The Organizing Functions of Dreaming—A Contemporary Psychoanalytic Model: Commentary on Paper by Hazel Ipp

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Dream mentation, a process that occurs during sleep, centrally functions, as waking mentation does, to process information. When we dream, we use variably dual modes of cognition—the imagistic, sensory-dominated primary-process mode and the linguistically anchored secondary-process mode (Noy, 1969, 1979; McLaughlin, 1978; McKinnon, 1979; Fosshage, 1983, 1987a, b; Lichtenberg, 1983; Bucci, 1985, 1994). These modes appear in dreams in the form of sensory images and spoken and unspoken words. Just as words are placed in a logical, coherent order to shape meaning and cognitive focus, so too are images sequentially ordered to express meaning and to further affective-cognitive processing (Fosshage, 1983). Sensory images tend to evoke more affect (see Epstein, 1994, for a review), which clarifies why dreams (especially rapid eye movement [REM] dreams, which are more imagistically dominated as compared to non-REM [NREM] dreams) can be so emotionally powerful. Although contemporary dream models differ, the view of dreams as centrally processing information is, I believe, an increasingly convergent perspective evolving out of dream and psychophysiological research, contemporary psychoanalytic theory, cognitive psychology, and clinical work.

I refer to my particular model as the organization model of dreams because the core process and function of dreaming is to organize data. I posit, more specifically, that dream mentation, like waking mentation, develops, maintains, and restores psychological organization and

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regulates affect (Fosshage, 1983, 1987b, 1997). In its variable use of imagistic and linguistic modes of mentation during REM and NREM cycles, dreaming, like waking mentation, ranges from elemental cognition (e.g., momentary replay of an event) to the most highly complex forms of mentation (e.g., efforts at complex emotional as well as intellectual problem-solving).

I will briefly delineate this model as well as the model-derived guidelines for working with dreams. Then, I will address Dr. Ipp’s clinical material. Elaborations of this model, including presentations of research evidence and ample clinical illustrations, can be found in a number of publications (Fosshage, 1983, 1987a, b, 1988, 1989, 1997; Fosshage and Loew, 1987; Lichtenberg, Lachmann, and Fosshage, 1996).

Dream Functions

Dream mentation, like waking mentation, can contribute to the development of psychological organization through the creation or consolidation of a new solution or synthesis. In contributing to development, new perceptual angles, new percepts of self and other, may emerge. New ways of behaving, new relational scenarios may be imagistically portrayed. Dream mentation, in addition, often continues

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1 To contribute to development is probably the most unrecognized dream function in psychoanalysis today, primarily due to the dominant influence of the classical model and the view that dreaming is a regressive and, therefore, primitive process. Jung (1916) was the first to suggest otherwise in his positing compensatory and prospective functions. When “ego consciousness” deviates too sharply from the Self (the central guiding principle of personality), the dream provides a “compensatory” function. That is, the dream attempts to get the person back on track—what my coauthors and I currently refer to as self-righting (Lichtenberg, Lachmann, and Fosshage, 1992). The dream’s foreshadowing of actualities that might emerge in the near future is what Jung called the prospective function. In my view, dreaming does not just foreshadow developments but is actively engaged in bringing about those internal changes. Moreover, the posited dichotomy between ego consciousness and the unconscious Self, in my judgment, positions Jungians to look to the dream all too much as the “true” guide for development—which can potentially disempower conscious waking efforts. In my view, an individual struggles in both dreaming and waking mentation to find his or her way, and either type of mentation at any particular moment may be in the forefront of these efforts.

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the unconscious and conscious waking efforts at conflict resolution—through restoring a previous state, using defensive processes, or creating a new organization.

Dream mentation, like waking mentation, can serve to maintain and restore psychological organization and self-cohesion. Maintenance and restoration are closely related functions and cannot always be distinguished. Maintenance refers to the modulation and continuation of ongoing psychological organization, whereas restoration addresses a more severe state of psychological disorganization. Kohut's (1977) description of the "self-state dream" (see also Ornstein, 1987) is an example in which dream efforts are aimed, in the face of a threat of self-fragmentation or dissolution, to restore a positive, cohesive sense of self. Regulation of affect (Kramer, 1993) in these dreams is central. When we have insufficiently expressed our anger and aversiveness in reaction to a perceived threat during the day, for example, we may attempt to set the situation right (self-righting) in our dreams through expression of anger (regulating affect) and restoration of self-equilibrium.

In dream mentation, as in waking mentation, we use (and reveal) our primary patterns of organizing experience (Piaget, 1954; Wachtel, 1980; Atwood and Stolorow and Lachmann, 1984–1985; Fosshage, 1994). Images of self, other, and self-with-other are intricately portrayed. Dream mentation, like waking mentation, can reinforce or transform these patterns.

Our dream efforts to develop, maintain, or restore psychological organization vary in their efficacy, and affects are central in assessing these efforts. The nightmare, for example, reveals a poignantly unsuccessful attempt to cope with a high-anxiety-producing stimulus or conflict. In addition, the dreamer's overall motivational aims may conflict. For example, developmental strivings may conflict with strivings to maintain familiar psychological organization and corresponding attachment patterns. Consider, for example, someone who returns in a dream to a disempowered, victimized position that is familiar and habitual—but at considerable cost in terms of vitality.

**Dream Content**

Freud's (1900, 1923) distinction between latent and manifest content—which is central to his model of dreams, is based on drive theory in which the latent drive impulses or infantile wishes have to be disguised and transformed into the manifest dream in order to preserve sleep. When drive and energy theory are eschewed, however, it is no longer theoretically necessary to posit the ubiquity of defensive or disguising operations in dream formation (Fosshage, 1983, 1987b). Although the postulation that all dreams involve a defensive (disguising) transformation of the underlying latent content is unique to the classical model, differentiating it from all other dream models, the manifest-latent distinction is deeply embedded in psychoanalysis (as well as in our culture) in interpreting dreams, resulting in ubiquitous translations of dream imagery. Unfortunately, these translations typically increase the analyst's influence, at the expense of the dreamer and the dream experience, in understanding dreams.

In my view, dreams directly reveal—through affects, metaphors, and themes—the dreamer's immediate concerns. Fromm (1951) spoke of symbolic (forgotten) language not as a language that disguises but as a "language in which we express inner experience as if it were a sensory experience" (p. 12). French and Fromm's (1964) problem-solving efforts, Fairbairn's (1944) object-relational processes, Kohut's (1977) self-regulation, Erikson's (1954) individualized ego modes of experiencing and relating, and my posited developmental, organizational, and regulatory processes, are all viewed as directly (manifestly) observable in dreams (Fosshage, 1983). Defense organizations, what we refer to as aversiveness (Lichtenberg, Lachmann, and Fosshage, 1992, 1996), are one route of protecting self-cohesion, and may appear directly in dreams or not, but they do not necessarily result in disguised stand-ins.

Therefore, I do not differentiate between latent and manifest content, for that distinction assumes a priori that transformation or disguise is always occurring during dreaming. Instead, I use the term dream content (Fosshage, 1983, 1987a, b). In my view, dream images are chosen primarily not for the purposes of disguise but for their evocative power and actual usefulness in thinking imagistically about the issue at hand, much as a waking person selects words to further the process of thinking meaningfully about internal concerns.

In eschewing the latent—manifest distinction and positing that dream content is directly revelatory, I am not suggesting that dream meanings are readily apparent (although at times they may be, as in Ipp's dream 3). Dreams are often elusive and difficult to understand. Their elusiveness, in my view, is related to six factors: poor dream recall;
lack of clarity in the dreaming process itself; metaphorical nature of the dream (Ullman, 1969); difficulty in understanding the meanings of images from a waking perspective; difficulty making sense when juxtaposing two different (i.e., waking and sleeping) mentational states; and a less than optimally facilitative intersubjective context in which the dream is told and explored.

The idea that dream images are chosen as the best imagistic and linguistic language available to the dreamer to express and facilitate what the dreamer is thinking about profoundly affects our work with and understanding of dreams. Dream images need to be assessed for what they reveal, metaphorically and thematically, not for what they conceal. With this emphasis, each dream image as used within the context of the dream scenario can be appreciated better for what it conveys. For example, the “I” in the dream identifies the dreamer, and the object images represent the dreamer’s images of the other. Not assuming that these object images are projections of the dreamer’s self gives us access to the dreamer’s images of others, self-with-others, and important relational patterns. Exploration may reveal that aspects of the dreamer are projected onto the other; yet, eschewing the common assumption that object representations are self-representations enables us to illuminate the patient’s self-with-other relational patterns as well as the aspects of the self projected onto the other.

**Guidelines for Working with Dreams**

From today’s perspective, we recognize that patient and analyst variably cocontribute to understanding the patient’s dreams. Clearly, we wish to maximize the influence of the dreaming experience itself in arriving at a coconstructed understanding. To this end, I suggest five guidelines for analytically working with dreams.

1. Dreaming is an affective—cognitive organizing experience that is at times continuous with, yet often divergent from, preceding and subsequent waking states. We need, therefore, to illuminate, as fully as possible, the patient’s dream experience. The first guideline is to listen as closely as possible to the patient’s experience within the dream (the empathic mode of perception; Kohut, 1959).

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2. Analytic inquiry is initially aimed to fill out the dreamer’s experience within the dream—the second guideline. I might ask, for example, “What were you feeling when that occurred in the dream?” “What were you experiencing?” Inquiry into the dreamer’s experience facilitates the dreamer’s involvement and affective reconnection with the dream experience itself and potentially counters the dreamer’s waking construal of the dream—particularly important when it is divergent from the metaphorical and thematic structure of the dream. This focus on the dreamer’s experience implicitly validates its importance and increases the dreamer’s conviction about the meaningfulness of the dream experience.

3. Dream imagery is not to be translated or seen as standing for something else but is to be understood metaphorically and thematically—the third guideline. When dreaming is viewed as an integrative and synthetic mentational process, the task is to illuminate more fully, through the dreamer’s associations and elaborations, the particular meaning of an image as it is used within the context of the dream. Each image is like a word within a sentence, and sequences of images are like sentences and paragraphs that tell a story. Waking clarification as to the meaning of a dream image is facilitative of understanding, yet the image can be understood fully only as it is used within the dream context, for the context shapes the meaning.

4. Affect-laden images of self, other, self-with-other, and relational scenarios can all be identified. The overall drama from beginning to end has immense communicative power about the dreamer’s innermost struggles and strivings. Once the dream’s scenarios are identified, our analytic task shifts to identifying (when unclear) if, where, and when these themes have emerged in waking life or how they are connected to waking experience—the fourth guideline.

5. When defining transference in the broadest sense as referring to the patient’s experience of the analyst (Gill, 1994), it follows that all dreams reported to an analyst have transference meaning. To determine whether the content of the dream is applicable or the process of communicating the dream carries the primary meaning for the analytic relationship, however, is critically important (Fosshage, 1994). Most commonly, the content of the dream, made possible by translations of dream imagery, is understood as reflective of the transference and, in my judgment, potentially, undermines the meaning of dream images and their dream contexts. As a fifth guideline, I never assume that the content of the dream directly relates to the transference unless the analyst appears in the dream or the dreamer.

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immediately associates to the analyst. Otherwise, the process of communicating the dream to the analyst—rather than the content—most likely carries the transference meaning. In analyzing a dream, relational patterns emergent in the dream need first to be identified and subsequently to be connected by the patient to waking life. If we sense that one of these patterns is occurring in the analytic relationship as well, even though the patient has not mentioned it, we can simply inquire, “I wonder if you are experiencing that here too?” The transference, in the sense of applying the content of the dream to the analytic relationship, can thus be addressed without translating dream imagery and without minimizing the patient’s dream or associated experience involving relationships outside the analytic relationship.

This phenomenologically grounded approach to dreams validates the dreamer’s experience and enhances conviction as to the meaning of the dream. Dream images are appreciated for their communicative value within the structure of the dream drama. It is important to note that the dreamer can begin or can continue to rely more on his or her own dream experience—rather than on the analyst’s interpretive translations—to understand the dream. All this facilitates an empowered and vital sense of self.

Ipp’s “Dream Series”

Ipp’s summary of her psychoanalytic treatment of Barbara includes a series of three of Barbara’s dreams in chronological (not sequential) order. These three dreams were chosen to “capture some of the essence of Barbara’s conflicts and progression” and to illustrate Ipp’s work with dreams within a psychoanalytic process. In a brief space, Ipp presents a lovely and meaningful description and explanation of Barbara’s struggles and their origins, the major transferential issues, and the process of treatment. In my view, Ipp’s treatment of Barbara, a person with an extremely difficult background, is masterful and has proceeded, as clearly depicted in the last dream, very well indeed.

In working with this dream series, Ipp consistently attempts to amplify and remain close to the dreamer’s experience, rarely engages in translation of dream images, and addresses relational scenarios that include self and self-with-other percepts. Thus, I find her approach to be most compatible with my own. As our task is a comparative one focusing on different perspectives in understanding and using dreams.

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within the psychoanalytic process, I will focus on the dreams and emphasize how I would work with and understand them from my perspective. I will integrate the fruits of Ipp’s and Barbara’s explorations in an attempt to illuminate the dreams’ meanings and their reflections on the clinical encounter as seen from my perspective. In raising my own set of questions, I am mindful that the clinical process would have shaped my interventions. In offering these exploratory questions, I am not suggesting that Ipp did or did not raise these same questions, for she clearly had very limited space in which to present the clinical material. In addition, Ipp the analyst was obviously in a unique position inside the encounter and had far more access to Barbara and the clinical process. In contrast, we four commentators are all looking at this material from the outside and are trying to find our way in; thus, our positions can be more easily compared with one another than with Ipp’s position.

Barbara’s “earlier dreams were highly constricted, monothematic, terse, and dominated by themes of ‘moving from dark house to dark house,’ attended by feelings of despair and helplessness leading to the only possible solution—to move again.” Barbara’s dreams reflected her internal state of despair, their relational origins, and her attempts to cope by “taking flight both—geographically... and emotionally.” Dream mentation was no more successful than waking mentation in dealing with this (internal and external) situation. As Ipp points out, gradually psychological change was dramatically experienced and portrayed—the dream homes became “light, airy, spacious, posited in sunlight and in settings surrounded by water.”

Dream 1

When Barbara was gaining some freedom from her expectations of criticism and diminishment within the analytic relationship and from her self-critical and disparaging attitudes, Barbara had the club-and-fish dream.

The dream opens with “Dan and I were at the club dancing around the fountain downstairs.” Although I would want Barbara to amplify her affective experience in the dream, it appears that, in keeping with her associations that the club was an important place during her adolescence and early 20s for “dancing around the fountain with various males,” she was feeling vitally alive. This is in keeping with Ipp’s description of her, just before the dream, as becoming “increasingly freer in terms of expressing a wider range of affect.” As

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Dan's presence at the club diverged from her waking view of his lackluster self, did his presence reflect some momentary change in her perception of her relationship with Dan? Perhaps this reflected a new vision of possibilities of coming alive herself, sexually and sexually, and in her relationship with Dan—a vision still not fully recognized from a waking state.

In the next dream sequence, Barbara cooked “a big white fish [for her friends] and felt proud of [her] efforts.” Her feeling of competence seems even more pronounced in her having cooked the dinner for her friends, one being a French chef. I would want her to elaborate on this dream experience to facilitate the development and consolidation of these affects and new self and self-with-other percepts. I would ask for her experience within her dream in an effort to illuminate the meaning of the big white fish within the dream context. Was the big white fish a special accomplishment given her serving it with such pride? Barbara's associations to Catholicism, to Dan's devotion, and to the tension between seem antithetical to her use of the fish image and her initial dream experience. If the white fish reflects constriction and tension, why would she be proud of her efforts? Is her more constricted waking perspective dominating her associations? In this instance, Barbara's pride and competence and dancing with Dan seem to be part of a new, more expansive and vital experience of her self—different from her previously more usual “darkness” and Dan's perceived constriction. Picking up on these new experiences (the developmental function of dream mentation) facilitates their consolidation and fosters a new waking perspective.

After starting off with expansiveness and vitality, the dream suddenly shifts—Jacques's announcement that “the fish was still frozen in the middle” triggers Barbara's profound embarrassment. Initially she rallies and thinks of “nuking” it in the microwave, but then she succumbs to humiliation and wants to “disappear” and be rendered “invisible.” She notes that she was frequently in this state of mind when she was a child. Jacques, the French chef, to whom she had wanted to demonstrate her competence, finds her fish frozen in the middle. Just at the height of her expansiveness and expression of competence and pride, she fails, feels humiliated, and understandably wants to withdraw and become invisible. This scenario corresponds with a waking occurrence. Barbara gave Jacques a cookbook and subsequently regretted doing so, for it seemed absurd to give an accomplished chef a cookbook. The moment of expansiveness—we would need to know what her initial experience was when she gave

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the cookbook—is followed by attitudes of self-denigration and humiliation. This thematic emotional sequence for Barbara must have had earlier origins. In addition to bringing up the sense of abuse she felt during her many hospitalizations and during her parents' “public drinking debacles,” “she recalled her father's irrational and verbally abusive assaults on her in front of her childhood friends.” To illuminate these origins further, I would pursue if there were other times when moments of expansiveness were met with critical and humiliating responses that led to shame and a desire to withdraw into oblivion.

To learn more about Barbara's image of Jacques (and of others like him) at that moment, I would explore how Jacques made his announcement. Was he critical, harsh, or matter-of-fact? Does this correspond with her experience of Jacques in waking life? Although we are told that she likes him, she sees him as not treating Sarah well and is concerned about his leaving Sarah "high and dry." In their exploration, Barbara recognizes her proneness to humiliation and her difficulty in asserting herself and expressing her anger, all apparent in her relationships with Mark, her former husband, and Sarah. To my mind, the one way that she does assert herself, although she probably does not experience it in this way, is in her "freezing" her sexual relationship with Dan. Might that be part of the motivation in the frozen-fish image? Barbara's later association, that she may have given Sarah steak, would need to be amplified. Is steak better than fish—in which case, is the assertive and aggressive motivation more apparent? Or, is the fish a prized cooking specimen, as I was taking it to be? In the dream, the fish had not been given enough fire; implicitly, Barbara the cook is still constricted and/or is actively not giving enough fire (i.e., closing down on the man). Barbara's "freezing” her emotions was initially an adaptive, self-protective response to her family and to the humiliating and intrusive hospital procedures during the first seven years of her life. As Ipp makes clear, Barbara is “thawing,” and, when she thaws and becomes expansive, she anticipates (based on her past experience) criticism, failure, and humiliation. Of course, her anticipation undoubtedly freezes her, which in turn easily leads to failure and humiliation.

What are the transference implications? Certainly Barbara's expansiveness is emerging from an affirming, protective analytic relationship. None of Barbara's associations suggests that the thematic content of expansiveness followed by humiliation is currently either experienced or expected in the analytic relationship. Wisely, Ipp stays with Barbara's dream and associations and does not attempt to apply

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the content of the dream to the transference. To do otherwise—to suggest that the content applies to the analytic relationship when...
Barbara is experiencing the analyst in a new way— inadvertently undermines these positive developments and can easily reinforce the old repetitive scenario.

**Dream 2**

The second dream opens with Barbara “traveling on a plush train with Mark—it felt like the train between Geneva and Lausanne. We were traveling all over the continent together…. Mark was so nice and polite and it felt okay like it did from time to time when he wasn't being sexual with me or trying to win me over.” To elaborate her affective experience, I would ask, “What was it like to travel on a plush train with Mark?” Her expansiveness in travel and her recapturing the “nice” aspects of Mark, her former husband, are harbinger of change. They correspond with her waking thoughts just before the dream: “how different things might have been with her first husband had she been as ‘solid’ then as she was beginning to feel now.”

What additional meaning did the train between Geneva and Lausanne have for Barbara? Did she view these cities as places of safety, equanimity, freedom? How did she experience Mark’s mother and her question in the dream? Her response sounds assertive. Although we need an elaboration of Barbara’s affective experience in the dream, her initial experience reflects increasing vitality—the plush train, expansive travel, safety (if accurate) of Switzerland, her assertion (if accurate) with Mark’s mother (“It doesn’t matter”), and Mark’s being “nice and polite.” The dreamer seems to be recapturing her experience with Mark at its best—apparently reworking the relationship with Mark in light of her psychological change of feeling more “solid.”

Then an abrupt shift occurs. “In Cologne, Mark got off the train and was gone.” What did she feel? What is the meaning of Cologne in contrast to Geneva and Lausanne? In the midst of this new, increasingly positive experience, Mark leaves once again—potentially deeply resonating with Barbara’s waking abandonment experiences with Mark and others. Luggage was left behind, and Barbara “thought maybe he hadn’t left after all.” What was her affective experience when she had that thought? Was she hoping that he would return? Was she disbelieving that he left? Was she upset by the fact that Mark was gone? Was she longing for him? Was she hopeful or skeptical about his return, or both? Was she seeing Mark for who he was? Was she relating to these events differently than in the past?

And then, as Mark is returning, Barbara is shocked to see that Mark is Dan, and she wakes up “shocked” and “shouting. ‘I don't believe it!’” In the analytic exploration, Barbara claimed that this “represented her fear that Dan could become Mark or someone like Mark—which would start the whole abuse—rejection cycle again.” Ipp questions it. I, too, wonder, for it would be a more likely meaning if in the dream she had indeed felt rejected and upset when Mark left (i.e., that the enticement-abuse-rejection cycle was repeated in the dream). Is she, from her more solid position, working through her relationship with Mark, recognizing the positive and negative, and arriving at her relationship with Dan? She now sees that Mark was egotistical regarding sex, and sex was much better with Dan. Her experience of herself and of men is clearly changing, as evidenced by the fact that in waking life she subsequently resumes cooking and sexual relations with Dan. This change is partially coming about, as Ipp describes, through Barbara’s differentiating from her mother’s attitudes about cooking and sex—corresponding with her assertiveness vis-à-vis Mark’s mother in the dream. In addition, in consolidating a more positive sense of self, Barbara is becoming more vital alive, which is evident at the beginning of the dream and which is corroborated by Ipp’s description. If even after exploration, the meaning of the end of the dream remains unclear, the dream mentation may simply be unclear. At such moments, it is important not to foreclose but to stay with and leave open the confusion, as Ipp did.

**Dream 3**

I can well understand Barbara’s excitement about dream 3. Barbara’s dream, affectively poignant and remarkably clear, expresses and furthers her ongoing development in a number of significant ways. No translations are needed for understanding this dream, as Barbara recognizes: “The symbolic aspects of the dream spoke for themselves.”

The dream, which opens with a group of friends and family “floating on mats down this beautiful river,” had the “feel of some of our better times when we were young and spending our summers at the lake with lots of people around.” A sense of peacefulness, of togetherness (Kohut’s twinship selfobject experience of essential likeness with others

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poignantly, imaginistically portrayed. Barbara starts out on a mat with her mother, but she feels “very uncomfortable” and needs to “stretch [her] legs or find [her] own position.” She was not angry and in a struggle with her mother; she simply felt that she “had to do something different.” Barbara recognizes her mother as “quite distant but pleasant”—this is the stronger, younger image of her mother, “not the frail self of her last few years.” With the reassuring smile from Ipp, who was on her own mat and separate, she was able to find her mat and “float down the river alongside my mother ... together, but separate. It felt very peaceful.”

What are the transferenceal implications? In this dream, the analyst appears directly. Barbara experiences Ipp as an affirming, protective, and modeling (i.e., comfortably individuated, “on her own mat”) presence. In self-psychological language, Barbara has a mirroring and idealizing self/object connection with Ipp. Ipp appears directly only in this dream—which makes clear its content concerns the dreamer’s experience of the analyst. To my mind, Ipp was correct in not translating other dream figures in the previous dreams to be transferenceal and in taking these dream persons at face value and understanding that Barbara was struggling with her important relationships and her sense of self and of self-with-other.

In this dream, Barbara separates from her mother and becomes her own person—a process that Ipp observes occurring also in the waking clinical situation. Barbara’s experience of differentiation from her mother, as Ipp delineates, is now not an aversive experience but one of renegotiating her position and assuring her of her own individuality while maintaining the desired and needed connection. It seems clear from the clinical process that these dramatic changes have been brought about through the exploratory/interpretive process, which has served as one essential feature of fundamentally new relational experience occurring within the analytic relationship. Barbara has become more comfortable with her attachment to Ipp, and she feels “far safer and less frightened that [Ipp] would abandon her or ‘shoot her down’ for her achievements.” This new relational experience, cocreated by patient and analyst, has fostered new attitudes and images of her self and of others. The dream beautifully depicts these changes and, through these poignant, affect-loaded images—furthers the consolidation of the changes that are taking place.

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