

DREAMTIME

M A G A Z I N E

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Title and Re-Titling the Dream: Dreamworker's Parallel to EMDR, a Transformative Therapy

Linda Yael Schiller

Von Franz reminds us that when Jung spoke of the transforming nature of dream work he said, "It is not understanding the dream that brings about transformation, but the intensity with which we engage the images."



I live and dream in Watertown, Massachusetts. That would not have meant much to most people before April 19th, 2013, but now we have joined the infamous list of terrorist sites following the Boston Marathon bombings. Watertown was where the chase, subsequent shootout, and capture of the suspects by the police and FBI occurred. Having dreamwork be part of a healing toolkit became even more relevant for our community as people recovered.

I had a Eureka moment last fall. We know that working on our dreams can be therapeutic; we can

get insights into our world and ourselves when we grapple with the images that we channel at night. What I recently discovered, however, is that the process of engaging with the dreams can actually be similar to the type of deep healing work that is done in the body/mind modality of EMDR. EMDR stands for "Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing," a body/mind therapy that helps people reprocess upsetting and traumatic events. What follows is how this deep reprocessing works with dreams. I call the dream process "Title and Re-Title"—you will see why.

Titling the Dream

One of the best ways to capture what Ernest Hartman (2007) calls the Central Image (C.I.) of the dream is to give it a title. The C.I. usually contains the energetic core of the dream. When titling a dream, I advise the dreamer to let the title emerge spontaneously; not to think about it too hard. Just let the title rise up and emerge as you put your attention on the dream as a whole. If the title that shows up surprises you, even better—that means you've tapped into something your deepest self knows, and which is about to emerge into your consciousness.



Photo courtesy of Alan Epstein, Watertown MA



Photo courtesy of Stan Fleishman, Newton MA

The title usually reflects this Central Image whether we know it or not. We often start our dreamwork by asking for the title; it then serves as a signpost pointing the way to something that we want to be sure not to miss as we work on the dream.

While working on dreams in my own dream circle, Jen titled her dream “Things Are Unclear.” After we worked on it for a while, Marcia asked “So, would you give it a different title now?” Sure enough, the title had changed from “Things Are Unclear” to “Diving Deep.” The feelings about the dream changed too—when she initially titled the dream her emotions were “foggy and uneasy, vague anxiety, and I don’t understand what it means.” When she re-titled the dream they changed to “Oh, now I have a new perspective; I can dive down into that water and discover what is there for me, I am really curious and excited to find out what happens next.”

EMDR

Suddenly I had a Eureka moment:

“OMG—This is like EMDR!” The negative feelings associated with the first title were transformed to more positive feelings by the second title. Standard EMDR protocol has people identify the problem they want to work on, along with the negative beliefs that they developed about themselves as a result of the problem. Next they identify a positive belief that they would desire to be true in light of the problem. The level of emotional distress is then rated on a scale of 0-10. This discussion begins the desensitization process (the “D” in EMDR), taking some of the edge off the material by discussing and sharing it. Next, a series of bilateral sets that activate both the right and left sides of the brain are performed; this adds the reprocessing part. The bilateral stimulation to the brain is usually done using eye movements (the “EM” parts of EMDR) by following someone’s hand or a light on a bar with the eyes. (Bilateral auditory tones or alternate side tapping can also be used as alternatives to the eye movements.)

This accelerated form of therapy can often allow people to reprocess

traumatic memories in a much shorter time to get the same insights, shifts in perspective, and relief from strong upsetting feelings. Acute recent events can be processed in a few sessions, and long standing chronic problems or issues can get relief in months instead of years. (Note, however, that only professionals who have received specialized training can responsibly practice EMDR. For more information on EMDR, see www.EMDRIA.org, or Francine Shapiro (1996), the founder of the method.)

In dreamwork, we can move back and forth between the waking and the dream/REM state while processing the dream material. In EMDR this back and forth processing also occurs, and shares the qualities of alterations in consciousness. One can access both conscious and unconscious material through both dreamwork and EMDR. Dreamwork can also expediently resolve both short and long term issues, especially as we track themes over time.

Re-processing, Re-titling Dreamwork

The changes in dreamer stance and distress levels can be tracked as the original and subsequent titles change. We “reprocessed” Jen’s dream as we discussed it, made suggestions, and “aired it out” by using a number of different methods of dreamwork. (For example: using the Gestalt perspective of each person or object in the dream being an aspect of self, associations to and from the dream images, symbolic meanings, working from both inside and outside of the dream as Bosnak (1996) and others teach.) The energy in Jen’s dream shifted from uneasiness to curiosity and excitement. In EMDR-speak, she had reduced her distress level in the

dream (from an 8 to a 2), and was able shift her feeling states as well.

It is worth noting that REM sleep has been compared to EMDR in several scholarly articles, since both involve eye movements and unconscious processing (Stickgold, 2007, 2008). Brain scans have shown that the same parts of the brain, primarily in the limbic system, are used in both REM sleep and in EMDR.

While using “Title and Re-Title” in the dream circle I facilitate and with clients, I also used the GAIA* (Guided Active Imagination Approach) method of safe dreamwork with distressing dreams. GAIA* is based on Jung’s active imagination and Herman’s (1992) and Van der Kolk’s (1996) best practices for maintaining safety in trauma treatment. (See Schiller (2012) for fuller discussion.)

Here’s an example of the transformative dreamwork that facilitated a change from one title to another:

Wendy’s dream: I see that my father is a terrorist, and he is after me with a knife inside our house, and he keeps catching me. I keep trying to outrun him, but there are no doors or windows, I am trapped in the house. I feel terrified, and I wake up with a pounding heart and sweating.

The title that Wendy gave the dream was “Trapped”, and her distress level was a 10—full out panic.

Here is the context that grounds the dream. Wendy, now an adult, had grown up with an abusive father. He had never come after her with a knife, but had been quite abusive. He had died when she was 16, so he was no longer a real world threat.

Given this, one of the questions we asked was why this dream occurred now? As she associated to the dream, she realized that it had occurred just a few days after the Marathon bombing. Although she was not downtown at the Marathon that day, she was affected by the lock downs as all were in the Boston area; police instructed everyone to lock their doors and stay inside until further notice. No wonder someone with a history of feeling trapped in her childhood home would have these feelings re-triggered. Just adding awareness of the connection of current events with her personal history allowed her to recognize that she felt that her father had “terrorized” the household. Her distress level went right down from 10 to 6.

Next, I asked Wendy what else she needed to feel safer. She said that she needed her favorite white scarf as a sort of a security blanket. When she added that in her mind’s eye she felt calmer, I then asked what she wanted to do about the dream father. His image was so large, that her first task was to shrink him down in the dream, so that he was only as big as a mouse. Next, I invited her to look around and notice where the doors and windows to the house were, using GAIA*. Using “day logic” on “dream logic”, I pointed out that there had to be some way to get in and out, since she was inside but now was outside the house! Accepting this “logic,” on inspection of the dreamscape house, she noticed that the doors and windows had been there all along, but that they had been painted the same color as the walls, so she didn’t see them before. Now she had a potential out. We moved in and out of the dream as we co-created what was needed to seed transformation.

To further contain the now shrunken father image, she put him in a frame. Once she had “captured” him in the frame, she put glass over it, sealing him off from her. As she did so, she felt less attachment to him, and less threat from him. Borrowing from mindfulness practices, we noticed that attachment was also a state of mind, and that she could also detach from suffering. Thich Nat Hahn (2012) suggests that we “compost” our internal garbage and use it for fertilizer. Wendy “composted” her emotions of fear and helplessness and imagined them fertilizing her garden. When we went back to the dream now, she said that her father was just a tiny mouse-like figure who had no more power over her. Her new dream title was “Mouse Under Glass.” She decided at the end to put mousetraps in the dream house, and to paint the doors and window frames a bright turquoise so that they would be easily apparent. In waking life, she decided to buy and fertilize tulip bulbs now (in fall) for the spring. Her distress level after about 45 minutes went from a 10 to a 6 to a 2. The re-titling consolidated

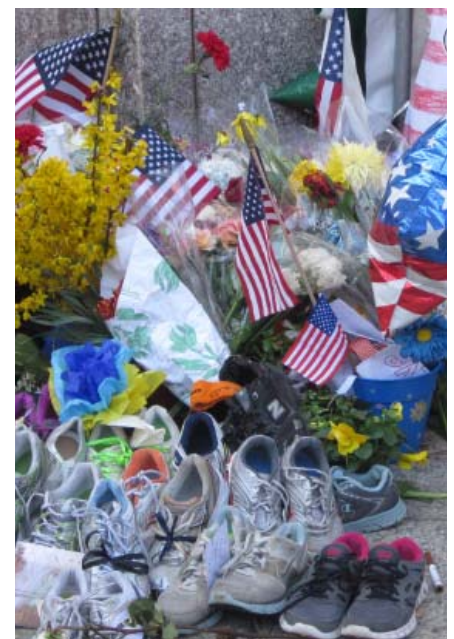


Photo by Stan Fleishman, Newton MA



Photo courtesy of Stan Fleishman, Newton MA

the work and allowed her to own the new feelings about the dream.

Here are some other “titling” shifts that occurred after dreamwork in the group—e.g. “aha” moments had occurred; connections with waking life were made; plans to address issues raised by the dream had been articulated. Watch what happens to the titles:

Karen, Member 1

Original title: “Broken Glass”

New title after dreamwork: “Picking Up the Pieces”

Her feelings shifted from grief, anxiety, and despair to hopefulness and empowerment.

Stacey, Member 2

Original title: “Earthquake”

New title after dreamwork: “Rebirth”

Her feelings shifted from fear, anxiety, and being overwhelmed to joy, hope, and lightness.

Rose, Member 3

Original title: “Dark Energies”

New title after dreamwork: “Claiming My Power”

Her feelings shifted from anger, fear, and a sense of malevolence to empowerment, strength, and zest.

The original dream titles all contained a Central Image that

was associated with distress for the dreamer. The new titles that emerged after doing 15-20 minutes of dreamwork reflect hope, opportunity, or some kind of growth.

It seems that something powerful is at work here. Although we already know that dreams can be powerful tools for healing, what was new and remarkable was the shift that occurred in long held belief systems or reoccurring distressing dream themes in a short amount of time. When the dream was reviewed weeks later, with attention to the changes in feelings, emphasized by a new title, the shift in perspective held solid. “Title and Re-Title” can be a pair of bookends to highlight this journey of transformation through dreamwork.

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Bio

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