



The Why and Who of Dreamwork Groups

By Justina Lasley

NEARLY EVERYONE IS CURIOUS ABOUT THEIR DREAMS.

Some people become interested in dreams at a very young age; I've met people who have kept dream journals since they were children. By contrast, some older people have never been interested in looking at anything so mystical as a dream, but yearn to understand them as they approach their senior years.

Most people who join dream groups are already intrigued by their dreams. Others may join because they have seen the positive effects of a dream group on a friend or relative. Still others, never having remembered a dream, join because they are curious about the workings of the psyche. They have a desire to understand who they are and how they can move toward personal growth.

Occasionally, a potential member will inquire about joining a dream group because he has experienced what is referred to as a "big" dream. A big dream is transforming. It is filled with intense emotion and a desire to understand, to know more about the dream and life in general.

Mentally healthy people are drawn to the dream as an avenue to change and personal growth. For some individuals, joining a dream group may be less intimidating than having personal or group therapy. It often does not seem as threatening as admitting that one has a problem that is severe

enough to go to a therapist. Joining a dream group seems more like a fun and creative experience, even though major transformations are made possible by understanding dreams.

Change

Change is the common denominator in dreamwork. Change may bring the dreamer to the dreamwork or the dreamwork may bring the dreamer to change. By this I mean that a person may join a dream group because he wants a difference in his life and believes that working in the group will facilitate a change: a decision that needs to be made, a fear that needs to be eased, or the steps that need to be taken in order to become more fulfilled.

Conversely, people who are already dealing with change also are drawn to dreamwork. They need balance, solutions, and encouragement. The dream offers all of this and the dream group provides even more through modeling, validating, and supporting the members.

People who enter traditional forms of therapy often do so in order to work on couple, family, or parenting issues. Dreamwork is personal work. A person doesn't usually join because she wants to "fix" someone else; instead, it is because something within her psyche is being stirred up. She is curious about what that is and what it means.

Commitment

Commitment is a very important aspect of dreamwork. Just as in any aspect of life, the more a member commits to the work, the more he will gain from the work.

Some leaders have groups where people can drop in and do not have to commit to a series of dream group sessions. The advantage is that it is easier for people to do this and more people will be introduced to dreamwork. Some attention to the dream is better than no dreamwork.

However, there are many advantages in making a commitment to the group. The members are agreeing that they are willing to make sacrifices to be at the meetings, to make dreamwork a priority by adding continuity to the work, and to make a commitment to the other members of the group to be present for all the work to be done. Trust is greater among members who know that everyone will be there consistently to hear their dreams and support their work.

Joining a dream group is a major step for many people in acknowledging to themselves and others that they want more from their lives, that there is something calling for change. The commitment to be part of the group may be the first time they have invested time to focus on their own lives. They will now have the opportunity to make major changes that will move them into the individuation process.

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Students in a dream group leadership training program, taken at Institute for Dream Studies at the IASD conference in Bridgewater, June, 2006. Three of the IDS advisers are in the photo: Stanley Krippner, Kelly Bulkeley and Nicolai Graton. Can you identify them?

I have found that once members commit to dreamwork, they are powerfully drawn to its power and intrigue. The members yearn for connection to the dream and to each other. Perhaps for the first time they feel like part of a safe community, a place where they can be vulnerable, honest, and free of being judged.

Readiness

It is advantageous if a person who joins the group is ready to look at her interior life and willing to make positive changes in her life.

A woman who joined one of my groups was curious about what goes on in a dream group. From the beginning, she chose not to share her

dreams. She attended several sessions, but never participated. She wasn't ready to begin making changes in her own life. I believe she thought it was going to be a class about dreams, which it is, at one level. But she wasn't interested in working with her dreams. Dream group was not what she had imagined, so together, she and I decided that she would join another group later.

Keeping the Group Together

Though people come to the work for varied reasons, once within the group they become connected by the common humanity expressed in the dream and in the ensuing discussions. They yearn for connection to the

dream and to each other. The members may for the first time begin to understand who they are authentically and how they can make changes to be more fulfilled and happier.

Group Makeup

The dream group leader assumes most of the responsibility for organizing the group. Ask yourself, "What do I intend to accomplish by forming this particular dream group?"

The group may be formed around a group with specific requirements for membership (for example, gender or age-based groups: women-only, men-only, teenagers-only, or all senior citizens).

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Or you may choose to organize a group based on your interests (cancer or abuse survivors, etc.) or to serve the needs of an existing group (a group of artists who meet regularly to support one another in their work). A mixed group may evolve with a focus, depending on who joins and the members' needs. Regardless of what brings an individual to dreamwork, s/he may prefer a specific kind of group. Some groups may include only members who fit a particular "profile" in order to meet their specific needs.

Possible group "profiles"

- Women
- Men
- Youth
- Young children
- Young adults/College
- Couples
- Mother/Daughter
- Mother/Son
- Father/Daughter
- Father/Son
- Divorced/Widowed
- Artists/Inventors
- Retirees
- Corporate executives/staff
- Church/Spiritual Group
- People with chronic health issues
- Abuse survivors

Same-Gender & Same-Age Groups

Often a dream group is organized according to gender or age. These groups are especially effective for those members who feel safer working with people who share similar issues.

Teens may feel more comfortable in sharing with others their age. Dreams are an interesting topic for teens, who in their social lives often feel too vulnerable to discuss what's private and personal. Dreamwork is perhaps one of the easiest ways to help teens express their feelings and begin to trust peers with their vulnerability.

Mixed-Gender & Mixed-Age Groups

Mixed gender groups can enrich the dreamwork process, just as a group enriches the understanding of an individual dream. A masculine point of view about a woman's dream or vice versa can add a new dimension to the dreamer's understanding of the dream.

The same is true of age. It is beneficial to have the varied viewpoints of people at different ages and stages in their lives. Diversity enriches and expands the understanding of the dream.

Even though a group may begin with a particular type of membership, at some point encourage the members to consider opening up to other ages or the opposite sex. Some members may be reluctant, but welcoming variety rewards the entire group. Even the most resistant members usually admit after a couple of meetings that they are glad the dissimilar member is a part of the group.

Relationship-based Groups

An unusual opportunity for conversation opens up through dreamwork. This is especially beneficial to mother/daughter and father/son pairings, where the exchange of important thoughts and ideas is often difficult. A new awareness of one another's vulnerabilities and strengths may develop. It can be the beginning of a very rewarding dialogue between parent and child.

In the same way, a couple can gain a great deal through group work. Stumbling blocks in the relationship often are changed into building blocks by sharing dreams. I always see a new sensitivity emerge, allowing the couple to be more understanding and supportive of each other.

Church/Spiritual Group

I believe my own dreamwork is the church. I own the dream is of a sacred origin and leads us to our spiritual core, our God center. Much of our religious teachings and beliefs comes through dreams, so religious and spiritually-based groups are a natural for group dreamwork.

People with Chronic Health Issues

Research shows that positive thinking and support are beneficial to people facing chronic health problems. A dream group not only provides support, but is also an ideal way for the person to experience and process the emotions associated with chronic illness.

By identifying the emotions within the dream, the dreamer gains awareness and understanding of her waking life emotions and begins to see more clearly how they affect her healing process.

Dreams may even provide information regarding the illness and offer suggestions for treatment. The psyche is aware of the body's condition before medical testing can detect any illness.

Abuse Survivors

People who have been abused emotionally, physically, or sexually often are alone in their suffering. The survivor may have been carrying the trauma of the abuse secretly throughout her life. She might feel that she cannot trust others with the information.

Dreams offer a gentle way of dealing with intense psychological pain. They enable the survivor to speak about things that have remained secrets for a lifetime. By sharing with others in the group, she finds that she is not alone in her struggle and receives the support she needs in order to take care of her needs related to the abuse. A note of caution: Because abuse carries so much psychological pain, perhaps the leadership could be done in tandem with a psychologist who specializes in the field of abuse.

Artists/Inventors

Creative people usually are interested in dreamwork. Many great works of art, literature, and music come directly from dreams. Research shows that dreams come from our more creative right brain, so it stands to reason that by accessing our dreams we are introduced to limitless creativity. The dream helps us glimpse our own creative genius.

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Justina Lasley's

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