout the course of interactions related to the dream the art therapist refers to the physical reality of the artwork and its particular elements. The artwork is an intermediary and is regarded as an autonomous entity, an equal partner in the triadic relationship with the dreamer and therapist.

The dreamer is then asked to write a script of the dream and to make a copy of the script for the art therapist. The purpose of creating the visual image and written record of the dream is to reconstruct it in a conscious state. After the script is written, the dreamer reads the dream story aloud and identifies key elements in the dream image. Addressing the art piece, the art therapist then reads the script back to the dreamer and refers to the key elements in the artwork. For the dreamer, the experience of hearing the script read by another person often is quite powerful. Hearing the dream in the therapist's voice fosters a sense of intimacy that helps to set the stage for what follows.

The art therapist then asks the dreamer to underline words or phrases in the dream script that seem to hold particular importance. Moustakas (1994) calls these significant phrases the "horizons" of the dream. The dreamer is then asked share the underlined horizons with the art therapist. The art therapist asks the dreamer to associate or identify where the horizons are located in the artwork.

With the artwork placed between them, the art therapist then solicits and makes note of the dreamer's associations to the horizons. When the dreamer has finished sharing associations to the horizons, the art therapist repeats them back to the dreamer as accurately as possible. It is important to note that the art therapist repeats the dreamer's associations but refrains from making any interpretive comments throughout the process.

The art therapist then asks the dreamer to group the horizons together by theme and to create "statements of existential concern." These are sentences the dreamer creates that integrate key elements of the horizon phrases. The dreamer then reads the existential statements of concern aloud while speaking directly to the artwork. The art therapist asks the dreamer to group the statements of existential concern together, and then to create one sentence that is an existential summary statement.

In the final phase of the process, the art therapist assists the dreamer in developing statements of paradoxical intent and a course of action in response to the dream. In the last step of the process, as a ritual ending to the encounter, the dreamer reads the action statement to the image.



Figure 1 Blindfold and Old Skin

An Illustration of the Process

This section of the paper is an illustration of the process of dialoguing with dreams in existential art therapy based on an examination of one of my dreams. In this vignette I use two different voices to portray different roles: as the dreamer and as the art therapist. As an ethical safeguard, rather than using an actual client's dream I ask the reader to follow the dialogue "as if" the situation were set in the context of a therapy session. Although at first glance it may seem that the process is overly structured, with familiarity and experience there is a flow that develops logically and naturally in the encounter.

Step 1: Creation of an image of the dream. This acrylic painting on canvas depicts a scene from the dream (Figure 1).

Step 2: Creation of a written record, or script, of the dream. In the dream, I am standing in a lonely place. At first I am not aware of anything, but then I notice the pool of water at my feet. It is a luminescent blue, shimmering as though it has its own light source beneath the surface of the water. The water is cold and clear. I am looking at the pool when a snake slithers out onto the bank at my feet and, right before my eyes, sheds its skin. I am captivated by this event. Then I hear the sound of a horse's hooves approaching from out of the shadowy darkness to my left. The horse is a beautiful golden palomino. The horse is wearing a red bandana blindfold. When the horse is right beside me, he lowers his head and the blindfold falls away. I awake with a wonderful feeling of excitement and renewal.

Step 3: The dream image is placed between the art therapist and the dreamer. The dreamer then reads the script of the dream aloud to the art therapist. As the dreamer reads the script aloud, he or she often becomes aware of poignant associations to the dream images and story.

Step 4: The art therapist then reads the script aloud to the dreamer. The process of hearing the dream script read again in another's voice stimulates additional associa-

tions on the part of the dreamer to the content of the dream images.

Step 5: Identifying the horizons of the dream. The art therapist asks the dreamer to identify key elements of the visual image and important phrases, underlining the “horizons” of the dream script. In my dream, these were: (a) standing in a lonely place, (b) the water is cold and clear, (c) a snake slithers out, (d) right before my eyes it sheds its skin, (e) shadowy darkness to my left, (f) the horse is wearing a red bandana blindfold, (g) lowers his head and the blindfold falls away, and (h) a wonderful feeling of excitement and renewal.

Step 6: Amplification of the horizons. With the image positioned between them, the art therapist solicits and makes note of the dreamer’s free associations or amplifications on the horizons. After the dreamer shares associations, the art therapist then repeats these associations back to the dreamer as faithfully as possible, serving as a reflective witness recording and repeating, as close to verbatim as possible, the comments of the dreamer.

Associations to horizon 1. Standing in a lonely place: When I had this dream I was struggling with very difficult feelings of loss and alienation that I had difficulty letting anyone know about. I have often had trouble letting others know when I am feeling vulnerable or when I am struggling.

Associations to horizon 2. The water is cold and clear: Water for me is a symbol of life, purity, cleansing, and sacredness. This must be a sacred place.

Associations to horizon 3. A snake slithers out: I used to be afraid of snakes, unrealistically afraid. My wife has helped me to see the beauty of snakes and to not be so frightened of them. She has taught me that it is all right to take emotional risks, to be vulnerable and open. I still can be fearful sometimes but not like I once was.

Associations to horizon 4. Right before my eyes it sheds its skin: I am surprised that the snake transforms, sheds its old skin, as I watch. It seems like something snakes would do in private, not something other people watch. This reminds me of how I used to get so angry at my wife when she would tell me that she had shared something about our relationship with her friends—some conflict, or something that I thought should be private. It always surprised me that she would be so open, so exposed, with her friends. The snake’s shedding/transforming also makes me think of the changes I have brought on in my life. For some reason there is also something mysterious about watching the snake leave its old skin behind. I feel honored to be there watching.

Associations to horizon 5. Shadowy darkness to my left: The shadowy darkness reminds me of the unknown, or of the dark and the evil side of my life.

Associations to horizon 6. The horse is wearing a red bandana blindfold: The palomino is a powerful, strong, very masculine animal but he is hindered because he

cannot see. There have been many times in my life when my sense of my own power and masculinity seem to have gotten in my way or blinded me.

Associations to horizon 7. Lowers his head and the blindfold falls away: The lowering of the head suggests a bowing motion or a self-humbling action; it evokes surrendering or accepting the blindness. In the instant of surrender the blinders fall away and I can see. Whenever I am in conflict, with someone else or with myself, the hardest thing is always getting myself to let go of my own stubborn willfulness. It seems that the moment I give up trying to win an argument, just then I am freed to a more meaningful encounter—I can see.

Associations to horizon 8. A wonderful feeling of excitement and renewal: The transformative phenomena of acceptance and surrender always lead me to a feeling that is almost euphoric. In my most important relationships these moments lead to a sense of deepened commitment and renewal.

Step 9: Repeating of the associations. The art therapist reads aloud the notes he or she has recorded regarding the dreamer’s associations to the horizons and identifies the location of the horizons in the visual image. The art therapist asks for any clarifications or expansions regarding the associations that may have been stimulated in the dreamer. The intent of this phase is to again provide an opportunity to hear, in another’s voice, comments and associations made to the visual and verbal horizons.

Step 10: Clustering the horizons. In this phase of the process, the art therapist asks the dreamer if it is possible to see connections among the horizons and to group, or cluster, the horizons accordingly. In the dream of the Blindfold and Old Skin, the following clusters emerged:

cluster 1. standing in a lonely place / shadowy darkness to my left

cluster 2. a snake slithers out / sheds its skin / the horse is wearing a red bandana blindfold

cluster 3. the water is cold and clear / lowers his head and the blinders fall away / a wonderful feeling of excitement and renewal

Step 11: Creation of existential statements of concern. In this step of the process the art therapist asks the dreamer to create a sentence that summarizes each of the horizon clusters as existential statements of concern:

1. When I use power in evil and negative ways I often am left feeling lonely, weak, and isolated.
2. I am strongest when I allow myself to be vulnerable to others and weakest when I am blinded by my pretensions of invulnerability and power.
3. When I accept and share my vulnerability I experience feelings of excitement and renewal in my relationships.

Step 12: Summary of statements of existential concern. In this step, the art therapist asks for possible connections among the statements of existential concern with the goal of integrating them into one summary statement.

Theoretically, this is an “essential message” from the dream to the dreamer. In the case of the Blindfold and Old Skin dream the following summary statement emerged:

Even though it is frightening to me, I am strongest and most satisfied and excited in relationships when I accept and share my weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

Step 13: Defining a course of action in response to the dream. Now the art therapist helps the dreamer to create a set of paradoxical intentions in response to the existential summary statement of the dream. The intent of this process is to identify a course of action that the dreamer can commit to taking in response to the dream message. This most often falls somewhere in between the extreme poles of the paradoxical intentions. The paradoxical intentions created in response to the blindfold dream are as follows:

1. For the next 2 weeks I will *take every opportunity* to share my fears and weaknesses with my colleagues at work.
2. For the next 2 weeks I will *avoid all situations* that could potentially lead to self revelation of my vulnerabilities.
3. During the next 2 weeks I will spend time with a good friend, and with my wife, and share with them some of the things that I feel insecure about.

Step 14: Committing to a course of action in response to the dream. When the paradoxical intentions are completed the art therapist asks the dreamer to make a commitment to one of the course of action statements. As a closing ritual the course of action is read directly to the dream image. In response to my dream, I made a commitment to spend time with a good friend and with my wife over a period of several weeks, and to share with them some of the things about which I feel insecure.

A Visual Image of the Process

The process of existential art therapy dream work can be visualized as a combination funnel and sieve (Figure 2) through which myriad images and phenomena of the original dream content are poured. At each step of the process, the client filters and distills the content of the dream until a summary statement of existential concern is identified and a behavioral course of action is defined.

The process of engaging with dream images in existential art therapy as discussed in this article is in many ways a phenomenological process of reduction and yet it is also one that honors the images and creativity of clients. Dreams are often quite complex, filled with many mysterious and intriguing images, and attempting to understand them can be daunting for both therapists and clients. Perhaps this is why working therapeutically with dream content has been done primarily in the context of long-term therapy relationships. However, the process outlined here can be utilized even in the very brief therapeutic encounters prevalent in today's short-term treatment environments. Working with dreams in this way can be of par-

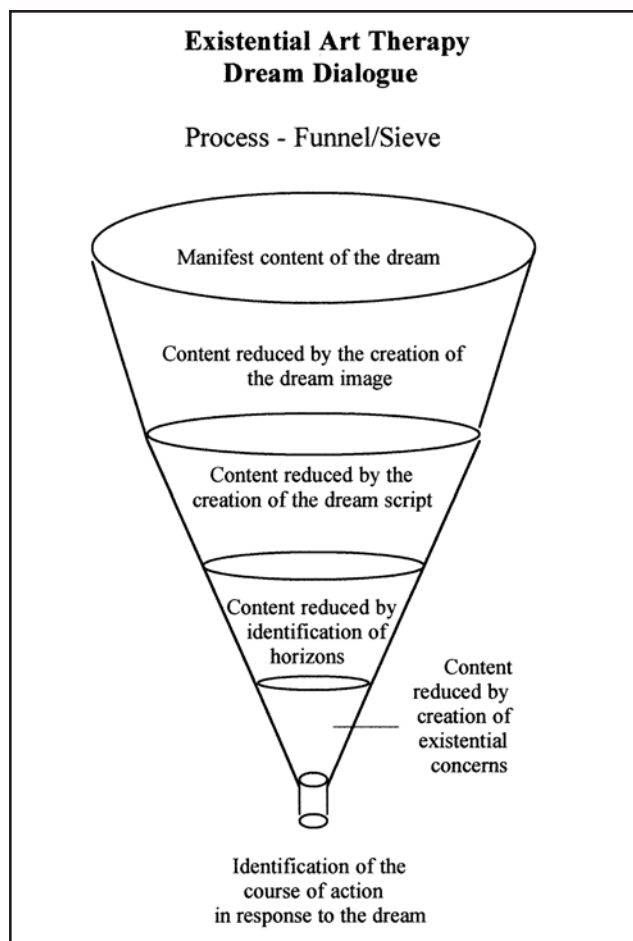


Figure 2

ticular benefit to clients in brief focal therapy because they leave the session committed to enacting a specific behavioral plan of action. The process of engaging with dream images makes it possible for art therapists to engage in depth-oriented dream work with clients in both brief and long-term therapy relationships.

Summary

Working with dreams using the phenomenological-existential process serves to honor the dreamer's creativity and inherent wisdom while the dreamer remains in control of each step in the reductive process. At no point does the art therapist offer any interpretation of either the artwork or the dream content. All of the messages that emerge from the dream are the creation of the dreamer/client, as are all interpretations and associations to the images of the dream. The art therapist establishes the structure and serves strictly as a guide, recorder, and witness to the process.

The art therapy dream engagement process described in this article may seem rather neat and tidy. But it has been my experience, from having working in this way with clients and art therapy students, that the process of reducing dream images to their essences invariably leads dreamers to a focused and more meaningful understanding of

dreams that were otherwise chaotic and confusing. The art therapy structure outlined in this article typically results in a straightforward course of action that provides clarity and relief amidst confusion.

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