

DREAMING TOGETHER



Explore Your Dreams
by Acting Them Out

JON LIPSKY



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Part One

TELLING THE DREAM STORY



Solo Dream Enactment



An Initiation Dream

Approaching middle age, I had a dream, which seemed, at first, of no great consequence.

Dream of the Shell & the Storm

I am twelve years old and floating in the bay on a rubber raft with Johnny L., my best friend then, whom I looked up to. The sky is clear; the water, calm. We are way out in the middle of the Great South Bay but have no fear because we consider ourselves experts on our rafts.

I slide off my raft and dive down to the bottom. It's not too deep. I see in the white sand a perfect little shell, the kind a hermit crab would hide in. I pick it up, pop to the surface, and show it to Johnny L. with great excitement. The color is ordinary—white with brown flecks—but the shape seems exquisite to me. It feels like a little treasure.

Johnny stares at it with a kind of blank look; it's just a plain, ordinary shell to him.

At that moment, the wind picks up. The sky turns dark and it looks like it's going to storm. I start swimming to shore as the waves pick up. Johnny has disappeared and it is just me alone out in the sea. By the time I get to the beach the sky has turned black and there are ominous lightning flashes. Up in the sky, towering above me, I see a three-pronged fiery bolt and feel the awesome power behind those thunderheads.

I see myself from a distance running along the beach, looking for shelter. There is a tremendous clap of thunder and flash of lightning; I am caught mid-stride in that terrible glare. As in a freeze-frame, my image is captured by that lightning bolt, a frozen moment in time. In that flash, I am petrified and illuminated.

This was the first dream I presented to my first dream group. I remember the event vividly. After I had finished telling the dream, I felt that I had totally failed; that my dream was really stupid; that everyone else had interesting dreams, everyone but me. What's more, I felt all churned up inside, frightened by the depths of my feelings, and ashamed that everyone could see what an emotional mess I was.

Of course, no one in the group said anything to me to make me feel this way. It was just what I felt, and I hid these feelings, even from myself.

I went to a café bar, really upset. I downed a couple of glasses of cheap wine and started writing furiously in my dream notebook, unaware of why the telling of this dream had brought up so much stuff. Over the years I've thought about this dream a lot. And it has seemed more and more appropriate that it should be the initial dream of my dream work.

I didn't know it then, but, just as in my dream, I had taken a dive into my depths. Dream work, I would learn, *is* like diving; and the deeper you go, the more pressure you feel—psychic pressure, of course, but pressure nonetheless. If you listen to enough dreams, you can begin to feel the pressure even from the outside as a listener. You can feel how deep the dreamer has gone into the depths of their dream by the pressure of the atmosphere in the room.

But I didn't know that then. I just felt the pressure. Sitting in the bar, I was aware only that this seemingly simple dream had shaken me to my core, leaving me exposed, scared, and ashamed. Why, I didn't know. It never occurred to me then that it might be the images themselves that had touched me so deeply.

If I had been more savvy about dreams, I might have written down a list of what had happened to cause my reaction: diving had happened; a precious object had been found and shown; a friend had been unimpressed; a dramatic storm had come up; a flash of light had illuminated and petrified me. At the time, though, I wasn't clear-headed enough about dreams to recognize the obvious: perhaps it was the series of images that had brought up my storm of unexpected emotions.

So, I wrote in my notebook the one thing I did know, though I hadn't admitted it to myself until that moment. I had chosen this dream over all the other dreams I could have told for a questionable reason: I was trying to impress

people, or at least fascinate them with one of my images, the three-pronged lightning bolt. I was aware, having read enough mythology, that this was the shape of the Trident, the power object wielded by Poseidon, the Greek god of oceans and earthquakes. And I thought: "Ah, here's something archetypal that my dream group can really chew on." With a smattering of Jung under my belt and a flair for the theatrical, I was drawn to the majesty of this symbolism. I liked the idea that little me could have such a big dream image. I even liked the melodrama of the storm.

The leader of our group was Robert Bosnak, a psychoanalyst who had trained at the Jung Institute in Zurich. He had a private therapy practice but was also interested in teaching people how to work with dreams in groups.

His main technique for this work was to slow things way down. Often we would work on a single dream for the entire two hours. The dreamer would be asked not only to tell the dream, but to re-enter it imaginatively: not just to see the pictures, but to go back inside the dream space.

Once inside, Robbie and the group would ask questions of the dreamer beginning with the most banal and matter-of-fact details: "What was the temperature of the water?" "How did the rubber raft feel on your skin?"

Sometimes the questions were more personal: "How did it feel to be caught in the storm?" Often, though, the questions would simply serve the purpose of keeping the dreamer inside the images, coaxing him or her to picture the dream moments over and over again in order to answer all the questions.

So we began the exploration of this dream with the most ordinary questions. What was the temperature of the water? Cool, refreshing. What was the weather like? Clear skies, balmy clouds. How did the rubber rafts feel? Secure: We feel like expert raft riders, who fearlessly ride big surf waves on our rafts.

And of course I spent what seemed a huge amount of time describing this shell, which seemed so special to me, frustrated that, no matter how hard I tried, I never could seem to convey its precious charm.

But then Robbie asked one of his favorite questions—"What's it like?" What's it like to show this shell to your best friend?

The first thing I thought of was my collection of china animals. When I was very young—six? eight?—I began collecting china animals . . . penguins, horses

. . . and these were very precious to me. When I showed them to someone I always expected them to love them as much as I did. They had (and still have) an honored place in my china cabinet. So showing this shell is like showing one of my china animals.

“And what’s that like?”

Well, as I thought about it, it felt a bit like opening night of one of my plays as the curtain is about to go up revealing my creation.

Inside the dream, in the water, popping to the surface, I could feel this mixture of joy, excitement, and anticipation as I revealed the treasure I had pulled up from the depths. I was hoping, I was expecting that Johnny L. would treasure it as much as I did. I wanted him to see what a great thing I had found. But he didn’t. He thought it was just an ordinary shell, not a treasure.

Switching points of view—another favorite Bosnak maneuver—I could feel, looking at myself through Johnny L.’s eyes, that I was still his friend, that we were still on this adventure together, but the shell was no big deal.

“And what’s *that* like?”

Well, of course it’s like the audience reaction on opening night when, even if almost everyone likes the play, even if most of the people are moved by it, not everyone appreciates it, some don’t understand it, and maybe even some people just find it (worst of all) ordinary, nothing special, just another play.

“And what’s that like?”

Sitting in the bar writing in my dream book, I realized that it’s very much like telling your first dream in front of your first dream group—full of excitement and anticipation—and feeling that it is received, not as a treasure, but as no big deal, just another dream.

Hmmm . . .

And then the storm comes up. It doesn’t feel like the showing of the shell to Johnny L. causes the storm. But that is what happens next—the two events are somehow connected. The dark clouds roll in, the waves kick up—lightning! thunder!—a sudden flash, and, as I swim for shore, high in the sky appears a tremendous electric bolt in the shape of the god’s Trident.

“So what’s *that* like?”

Initially, I had thought it was pretty dramatic. But as Robbie and others in group asked questions about this three-pronged flash, the more and more it sounded melodramatic, full of “sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

Not that anybody said this. It was just how I felt, hearing my own voice describe these clouds, these flashes of light—what seemed impressive, a dream treasure, was really just all puffed up.

Sitting in the bar, shaken by the experience, I realized that this storm was still raging in me: a melodramatic storm, to be sure. What had happened, really, was that all this emotion felt like some kind of foam, insubstantial, almost a cartoon. I felt exposed, as if my feelings were fake, as if I had failed to say anything of substance.

And this made me afraid and ashamed. I don’t know why it brought up so much fear and shame, but it did. The fact that I could not present a dream of any substance made me feel insubstantial, false, fake. My little treasure of a dream was not only unimpressive, it was without value. Or so it seemed.

Except for one thing: that lightning bolt had caught me in its flash, had captured me like a photograph, in a frozen moment of time.

“What’s it like?” “What’s it like?”

In my dream notebook, I had written down: “In that flash I am petrified and illuminated.”

“Petrified.” “Illuminated.” When I first wrote these down, I had meant that I was petrified like an insect in amber, frozen in time, and that I was illuminated by the flash in the darkness and revealed in mid-stride.

But as I looked at these words and as I worked on this dream subsequently, it became clear that they had double meanings. Clearly, the telling of this dream petrified me, scared me by how much I felt revealed by it. At the same time, in some strange way, this dream, my initiation dream, was illuminating, showing clearly, starkly, in vivid relief, some aspect of the alchemy of my being.

Since that time, having worked on many dreams myself and heard many dreams told and enacted, I have more understanding and compassion for my Shell & Storm Dream. Over and over I have experienced how I dive down to my depths to find my treasures, my precious things, how I try to show these things

of value to those I admire—hoping they will find them just as valuable. Storms accompany these actions, melodramatic, full of sound and fury. But while it feels like this process is signifying nothing, that's not quite true. While it is petrifying, revealing me in stark relief, it is, at the same time, illuminating, opening me up to unexpected revelations.

Even telling this dream now, imagining it revealed in this book, brings up some of those old feelings. The only difference is, I've been here before and I know the emotional territory. The storm is not so grandiose; the lightning not so petrifying. And even the little shell of a dream is not so precious. It's one of many dreams that weave a portrait of my inner life.

In any case, this is how dream work works. You tell a dream and relive it. In reliving it, you re-experience it, sometimes discovering new things, sometimes uncovering depths of feeling you didn't know you had. The dream cooks. You hold up the images again and again, looking at them from different points of view, and new connections are made. The dream becomes a foreign country you can visit until, over time, you learn to navigate within it and discover how its scenery and customs reflect on the activities that go on in the land you inhabit in the daylight hours.

This book, then, is a special kind of cookbook: how to cook dreams by enacting them.



Weaving Tales

Entering the dream story

The first step toward re-experiencing your dreams is to re-enter the dream story. We do this all the time when we wake up in the morning and relate to our partner or best friend the wild things that happened in the night. But often this is done from a distance, from a daytime perspective, remarking on the strange characters and weird environments, but not really feeling their presence. An alternative, which is much more satisfying and enlightening, is to enter fully into the story as if it were happening to you all over again.

Telling dreams at the kitchen table

The easiest way to enact dreams is to avoid the notion of “acting” altogether and simply tell them as you would in a café, or at the kitchen table. Tell the dream any way you want. Acting will happen. It’s inevitable. If the dreams have strong emotional moments or vivid characters or striking images, you will intuitively and instinctively start to use gesture and expression and tone of voice to convey the story.

For instance, when my friend, Anna, at a café first told me her dream about “The White Bull” (see p. 155) she acted it out without even thinking about it. Her eyes naturally got wide with fear when she described the bull, and her voice dropped to a lower register when she related what the bull seemed to be thinking:

“Since you are so scared I’ll put you over the fence.” And very gently he lifts me over the fence and places me down outside the field.

Demonstrating how the bull lifted her up, she automatically put two fingers on her forehead as a sign of horns, and showed how gently the bull lifted her by a small nodding gesture.

I look back and in the place of the bull is a tall handsome boy of twenty. Somehow I know he is my son.

In the café, when she tells me this part of the dream her eyes tear up, her voice quavers a little. Anna doesn’t have a son in real life; the depth of her longing for a child appears without effort or affectation. It’s simply how she feels about this image.

Good acting is being present in the moment. Like Anna, if you can simply re-experience your dream while telling it, you will naturally “act” the way you feel.

This way of telling dreams—as if at a café or at the kitchen table—is a particularly good way to start dream work in a group that is made up of people who don’t think of themselves as actors. By seeing the natural way people in conversation strike poses, make faces, change voices to convey what happened, it becomes clear that everyone is an actor, even if they have no experience.

All the same techniques that are used to tell a story at the kitchen table can be used for more theatrical presentations. Watching how people naturally tell stories is a first step towards figuring out techniques for Dream Enactment.

There is a great benefit in starting off with this kind of dream telling. For one thing, everyone can do it and you can't get it wrong. Whatever happens, happens. But more than that, it demystifies the telling of dreams and makes it a natural thing to do.

It bears repeating: people bring to dreams all kinds of baggage. Some find dreams hopelessly obscure, while others are scared they will reveal too much. Whatever the preconceptions, most people when they hear a series of dreams recognize that they are funny, moving, revealing, and common to us all. The baggage naturally drops away.

People tend to devalue their dreams because they forget them easily or only remember inscrutable fragments. Upon hearing other people's dreams, however, even the most jaded dreamer recognizes that, at least for other people, dreams—even dream fragments—seem to be meaningful. Often, the telling of dreams “at the kitchen table” will stimulate people to remember more of their dreams.

Finally, by starting off with this laid-back, conversational style of telling dreams, the focus can be on the dream material itself and its relationship to the dreamer, not on performance challenges that might be intimidating. It puts us in the land of dreams without a lot of melodrama and reminds us that dreams are ordinary reflections of our inner life. Hopefully, it also introduces the idea that dreams are fun to tell and listen to. Any group sharing a bunch of dreams with one another is sure to be moved by the personal feelings evoked by the dream figures, and sure to crack up laughing over the crazy, delightful juxtaposition of images.

Telling dreams around a campfire

Another easy and unimposing way of getting into Dream Enactment—but one which adds a little more theatricality—is to tell dreams as if you were storytelling around a campfire. That is, you tell your dream in the same way you would tell children a fairy tale or a ghost story: acting out the main actions

and playing all the parts. The story of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* requires that you put on a different posture and voice for Papa Bear, Mama Bear, and Baby Bear. In the same way, you would tell your dream dramatically setting all the scenes, portraying all the characters, and acting out all the actions.

It is a dark and a gloomy night. All the little children are tucked in bed, when suddenly they hear, oh! heavy footsteps on the roof—boom! boom! boom!—and a deep voice calling, “Who stole my big thumb?!”

In this fairy tale of *The Giant Who Lost His Big Thumb*, you would naturally make a dark and gloomy voice to describe the night, make an innocent kid voice to curl up safe and snug in bed, and, with your face, act surprised and scared by the noise on the roof, while your voice and stomping feet act out the *boom! boom! boom!* of the giant’s step.

In the same way, you can act out dreams in storytelling fashion.

Here’s a dream of Anna’s after she had become familiar enough with Dream Enactment that she felt comfortable to get up and demonstrate some of the narrative.

Anna’s Bear Dream

I am in my car and see, in the back seat, a cushion, like the Indian prayer cushion I have just started using for meditation. As I step out of the car, I see, where the cushion sat, a baby bear. Suddenly, I hear a roar. It’s the mother bear, very fierce, bellowing behind a heavy wooden barn door. I want to run but there’s no escape. The mother bear breaks down the door, but instead of attacking me, she begins to turn white, like a statue, like marble, but very delicate as if her fur were covered with hoar frost. When she is totally white, the mother bear, in formal oriental fashion, bows deeply to me. I bow deeply to the mother bear.

In telling this dream, Anna, who had been sitting at a table, felt compelled to get up in order to show how the mother bear bowed. She felt compelled, too, to push through an imaginary door to show the power of the mother bear to break through. These actions seemed all the more necessary because Anna is Swiss and felt she could not convey the images to her English-

speaking audience with sufficient precision without getting up on her feet and showing the action.

This suggests the level of theatricality this form of Dream Enactment entails. It is as if you are telling the dream to someone who does not quite catch the nuances of your language—a child, perhaps, or a foreigner. So you tell the simple and descriptive parts in an ordinary manner, but the strange and powerful parts you act out on your feet to make sure your listener gets it.

The advantage of this technique is that everyone has experienced this kind of storytelling and can imagine how to do it even if they are shy about it. It also begins to establish the kind of imagery that will be basic to the embodiment of all dreams: environments, characters, objects, and actions. Groups that are shy or inexperienced as actors will settle into more dramatic Dream Enactment by warming up to it through this kind of campfire storytelling.

If dreams were, indeed, fairy tales, we might leave it at this: just tell the stories and enjoy them for their odd, vivid narratives and images. But dreams are more than this. They often seem to resonate on a personal basis. They are connected in a mysterious (and sometimes not-so-mysterious) way to our waking life. And their imagery often seems to have layers of meaning, like a good poem or painting.

To get to the more intricate and powerful aspects of dreams, we need a form of enactment that is more sensitive to the nuances of dream life. We need to fully embody the images as if we are both telling it and, at the same time, re-living it. From outside the dream, we are narrating, relating the images to one another and to our waking life. From inside the dream, we are re-experiencing the events, not just from our own point of view but from every point of view the dream offers.

This is more complex than storytelling at the kitchen table or around the campfire, and requires a number of different steps. The following pages lead you through a process that includes choosing a dream; warming up to dreams; working physically and vocally with dream settings, characters, objects, and actions, and culminates in informal solo dream presentations.