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DREAMS:
THE INNERMOST DOOR

ROBERT BOSNAK

STEPHEN A. MARTIN

CAROL SCHREIER RUPPRECHT

PAUL K. KUGLER

The Role of the "Little Dream" in Individuation
by Stephen A. Martin

Many years ago, a paper was written entitled "The Imitation of Jung," modeled in principle after Thomas à Kempis' "Imitation of Christ." Its author, James Yandell, made a most salient point: He said that in our inner work the goal is not to *be* Carl Gustav Jung—that is, to ape Jung's journey with all of its riches, excesses, and tribulations. Jung in fact denounced superficial imitation as an escape from the burdens of genuine individuation. Rather, we are to approach our individual growth, our unique relationship to the unconscious, our own individuation, with all the enthusiasm, honesty, and vigilant involvement possible to us. Would that this were as simple as it sounds.

It is all too common to embark on earnest inner work with an unconscious, and sometimes not so unconscious, intent to have quintessentially "Jungian" experiences. Many of us begin by what has come to be known as "romancing the jolt," expecting the psyche to produce knock-your-socks-off, unequivocally archetypal dreams—visionary, heroic, dramatic, replete with strange and fateful encounters: magical snakes, golden bowls, hooded psychopomps. Perhaps the initial motivation to start an inner dialogue has been a dream of just such unusual quality, in which case the conviction is all the stronger. More often, however, the idea that Jungian dreamwork will lead to "big dreams" is similar in kind to the vague, though tenacious, presumption that when individuation is completed, at some mythical future time, one will glow in the dark with a bodhisattvic luminosity.

What typically occurs is something quite different, quite the opposite from this rather ideal fantasy. When we build a bridge from the conscious mind to some further shore of unconscious content, the first denizens of that dark country to cross over are usually the mundane impressions and perceptions that we consign to the unconscious mind

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simply because they are in conflict with our self-image. As if to irritate and annoy, the unconscious will produce all varieties of unremarkable dreams that seem meaningless or pedestrian, dashing any hopes of repeating Jung's pioneering efforts. The neophyte dreamer may well lose heart at this point and even feel inadequate. If this is happening in analysis, the dreamer may blame the therapist for not "constellating" the larger-than-life issues that glide beneath our everyday concerns like fish glimpsed beneath a sheet of ice. Therapists themselves are not immune to this feeling of inadequacy; some will claim that the absence of "meaningful" big dreams is a resistance.

Jung is not always helpful at the point when a dreamer begins to lose hope for those cinemagraphic epics that punctuate the *Collected Works*. We read *Psychology and Alchemy*, in which the Nobel laureate Wolfgang Pauli's dreams form the basis of Jung's understanding of alchemy as a psychological metaphor, and wonder if Pauli ever had an ordinary dream. Moreover, Jung says quite clearly in "On the Nature of Dreams" (1945/1948):

Not all dreams are of equal importance. Even primitives distinguish between "little" and "big" dreams, or, as we might say, "insignificant" and "significant" dreams. Looked at more closely, "little" dreams are the nightly fragments of fantasy coming from the subjective and personal sphere, and their meaning is limited to the affairs of everyday . . . Significant dreams, on the other hand . . . not infrequently prove to be the richest jewel in the treasure-house of psychic experience . . .

Thus we speak on the one hand of a *personal* and on the other of a *collective* unconscious, which lies at a deeper level and is further removed from consciousness than the personal unconscious. The "big" or "meaningful" dreams come from this deeper level. (CW 8, par. 554, 555)

The irony is that a dreamer's loss of heart signals that he or she has reached a critical juncture of great promise: The inner work cannot truly begin until we have relinquished a largely outmoded heroic attitude, the inflated desire to imitate Jung that all of us bring, in one way or another, to the start of our journey. In the words of a Chassidic master, if we cannot see God, it is because we have not bent low enough.

Jung's apparently inviolable distinction between "big" and "little" dreams is misunderstood if it is read as a distinction between sacred and profane or between Self-oriented and ego-oriented experience. He first used the phrase "smaller than small, bigger than big" to describe



Philipp Otto Runge. *The Child in the Meadow* (fragment of *Morning*), 1809-10. Oil on canvas, 12 x 12³/₈ in. Hamburg: Kunsthalle

the phenomenology of the Self, and in fact characterized his psychological work as an attempt to articulate the Self in everyday life. Jung said that too many people think of individuation as the process whereby the ego establishes itself, whereas he meant the process whereby the ego learns to relate to an unseen ordering principle that embraces the entirety of the personality, if not the cosmos. It is this distinction he was attempting to make when he spoke of “little” dreams designed to keep the ego in balance and “big” dreams that involve the relationship of the ego to the larger Self.

It is important to recognize that, for Jung, the Self was the psychological experience of the divine in human life. To be in touch with the “smaller than small, bigger than big” was, for him, to have a hand on the pulse of the deepest potential of our private and collective universes. Big stuff to be sure. At the same time, he also connected the “smaller than small” to the archetypal image of the child within, so innocent, so vulnerable, and so powerless, yet the empowering source

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Smaller Than Small, Bigger Than Big

Hakuin. *The three sages tasting vinegar*, early 18th century. Ink on paper



of our capacity to live life spontaneously, flexibly, and with the clear and pressing urge to develop into our unique selves. Smaller than small, bigger than big means the potential to become what it is in our individual nature to become and the possibility of touching the very sourcepoint of all human meaning and existence.

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The assumption that the small is paradoxically large and meaningful is at the core of all our major faiths, both Western and Eastern. We see it perhaps more easily in Eastern philosophies, such as Zen Buddhism, which understands our inherent divinity revealed in the round of daily activities of living.

The Zen student complained, "We have to dress and eat every day. How do we escape from these chores?" The Zen master answered, "We dress; we eat." The student said, "I don't get the point," to which the master replied, "If you don't get it, put on your clothes and eat your food."

It should be noted, however, that the central mystery of Christian

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worship, the Eucharist, is also a matter of food and drink. The biblical psalms devote many verses to the manifold nature of everyday life: the teeming of innumerable small things. Eliot describes the everyday world as “the visible reminder of Invisible Light.” From James Joyce we inherit the notion of “epiphany,” which he defined as the sudden revelation of the “whatness of a thing” amid the most commonplace reality. I daresay no one is a stranger to this kind of experience. But it has particular import for the therapist and inward seeker, because it is in the intensity of self-examination that one is confronted with and struck by the “mereness” of our lives. If we cannot sufficiently appreciate the small as a doorway to the large, the mundane as a “visible reminder” of the archetypal, then we will go away disillusioned—and for all the wrong reasons.

From this perspective, what are small dreams? They are visitations in our sleep that contain little if any strange, portentous, highly emotional, or patently mytho-archetypal content. They do not jump out at you. They are, in fact, most easily recognizable by our knee-jerk reaction not to bother to remember them or write them down because they seem so unimportant, so mundane, so easily interpretable. They are not obviously numinous; rather, they seem like psychic static that fills in the void until something really significant catches our attention. Here are three examples: (1) A woman in her late thirties dreamed that she was being considered for the job of librarian. (2) A hard-driving business executive dreamed that he was on a porch, looking at the night sky while crickets chirped. (3) A psychologist who wanted to become a Jungian analyst dreamed she was on a farm surrounded by sick animals.

I am using these examples because they meant nothing to the individual dreamers when they were initially fished out of the deep. They seemed irrelevant, silly, uninspiring, precisely the sorts of ordinary dreams that aren't worth remembering. But, you see, the dreamers did remember these dreams; they not only remembered them, they also brought them into their therapies, all the while dismissing their significance. All three of these dreams were small in terms of their plastic form and their manifest imagery, but were not small at all in terms of their meaning. All three contained life-changing possibility.

The problem at hand, even before interpretation could begin, was to value the dream enough to work toward that meaning. In other words, the value of a small dream depends greatly on the dreamer's ability to be aware of it. To come to this place, the dreamer must be educated, initiated, enthused, and at times pushed by the therapeutic

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process toward a new vision of the potential import of even the smallest, most modest fragment. Once that has happened, a dreamer's dream life can grow exponentially in emotional size and meaning.

Thus, an essential aspect of the therapeutic alliance is often the establishment of a relationship with the therapist through which the dreamer can discover and integrate the psychological faith that his or her process, limited as it may feel, presents dream material every bit as amazing as those of legendary figures like Freud or Jung. This psychological faith is the alpha and omega of the process of individuation.

Let's look at this process from the other way around. So-called "big" dreams are relatively easy for a therapist to work with. Their symbols clamor for interpretation. Our source books, symbol dictionaries, and volumes of Jungian writing answer our every need for universal meaning. The concomitant "big" feelings these dreams evoke are like large skeins of material simply waiting to be woven into coherent meaning.

The "small" dream is not nearly so cooperative. It is often simple and silent, neither opening of its own accord nor yielding to direct attempts to understand its meaning. Jung considered this aspect of dreaming as well, locating the experience in the symbolic world of mythology and alchemy. He spoke of Hermes, the messenger god in the Greek pantheon. In Hermes we find a most remarkable character, one who on the surface often seems pedestrian and self-effacing. Hermes is no haughty god, covetous of his honor or dignity. Nor is he much interested in battlefield victory or Olympian status. He prefers to watch over and reward the wayfarer and the thief, those who travel strange roads and are dependent on their wits for survival.

As a psychopomp, Hermes is the lord of the intermediate world of dreams and the night, a "guide of souls" who leads downward into the realm of death, our individual fate, and upward into the world of transcendent meaning, the divinity within ourselves. As a divine child, he stole his brother Apollo's cattle just a day or two after his birth, then placated his angry sibling by making him a gift of the lyre he had invented shortly before his larceny. His good-natured diffidence is legend. He has shepherded and guided many a hero, Odysseus among them. His trademark is to appear as a youth with essential advice in the nick of time, only to disappear a moment later, seeking neither credit nor fee.

As the patron of commerce, windfall, and crafty resourcefulness, Hermes never stands on ceremony and is interested only in keeping the flow of soulfulness or meaning going. Psychologically, Hermes is

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the process of working at a dream, the wit and the craft, the appreciation for nuance, and the willingness to trust that the essential will be revealed in the nick of time.

From Hermes, Jung was led to Mercurius, the guiding spirit in alchemy. Jung had already found alchemy to be an enormously rich symbolic system that described a developmental process remarkably similar to the process of individuation as revealed in his patients' dreams, fantasies, and visions. Mercurius is the cornerstone of the alchemical process. Mercurius reveals to the alchemist the secret unity of all things, the philosopher's stone that is right under our noses. Psychologically, Mercurius is the transformative moment when we get the message that what seems utterly ordinary is really alive with the "light of nature," glowing with potential meaning and simply waiting for us, the sleeper, to awaken.

For Jung, Mercurius ultimately symbolized the individual process of growth on the one hand, and the Self that guides that process on the other, just as the philosopher's stone is simultaneously the means to transform the base into the noble and the very goal itself. In Mercurius Jung found the archetypal correlate of the "smaller than small, bigger than big."

In other words, there is no such thing as a small dream, only small dream perspectives. By shifting our perspective in subtle, crafty ways, the small dream reveals not only valuable information about the dreamer's personal attitude toward life, but about his or her larger destiny as well. It is Hermes/Mercurius, as the archetypal pattern of seeking and finding, that enables a dreamer to see the sacred in the ordinary, to perceive fully—emotionally, cognitively, intuitively—what was previously invisible. As therapists, we must become, imaginally or symbolically speaking, "as if" Hermes/Mercurius in order to facilitate this transformation of vision in our clients.

We do this by playing with every possible association and amplification of the dream material, no matter how absurd or far-fetched. Sometimes we turn silent with the dream, ushering the dreamer into an imaginal state through guided imagery, a kind of twilight vision of the intermediate world of Hermes/Mercurius, where the dream may come to life again in a felt sense and tell us more about its emotional core, its content, and its potential. Sometimes we must embody the dream, as the Gestalt school has taught us to do, or travel with it over the highways of life, particularly when we have directed the dreamer to live with this self-produced enigma between appointments, either quietly or in discussion with others. In that way we

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hallow the small dream, giving it a presumption of bigness, again, in the faith that its intentionality will be revealed.

Small dreamwork is no high art, filled with masterful insight and Olympian-sized success for either interpreter or dreamer. To work with small dreams, one must cultivate humility and the ability to tinker, to seize the opportune moments. We must, as Rilke said of the artist, "... learn to love the enigma." This, too, is Hermes/Mercurius. But most of all the therapist must carry for the dreamer the utter conviction that in due time the switch in perspective will occur wherein the dreamer will get the gist of the dream, come away from the small dream experience with the awareness that although modest in display, that cast-off of a dream was more than what met the eye. The therapist must be a champion of the dreamer's individual destiny and a psychopomp, a guide of souls, for a deeper reality: small and large together.

As for the "small dreams" I mentioned earlier, each was a door to the core issue of the dreamer's life, a crucial step in the dreamer's individuation process. In each case, part of the work was to incarnate in the dreamer the faith that the dream was an important part of his or her journey.

The first dream was dreamed by a woman in her late thirties who had become mired in an unsatisfactory marriage and who had not adequately utilized a rather active and lively intellect. Instead, she had come to think of herself as inadequate, out of life, and completely unable to change. Her feeling about this dream issued from a quintessential small-dream perspective. This is really unimportant and meaningless, she said, I simply dreamed that I was running for the job of librarian. Above her protestations of smallness, I asked her to tell me about libraries.

She said that she loved libraries and could spend hours in them. Then, suddenly, tears started streaming down her face. She was startled and embarrassed; she had no idea why she was crying. All at once it became abundantly clear that to direct a library was no small issue for her, but symbolized her potential to have at her fingertips mastery of the world of the intellect—a desire that seemed so out of reach, yet something she was very actively working on in therapy. Running for the job was a marvelous image of her process to this point: She was not yet there, but because of her commitment to the inner work, her candidacy for this position was clear.

The second dreamer was a hard-nosed businessman, someone whose entire existence was devoted to competition and winning. This





Mercurius in the
"philosopher's egg."
Altus, *Mutus Liber*,
1677

attitude took its toll in the form of periods of intense depression and sexual acting out. Overtly, the man was a remarkable success; internally, he was a mass of anxiety. He preferred problem-solving to letting the unconscious speak and had little faith in anything he couldn't understand and control. Dreams by and large eluded him, but finally he caught one: I was on a porch, he said, looking at the night sky while crickets chirped.

No matter what we did with this dream in therapy, the dreamer couldn't connect with it. Words weren't enough. Over the course of that summer, I asked him to spend time at precisely the activity the dream represented, watching the night sky either alone or in the company of his wife. Again and again, he would come in empty-handed and frustrated, irritated that I persisted.

Then, after some months, he happened to see on television that marvelous 1939 film, *Jezebel*, starring Bette Davis as a highly-strung, childish Southern Belle, much like our businessman, accustomed to getting her own way. The dreamer came into the next session dumbfounded. He was shaken by the scene in which Bette Davis, in a desperate effort to regain her lost love, a man who had subsequently



married a soulless Northerner, delivers an impassioned soliloquy, conjuring up for him the South as his true home. Everything about the South, she says, from its rankest swamp odors to the anonymous night sounds, are in his blood, defining his life's meaning.

For the dreamer, this windfall, this synchronicity, gave him the meaning of his dream: In his relentless drive for the industrial success the North signified, he had lost touch with his soul—call it wife, call it family, call it simply the capacity for quiet wonder. Primed by the demand to hold the dream in reverence, one might say that Hermes/Mercurius intervened by providing the opportunity for his emotional understanding.

The third dreamer was in some ways the most difficult, even though she was on the surface the most open to dreamwork. As an aspiring analyst-to-be, she took the importance of dreams, all dreams, to be self-evident; yet she subtly dismissed dreams that did not “measure up,” clearly preferring ones that held more substantial promise. When she dreamed “big” dreams, she worked them up assiduously, producing pages and pages of good amplification and commentary. In the end, however, she came off as stiff and cerebral, out of touch with the very process in which she was investing so much time and effort.

During one session, where there was little going on in the way of “big” dreams, I asked if there were any dream leftovers, as it were. She said yes, she'd had one a while ago, but it didn't seem like much: I was on a farm, and sick animals were all over the place. Instead of interpreting the dream verbally, I asked the dreamer to rejoin the animals on the farm in a guided imagery exercise, walking among them, looking, feeling, smelling. At one point during the exercise, an ailing pig came up to her. She shrank from it, but the pig pursued her until, cornered near the pigsty, she was forced to hear it out. The pig told her that she was the cause of all this pain among the animals, she was making them sick with all of her words, ignoring them and their needs.

The dreamer came out of this imagery confused and upset, but gradually she reached the inescapable conclusion that in her desire to have the right analysis, the correct meaning, her animals, the body of her life, were suffering. She came to realize emotionally the defensive manner in which she tried to control things through research and interpretation. She thereupon decided to take time out from her life as the perfect Jungian-to-be and learn how to get her internal farm functioning again. She began to listen to her moods and got acquainted with the kinds of things her dream animals were doing: rooting in the mud (enjoying life), scratching at the surface of things like an enthusi-



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astic chicken (searching for interesting small bits of life instead of ignoring them). In short, she began making sure that no one part of herself was to suffer at the expense of any other.

All dreams are big dreams, carriers of personal and archetypal meaning that can and must be accessed for the sake of individuation. That subcategory we have come to call “the small dream” is a misnomer, telling us more about what we do not know than about the value of the dream. It is incumbent upon us to treat all of our dreams with the deepest respect, even if their meanings elude us. For it is an ego-conceit to think we can know the full meaning of dreams in advance or select which are important and which not. If we approach our small and large dreams with psychological faith and a little craftiness, we may well find that we understand what individuation is all about.

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Stephen A. Martin, Psy.D., is a Jungian analyst and clinical psychologist in Ardmore, Pennsylvania. He is also editor-in-chief of *Quadrant*.

Note

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