

The Pelican: Structure, Dynamics, Function and Meaning of a Nightmarish Dream

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A dream laboratory has just been established at the University of Oregon by Drs. Louis Breger and Les Davidson (Breger, Hunter and Lane, 1971). We are testing out the equipment (a machine that records brain waves, movements of the eyes and muscular tension in the neck), as well as the sound recording system (enabling the sleep subject to report on their dreams and the lab attendants to record these verbal reports) We are inviting some of the college students we know to come into the laboratory so that we can learn how to apply the electrodes (using a collodion glue) and how to interact with these sleep subjects during the night when we wake them up.

One of the first volunteers is Katherine (name changed to protect confidentiality), an advanced undergraduate at the university. I am one of the people running the laboratory and get Katherine ready for sleep. It is now fairly late at night. Katherine had already had several rather detailed dreams that she reported in the lab. Her ability to recall her dreams was remarkable—though there might be a fair amount of what is called “secondary elaboration” – always a challenging issue in dream laboratory studies.

We are looking at the pens moving back and forth on the machine as they record shifts in overall electrical brain potential, movements of the eyes and shifts in muscular tension in the neck. Katherine’s eye movements were quite rapid and there was increasing muscular tension. Her brain waves suggested that Katherine was in an alpha state. She was stirring in her bed. Katherine was also quietly moaning. We decided to wake her up. Following is a transcript of her report. “J” is the lab associate located in the adjacent room who is conducting the interview with Katherine (represents by “K”).

The Dream

J: What’s been going through your mind? (the standard question)

K: (voice a bit hesitant, still waking up) I was dreaming, I think . . . Yes, I was walking down a walkway that is raised above a garden filled with flowers. The sky all around me was bright red and I was walking, I think, from a building. I am in a wheelchair. I don’t know why I’m in the wheelchair. I have playing cards in my lap. I must be playing too many card games [said with a bit of humor]

I am going back in my dream. I was walking down the hallway in the building. And then I am back in my room. . . . I am looking at my dresser. There is a hairbrush on the top of the dresser. It is a brush with very soft bristles [said by Katherine in a very gentle tone.] It seems to be a child’s hairbrush. There is a name on the brush. . . . The name is “Pelican.” I don’t know why it is called that. I am looking in the mirror [she gasps] I don’t remember anything else!!! [she begins to softly cry] [long pause]

It was horrible!!!

J.: what was horrible!

K: my face. My face was horrible. Ugly, a big beak, scale-ly [said with a strong sense of disgust]. I am ugly. I throw the brush at the mirror and it shatters. [K weeps softly]

J: K, do you want me to bring you some water?

K: Yes, please [still crying]

J enters the room and gives K some water

K: It is horrible. I was a monster!

J leaves the room

K: I want to tell you more about the dream. I was wheeling myself down the raised walkway. There was a ramp and I . . . and I just rolled off the end of the ramp [K cries out loudly] There was nothing. I just rolled off the end! It was like I have to take all the tricks but have no trump. There is no hope. . . . That's it! I can't remember anything else. I am going back to sleep.

J: OK.

Structure and Dynamics of the Dream

Like many dreams that are truly remarkable and memorable, this laboratory nightmare provides us with the opportunity to view and appreciation both structure and dynamics.

Structure

This dream was framed in a clear structure. It began in the room occupied by the dreamer in some institutional setting (perhaps a hospital), then moves to a hallway and out of the building onto a raised walkway. Finally, the dreamer (in a wheelchair) rolls off the end of the walkway (a bridge). The dream does not wander through multiple settings. It is confined and well structured—making the end of the dream (rolling off the end of the walkway/bridge) that much more dramatic.

The dreamer begins her recall about three quarters of the way through the dream and then moves slowly back to the start of the dream. The dream reaches a dramatic and highly emotional point for the dreamer when she is in **the** room. After a break in her recall of the dream, the dreamer moves in her recall to the end of the dream, where a second emotional and traumatic point is confronted. The dreamer then ceases her recall either because the dream is done (she wakes up **then** falls in her wheelchair off the end of the bridge) or because she resists recalling anything further (which means that there was more to the dream).

Dynamics

This is a remarkable dream in that it represents not just the unique opportunity (available in a dream lab) to report the contents (and emotions) of a dream soon after it is experienced, but also because this particular dream (as a nightmare) represents (at least potentially) several of the most interesting and impressive of the complex dynamics to be found in dreams.

First, there is the process of repression that is represented in the dreamer's failure early in her recall of the dream to indicate why she is called the "pelican." Later in her recall of the dream, Katherine becomes fully and shockingly aware of why she is called the "Pelican" – it is because of her horribly deformed nose/beak. With the repressive defensive structure set aside, Katherine confronts not only her deformed face but also very soon her fateful rolling off the end of the bridge. As one point of trauma is revealed, another comes to the surface. Repression in this case serves to block a cascade of experiences and emotions (as is often the case when we are awake).

Second, there is the multi-tiered presentation of content and symbols in this dream. Much as Sigmund Freud noted in his original, pioneering study), there seem to be specific themes that are played out in several different ways and at several different levels. In the case of this dream, there is the multi-tiered representation of the term "Bridge." At the primary level (Tier One) there is the direct use of this word, as Katherine is describing her wheeling off the *Bridge* at the end of her dream.

At a secondary, interferential level (Tier Two) we find Katherine's introduction of a second meaning of the word "bridge." She holds cards in her hands and when rolling off the Bridge refers to an unfortunate state one can be in when playing Bridge—having to take all the tricks but having no trump cards in your hand with which to win the trick. We can infer the game of *Bridge* from these references. Katherine speaks in the dream of "playing too many card games." She later reports that she is engaged during the day in many games of Bridge when sitting in the Student Union – neglecting her studies.

At a tertiary, interpretative level (Tier Three), we can find a third use of the word "bridge" in Katherine's nightmare. The beak that she identifies with disgust is actually her broken nose. More specifically, it is a break in the Bridge of her nose. A third use of the word "bridge." Prior to this night of dreaming, Katherine revealed that she broke her nose earlier in her life and has been self-conscious about the shape of her nose ever since. It may be important to note that an outside observer is not likely to notice that her nose is in any way misshapen. In fact, by modern standards, Katherine's nose and face would be considered quite elegant—and she is often described by other people as being a beautiful (as well as quite intelligent) young woman. There is a major discrepancy between Katherine's self-image and the image other people have of her.

There is also the dynamic presentation of background detail in Katherine's dream. She is in a wheelchair and moving on a raised walkway, suggesting some physical restrictions and even disability. There is not only the representation of a card game but also the bright red of the landscape that complements the red color of some shapes (including hearts) on the cards. There is also the hairbrush—the bristles of which may complement the scaly features of her Pelican beak. Finally, there is the mirror that she shatters with the hairbrush. Does the mirror in some way represent her self-image?

It seems that the "minor" features of this dream (like the minor characters in a novel or movie) complement and enrich the "major" features of the dream. This dream, like most compelling dreams, is told through strong visual images – and not just the words and/or actions of the dreamer. It seems appropriate that one of the major indicators of a dream taking place is the shifting of our eyes (rather than movement of other parts of our body). We dream in pictures—not in words!

Function of the Dream

We might now pose the inevitable question: what function does this dream serve Katherine? It certainly is a source of distress for her as she recalls it in the dream laboratory. Katherine did not recall this dream

during the following morning or even remember being woken up and recounting this deeply emotional experience in her sleeping life. However, we might wonder if something of this distressing dream lingered with Katherine during the following day. It is hard to imagine that highly stressful, trauma-laden dreams that wake us up at night don't have some impact on our emotional life during the coming day. If this is the case with Katherine, then what might be the benefits associated with these attendant emotional costs.

In a previous essay (Bergquist, 2022), I have identified multiple functions that might be served by dreams. From an evolutionary perspective, one might assume that there are some adaptive purposes for the time we spend dreaming--and perhaps even for the large amount of time that seems to be spent by other animals in states that are indicative of dreaming (alpha brain patterns and rapid eye movements). I wrote about the entertaining and reassuring function served by some dreams. These certainly do not seem to be the functions served by Katherine's Pelican dream. I would suggest that the function served by this dream might relate most closely to that identified by two psychoanalysts, Thomas French and Erica Fromm, in their seminar book published in 1964 on *Dream Interpretation* (French and Fromm, 1964).

French and Fromm: Resolving the Focal Conflict

Thomas French and Erika Fromm were psychanalytically trained psychotherapists who were serving patients during the 20th Century in Chicago Illinois. While their training can be traced back to the pioneering work of Sigmund Freud, they offer an important distinction between their own perspectives and practices and those of Dr. Freud (French and Fromm, 1964, p.90).

Freud's description of the "primary process" seems to the authors to undervalue the thought processes involved in dreaming. "Free and massive displacement of energy along any available associative pathway," sounds like an automatic and mechanical process, not guided by any directing intelligence. Freud's next phrase, "without regard for reality or logical relations," confirms this impression. When we make a careful study of the dream work, either in our own or in Freud's examples, we discover that the dreamer's ego's attempts to solve its practical problem are guided by an alert and often adroit intelligence.

Their divergence from traditional drive-oriented psychoanalysis—with the primitive Id serving a dominant role and the super-ego serving an important assisting role—is aligned with a school of psychoanalytic thought called "ego psychology." From an ego psychological perspective, a strong role is being played by the reality-oriented and adaptive ego.

Specifically with regard to the role played by dreams, French and Fromm are of the mind that dreamers engage in "rational" processes when producing their dreams. The dream becomes a problem-solving venture rather than just a tool for the indirect expression of Id-based impulses and desires. One is to appreciate the creativity and economy found dreams—provided that they are correctly interpreted. French and Fromm (1964, p. 207) put it this way:

. . . .[E]very dream is struggling, more or less successfully, to solve a problem. The problems with which dreams struggle are always practical problems and usually problems of interpersonal adaptation. Our working assumption is, further, that the dream work can be resolved into a series or hierarchy of substitutions of one problem for another. Most important is our

assumption that each of these substitutions was intelligibly motivated. Condensations in the dream work, too, we assume, were intelligibly motivated.

According to French and Fromm (1964, p. 37), the struggles that occur in a dream are waged at multiple levels as the dreamer is seeking to solve a problem. Ultimately, if not easily resolved, this problem derives from a primitive focal conflict in the dreamer's life. In their identification of these multiple levels, French and Fromm are borrowing from Freud's initial multi-tiered model of dreams—as well as Freud's assumption that dreams have multiple meanings. For French and Fromm, the dream seems to be operating at three levels. There is the manifest content at the most obvious and accessible level. As proposed by most psychoanalytically oriented dream interpreters, the manifest content is precipitated by events and issues arising during the previous waking day. French and Fromm's view of the dream's functioning is unique once they address the second level of a dream.

At this second level, the dreamer is making use of the manifest content to engage in preliminary problem-solving with regard to the focal conflict in their life. Rather than addressing the focal conflict itself, the dreamer is addressing a problem as well as related sub-focal conflicts that are associated with the focal conflict. The dreamer is providing a “cognitive structure” in the dream which enables this sub-focal engagement to take place. Finally, at level three, the focal conflict is being addressed in a manner that is more direct—though symbolism, substitution and delay are mechanisms being used by the dreamer to manage the powerful emotions associated with their focal conflict.

I will try to unpack and make sense of French and Fromm's three levels by delving more deeply into their description of each level and by bringing in K's nightmare to illustrate how their ego psychological approach to dream interpretation might be deployed in the interpretation of this particular dream. I turn first to level one.

Level One: Manifest Content

This is one area where most psychoanalysts are in agreement with one another regarding dream content—and are in agreement with non-analytic observers of dream content. There often is material in dreams that relate to events and thoughts that occurred during the day prior to bedtime. Freud wrote about this previous day residue and of the “manifest” content in the dream that borrows directly for this residue. We dream about a meeting that actually occurred during the previous day or we dream of an interaction we had with our child prior to falling asleep. It was not unusual that someone sleeping in the dream lab had dreams filled with recollections of this unusual event in the dreamer's life (for example, having the electrodes attached to their head, sleeping in a strange bed, being woken up at night by “strangers”).

Considerable agreement is also to be found regarding the occurrence of this daytime residue in dreams. This residue is most likely to be found in the early dreams of a night. Later dreams tend to incorporate events and thoughts from earlier in the dreamer's life as well as content that is highly fanciful and unrelated directly to any events or thoughts that have actually occurred in either the dreamer's recent history or distant past. It is this “regression” from recent events to past events or non-events that provides “grist for the mill” when it comes to interpretations of dream content—and it is where perspectives on the content of dreams tends to diverge.

Obviously, one can conclude that the manifest content of a dream is just that: a repeat of those events that are most interesting or most puzzling for the dreamer. All of us have pondered about and rehearsed

a specific event that occurred previously in the day. We have all given additional thought to an idea we considered at a previous time during an event-filled day. The “slow-thinking” (Kahneman, 2013) that we do when carefully considering some issue often includes a review of previously occurring events or previously considered ideas. It makes absolute sense to propose that we also do this review in our dreams—and in our hypnogogic state while falling asleep.

It is at this point that the interpretive pathways diverge. And these pathways never cross again. Beginning with Freud’s revolutionary interpretation of dreams, the manifest content of a dream has never been left alone. As French and Fromm (1964, p. 164) note with regard to Freud’s discovery about dreams: “. . . the chains of association that lead from the latent dream thoughts to the manifest dream seem to give evidence of displacement of energy without regard for reality or logical relations.” While, as ego psychologists, French and Fromm are more interested in Ego-driving problem-solving ventures rather than Id-driven management of energy, they recognize as Freud did that there is a “chain of association” between the manifest content of a dream and the more elusive “latent” content of the dream. For French and Fromm this association is based in what they call the “cognitive structure” of the dream (to which I shall turn shortly).

Before doing so, I will identify the obvious connections between the content of Katherine’s nightmarish dream and activities that occurred during the day prior to her visiting the dream lab. As Katherine repeatedly told us, she was “addicted” to the game of Bridge. She undoubtedly played her accustomed game of Bridge in the Student Union at the University of Oregon during the previous day. Even if she didn’t play this **game**, it is fair to assume that she was thinking about and pondering a game she had played during the previous day or two.

There is a second piece of daytime debris about which we have to speculate. Did Katherine look in the mirror during the previous day – and was she not pleased with her looks. We don’t know for sure—but do know from informal conversations with her that she was often unhappy with her physical appearance—particularly her nose which was prominent. Though Katherine’s nose was a major feature of her face, it was quite elegant and a bit Romanesque. By most standards of the time, her nose and overall face would be considered “beautiful” –not ugly—by most people Katherine would encounter. Many a Hollywood actress would “give a fortune” to have a face like Katherine’s. Yet, she views her prominent feature (nose) as “ugly.”

I would also like to note several other features in the dream that relate to its manifest content. First, the sky outside the building is bright red. Second, it is worth noting that there is no one else in the dream – just Katherine and the cards. Third, Katherine is confined to and supported by the hallway and walkway—even the bridge. She is also confined to a wheelchair (at least during the last portion of the dream). The garden below the walkway is noted; however, there is very little reference to this element in the dream.

The manifest elements of the dream can play an important role in its dynamic, multi-tiered property. The wheelchair, for instance, serves a multi-tiered functional purpose, suggesting both that there has been an injury or that the person in the wheelchair is old (a step toward death). The red sky serves a multi-tiered symbolic purpose, representing the red in a deck of cards (bridge), the color of sunset (death), and the color of blood (injury). French and Fromm have quite a bit to say about the way the manifest elements are used in a dream. It is all about “cognitive structure.”

Cognitive Structure

We can turn directly to French and Fromm's words (1964, p. 38) to find out how they propose that manifest content gets employed by a dreamer to address important issues in their life:

We use the term "cognitive structure" to designate the way in which the meanings of a dream fit together and the way that they fit into the context of the dreamer's situation in real life. We think of the cognitive structure of a dream as a constellation of related problems. In this constellation, there is usually one problem on which deeper problems converge and from which more superficial problems radiate. This [is] the dreamer's focal problem at the moment of dreaming. Every focal conflict is a reaction to some event or emotional situation of the preceding day which served as a "precipitating stimulus."

French and Fromm (1964, p. 61) are particularly interested in deeply felt conflicts regarding interpersonal relationships. When interpreting a dream and working with their therapy clients, these two psychoanalysts are particularly interested in discovering what guides us in our attempt to fit into groups to which we belong. If they were to work with Katherine regarding her interpersonal relationships, then they would soon discover that Katherine draws a distinction between her Bridge friends **and** her friends who do not play Bridge with her. They would find that Katherine has very few non-bridge friends. The guiding structure for Katherine in her relationships with other people seems to be grounded in a formal set of rules regarding how to relate to one another (as found in the game of Bridge). Furthermore, while the relationships are friendly, they are also tinged with competition (as in the game of Bridge).

Strong relationships can be formed (as is the case with one's partner in playing Bridge); however, these relationships may be temporary (shifting partners). Furthermore, for Katherine these relationships are oriented toward the collaborative achievement of something together--as in winning a game of Bridge with one's partner (or agreeing to participate with people she knows in the dream lab). It might also be informative to note that Katherine decided after graduating from the University of Oregon to work in the field of special education. This work provided her with a structured setting in which to relate to other people. Furthermore, this is a setting in which she had considerable control and held a position of authority over people who required assistance. In other words, Katherine held all of the trump cards when assisting people with special needs.

For French and Fromm, the focus could now turn to the identification of characters, actions, settings and events in the dream that point to and help to "resolve" issues of major importance. This is where these two analysts are striking out in new, uncharted territory regarding dream interpretation. As note in the subtitle of their book, they are offered a "new approach."

Level Two: Sub-focal Conflicts

We begin this consideration of second level interpretation by once again turning directly to the words offered by French and Fromm (1964, p. 40):

We often succeed in recognizing the focal conflict on which the dreamer's interest is for the moment centered, but underneath this focal conflict there is always a whole constellation of "sub-focal" conflicts, some of them dating back to the "prehistory" of the patient's infancy. We

speak of a constellation because we expect to find that these conflicts are closely related to one another.

Cognitive Structure: For French and Fromm, the level two content of a dream is directly linked to the dream's manifest content. It is through the cognitive structure of the dream that this linkage takes place. This cognitive structure, in turn, preserves the direct meaning of the manifest content while hinting at another meaning. We don't need fancy symbolic representations (as found in many "Dream dictionaries") nor do we need universal thematic archetypes such as the Jungians are offering. Rather it is a small step to the representation of sub-focal conflicts—especially when these representations often come in a cluster and appear repeatedly on our dreams (French and Fromm, 1964 p. 40).

It is as if the sub-focal conflicts are screaming out for our attention. They are not hidden in a veil. They are not to be seen "through a glass darkly." Rather, they are presented in a manner that points the way toward resolution. They offer "out-of-the-box" perspectives and practices. "Divergent" ways of seeing and working on the problem are offered in the "safe environment" of the dream. No real-life action is taking during the dream (we are asleep after all!), so we can "make believe" and do some pilot testing. As Deirdre Barrett (2001) noted in *The Committee of Sleep* the sub-focal conflicts that often have arisen during the previous day (and are represented in the manifest content of the dream) can be solved or at least managed through the creative problem-solving processes of the dream.

Hypothetical examples of Sub-Focal Conflicts: The sub-focal conflict might reside in our attempt to be heard during a meeting held yesterday. In the dream, we are naked and have been dancing on the table. We did get everyone's attention. The "answer" to this sub-focal conflict might reside in our being candid in our comments during the meeting. We might have to risk being vulnerable (naked) in order to be heard and have some influence. At the very least, we might have to offer our suggestions in a dramatic manner that can't be ignored. We don't have to dance on the table, but we might need to offer a compelling description of how our idea would have an impact or we might have to offer some quite telling graphics (perhaps a powerful power point presentation) to get attention.

Perhaps the sub-focal conflict resides at a more personal level. We have had a fight with our spouse three hours before going to bed. We simmer with rage regarding the way in which our loved one "mistreated" us and "misrepresented" the struggle we are having in managing our finances. Sometime during the night, we have a dream in which we are standing (and swaying) with our spouse on a tightrope that is strung somehow between our current home and the home we lived in when we were first married. Our spouse is holding our hand and we are asking a trusted friend to lower the tightrope so that it is now only about one foot above the ground. We can now step off the tightrope with our spouse and detach it from our old home.

This dream might be "teaching" us about how big a financial risk we are taking right now. We might have to lower the tightrope a bit so that we are now so far above the ground. Do we have someone in our life (perhaps a financial advisory) who can help us with our financial management. We also might wish to somehow "unhook" from the financial battles we had earlier in our life together as a couple. There are "old ways" of viewing our finances that must be discarded if we are to deal with the "reality" of our current marriage and financial state. Perhaps this dream can be shared with our spouse and together we can take some appropriate actions and request some needed assistance from a financial advisor.

Katherine's Sub-Focal Conflict(s): Back to Katherine. Her interpersonal problem resides not in a meeting that she is attending nor in financial struggles with a life partner—for she is not yet working in an organization and has not yet established a loving relationship with someone. Rather, she is experiencing difficult relationships with other people—except when playing card games. At the present time, Katherine can remain distant and emotionally **detached** from other people in her life when she engaged with them in a rule-based format and when she can be competitive in her relationships with other people.

There might even be a side benefit for Katherine. She knows when she has won and lost—and perhaps she hates to lose. As French and Fromm suggest there might be a cluster of sub-conflicts that are represented in Katherine's dreams—formal, rule-based relationships that are “safe” for her intermix with Katherine's competitive urges. There might even be a related sub-conflict concerning Katherine's desire to be a successful student (competition) while also wishing to escape from the strictures of formal course work at her university. Card games at the Student Union provide a wonderful escape route.

We can take this sub-focal conflict one step further by turning to French and Fromm's observations regarding what they call “empathic understanding (French and Fromm, 1964, pp. 145-146).” While these two analysts were using this term to identify a critical perspective to be engaged by anyone doing therapy and providing dream interpretations, their observations seem also to apply to the struggles Katherine were having in establishing open and “spontaneous” relationships with other people outside the game of cards. For French and Fromm, empathic understanding comes in a full appreciation for the multi-tiered way in which people communicate with one another. There is a “language of the unconscious” (French and Fromm, 1964, p. 100) which a therapist can discern in their patient's reporting during a therapy session of their activities, feelings – and dreams.

While Katherine doesn't have to display the level of “empathic understanding” required of the successful therapist, she does have to be appreciative of the many ways in which the thoughts and feelings of other people in her life are conveyed—outside the structure of a card game. She must be open to the spontaneity of “authentic” interactions. All of this, in turn, requires that Katherine absorb what is now called a “theory of mind.” This is the recognition (“theory”) that other people have their own independent thoughts and feelings that are likely to differ from one's own thoughts and feelings. While it is easy, in a game of Bridge, to anticipate how another player is thinking and feeling about the game, it is a whole different matter when anticipating what another person is thinking and feeling outside the game—especially if this is someone whom we care about or who cares deeply about us. Our “theory of mind” must be capable of withstanding the emotional pressures that lead to distortion in an intimate loving relationship (Bergquist, 2022).

Personal Symbols

The first and most important point made by French and Fromm regarding the symbolic representations in dreams is that they are not amenable to any universal interpretation. These two analysts would seem to suggest that we throw out any dictionary of dream symbols. We should shy away from answering any suggest made by a friend to tell them what their dream “means.” As French and Fromm (1964, p. 87) conclude from their own work: *Dreams are Personal*. Dreams were never intended to be communicated to other people—they are for “private use.”

It is interesting to note that dreamers tend to shut down after several days of disclosing their dreams in a laboratory. This shutting down tends to occur even when the dreamer can't recall any of their dreams. While other factors might account for at least some of these outcomes (such as the loss of sleep in the lab), I have found in my own work in the dream lab that it was not a good policy to ask a subject to spend more than three nights in the lab—for their own welfare as someone who needs both sleep and dreams.

French and Fromm offer a second, related conclusion: dreams were never meant to make sense for other people. They are highly personalized and unique problem-solving ventures that are often very insightful and creative precisely because they are tailored specifically for this dreamer. As we have already mentioned, Deirdre Barrett (2001) proposes that dreams are populated by one's own personal committee of "experts." These are characters in the dream (as well as events and settings) that at some level "know" all about this person's past experiences and present day needs and fears.

Internalization of Symbolic Representations: Given these cautionary notes, French and Fromm do offer several generally applicable observations about the symbols being used in dreams. They suggest that symbolic representations are first provided to us during our childhood. They generally precede words in the way that they are used to communicate something of importance to us as young children. There are the obvious examples: Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, the American flag. Somewhat more elusive symbols are found in the child's relationship to their parents (who are all good or all bad – the symbolic splitting function approach emphasized by object relation theorists). Children also approach the rules of games that they play in a symbolic manner-- the rules come from some higher source (much as in the case of rituals associated with the display of one's national flag).

French and Fromm (1964, p. 136) turn to the work of Jean Piaget with regard to the concrete operations being engaged by children. French and Fromm note how a child will assign symbolic status to some external entity or event (such as receiving a piece of candy as a reward) so that they can, in turn, internalize this symbolized entity or event. In this internalization, the child is now able to incorporate the entity or event in their own fantasy life. The object relations theorists (providing a version of psychoanalysis that differs in many respects from ego psychologists) write about the way in which the symbolized content as a set of psychological "objects" can be engaged in a wide variety of ways that may or may not align very well with the real world.

In a similar manner, a dream can operate in a concrete manner with objects in the dream taking on symbolic significance. These objects can, in turn, be manipulated on behalf of the dreamer's attempt to address sub-focal conflicts or the fundamental focal conflict itself. The dreamer is being ignored by people attending a meeting and eventually appears naked at this meeting. The dreamer and their spouse are standing on a tightrope. The meeting can symbolize the relationship of certain people with the dreamer, while nudity symbolizes the dreamer's vulnerable position when interacting with these people. The tightrope is a dramatic, symbolic representation of another type of vulnerability—that associated with financial matters.

French and Fromm note that Piaget identifies and describes the progress of the child's development beyond concrete operations to a state of formal operations that allows the child (now a young adult) to use symbols in a functional manner rather than embracing them as somehow being "real." It should be noted that the movement to formal operations also enables us to formulate the "theory of mind" that I mentioned earlier. We can gain a sense of what another person is thinking and feeling—which allows us

to distinguish our own thought and feelings from theirs. Our personal silo has been shattered and we can look freely at another person—unless like Katherine we are locked in the concrete operations of a card game and somehow still believed that this game represents “real” relationships.

Much like the artist, the young, maturing adult can engage symbols as metaphors and can use them to express ideas and display emotions that are often elusive. However, we “regress” to the childhood state of concrete operations during our dreams. We revert to the concrete representation and use of the symbol during the night—especially as we seek to resolve in our dreams focal conflicts that are elusive much like what artists seek to represent in their work. As the ego psychologists note, this regression in our dreams and in our works of art is in the service of the ego (Kris, 1953).

Furthermore, we are able to use symbols in a flexible and creative manner even in our dreams. At one level we treat these symbols as “real” and at another level as metaphors that can be manipulated for expressive or problem-solving purposes. For example, Katherine was “playful” in her use of the word “Bridge” to represent not just a highly structured card game, but also a physical structure and a structure of the human nose. All three of these representations convey something about Katherine’s need for structure in her life. They offer Katherine a multi-tiered Symbol that is carried, economically, in a single word: “Bridge”.

We are now ready to turn specifically to Katherine’s use of symbols, given this reference to Katherine’s creative use of the word “Bridge.”

Katherine’s Symbolic Representations: We might first ask the obvious question: why is Katherine called a Pelican? It would seem to be because she is representing in this dream as someone with a large, scaly beak. We soon recognize that this explanation is not adequate—for pelicans are not the only animals with large scaly beaks. Furthermore, their beak looks quite different from other beaks and is not the prominent feature when viewing the Pelican. Its beak is accompanied by a large throat pouch. And neither its beak nor its throat pouch is particularly scaly. Perhaps we need to go deeper into the reason why Katherine is called “The Pelican.”

We might find that the portrait of a pelican is to be found in Katherine’s childhood books or in the rhymes that she learned as a child. The pelican not only has a large (and perhaps ugly) throat pouch, this water fowl uses this pouch to store the fish that it catches. It can store a large quantity of fish – much more than other birds that catch fish. This means that the pelican is capable of devouring a large number of fish that have been stored in its pouch.

There is even a somewhat irreverent (“naughty”) rhyme about the Pelican that most people have heard sometimes during their childhood. It comes in two versions and mentions the Pelican’s beak and capacity to store a large amount of food:

A wonderful bird is the pelican,
His bill will hold more than his belican,
He can take in his beak
Enough food for a week
But I’m damned if I see how the helican!

Another version: A funny old bird is a pelican.
His beak can hold more than his belican.
Food for a week
He can hold in his beak,
But I don’t know how the helican.

Given the visual representation of the Pelican with the large throat pouch (this is actually only one type of Pelican) and given the accompanying rhyme, the young Katherine might have considered the pelican to be symbolic of Gluttony and (more generally) Greed--given that its pouch can hold more than his belly

can (actually consume and digest). Does Katherine worry about being a Glutton—given that her weight may be part of her struggles with a distorted, negative self-image (she is in fact a bit slim)? Is her competitive spirit in playing a game of Bridge evidence of Greed (her “need” to always win)? We might find that Katherine has symbolized the Pelican (as Gluttony and Greed) and internalized this symbol—so that she can insert it in her dream so that it can “scare the hell out her.” The Pelican shouldn’t do that to Katherine. The Pelican responds: the “hellican!” We can push further: is Katherine being punished for her Gluttony and Greed by being given an ugly beak and eventually being rolled off the end of a bridge to her death? These are indeed symbolic representations that are very personal for and privately held by Katherine.

Level Three: Focal Conflict

When moving to the identification of focal conflict in a dream, it is appropriate to look for the emotions—especially as invested in a particular person or event in the dream. Psychoanalysts speak of this as the process of Cathexis (French and Fromm, 1964, p. 45). A specific object, idea or person is invested with mental and emotional energy – often a combination of thoughts and feelings. Stated somewhat differently, our role as explorer of the focal conflict requires that we travel to a deeper and more emotional domain. We are also moving in most cases to an earlier time in our life and to more primitive (and usually more vivid) imagery.

Perhaps of greatest importance is the source of the emotions that are generated. These emotions are often based on “unreal” threats (and hopes). These are the “bogie men” who resided beneath our beds when we were young, as well as the brave warriors and lovely princesses we will be when we “grow up.” We know that we are coming close to the focal conflict when “regression” (to an earlier time in our life or to a more primitive state of cognitive processing) is fully in force.

We also know that we are approaching an area of Cathexis – and the focal conflict – when one of two defensive maneuvers that are identified by French and Fromm are in operation. These maneuvers are substitution and delay. It should be noted that these defenses also operate when we are awake and are vaguely aware that we are about to step in some very “nasty” stuff (memories, fear, shame – perhaps an unsettled gut).

Substitution: A focal conflict is inevitably very difficult to confront. As a result, we often avoid addressing it while we are awake. We “wait” until we are asleep and can engage the creative and (at-times) problem-solving abilities of our dreams to address the focal conflict. French and Fromm identify several ways in our dreams that allow us to work at least indirectly with our focal conflict. First, we can engage in substituting (French and Fromm, 1964, pp.65-68). In our dreams we can substitute one problem for another that is easier to solve. When we substitute, our defense mechanisms are at least partially bypassed. It seems that the solution of problems associated with our focal conflict problem is more important than the fearful psychic content against which we are defending. One might even suggest that French and Fromm’s focal conflict takes precedence over Freud’s repressed passions and fears.

For K, substitution during her dream occurs when she is finding a way to take all the tricks without trump as a substitute for the much greater threat of being unable to relate to other people. Played out in the dream, this theme may relate directly to the daytime strategy of substituting the artificiality of playing cards for the reality of genuine (often unpredictable) interpersonal relationships.

At an even deeper level, we might speculate that confrontation of the dreamer with viewing her ugly beak in the mirror is K's substitute for addressing the much deeper problem of confronting her morality and ultimately her death.

Delaying: French and Fromm identify a related strategy for avoiding direct confrontation with the focal conflict. They identify the process of delaying (p. 69). We delay addressing the focal conflict by first focusing on a related matter. K delayed addressing the inability to relate to other people in a genuine way by playing cards with them (an artificial, controlling, competitive way of relating to other people). Furthermore, she delayed dealing with death by focusing on injury and physical appearance (the "death" of pleasing physical appearance).

Dynamics of Polarity: There may be a very good reason to substitute and delay when confronted with a region of Cathexis. There is a pull in two directions. For instance, French and Fromm (1964, p. 31) describes a pull back and forth in one of their patients between "the conscious purpose to continue with his psychoanalytic treatment" and "fear of reactivating disturbing conflicts from his "prehistoric" past." For this patient, the pull was found not only in their daytime psychoanalytic sessions but also in their dreams. French and Fromm suggest that this pull relates directly to this patient's focal conflict.

I suggest that this pull between two opposing actions is found abundantly in our life. We are frequently running away from a region that is filled with disturbing thoughts, emotions and contemplated actions. We are then drawn back to this region--much as we are drawn to a car crash on the Interstate or a brawl between two men at the fish market. Our Id is fully in operation both in the act of running away and running back to the scene of damage or violence. We might even be drawn back by our Ego to the region of Cathexis so that we can engage, like French and Fromm's patient, in "the conscious purpose" to work on our focal conflict. We realize at some level that we do have to address the focal conflict along with all of the emotions and primitive thoughts that are associated with and are cathected on behalf of this conflict.

This region of tension and diametric pull is not easy to navigate. We find that we are swinging back and forth before avoidance and approach. Barry Johnson (1996) has identified this emotionally laden region as Polarity. Elsewhere, my colleague Jeremy Fish and I have noted that Johnson's polarity is a specific kind of dilemma. It is usually two-sided and very difficult to resolve (Fish and Bergquist, 2022). Both sides of the Polarity are with merit and neither side can be abandoned without great cost. While Johnson is primarily focusing on how polarities operate during our waking life, we can find his description of polarity to be equally applicable when examining the dynamics operating in a dream when the dreamer is approaching their focal conflict.

I will offer a dynamic rendering of how polarity would operate in a dream. First, the dreamer would confront some person or event in the dream that arouses profound emotions (cathexis). The dreamer immediately turns away from this person or event—perhaps actually running away in the dream. Soon the dreamer "stops in their tracks." They realize that they are also enthralled with (or at least curious about) the fearful person or event. They turn back toward and either race back (or creep back) to the "monstrous" person or event. And then they are once again frightened and run away. This time, the cathexis might be even greater (with other people or events being drawn in to form an even more frightening "cohort of evil.")

Yet, as the dreamer races away, they become even more enthralled with the frightening person or event—especially now that it is a cohort of evil. We love the assembly of an army in the movies we watch and some of us are even more enthralled with the assembly of costumed villains to be found in the Marvel Comic movies. We might instead act a bit “grown up” in the dream (ego function) and decide that we must face this evil force. The third of Freud’s triumvirate (the super ego) might even enter the dream at this point. The Super-Ego induces shame in us: “what a coward we are to run away from this evil cohort. Be brave and return to the battle.” This super-ego function might be served by a wise old man or woman who is quite judgmental about our behavior. Perhaps, instead, there is a child who asks why we are running away. More metaphorically, there might be a wind (or tornado) that blows us back toward the evil cohort

Most importantly, we are likely to find that this swinging back and forth occurs very quickly. In our waking life, we might take a considerable amount of time in deliberating about and turning away from each of the two polarity opposites (especially if this polarity is being debated in a public forum). Time is often collapsed in our dreams—and this is particularly the case with polarities. I had the opportunity to attend a session many years ago with Karl Pribram, a noted (and controversial) neuroscientist from Stanford University. Pribram suggested that every profound change (at least at the level of neuro-firings) is preceded by a “dithering” action where there is a rapid swinging back and forth. The dither is followed by the change. This might be what happens when the dreamer confronts the focal conflict (or at least a cathexis associated with focal conflict). A Dither takes place, after which the dreamer either begins to substitute and delay or begin to address the focal conflict—usually by trying out several alternative ways to manage or even resolve the conflict.

Hypothetical examples of dreamers addressing Focal Conflicts: What might a focal conflict hypothetically look like and how might it relate to the two hypothetical sub-focal conflicts I have already described? The dreamer who is struggling with the issue of recognition in their work group might find that this sub-focal conflict points to a deeper and more primitive (early life) struggle with recognition in their own family of origin. They might have been the middle child who believes (and feels) that they are always overlooked. Instead, they might be the youngest child who is never taken seriously. Even in their 20s and 30s they are labeled “the kid” by other members of their immediate (and even extended) family. As a child, they were stomping their feet and crying out loud that “no one listens to me!” or “I am not a baby!”

As an adult, this person is still seeking recognition and finds that their childhood “tantrums” were both embarrassing and somehow “justified.” This is a focal conflict that might be represented in their dreams as a muzzle placed over their mouth, or, more subtly, as a theatrical production in which their role is minimal or abruptly cut out of the play. Perhaps, their focal conflict is portrayed in more archetypal form as a battle between two large monsters. Much as in the role played by Fay Wray in the original King Kong movie, our dreamer must hide behind a rock and watch the battle being waged by these two powerful forces. One final version of dream content that might be portraying the focal conflict: there could be an elaborate action-sequence in which the dreamer takes on a Paul Revere type role by racing around their community warning of the impending attack of some alien force (perhaps represented by some folks at the dreamer’s workplace or from the dreamer’s adolescence). No one is listening to the dreamer. The dreamer gets desperate and is shouting (and even crying) much like they did in childhood.

How might these representations in the dream help the dreamer resolve their focal conflict regarding recognition? Perhaps, the dreamer takes off the muzzle and finds out what happens to them or they

write their own play and feature themselves as the main character. Does anyone come to the play? The dreamer step away from the rock and tells the two monsters to quit fighting or to go home and behave themselves. Do the monsters agree or do they join together and gnaw on our dreamer. Perhaps our Paul Revere dreamer elicits assistance from someone else in their community would has credibility. Instead, our dreamer might simply leave this community and let its ignoring residents fend for themselves when the aliens attack.

It is all about acting rather than freezing in place and dithering. It is about discovering what happens when this action is taken. There might be dithering before the action is taken. The muzzle is taken off and then put back on. The play is on and then it is off. The Fay Wray figure might step out from the rock and then return to the rock. The Paul Revere character hops on and of the horse. Finally, the Dithering turns to action. The dreamer might decide to be courageous and risk-taking. As French and Fromm note, while substitution can move a dreamer away from their focal conflict, it can also provide time for the dreamer to envision a more productive, ego-driven form of substitution. The dreamer is substituting action for inaction and substituting active engagement in change for passive acceptance of the conflict as unresolvable. Fay Wray acts, as does Paul Revere and the playwright.

What about the dreamer who finds in their sub-focal conflict an ongoing struggle with their spouse about finances? They have been swaying on the tightrope (this might be a form of dithering)—but have been able to lower it and step down from the tightrope with assistance of a friend. Nice resolution of this sub-focal conflict. However, there is still a lingering sense that all is not resolved. The financially based conflict with their spouse ends up being a substitute for the focal conflict. The spousal conflict might even serve as a delay from dealing with the “real” issue. The dreamer and their spouse might see a marital therapist—but find that this isn’t the complete answer. They both decide to seek out individual therapy after recognizing in their couples’ session that something “deeper” is taking place for both of them. Their marital conflict is substituting for and delaying their recognition of more fundamental personal issues that might result from childhood experiences.

This daytime and joint recognition of substitution and delay by both of these thoughtful adults is replicated in our dreamer’s nighttime psychological work. Unlike with the dreamer who is seeking personal recognition and influence, this dreamer is seeking something that is not found through action. This dreamer is looking for what Erik Erikson (1963) identifies as the first desired outcome in a child’s life. This outcome concerns Trust. We can dwell on the financial tightrope only if we trust that we will not fall and that our spouse is there to help us not fall. Even before our fears about finances, we are fearful about our survival as an infant. We must trust our caregiver(s) to provide nourishment and a roof over our heads.

The noted psychotherapist, Harry Stack Sullivan, was said to have suggested that there is an even more primitive fear: we fear being dropped as an infant who is being held in our caregiver’s arms. We imagine in some primal way that we are falling and falling and falling. It is only when we trust our caregiver that we can delight as an infant in being tossed up in the air. This is the first of what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) would label as a “flow” experience. The anxiety associated with potentially falling is matched by the confidence that person tossing us is well-intended and capable of catching us. While flow is found in the experience for some of us of climbing up the side of a mountain, it is found much earlier in the experience of flying through the air as an infant.

This is why action makes no sense for the dreamer in addressing the challenge of finding security through a trusting relationship. It is not a matter of doing something. It is a matter of finding and accepting trust in the intentions and competency of another person. We can't return to our childhood and retrieve the trust of our mother or father. However, we can find a way to establish and ensure the trust of people in our life right now—especially someone with whom we have established an enduring, intimate relationship (Bergquist, 2022). During the day this means that we should reflect on and share some of our childhood experiences (especially fears) with our personal therapist – and eventually our spouse (and others in our family).

In our dreams we can address the focal issue of security and trust by imagining that we are sitting by a warm fire on a chilly winter day with our family all around us (including our now-deceased parents). Our dream might instead seek resolution of the trust conflict by providing an action-based story of some fearsome animal (such as a bear or lion) actually protecting us against an attacking monster. At a more archetypal level, our dream might introduce a powerful maternal figure in whose arms we are being held following our journey through treacherous territory. The key point is that we are being provided with some security. How does it make us feel in the dream? And is this enough security to make us comfortable with our own vulnerability – or do we feel like we still might fall?

Katherine's focal conflict

I suggest that her focal conflict resides at two related levels: (1) her damaged and now distorted self that relates to damaged interpersonal relationship, and (2) her mortal self that relates to her fear of death. The first of these related focal conflicts can be directly addressed through action she might take. The second of these focal conflicts is one that Katherine (like all of us) must live with throughout her life. Both of these focal conflicts reside in the unique human conditions. As social animals, we human beings are deeply dependent on relationships with other people. As transcendence-aware animals who can look down upon oneself as a mortal being, we are deeply concerned about our limited life in the infinite expanse of this universe. Given this general perspective on Katherine's focal conflicts, I turn now to a somewhat more detailed reflection on each of these conflicts.

Damaged/distorted self: First, there is her self-image. This image exists in both the physical and psychological domain for K – as is the case for most of us. At the physical level, we know that Katherine had some damage to her nose when she was young—and we know from her self-reports and from her careful attention to makeup and dress that she is sensitive about her physical appearance. Apparently, it is not unusual for a person (either female or male) who is strikingly beautiful/handsome to have a quite different and often quite negative image of themselves.

They might have been too thin, too fat or quite awkward when young. While they might have “grown out” of this less-than-beautiful phase of their physical appearance, the old image will linger with them. But in other terms, many of us (if not all of us) are living with a self-image that is out-of-date. While sometimes this delayed self-image is too our superficial benefit (as we grow older and find a few wrinkles and other evidence of bodily decline), it can also yield damaged images of self – as might have been the case with Katherine.

There is an even deeper wound associated with self-image. This has to do with the vision of our self as a “good” person or a “bad” person. Several years ago, the noted researcher, Carol Gilligan, was studying the development of young women—especially as they reasoned about challenging ethical issues.

Frustrated by the evidence she was getting, Carol Gilligan at one point apparently stopped an interview and asked her interviewee in an exasperated tone if what she was saying is “really” what she believes. At this point, her young female subject admitted that her response to this ethical dilemma was based on what young women (and perhaps all women) are supposed to say. Gilligan finds that most of the young women she was interviewing offered two quite different versions of themselves to the world.

There is the polite, thoughtful and caring self that they offer out in public. Then there is a second self that is something of a rogue. This self is perhaps a bit greedy, self-serving and even rude. While these two selves might be confined to the middle-class women that Gilligan was interviewing (and might not be found in young men), they might very well be found in the heart and soul of Katherine. At the very least, the not so nice Katherine might be on display when she is playing a competitive game of Bridge. This is the self that might block Katherine’s ability (or perhaps willingness) to establish caring authentic relationships with other people outside the card game. Is the Pelican representative of an ugly person who is unappealing and greedy (“her belly-can”).

The Mortal Self: There is another way in which to view the focal conflict that is displayed in Katherine’s Pelican dream. She might be addressing the fundamental existential challenge which all of us must eventually confront. We are mortal and are blessed or cursed with the ability to “transcend” our mortal self. We can look down upon our life only to discover that it is of limited duration. We will die at some point and must inevitably come to terms with what this limited life span means for us. Why do we live if we are going to die? Why does our life matter when we will eventually be dead and forgotten—the duration of our life is actually quite short (at most an instance) when considered in terms of the infinite age of the universe.

Research regarding the fears we experience in childhood often revolve around the matter of dying and death. As children we ask: what is death? What occurs in our “life” after death? Does death “hurt”? It would not be surprising to find that this fundamental fear is transformed into a primary focal conflict early in our life. We don’t want to die and don’t want other people we love to die? The conflict resides in a desire on the one hand to escape from any pondering of death and on the other hand from preparation for our own eventual death and, more immediately, for the preparation of the death of our parents or other people about we care (and about whom we are often dependent).

At a slightly more “advanced level” we take on a conflict regarding what we do in response to our transcendental awareness of mortality. Do we try to find meaning in our life and seek to have an impact in our world (even though we know that this impact is transitory and insignificant given the size and infinite duration of our expanding universe). Do we instead embrace the existential despair and escapism portrayed in disturbing song written and sung by Peggy Lee: “Is that all there is. If that’s all there is then let’s go dancing.”

Some of us engage this existential conflict through our affiliations with a specific religion or secular ideology. We find meaning and personal significance—even salvation—in these institutional affiliations. Alternatively, we seek out meaning and significance through our own personal journey. If neither of these pathways work out, then we just go on “dancing” (often with the assistance of sex, drugs and rock-and-roll—or whatever may be the current societally-preferred mode of escape).

For Katherine, the forces of mortality and related despair might be particularly powerful if she was “damaged” earlier in her life. Like others who have experienced (or witnessed in loved others) an

intrusive physical event (broken nose), Katherine might find this fundamental question about life and death to reside at the heart of her focal conflict. In the nightmare we find Katherine rolling off the end of the bridge. She has no control over this fateful destination (“I have no trump”). Even the pathway to her destruction is restricted: she is sitting in a wheelchair traveling down a restrictive hallway and a walkway that leads to the bridge.

It is appropriate and timely that we now ask: how successful has Katherine been in addressing the focal conflict(s) in her life through this dream? The immediate answer would seem to be that she was unsuccessful. The dream evolved into (or began as) an overwhelming nightmare that “caused” Katherine to wake up and to experience powerful feelings of fear and disgust. I would suggest that something has not worked well in our dream whenever we wake up in a cold sweat and are fearful of going back to sleep. We have confronted a monstrous issue and have not been adequate to the task. The scoreboard suggests that Freud’s Id and Superego have defeated French and Fromm’s ego. However, we must pause before declaring victory for Freud.

From a broader perspective, it might be necessary for Katherine to repeatedly confront her distorted and disturbing self-image and to confront the even more disturbing recognition of her morality. Can these deep focal conflicts ever be resolved? Is the primary “problem-solving” function that French and Fromm propose are being served by dreams just a “pipe-dream”? Perhaps, dreams provide only an “inoculating” function—they enable us eventually to become “immune” to our focal conflict or perhaps even bored in addressing the infancy-based conflict one more time.

Is it possible that Katherine’s nightmare served some purpose other than just jolting her emotionally (a moment of Cathexis)—a jolt that forces her to confront issues related to her focal conflict(s) as well as attendant sub-focal conflicts? Is this nightmare, instead, only helping to inoculate her against these emotions and providing her with the opportunity to “pilot test” some diversionary or delaying tactics—such as playing cards (with trump in hand!) or playing sick and old (sitting in a wheelchair). Is the Pelican and Bridge (physical structure, game of cards, and point of breakage of the nose) seeking to “teach” Katherine something. Perhaps, Katherine should symbolically get rid of her mirror (she shattered it in the dream). This would mean, in daily life, to be less obsessed about her physical appearance and to attend more outward (to other people) than inward (to herself).

This nightmare might also be encouraging her to step away from her structured life on occasion. She need not sit in the wheelchair nor is she confined to the walkway that leads to the bridge. Katherine can take a walk in the garden that reside below the walkway. The red sky might be quite beautiful to observe if Katherine were to become less preoccupied with the bridge that is located at the end of the walkway. The bridge, itself, might be quite beautiful if viewed from the garden. Can Katherine find time to journey away from the Student Union and begin to enjoy the natural beauty to be found in this region of the Pacific Northwest. Death might seem a little less daunting when matched against the turbulent power of the nearby Willamette River or the majesty of a somewhat more distant Mount Hood.

Am I being too optimistic or perhaps a touch too dramatic in suggesting that this nightmarish dream is teaching Katherine anything? Maybe, Peggy Lee has nailed it on the head: perhaps we should just entertain ourselves (“go dancing”) in our dreams rather than take on weighty issues. There is some preliminary informal evidence suggesting that focal conflicts appear less frequently in our dreams as we grow older. Formal research should be done to determine if this is the case. However, we need to address one other fascinating matter regarding the nature and function of dreams before leaving our

dream lab, Katherine's nightmare, and French and Fromm's approach to dream interpretation. This final matter concerns what is actually happening in our "psyche" (internal world) while we are not only asleep, but also awake.

Preconscious Realization

As we come to appreciate the complex and often creative processes being engaged by our dreams in an attempt to address the life-long challenges of focal conflict, there is an even greater appreciation to which we might arrive when considering how the dream and attempts at resolving a focal conflict fit into our waking life. It seems that the focal conflict is not totally outside our awareness during the day. This conflict "haunts" us and shows up indirectly in our approach to daytime problems and in the daydreams and fantasies we find creeping into our consciousness during times when we are relaxed (such as when we are taking a shower) or when we are distracted (such as when we are attending a boring meeting).

French and Fromm describe the "preconscious realization" of a focal conflict that occurs during the day. They write about a therapy client who is trying to keep his family together as "head of the family." During a therapy session he "comes close" to recognizing the fundamental (focal) nature of this conflict in his life. French and Fromm note that he "came for a moment to the preconscious realizations from which he then shrank." (French and Fromm, 1964, p. 81)

In describing the preconscious processes that are engaged by the dreamer, French and Fromm (1964, p. 188) offer an insightful metaphor regarding the cambium layer of bark on a tree:

Just under the bark of a tree, is a layer of cells which botanists call the cambium layer. This cambium layer is the actively growing area in the tree trunk. Above, it lays down ever new and replaceable layers of protective bark. Below, the cambium layer keeps building up new rings of wood.

Somewhat similar to the cambium layer of a tree trunk is the focal-problem level of the mind. This is the level where active growth, problem-solving, and learning all take place, probably the only level that is directly accessible to therapeutic influence. Above, this living, growing level of the mind keeps generating new attempts at solution for problems that arise. Below, it solidifies into the more stable structures of a healthy ego or into the rigid patterns of a neurotic ego.

I suggest that this metaphor regarding the cambium layer of the mind is of great importance when we are seeking to make sense of a dream. Furthermore, it is at this point that French and Fromm seem to be treading into the territory that Freud had already explored regarding the function served by anxiety and that another ego psychologist, George Klein, was about to explore regarding a remarkable phenomenon called Subliminal Perception.

Signal Anxiety

I propose that French and Fromm's preconscious realization relates directly to the Signal Anxiety function described by the master himself (Freud, 1936). One of Freud's theories regarding the purpose of anxiety relates to the way in which anxiety activates our psychological defenses. In accordance with Freud, I would point to an important psychological dynamic that is often ignored in the psychoanalytic literature. It seems obvious to me that at some level we must "know" what is fearful—so that we can

activate the signal anxiety and motivate the defense. As Freud noted, the anxiety signals the need for us to engage in repression of some memory or urge, to project the need or fear to some other person, or to make use of a more “mature” defense such as sublimation (finding a way to indirectly address the urge or reduce the fear).

French and Fromm’s preconscious process seems to start with something like Freud’s signal anxiety. In their case, anxiety ultimately concerns the focal conflict. As ego psychologists, French and Fromm go far beyond Freud in describe ways in which the defensive structures operating following preconscious realization. Our two ego psychologists, join Anna Freud (Dr. Freud’s daughter), Heinz Hartmann, Ernst Kris, and American psychoanalyst (like Robert White and Erik Erikson) in their elaboration of ego-based defenses—and the evolution of these defensive structures over a lifetime.

For K. the thought about physical injury portends death and dealing with **one’s** mortality (transcendence anxiety). Her focus on the game of Bridge would be accompanied by a lingering concern about her relationship with people outside the game. When looking into her mirror each day, Katherine catches glimpses of the broken nose she saw in her mirror as a young woman. The Pelican’s face might itself appear for a brief moment in the mirror—replacing her face as a young adult. We have all caught glimpses of ourselves as a very different person when looking into the mirror. We see ourselves as a kid and wonder what happened to this youthful demeanor. We find ourselves staring at the wrinkles appearing beside our eyes or look down at our hands and notice the loosened skin. “My God, I am looking old.” We can then imagine for a moment what we will look like ten or twenty years from now. This is all a form of preconscious processing—and it probably was to be found in the underlying life of Katherine during the day prior to the dream lab nightmare.

Peremptory Ideation

I wish to turn to insights offered by another ego psychologist. This is George Klein (1967), who conducted fascinating and often quite controversial studies regarding processes that might well be related to and might expand on French and Fromm’s preconscious realization. Klein writes about and conducts research regarding what he calls “peremptory ideation.” In essence, Klein proposed that in our internal world (psyche) we create a specific idea or image that begins to “travel” around our psyche (head and heart) picking up fragments of unconsciously held material (memories, feelings, thoughts). This process operates much like an avalanche—and other forms of what chaos theorist often label “strange attractors”. This train of ideation becomes increasingly rich and emotionally powerful. Everything is pulled into the “attractor basin”.

At some point, this ideation begins to pull in material from outside the psyche. External events suddenly take on greater saliency (more emotional power and vividness)—and it is because they are now connected to the internal ideation. Klein suggested that the ideation now takes priority with regard to what is valued, attended to and remembered in the external world. It assumes a commanding (“peremptory”) presence. A positive (reinforcing) loop is created, with the external material now joining the interior material—all clustered around the original (often primitive) ideation.

Klein chose to demonstrate the existence and power of peremptory ideation by introducing the concept of Subliminal Perception. In one of his experiments using subliminal perception, Klein had subjects look up at a wall where a picture is flashed on the screen for 1 second or 1/10th of a second or 1/100th of a

second. This picture portrayed a silhouetted tree in which a duck was embedded (shown in the black outlined by the white tree). One week later he had his subjects return to his lab and take a “projective test” (the Thematic Apperception Test) in which they were to create stories from a series of pictures that they were shown. Klein found that two of the groups produced a significantly greater number of stories involving waterfowls than did the third group. Which were these two groups? They were those who saw the embedded duck image for very short periods of time (1/10 and 1/100 of a second). They had viewed the duck at a “subliminal” level of awareness.

Klein conducted a second experiment in which the word “cheese” was projected on the wall at the same three speeds. Once again, subjects came back a week later. They were given a memory test that required them to recall a list of words after an appropriate interval of time. In this case, those receiving the word “cheese” at a subliminal level recalled cheese related words (such as cottage) at a significantly greater level than did those viewing “cheese” at a liminal (1 second) level.

Klein proposed that the subliminal duck and choose activated an ideational chain which influenced their later creation of a story or recall of words. Both the embedded duck and word cheese would have been anomalies. We don’t see embedded ducks or the word cheese on a wall very often in our lives—so an “alarm bell” went off and the ideational train left the station.

The peremptory ideation described by Klein can be used to expand on French and Fromm’ preconscious realization. Something in the external world aligns with the content contained in the peremptory ideation that is moving through our psyche. I can envision the external preconscious image or content “hooking on” to the ideological “train” that is passing by inside us. For instance, we interact with a woman who vaguely reminds us of our mother, and this aligns with an internal ideation that is moving through our psyche that concerns our mother or more generally a particular kind of woman or particular kind of relationship with someone like our mother. We know that something is a bit different (like the hidden duck or flash of “cheese”). The *Deja Vue* phenomenon, for instances, might be attributable at least in part to the alignment of an external event with our internal ideation. We believe that “we have been there before but don’t know where or when “Perhaps we have “been there” in our ideation.

While Klein focused on the internal, daytime dynamics of the peremptory ideation, I propose that this daytime ideation might precipitate or at least contribute to the content of our dreams—especially if the internal ideation is associated with our sub-focal conflicts or with our focal content. I assume that peremptory ideation doesn’t take the evening off for a bit of sleep on its own part. Rather, during the time of sleep, this ideation might be fully in force, without any of the safeguards or distractions associated with our waking life. While French and Fromm (as well as other psychoanalysts) propose that the manifest content of a dream consists mostly of residue from the previous day’s events and activities, we might add the content contains in the peremptory ideation train that is operating during our waking hours.

K’s Nightmare: An Integrated Interpretation

What then about the nightmare collected in the dream lab? Perhaps a peremptory ideational train was traveling through K’s psyche. Perhaps this train relates to or is at least triggered by K’s loss of a card

game. This loss could be interpreted (and felt) by K as the temporary “death” of success. Like an avalanche, this concern of K regarding the death of success could begin to move through K’s preconscious thoughts and vaguely show up in how she is “feeling” the rest of the day. This primitive concern and fear pick up other content (perhaps she fears not working hard enough on some school assignment—another source of potential failure and “death”). K might also pick up related affect.

We know that related emotions often are attracted to one another in our psyche. We are feeling embarrassed about something and begin to feel not only embarrassed but also ashamed, anxiety and angry. These emotions form an “affective” chain—a dynamic that is often evident in a psychotherapy session. The affective chain, in turn, brings together memories related to these emotions. We are embarrassed about our drunken behavior at a recent party and find that other embarrassing moments in our life come to the fore.

We then find that a memory emerges regarding a moment when we felt shame after being told as a teenager not to come to an event. Another memory comes to the fore regarding the time when our brother told us not to follow him to the baseball game. We remember being very angry and find that the anger is still there. We love our brother, but also hate him. All of this “seemingly unrelated” content and emotions emerge in what Frederick Bartlett (1995) would identify as a schema regarding our sense of self-worth. Other psychologists and therapists would similarly relate this emerging cluster of thoughts, memories and feelings to enduring schemata regarding self (e.g. Horowitz, 1991; Yung, Klosko and Weishaar, 2003).

For K, this would mean that her loss of a card game—a failure to take all of the tricks (perhaps having no trump in her hand)—relates to her own self-schema and ultimately to her focal conflict that relates directly to this schema. She lacks a sense of self-worth, worries about her physical appearance and, as a result, finds it hard to establish a “genuine” and trusting relationship with other people. Her “wounded” self-image and related concerns and fears all “get on board” the peremptory ideational train that was triggered by her loss of the card game.

Along comes K’s night of sleep in the dream lab. She tends to some residue from her previous day (including the card game) and perhaps to some content from her ideational train. K may also attend in some of her dreams to sub-focal conflicts—such as her relationship with people outside of the card game. Then comes a dream late at night that enables (or even requires) that K attend not just the manifest content and sub-focal conflicts, but to those issues and those profound concerns and fears that are most closely associated with her focal conflict. Ideational content and emotions related to her self-schemata and her focal conflict disembark from the ideational train> K has to deal with them and does so – with only limited success—in her Pelican Dream.

Conclusions

French and Fromm (1964, p. 85) recommend that three steps be taken in the “reconstruction of the dream.” We have taken these three steps in reconstructing Katherine’s Pelican nightmare. First, we are to find the problem that resides at the heart of the dreamer’s life. This is the focal conflict. Unlike French and Fromm, we do not have access to any therapeutic-derived data from Katherine. However, we do

know something of her life (both past and present), based on informal interaction with her prior and after her participation in the dream lab.

Furthermore, we reversed the usual order presented by French and Fromm. Rather than beginning with outside information regarding Katherine, we started with the dream itself and speculated “outward” to hypothesize about her focal conflict. We began with her Pelican beak, the cards in her lap, her wheeling off the bridge and other content in the dream. We then attempted to link it back to her daily life (especially her obsession with the game of Bridge and her concern about personal appearance) and to her earlier history (broken nose). The conclusion we reached regarding Katherine’s focal conflict concerned two related issues: her personal relationships and her ultimate fear of death.

The second step proposed by French and Fromm concerns identification of “the derivative problems that lead, by intelligibly motivated substitutions (or delays), to various parts of the manifest dream” (French and Fromm, 1964, p. 95). We have proposed that Katherine’s nightmare engages many daytime residues and manifest dream elements in pointing toward both the sub-focal and focal conflicts that challenge her in her waking life. The game of Bridge relates to an actual event that occurred during the previous day in Katherine’s life. Her nightmare has creatively bridged the gap between the real world and the world of Katherine’s unconscious life (even her peremptory ideations).

Finally, we have traced “the dreamer’s focal conflict and their patterns for responding to it to their sources in the dreamer’s past” (French and Fromm, 1964, p. 95). Though we don’t have access to any therapeutic records, we do have knowledge of Katherine’s broken nose and her lingering concern with physical appearances.

As French and Fromm (1964, p. 7) have declared, the evidence of thoughtful and creative ego-functioning in a dream (such as found in Kathrine’s Pelican Dream) is “so abundant that its significance cannot be grasped all at once.” I have certainly found this to be the case as I return repeatedly to Kathrine’s dream and find new insights each time. French and Fromm (1964, p. 9) offer the following advice:

In order to make full use of [the interpretative process] the interpreter must proceed as he would with a complicated jigsaw puzzle, trying to piece together first one part of it and then another, until finally he gets a glimpse of what the whole picture is like.

Making use of the ego psychological perspectives and interpretive strategies of Thomas French and Erika Fromm, I have been able to assemble a wondrous portrait of Katherine’s inner life—especially as it relates to her outer life and her confrontation with fundamental issues in her life. I know that a wide variety of pictures can be assembled from Katherine’s rich and complex dream. I hope the portrait I have rendered is an interpretive offering that you find particularly intriguing. You might even gain some insights regarding your own dreams and the dreams of people with whom you interact and might even attempt to help. I would like this to be the outcome of my work with this dream about a Pelican.

Coda

I had a dream last night, just as I am preparing to **publish** this essay. In the dream, I was meeting with Lou Breger (who very sadly passed away about one year ago). I was telling him about this dream and about **its** origins in the dream lab (which Breger established) and about my use of the French and Fromm

approach to dream interpretation (to which Breger introduced me). He was delighted on both accounts. I then mentioned that I would be moving on in future essays to other interpretations of dreams—often using dreams I have collected in years since the dream lab was concluded. Lou Breger seemed to be equally as delighted that I was looking at dreams from multiple perspectives and that I had moved on beyond the lab.

As I woke up and recalled this dream with Lou Breger, I was reminded of an old Yiddish story involving a wise Rabbi (of course). A young assistant to the Rabbi listened as a member of their synagogue came to meet with the Rabbi and complained about the mistreatment he had received from a neighbor. The Rabbi agreed wholeheartedly that this man had every right to be angry. The Rabbi declared: "You are right, absolutely right!" Our man left with a smile on his face—for his story and feelings had been confirmed by the Rabbi. The neighbor soon arrived and offered the Rabbi his own version of the story. The Rabbi once again supported this story. He told the neighbor: "You are right, absolutely right!" The neighbor left with a smile on his face, having found justification for his side of the story. The assistant was quite upset. He confronted the Rabbi and declared that both of these stories can't be correct. Only one can be right. The Rabbi paused for a moment and then declared: "You are right, absolutely right!"

When I offer alternative interpretations of other dreams, I can image my mentor, Lou Breger, declaring: "You are right, absolutely right." So, I move on to other dreams and to other ways in which to view the structure, dynamics, function(s) and meaning(s) of dreams.

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