The Dreamer and the Dreams: Clinical Presentation

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Three dreams from the first few years of an analysis of a significantly traumatized woman were selected to demonstrate their resonance with, organization of, and consolidation of certain pivotal themes emerging in the clinical process itself. These dreams occurred chronologically but not sequentially and are posited in the affective and thematic contexts in which they were reported. The dreams selected herald the beginning of a new phase in the patient's development, which had previously been mired in darkness and despair.

Barbara, an attractive, animated woman in her early 50s, entered analysis with me following her husband's hospitalization for depression. This episode had triggered a considerable reaction in her. Feeling blamed and isolated, she was put painfully in touch with long-standing feelings of shame, unworthiness, aloneness, and the terror of further abandonment—feelings from which she had isolated herself for much of her adult life. She now felt flooded with affect and difficult early memories that were leaving her feeling overwhelmed and less functional than usual.

Barbara, one of three offspring, was sandwiched between two brothers, Dennis, the eldest sibling, the pitied and overaccommodated “family failure,” and Michael, “the apple of his mother's eye” who became the empowered family patriarch following their father's demise some 18 years earlier. Barbara's mother, an extremely controlling, spirited, and critical woman, alive at the commencement of the analysis, was battling a cancer that had plagued her for some 13 years. She died several years into the analysis—a phoenix who continues to rise but in a significantly transformed psychological configuration. Both parents were alcoholic. Her father, severely intoxicated, choked to death while her mother stood by, too drunk to help. This event finally motivated her mother to get her drinking under control. Barbara has poignant memories of a childhood fraught with emotional neglect; isolation; painful beatings from father, especially during his frequent drunken rages; ministering to her drunken mother during her disabling stupors; and fending off her mother's harsh, critical, rejecting onslaughts characterizing her sober periods.

Barbara's family was extremely wealthy and moved in the upper echelons of society. Barbara had always been ambivalent about money, and the topic was emotionally loaded: “Instead of love, we received money.” Money denoted both deprivation (of real care and affection) and enormous control. At the same time, it served as a source of solace and pleasure in terms of the material opportunities afforded.

Death, loss, and separation featured significantly in Barbara's earlier years. Apart from having several miscarriages, her mother also lost a baby only a few weeks after birth. Barbara was six at the time. When she was eight, her uncle, the mother's only sibling, committed suicide, bringing shame on the family and yet another extended emotional withdrawal on the part of the mother but no opportunity for grieving or processing the loss. Several of Barbara's beloved pets died or disappeared mysteriously. In addition, she underwent numerous extended hospitalizations for a kidney disorder during her first seven years. The disorder was finally resolved with the advent of antibiotics. Her anxiety escalated at the time, culminating in her refusal to attend school on and off for about a year. She had to repeat the year, much to her mother's relief—this would allow Dennis, the academically struggling older brother, to feel less unworthy. The notion that Barbara should inhibit her skills and achievements so as to minimize her brother's failures has been an important theme coursing through her life and manifesting itself in most of her significant relationships.

Following several incidents of sexual abuse at the hands of Dennis—a situation that left her violated, ashamed, helpless, and even more alone—Barbara asked to go to boarding school. She was 14 at the time. She recalls attending school as positive in that she was able to develop her academic skills, and it gained a respite from her family chaos. During this time, though, her own drinking assumed significant proportions. By 20, she was more often under the influence of alcohol than not. Anesthetized and socially facilitated, she went on to discover...
new horizons. Around this time, she met and shortly thereafter married her first husband, Mark. They had three sons together. This was a very stormy relationship often involving physical violence. Alcohol carried her along, numbing her to the pain of the physical beatings and her husband’s flagrant infidelities. The seeming oblivion with which she handled the impact of the drinking and violence on her children haunts her deeply to this day. Her oldest son was a fetal-alcohol-syndrome baby who has significant cognitive dysfunctions. His difficulties and the conflicts surrounding them very much mirrored her struggles with Dennis, compounding both her guilt and her anger. Finally, when her youngest son was about seven, Mark disappeared with another woman yet again, and Barbara sought the help of a psychiatrist. The help seems to have been a supportive therapy that enabled her to join Alcoholics Anonymous, get sober, and leave her husband.

Several years later, Barbara met and married her current husband, Dan. A devoted father of four, he became readily engaged with her sons and provided them with their first warm and secure home. Although Dan was somewhat “beige” compared with her dynamic and seductive first husband, this marriage continued seemingly harmoniously for a while. Then, a few years ago, when yet another of Dan’s business ventures failed, and Barbara was left to bail him out financially for a second time, her resentment began growing, and manifesting itself in disrespect, if not contempt. Dan’s evolving depression became sufficiently disabling that his psychiatrist recommended hospitalization in a facility specializing in affective disorders. After several “command performances” at the hospital, where she met Dan’s social worker, Barbara found herself feeling blamed, increasingly anxious, and alone without recourse to her old pain-avoiding strategies involving activity and alcohol. To get the help she needed, she decided to go into treatment herself.

Barbara commenced treatment with me on a twice-weekly face-to-face basis. Although intent on finally coming to grips with her past and current relationships, she was frightened of the feelings surging within her. She experienced herself as out of control and was concerned that her previous modes of defense seemed less effective than before. At first, our sessions waxed and waned as she struggled with the painful affect generated by a surge of early and later memories and her compelling need to distance herself from these with humorous anecdotal accounts of clearly difficult material. As her alliance with me strengthened, she began to better observe and be responsive to my interpretations of this distancing pattern in the face of challenging affect. She was frustrated with her difficulty in sustaining her experienced emotions from session to session and even during individual sessions.

We began to consider the merits of increasing the frequency of our sessions and having her use the couch. This move was effected after due consideration of her fears of not having the face-to-face contact and of the feelings of aloneness, isolation, and vulnerability that she might experience.

Barbara’s transition to the couch was relatively smooth. Initial associations to being “exposed on an operating table” and to being at the mercy of her “untrustworthy dentist working on her from behind” spoke poignantly of her anxieties and fears. Her facility in verbalizing these concerns helped keep us both attuned, and, in so doing, her more overt anxiety was sufficiently allayed as to allow us to proceed. It soon became apparent that she preferred the couch. Considerable memories and attendant affect were stirred and tolerated in an unprecedented way. She spoke about feeling “more open” and of a new “positive energy” that she was experiencing and holding in new ways. Hope strengthened, and our connection became further consolidated.

A Consideration of Selected Dream Material

In keeping with the purpose of this project, I have selected dream material that illustrates aspects of my use and understanding of dreams in the clinical process. The particular selection focuses on certain specific themes addressed in the analysis. Center stage in Barbara’s analysis has been her relationship with her mother and all the attendant themes of rejection, abandonment, sadness, hatred, desperation, and longing that punctuated their interactions both in reality and fantasy. These themes were continued in her relationship with Mark. The familiarity of this abusive behavior perhaps enabled her undue tolerance of abuse both physical and emotional.

These early experiences manifested themselves in various transferential aspects of our work together. Barbara’s longings to be closely connected to and reliant on me were constantly pitted against her terror of being criticized or derided; of being humiliated, “shot
down,” hurt,” and, most important, of being cruelly abandoned. Although alcohol had served important anesthetizing functions for her in earlier times, frenetic activity and taking flight—both geographically (countless moves to different abodes and cities) and emotionally—remained important mechanisms for Barbara in the face of painful affects or situations that could trigger them. These distancing devices were evident early in the treatment. She could employ her excellent sense of humor and social adroitness with such elegance as to catch me off-balance and have me happily join her on the path to distraction and distance from the more difficult material at hand. Along with this were her sudden announcements of imminent vacations at times of increased vulnerability vis-à-vis her growing attachment to and reliance on me and our sessions, especially after verbalizing such feelings to me. Gradually, we were able to deal with these feelings which enabled more discussion and process as opposed to action. I, too, had to forfeit some of the pleasure of simply being swept up in Barbara’s engaging humor—or at least not so completely as to lose focus and help perpetuate the distancing effects.

Barbara’s dreams reflect an interesting progression paralleling our work together and some of the generalizations that were beginning to occur outside the sessions. Her 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. Nothing changed; moving was as inevitable as the dark, forbidding house she was forced to occupy yet again. Gradually, with her growing tolerance of our evolving relationship, her dreams yielded a new dimension. Although still containing an abundance of “moving” themes, the locations assumed dramatically different qualities. Now the homes were light, airy, spacious, posited in sunlight and in settings surrounded by water. Feelings of hope and possibility stirred, and Barbara tentatively articulated these feelings; her dreams began to reflect her increasing negotiation of external and internal space as well as the nascent resurgence of her creative forces, which had lain dormant for so long.

For the purposes of this discussion, I have selected the following three dreams, which occurred chronologically in the analysis and which, I believe, reflect certain central themes in terms of Barbara’s psychology and its evolution. Selecting dreams occurring over a six-year analysis is no small task. Which themes should I concentrate on? Which aspects of Barbara’s development should I pursue? Each choice risks valuing one important issue over another. Yet choices had to be made, and hopefully mine captures some of the essence of Barbara’s conflicts and progression.

**Dream 1**

The first dream to be focused on occurred about 15 months into the analysis. Around this time, a further anxiety as to our connection had emerged, with Barbara’s growing awareness of how much of our sessions was devoted to talking about her mother and the parameters of their relationship. She felt it reflected her weakness—a weakness she likened to her husband’s chatter, which she found to be self-pitying and mired in doom and gloom. Her expectation that I would respond with similar disdain was further fueled by her memory of her previous psychiatrist, who had admonished her for any efforts to discuss her “mother issues” (he saw his mandate as anchored in having her leave her first husband). His attitude served as further confirmation that her feelings were simply an expression of weakness and self-indulgence. Her articulation of these concerns and our recognition of some of their origins seemed to diminish their potency in our relationship as well as enable her to become increasingly freer in terms of expressing a wider range of affect with less fear of recrimination from me. She recounted the following dream during this period:

Dan and I were at the club dancing around the fountain downstairs. I had cooked dinner for my friends Sarah and Jacques—

he’s a French chef. I had made a big white fish and felt proud of my efforts. When we sat down to eat, Jacques announced the

fish was still frozen in the middle. I was so embarrassed. I wanted to take it from him and put it in the microwave and nuke it.

Instead, I just stood there wanting to disappear—wishing I was invisible ... like I often felt when I was a child.

Barbara’s spontaneous associations included memories of the club as an important place for her during her adolescence and early 20s. She had spent many a night dancing around the fountain with various males including her first husband, Mark. She talked about another dream that took place in this fountain room. In this dream, Mark was leaving with one of her friends—a situation she had to deal with frequently in reality.

The white fish she associated to Catholicism and to Dan’s devotion in this regard—an issue of tension between them. Perhaps

Dan’s

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presence at the club was incongruous, with the white fish providing the stark contrast between Dan's lackluster self and Mark's vibrancy and potency—a contrast I suggested. Barbara felt that the cooking theme was triggered by her having just given Jacques a cookbook for his birthday—something she subsequently regretted, as it seemed an absurd gift for an accomplished chef. Although she likes Jacques, she dislikes his treatment of Sarah, who works hard, struggles financially, and receives little help from Jacques with his untold millions.

Perhaps the club represented the money theme. It is a club for the very wealthy and would certainly not be a natural habitat for Sarah. She worries about Sarah being left high and dry by Jacques—a concern dovetailing with her own fears of emotional abandonment. After voicing these concerns, she added that perhaps she had given Jacques the frozen fish and Sarah a steak in the dream. “Yet I also have a lot of stuff with Sarah—she's an old friend, but there's so much I can't address with her. She's always blasting me in one way or another about money and expenses. Sometimes I feel like I'm a masochist because she is so often tough on me, and I can't level with her. In many ways, she feels like my mother…. I can't level with her either.”

Previously, Barbara and I noted that anger was extremely difficult for her. Mostly it had gone unregistered; instead, she experienced it as hurt, despair, and, mostly, humiliation. Its distinguishing characteristic had been a sense of depletion—not the case when she felt simply sad or hurt. I suggested that perhaps she had complex and conflicted feelings about each of the parties in the dream, that the club was strongly associated with Mark and memories that spoke to humiliation and betrayal, and that perhaps the frozen fish represented an important aspect of her self—of her “freezing” of powerful feelings over time, feelings centered on issues of spontaneity, sexuality, and vitality that were too painful to hold in awareness or too shameful to give expression to. This resonated strongly, and she associated to an incident involving this “freezing process.” She recalled the time when her first husband had returned home, after a few days away with a woman, to inform her he was leaving her for the woman. She recalled how she had not protested; she had simply sealed off the experience, frozen the feelings. “I couldn’t stand the terrible humiliation anymore.” Several other memories emerged with similar themes eliciting similar responses.

She understood her tolerance of abuse as being strongly linked to this freezing process. She stated:

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I think some of my sense of early abuse came from all the hospitalizations when I was little—all the undressing, prodding, poking, and needles, and being forced to say nothing about how it hurt, how it felt…. It was an adult hospital, and I was not being treated like a child … I was so often alone in that room … I thought that my survival would be imbued with being alone and different from other children … I have this picture of being strapped to the bed, and all these people in masks and white uniforms and cold hands … I was so frightened. I think I started to freeze up my feelings then.

It seemed that the beginning of the “unfreezing” of some of these feelings began with Dan's hospitalization for depression. This had been a traumatic and humiliating time for her, flooding her with all sorts of feelings, many of which, we understood, deriving from her experiences with Mark. Clearly, these feelings had earlier origins. Her somewhat diffuse awareness of this assumed greater focus as she recalled her father's irrational and verbally abusive assaults on her in front of her childhood friends. She recalled similar “freezing” in response to her parents’ public drinking debacles, which would leave her alone, unprotected, and deeply ashamed. She and her siblings coped with episodes by clowning around, demonstrating “gaiety” and “apparent normalcy,” while inside she was in a state of frozen despair and frequently felt suicidal.

Although Barbara's “unfreezing” of some of her strong affects began with Dan's hospitalization, many of these feelings were undifferentiated, and she felt flooded, frightened, and overwhelmed. Through the analytic process and the increasing safety of our relationship, her feelings were beginning to thaw and to emerge in a more differentiated and focused way; although they were extremely painful, they were less frightening and overwhelming. Anger itself began to be more comfortably experienced for what it was, rather than being registered as simply hurt or humiliation, as had been the case. It took her mother's death and her subsequent grieving process for her to gain a clearer perspective as to the range of affects that had been frozen. I will address this subsequently.

**Dream 2**

This dream occurred a few months after Barbara's mother's death, approximately two years into the analysis. This period had been

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particularly difficult for her; her grieving process was being hampered by some incredible machinations regarding her mother's estate
and her "needy" and "greedy" brothers' relentless manipulations and "strong-arm" tactics aimed at depriving her of whatever they could. Her husband Dan was particularly passive during this time, cowering in the face of her brothers' behavior. Barbara had been reflecting more fully on her own wants and how these had always been hidden so as to protect herself from exposure and ridicule as well as from her own inner experience and fear of these intense needs and longings. Freeing up her anger in response to her increasingly clearer perceptions of the events swirling around her, she began to mobilize a self-assertiveness less restricted by her earlier terror of exposure and loss. As a result, she was able to identify and claim what she wanted for herself, in terms of her mother's estate, with a sense of greater ease and legitimacy. Enjoying her success with this growing self-assertion—and with having tamed if not gained the respect of her brothers and husband—Barbara began to fantasize about how different things might have been with her first husband had she been as "solid" then as she was beginning to feel now. She recounted the following dream during this period:

I was traveling on a plush train with Mark—it felt like the train between Geneva and Lausanne. We were traveling all over the continent together. At the beginning of the dream, Mark's mother asked why we were traveling together. I felt or said, "It doesn't matter." 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. In Cologne, Mark got off the train and was gone. He had left some of his luggage behind, and I thought maybe he hadn't left after all. Later, through the fog, I saw him returning. As he got closer, I saw it wasn't him—it was Dan. Mark had become Dan. I felt shocked and woke up shouting, "I don't believe it!"

Barbara's initial associations to this dream centered on Mark. "Sex was never very good with him. I think I needed someone less egotistical. I also never felt safe with him. Mark was so like my father with his cold, hard anger, which could turn violent at any moment, except he had more winning ways about him." But, mostly, Barbara experienced him as egotistical, exploitive, detached, a shaming and dismantling of her. We likened this to her experience at the hands of her sexually abusive brother. With both, she was left feeling shamed, "dirtied," used, afraid of sex. In contrast, her sexual relationship with Dan has

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always felt good, free, and mutually satisfying. What, then, was this longing for Mark? What of the remaining baggage? What aspect of Mark drew her to him but required that Mark be transformed into Dan at journey's end? I explored Barbara's potential disappointment at this transformation. She denied being disappointed and claimed instead that the transformation represented her fear that Dan could become Mark or someone like Mark—which would start the whole abuse—rejection cycle again. Maybe but maybe not. Perhaps the transformation represented a stifling of the old seductive excitement she had felt in Mark's presence, even more so when he was being "nice." A timely transformation would be necessary to protect against the inevitable pain and despair she felt when sexually involved with Mark. Like Dona Flora and her two husbands—if only they could be merged!

Further associations took Barbara back to her mother, who had always debased her for showing off her attractiveness and being interested in men. As she talked, she became aware that, in joining AA and giving up alcohol, she had moved into a world that differentiated her from her mother for the first time. Coinciding with this differentiation was a sexual freeing-up—"I started enjoying sex ... like I'd separated from some of her poisonous control ... breaking away from my mother enabled me to have sex"—an additional unfreezing of important 'life juices.' She made further associations to the previous spring—just a few months before her mother died. "I withdrew sexually. I didn't want to be touched. This went on for a while after her death, too. I also stopped cooking for Dan." Her mother had always hated cooking, and we considered how Barbara's withdrawal from both sex and cooking represented an identification with her mother that embodied the unconscious fantasy of holding onto this connection in the face of the imminent loss of her mother. This resonated, and she further considered her neck problem to reflect yet another identification with her mother, whose cancer had settled in her neck.

Barbara's neck problem began a week or so after her mother's death. She also experienced a bad case of hives around this time. She recalled having had hives as a child and that period having been a time when her mother had come through for her in an unusually nurturant and tender way. We understood the recent bout of hives as a body memory that connected her with her more nurturant mother. We were now able to consider her yearnings for this mother anew.

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Similarly, we came to understand the link between physical illness and the legitimization of claiming care for herself (e.g., her neck problem finally mobilized her husband Dan to assume some of the domestic responsibilities). During a bout of bronchitis around this time, she articulated a longing to be able to stay nestled in a flower in my office, "cozy and warm" and away from all the struggles outside.

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Barbara's neck problem ran an interesting course. Concerns about further nerve damage led her physician to suggest surgery. She decided to wait a while—a decision somewhat inspired by her experience of symptom relief during our sessions, particularly while she talked. A few months later, her neurosurgeon confirmed recovery of her nerve functions, and plans for surgery were canceled—an event that further validated her profound faith in the analysis.

Both cooking and sexual relations were resumed shortly thereafter, and Barbara's relationship with Dan has continued to deepen. Dan has shown an increasing respect for her evolving assertiveness and emotional solidity—with the respect coming as a surprise to Barbara, who had expected rejection and abandonment in response to her flourishing self.

**Dream 3**

As Barbara continued to work through and mourn her mother's death, she became increasingly cognizant of her mother's positive attributes. Interspersed with memories of anger and hurt there were now some warm recollections of her mother's indomitable style and courage in her forthrightness—attributes Barbara was increasingly keen on possessing. This stood in stark contrast to her earlier terror of being like her mother, whose strength had always been associated with negativity and as an inevitable trigger for rejection by others. Barbara's nascent identification with what she perceived to be my strengths was serving an important function in this regard. Her tears flowed freely as she talked more frequently of missing her mother, their daily telephone contact, and the sharing of important and funny incidents in their lives. She became far more able to tolerate her flowing tears and no longer afraid that they would overwhelm her or render her weak and unacceptable. Concomitantly, she was demonstrating greater assertiveness in her life, taking charge of her own finances and making important choices in a proactive way with less fear of repercussions from people who she had always perceived as needing her to remain docile and dependent so as to ensure a sense of their own strength and worth. The following dream occurred during this period, approximately three years into the analysis:

There was a whole group of us—friends and family—floating on mats down this beautiful river. It had a feel of some of our better times when we were young and spending our summers at the lake with lots of people around. I was on a mat with my mother... I felt very uncomfortable ... I couldn't stretch my legs or find my own position. I didn't feel angry with my mother ... I just felt that I had to do something different. My mother was quite distant but pleasant. She was a younger version of herself ... not the frail self of her last few years. I felt a need to break away and find my own independence but in a gentle way this time. I looked around and saw you floating on your own mat—separate from the group. You smiled at me. It felt reassuring. I found my own mat and continued to float down the river alongside my mother ... together, but separate. It felt very peaceful.

Barbara felt very excited about this dream and stated that the symbolic aspects of the dream spoke for themselves. Indeed they did. She talked about feeling freer of her mother's malignant control in ways that enabled her to stay more comfortably connected with her mother internally. She talked further about her increasing liberation from her brothers' financial and emotional control of her—a liberation that was occurring with far less anxiety about reprisals including rejection and/or abandonment. She wondered whether she had simply transferred all her dependency onto me, as she seemed to require the sight of me on my own mat to pursue what she knew she needed to do—that is, to find her own mat. Yet her experience of this differentiation felt quite different. She did not need to take flight or use other extreme measures to ensure separateness or "independence." By gently renegotiating her position, she could assume a more individuated place while maintaining the connection she deeply wanted and needed. She expressed deep sorrow that this had not been possible during her mother's lifetime and talked about how much she had always yearned for a reliable and close bond with a nurturant mother who could enjoy and celebrate her.

Barbara went on to articulate her feelings of increased comfort regarding her dependency on me. She said that she felt safer and less frightened that I would abandon her or "shoot her down" for her

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achievements. She felt that I enjoyed her accomplishments and that she was almost ready to trust that my pleasure would not yield to a destructive envy. She stated that her reliance on me was enabling her to become more self-reliant, to try new things, to feel less frightened, and to be less dependent on the approval and disapproval of others. She wondered how life might have been if she had had a mother who could have helped these developments occur naturally. She spoke about this with a quiet sadness rather than with the

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raw and intensely painful affect that had earlier punctuated her accounts of her deprivations.

In her delight with this dream and the feelings it generated, Barbara was able to capture much of the essence of her process in analysis: “It’s funny, I have this image…. When I first saw this couch in your office, I thought of a coffin … and here I lie, feeling more alive than I ever have.” I suggested that coffins had featured prominently of late (her mother’s death was followed by several other family deaths in rapid succession) and that her grieving had enabled a freeing up of important aspects of her self—a new lease on life, so to speak. This resonated strongly, as illustrated in her response: “I feel like a phoenix rising from the ashes!”

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