Dreaming to Different Beats: Reply to Commentaries

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It is both an honor and a challenge to respond to the commentaries on my clinical material. Each reflects considerable thought, effort, and respect. The different theoretical approaches produced considerable departures in terms of understanding and positioning of the dream material. Although I clearly found myself resonating to those approaches more closely allied with my own, I found each of the commentaries evocative in its own right—stirring new questions and generating fresh thoughts as I reconsidered Barbara along the different lines posited.

As always, working with disembodied clinical material is no easy task. So much of importance is lost in the telling, and those outside the analysis are not privy to the ambience; the to-and-fro over time; the nuances that blossom and take shape in the material and in the interactional field; and, most especially in this example, the extensions of meaning of the dream imagery and affect that are so often a continuation of much that has gone before in the analytic process itself. Given the small window opening into Barbara’s world, Adams, Ellman, Fossjahge, and Levenson have ably captured certain critical features that contribute to her essence.

The commentators’ portrayals of Barbara are wide-ranging—she is, variously, seen as extremely narcissistic, prone to borderline rages, grandiose and with significant ego defects suggestive of a poor prognosis, a highly traumatized woman with an unrealistic sense of her own limitations who leads an indolent life with questionable values, and a woman with a growing sense of expansiveness and possibility as she renegotiates her sense of self and relational with others through good use of the analytic process. Although there is some overlap in aspects of the understandings put forth, the spin put on them differs dramatically. In many ways, this range seems to reflect the theoretical orientation of the particular commentator, so while one focuses on evolving expansiveness as positive and encouraging, another treats

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the same material with suspicion, and yet another sees it as evidence of a defective ego indulging in grandiose departures from reality.

As Ellman and Levenson suggest, the material presented was drawn from an earlier phase of Barbara’s treatment in which she was exploring and experimenting with aspects of herself previously unarticulated either privately or, most especially, in the presence of another. An evolving sense of my commitment to and obvious enjoyment of Barbara was enabling a “thawing” of previously undifferentiated painful affect that allowed for a more integrated recall of early memories, a fresh understanding of the impact of these events on her development, and a new understanding of herself in relation to others. It was this prolonged period that enabled Barbara to become less inhibited and terrified of loss of connection while achieving an increased sense of possibility of her own potential strengths. As long as Barbara remained so exquisitely sensitive to any potential “criticism” from me, it was neither possible nor fruitful to actively or fully use countertransference issues in the treatment. As the treatment has progressed, this has altered significantly, with much more being achieved in the interactional arena—an important aspect identified and anticipated by both Ellman and Levenson.

Given the wide disparity in the commentaries, I will respond to aspects of them individually. The limitations of space preclude doing justice to the many rich ideas raised, but I will attempt to comment on some of the major issues identified.

Fossjahge comments on the compatibility of our approaches to dream material—an opinion I endorse. His particular model of dream interpretation, which combines Jungian, relational, and self-psychological ideas, prioritizes staying close to the patient’s affective experience as determined by the dream imagery and the associations to this imagery as these evolve within the relational field of the analysis. His emphasis on the organizational and developmental function of dreams is something I clearly resonate with, and I believe that this dream series was rendered more meaningful through such an approach, as effectively demonstrated in his work with the three dreams provided. That approach offers an understanding of Barbara that in many ways is closest to my own. Fossjahge focuses on what Kohut called “the leading edge”—aspects of the patient that are striving toward healing and growth. Fossjahge emphasizes Barbara’s efforts to be expansive and vital and to take risks in this regard even as she remains conscious of her proclivity to humiliation and despair and anticipates defeat. He

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recognizes her nascent efforts to be assertive and her evolving sense of differentiation as evidenced through the dreams, culminating in the third dream, in which she experienced herself as more solidly differentiated while remaining connected to her significant relational world (i.e., her mother and me). Fosshage accurately portrays the quality and tone of the analytic relationship that served a critical function in bringing Barbara to the place of the third dream—a place that subsequently served as a springboard for greater consolidation and more active work in the interactional field between us.

Aside from a few of Fosshage's own associations to Barbara's imagery, I disagree with very little he suggests. I feel he has provided a sensitive and accurate portrayal of Barbara and the therapeutic arena in which she was operating at the time. Although I generally agree with his approach of not imposing transference issues on the situation unless directly identified in the dream or through associations to the dream, I perhaps do so with less conviction than he does. I believe, along with Ellman and Levenson, that important transference issues are evident in the first two dreams. In the first, Barbara anticipates being humiliated by me, not because she experienced me this way, as Fosshage notes, but because of a lifetime of experience of humiliation by her mother, particularly in regard to her desires around men. The reference to her ex-mother-in-law in the second dream represents a variation on the theme, in which criticism and disapproval are anticipated from me around her continuing fascination with Mark (also reflected in ongoing clinical material at the time). I, like the mother-in-law, was being dismissed (Ellman suggests "silenced") in the dream. I did not take these references up at the time of the dreams—not on account of the lack of direct or associated reference to me, but because to have done so would have been experienced by her as criticism and confirmation of the precise fear she was struggling with in the first place. This rationale is noted by most of the commentators, including Fosshage. These transferential themes were elaborated on as the treatment progressed, and we were better positioned to work more actively with transference and countertransference issues that arose.

Levenson, drawing from an interpersonal model, argues that the manifest content of the dream is the dream itself, which is interpreted along two axes, the metaphoric and the metonymic. Applying this approach to Barbara's dreams yielded a rich and evocative account that stimulated and delighted me. Similarly, Levenson's notion of the bipolarity of dream metaphors is a very important contribution to this discussion and certainly sharpened my awareness as to some of the polarities so clearly operant with Barbara.

As Levenson elegantly courses his way through the dreams, he raises questions and proposes connections that demonstrate great perspicacity, if not a foreshadowing of what was to come as the treatment unfolded. I'll take up the money theme in particular, as it so aptly caught his attention and has played such a pivotal role in Barbara's life and, increasingly, in the transference-countertransference arena. As Levenson notes, growing up with that much money complicates much. It certainly played havoc with Barbara's sense of self. Not wishing to be seen as one of the "idle rich" and scared of being exploited, she played down her wealth, indulged in a few luxuries for herself, extended herself in her studies, and maintained a taxing full-time job, all of which earned her a full measure of her mother's scorn. In our earlier days together, I saw Barbara's need to achieve greater comfort with her money as a potential "goal." This was not motivated by one of my "values"—seemingly a concern of Levenson— but by my sense that "her discomfort" served as yet another manifestation of Barbara's pattern of self-constriction and fear of reprisal. It was only some time after her mother had died that she gave up her job and slowly and increasingly comfortably began to enjoy her wealth. During this time, money reared its head in our interactions. Protests about increased fees—fees that had been raised on the same minimal basis each year—served as one manifestation of her readiness to feel exploited by me too. The topic of exploitation entered the arena loud and clear, with each of us feeling she could be exploited by the other. Envy, too, entered our field. From Barbara's perspective, envy had always played a part in her feeling that she had to inhibit or hide her "assets." Now she became concerned about my potential reactions to her bountiful acquisitions and facility in achieving them. Indeed, I began to have some negative reactions to her increasing indulgences. Apart from any values that may have been operant, I could not deny that envy was playing a part, as I observed the ease with which she could effect such luxury—I think all the exotic vacations stirred me most! We have done some productive work in this area—work that certainly bore witness to an idealized transference yielding to a far more complex interactional field. Nonetheless, Barbara remains very rich, and I, like her husband, Dan, a mere professional, continue to be a simple "hourly wage earner."

I would like to take up some aspects of the third dream—a dream that encouraged Adams and Fosshage, that Ellman sees as
simply “reassuring” for Barbara and me, and that stirred Levenson's suspicion. Levenson's concern with the created idyll, which he rightly distrusts, did not draw my focus during the relating of this dream. After the very long period of angst and struggle during which Barbara attempted to renegotiate an internal relationship with her mother, less polarized in all-or-nothing terms, this dream reflected both her growing sense of separateness and her maintenance of a tie. This felt like the accomplishment. At that point, I treated her passively floating down-stream as background, as our sights were more focused on her achieving this individuation. It was this possibility that triggered her jubilation. I do not believe that either of us entertained an idea, not even for a moment, that this was effortless or tranquil. Of course, Levenson's point is well taken—why would this idyllic image serve as background? A fantasized state? A possibility of some relief after so much angst? I simply do not know, as I did not explore it—not on account of a “value judgment” but because, as already stated, my attention was on what I believed to be the foreground issues.

Adams, drawing from a Jungian model, views dreams as serving ego-comematory functions. He emphasizes the Jungian approach of “sticking to the image,” which, I assume, entails a close and detailed exploration between patient and analyst of each particular image. Surprisingly, having emphasized the importance of this method, Adams then chooses to interpret the three dreams in isolation—separate from any of the associations or clinical material provided. It seems that, in this departure, he achieves a particularly negative and pathological view of Barbara as someone who suffers from a “preposterously presumptuous narcissism,” who “reacts with a psychotic style” with defensive aspects akin to “borderline anger and aggression,” and who is also “out to lunch.” In viewing Barbara's not improvising in the first dream in a manner befitting a “more normal adult,” Adams suggests that she is unlikely to make effective use of the analytic relationship and that her prognosis is poor. He finds similar evidence for her ego defects in the second dream: “Appropriateness and presumptuousness are not questions this ego takes seriously.” Adams's own associations to the countries named in the second dream led him to conclude that I should treat her “with strict ‘Swiss’ analytic neutrality”—as if there were such a thing and as if the Swiss were strictly neutral! With the third dream, Adams feels the stirring of hope: “Barbara is not the narcissit that she once was—at least in relation to the image of the mother,” and as such “the prognosis is much more optimistic than in the previous two dreams.” This optimistic note is carried forth to the conclusion, in which Adams maintains that the transformative function of Barbara's unconscious has now compensated the “defective attitude of the (her) ego.” Although I agree with Adam's sensitive and incisive interpretation of the third dream and its implications in terms of Barbara's development through the treatment, her transformation seems to be remarkable in terms of his earlier pessimism.

I found little of Barbara that was recognizable in Adam's initial portrayal of her. By interpreting her dreams without recourse to her associations or clinical material, he seems to foreclose on critical elements that spoke to her initial feelings of vitality in the first dream, easily rendered unstable by her anxiety and her propensity to shame, as well as her important yet nascent efforts to experiment in areas previously not possible on account of her terror of failure and humiliation and/or of success and rejection. Where Adams saw her cooking a meal for Jacques as presumptuous and grandiose, I saw it as an early if somewhat clumsy effort to take risks, to put herself on the line, to take a tentative step forward, a little prematurely, as she still lacked the resilience and resources to cope with the task. Beyond the frozen fish and the microwave are many complex issues relating to identity, belonging, relationships with women, and attraction to men like Jacques who, like her father and first husband (Mark), represent excitement, allure, and incredible cruelty and misogyny. Elman touches on some of this in his remarks on this dream as he considers the possibility that Barbara “wishes” to get rid of Sarah and Dan so she can be with Jacques. Jacques could well be a stand-in for Mark, who is associated with the club and who stands in such contrast to her current husband—a theme continued in the second dream. Similarly, the botched fish has a multitude of meanings relating to possible guilt feelings (as suggested by Elman) but more especially to anxiety regarding her own desires and the anticipated negative consequences of achieving these desires. Her mother always resented Barbara's relationship with her father and always demanded Barbara be less so her older brother could seem like more. Barbara spent a lifetime inhibiting her skills, hiding her successes, and clinging around so as to defuse difficult and painful situations. Nuking the fish, though certainly not a practice in keeping with French cuisine, has an absurd quality not unlike some of her early improvisations when fending off

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shame and humiliation—unsuccessful improvisations that tended to yield to the wish to become invisible.

In terms of the transference implications, this dream occurred commensurate with Barbara's expressing fears of being humiliated and criticized by me. Although feeling safe enough to share this humiliating dream with me is in itself an achievement, I believe she is communicating some concern that I, like her previous therapist, might experience her offerings as “half-cooked”—a suggestion made by Levenson. Adams maintains that this dream conveys her narcissistic view of herself as my equal or superior, that her competitive
preclusion would inspire serving me up indigestible material rendering me analytically unable. This is an interesting idea. Yet, in tracking the dream itself and, more importantly, in being posited in terms of her history, her associations, and the clinical process, it seems unlikely. It is an idea, tilted in a negative direction, that takes into account little of the quality of her anxieties, her lack of triumph in defeating the other at this point, and, as Adams suggests, her limited “resourcefulness” in this regard. That I might find her “half-baked” or indigestible seems to be her fear, not her motivation. This dream represents, in many ways, a repetitive scenario in her waking life, as noted by Fossnage—a scenario in which efforts to assert herself or to feel enlivened were often inhibited or aborted either by another or by her in anticipation of reprisal from another. The anger and possible aggression inherent in this dream cannot be ignored, and Barbara and I did not ignore them, as briefly described in my presentation following the dream.

Ellman’s commentary provides some interesting and important insights into certain aspects of Barbara and some of the operant transference issues. He, in line with a classical tradition, is the only commentator who maintains a sharp distinction between latent and manifest content, favoring latent as the one true possibility for genuine analytic work. Without exploring and uncovering the latent, the hidden meanings, the disguised motives, he maintains that nothing “new” is learned. He posits my work with Barbara in these terms. I strongly disagree with this idea, which stands to reason, as our theoretical positions are so divergent. Like Fossnage and Levenson, I see dream mentation as having a certain continuity and some divergence with waking mentation and as serving important functions in affect regulation and psychological organization. “New” for me extends beyond the potential discoveries emerging from the disguised

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or the repressed. It includes a variety of possibilities such as connecting and synthesizing memories and affects in new ways, making new connections and achieving fresh understandings of previously unconnected psychological events, experiencing oneself in new ways concomitant with the experience of oneself in new relation to another. These aspects of new are evident in the material offered up by Barbara in terms of her burgeoning sense of possibility and sparseness reflected and confirmed by her dream imagery as well as the new connections she was able to make as her associations took her to old memories in a way that offered fresh connections and novel understandings of the impact of these memories. To my mind, this “new” defies Ellman’s assertion that nothing new emerged from her dream material. Clearly, her dream material was not fully mined. Dream material never is. In part, this was due to my making judgment calls at the time, which is not tantamount to my walking on eggshells, as Ellman suggests. In part, given the dream’s continuity with other clinical material, it served simply to organize and consolidate that material, and, in part, given the particular emphases at any given time in the process, certain material was privileged over other, also meaningful material.

Ellman really gets into his stride with the second dream. He asserts “that the form of the write-up leaves me outside what I would consider analytic understanding.” In what seems to be a parody of the material, he “questions” her “dramatic improvement” after “recognizing her attachment to her mother”—a gross simplification that ignores the complexities described and implicit in the account provided about her grieving process. Furthermore, it is evident right through the material that Barbara was painfully aware of her negative feelings toward her mother—feelings that achieved sharper focus as her grieving process ensued. I do not understand Ellman’s skepticism in this regard. Her statement in her third dream, “I didn’t feel angry with my mother,” can be seen as a measure of relief from a fairly chronic experience rather than a simple denial as Ellman suggests. Space constraints rendered it impossible for me to do justice to the clinical material I could furnish to anchor the dreams. Perhaps Ellman can take the manifest as the truth in this instance, so that when I write that Barbara’s associations took her to her mother, he will know that my words reflect the situation.

Having more or less portrayed the treatment to date as simply a “reassurance” to us both even as we failed to access any “uncharted territory,” Ellman offers a rationale for this less than optimal state of

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affairs. He suggests that we “were engaged in a more important task”—establishing “analytic trust.” Although no one could disagree that analytic trust is vital, his inserting the notion at the end of a paper seemingly dedicated to demonstrating what should have occurred and did not occur analytically is confusing. Is it intended to appease, or is it simply a euphemistic way of minimizing changes that did occur for Barbara? It seems that the other commentators are able to discern clear and significant improvements in her. Ellman maintains that, in the future (the “analysis proper” period?), Barbara will be able to “self-reflect” and “transform the other into another,” and “conflictual elements in her dream productions will not have to be expelled, negated or rationalized but rather accepted as part of the self.” Undoubtedly, we had a long way to go, but I would not have posited the work to be done in these terms. Ellman’s view resembles Adams’s pessimistic thoughts at the outset of his commentary. Adams, however, demonstrates a significant shift as the dreams progress, and he recognizes important transformations in Barbara’s functioning—her achieved “compensation in the service of individuation.” Ellman, it seems, remains bounded by different ideas. It is perhaps in contemplating our differences that we are
afforded new opportunities to frame or reframe our own beliefs and perspectives.

I am very grateful for having had the opportunity to have been part of this project, and I feel extremely stimulated and enriched by the thoughtful and evocative discourse generated by Adams, Ellman, Fosshage, and Levenson. Each commentary has, in its own way, served to generate fresh questions and considerations that will no doubt continue to percolate in and inspire me for quite some time.

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