

Engaging with Unconscious Processes in a Women's Group

Insights from Social Dreaming

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Abstract

This article draws from the first Woman as Medicine retreat held in 2017. In all, 3 retreats have been held so far. This paper presents the use of dreams through the method of social dreaming matrix. I present my experience of working with a group of women who came together for a 5-day retreat "Woman as Medicine". The method was used to get in touch with unconscious processes in the group, prior to and during the retreat. The paper outlines the themes accessed from the sharing of the dreams with some examples of the dreams and associations and their implication on the group. It suggests that there is merit in working with dreams and their association to get in touch with layers of unconscious processes in groups.

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Introduction

This paper presents a case for using dreams to work with unconscious processes in groups. I present this in the session on **ABS Practice and Emotional Well-being** because I believe that connecting to unconscious processes is important for Emotional Well-being. Healthy relationships with self and between men and women, is a corner stone of the concept of well-being. While there are many methods available to work with our individual self, bringing in unconscious processes while we work with groups is not so popular yet. Here's an account of how I have used social dreaming as a method in the process of working with a group of women in a retreat titled 'Woman as Medicine (WAM). I was invited to lead the sessions on working with dreams and co-facilitate the retreat by Sukhvinder Sircar. The retreat spanned for 5 days, with 20 women participating and 2 women acting as facilitators.

I begin by sharing the context of the retreat to situate why we chose to work with the social dreaming method, followed by a section on the methodology. The third section traces insights gained from the dreams, which helped us 1), understand and prepare the group for the deep dive required in the retreat, and 2), work with the group's unconscious processes during the retreat. I conclude the paper by showing how the social dreaming method aided in facilitating the retreat with its specific focus and the importance of working with the unconscious in group work.

Context of the Retreat

This retreat was aimed as an inner journey in the process of the emergence of 'Woman as Medicine', specially offered for the Joyous Woman Group started by Sukhvinder Sircar. The rationale was that '*Medicine is not what you do or give. It is Who You Are...*' and '*...to have*

a clear understanding of who we are as the medicine, and deeper embodiment of the sacred feminine' (from the page created on FB announcing the retreat). Becoming a 'Woman as Medicine' means a journey in to one's depths to recover the sacred feminine. What is the 'Sacred Feminine'? It is the process of integrating the different disintegrated parts of herself, the parts which were broken off and discarded in her life's journey and the acceptance of such parts and reintegrating them into a 'whole, one who does not divide. Sukhvinder Sircar writes "she is entering a process of gathering back all that she had cast away. She had lived in a world divided by race, colour of skin, money, education, culture and more. While her inner world is embracing her shadow, her outer world is healing the split. The more she meets herself inside, the more she meets each one outside. Her outer world is not categorised into first, second or third world. The word elite is being erased. It is a journey to hold an 'equal' gaze. She is meeting everyone where they are, with honour and respect. She is embodying the true meaning of Yoga!

The process of resurgence of the sacred feminine has a lot to cover: centuries of patriarchy, colonisation, and its impact on generations. This process of resurgence is not without its difficulties. It requires a surrender to the present process, both conscious and unconscious. This learning from surrender requires a safe space for deeper processes to emerge from the unconscious. One of the ways to access the world of the unconscious is through dreams— by creating a cauldron in which the dreams, with their archetypal images, could arrive and swirl around, allowing us to draw unexpected treasures from them. Therefore, we introduced the social dreaming method in addition to other experiential methods, such as joyful explorations through body movements, song, dance, meditation, fun, laughter, free-flowing discussions, and periods of quiet reflection. Connecting to the unconscious processes began a month before the retreat, to understand what the members were bringing in to the retreat space.

Methodology

The idea of exploring dreams to understand parts of oneself that one was not aware of, is well known in analytical psychology. Jung writes, *'The dream is a little hidden door in the innermost and most secret recesses of the soul, opening into that cosmic night which was psyche long before there was any ego-consciousness, and which will remain psyche no matter how far our ego-consciousness may extend.'* An individual's lifetime journey is to integrate the conscious and unconscious aspects of oneself towards wholeness.

I have been engaged with social dreaming for more than a decade in group relations conferences and workshops as a consultant in India and abroad. (Prasad and Sher). Social Dreaming events are integral part of group relations conferences (GRC). It is believed that dreams are independent of the dreamer and can offer help both to them and the dreamer's community. It is a way of working with dreams where the focus is on the **dream** and not the dreamer, where people who come together solely for this purpose, share dreams (Gordon Lawrence). The meaning of a dream is about the broader world in which one lives. Participants at a Social Dreaming event access a potential to create new thoughts that arise from what has been described as the 'associative unconscious' (Susan Long). These new thoughts are often an expression of ideas, thoughts and feelings that are deeply held or known but yet to be expressed or thought (the 'unthought known', Christopher Bollas). This key feature differentiates Social Dreaming from other forms dream work.

Two other important ideas associated with social dreaming method include Jung's collective unconscious based on archetypes as the repository of universally applicable and available images; and the experientially developed ancient (pre-Hindu) Indian belief that the individual

contains the microcosm of the macrocosm. Utilising these ideas, in a social dreaming matrix individual dreams are shared and associated with to let messages to the community emerge. Central to the social dreaming is the *matrix*, or the container, which like the uterus offers conditions for ideas to grow. Thus, in a social dreaming (SDM) session the same set of members share dreams from the previous nights, associate with them and develop meanings for the group. The session is held by a set of consultants who hold the boundaries of time, task and territory and encourage sharing. (Gangjee,). “Dreaming can be thought of as being a representation of ‘social truth’ contained in the images that lies in the conscious minds of dreamers participating in a social space.” (Sher)

The Unconscious in the WAM Retreat

Social dreaming was introduced in the WAM retreat in 2 stages. The first was aimed at accessing and exploring insights of the dreams before the retreat and the second was working with dreams during the retreat.

- **Social dreaming - pre-retreat:** At the start, a guide to record dreams was shared. This contained tips on inviting and recording dreams and associating with one’s own and others’ dreams. By associations it was meant what memories, thoughts, feelings, sensations do the dreams evoke in the person.

A month before the retreat, an online Facebook page about dreaming was created for the women participants to post their dreams and share their associations. For every dream that was shared on the page, members posted their associations to it. Our focus was to discern what the dreams and associations could be saying about the emerging picture of the WAM group before retreat began.

This also gave the retreat leaders an indication of co-creating the placenta of the matrix for the pulsing life to arrive as it offered a cue of what was arriving. In our

role as facilitators, we distilled the themes and offered it to the group as nourishment for further unconscious to emerge. This way, one cycle of conscious emerged from the churning of the unconscious and became the foundation for more layers of unconscious to emerge. 30 days prior to the workshop, 31 dreams and 60 associations were posted on this page. This process was unlike the normal method of asking for participant expectation which usually comes from the conscious world.

- **Early morning SDM for 4 days during the retreat.** Every morning (excepting day 1), 30 minutes were devoted to sharing of dreams of the participants, followed by an eruption of rich associations to each dream. These associations were then strung together to see what themes arose from the unconscious and what it meant to the work of the group each day.

Insights from Social Dreaming Sessions to the Group 'Woman as Medicine' -- the group unconscious from pre-retreat themes

The Facebook page provided an opportunity to the participants to present a rich tapestry of dreams and associations that were collated. The themes that emerged are presented here with glimpses of the dreams and associations.

Entry and Expectation

- Of achieving a wholeness within: There is an expectation of reaching a wholeness which is vast and full of energy, leading to a vision of the future shape of things.
- *Eye Ball with jet black sharp eyebrows glaring at the dreamer, but inviting her just with her powerful look. A sudden overwhelmed joy and excitement is taking the dreamer to another room which has a huge vision board.*
- Initiation in to the feminine: There is a collective immersion and initiation in to the feminine and consciousness.

- Anticipation that we may have to face the un-swallowable: Overwhelmed by the anticipation of what is going to happen and what will emerge and will it be 'un-swallowable'. Me and my shadow bears not only unwanted unacceptable dark but also gifts (life with bags) and potential.
- *The dreamer is walking down a corridor with loads of stuff... It turned in to a huge hall that turned in to storage with shadows- lots of water on one side and aloo on another. The corridor turns??*
- What is the WAM workshop going to give/teach us? Unconscious will remain unknown until it is explored and understood. So far, it has been impacting us without our knowledge.
- The wisdom of the women's circle is to partner with you to show you the way, to take you there and journey with you, after which it is your responsibility.
- *Dreamer is driving people, mostly women she knows, from one place to another, dropping them off and returning to drive more people. This is associated with the scene of elections where people are picked up and dropped off.*
- The women's circle needs to be open and safe enough for one to be courageous and true to oneself.

The Anxious Part

- There is an unconscious part of us which does not want to take the journey. This is the resisting part of us that blames the other – group facilitator, the method or the other women.
- Having to be a witness to self and to the other at the same time, the Drishta (observer) and the Drishtee (what is being observed).

- *Dreamer slips in to memory to see a wall with photo frames, goes in to another dream while looking one picture.*
- To travel without knowing the path, trusting we will reach our destination - like in a maze.
- Parts of one may be lost in transition is the fear and sadness. So safe guard - but how can you transit if you are not willing to let go.
- *Fear of losing check-in baggage or of accidentally getting onto the wrong flight or train.* Questioning the purpose of the retreat arises. Are we going because we are a true believer of the divine feminine/ shakti and owe deep allegiance to her or is it only for a short time during Navratri while rest of the time we follow our masculine patriarchal ways of Being? Is the awakening from the unconscious to conscious with true inner light?
- *A long dream ... with maternal grandmother saying everyone follows the male god and she follows the female god during Navaratri...*

Confronting Patriarchy

- Patriarchy is scared of truth - exposing nakedness and truth is the power of women.
- *Two men are trying to harass two girls and the dreamer is trying to protect them. Dreamer says she will undress but will not allow them to touch these girls.*
- Patriarchal notions of success, glamour, spotlight, affluence- does not apply to the divine feminine and medicine women. Not willing to give up our façade.
- The corrupt masculine in us is still retaining control over our inner space and we are accepting it though it is unsettling

The Time to Act is Now

- There is an urgency to clean-up the toxicity - here and now we have to start- willing to clean up in the front of others, even the places within ourselves that need cleaning.
 - *The house is empty. Dreamer is talking to some visitors and suddenly notices that the walls and roof is covered with cobwebs. Thinks he/she will start cleaning them once the visitors/ guests leave but thinks again and starts removing the cobwebs while visitors are still around.*

The Task

- The task is to go down level after level into the unconscious. But people cannot seem to read them and need help to leave their identity behind. Absence of a normal path and the guidance to explore creates a need to create one's path and methods. The need for taking up unexpected roles arise and be prepared to face the consequences. The parts of what one has left behind cannot be recovered.
- We think we are alone in life but our mothers are with us keeping pace with us. Need to work on the mother in me. If we try to move with this incomplete story, we can't move to resolve the grudges of our mother wound.

There is an empty seat next to dreamer's mother... who looks like her... which no one takes ... the vehicle is already moving ... dreamer watches her mother go

The Process of Diving in to Self

If we bury unsettling and uncomfortable things in fear of others seeing it, they pour out at the most unexpected moments *Old windows... cockroaches start pouring out of the window sill...*

- Taking selfies rather than absorbing and being with my own nature but dividing it in to dualities, separating and objectifying my nature.

- *There is huge lake water very clear and beautiful sea green... dreamer is lying in the middle on a wooden plank and wants a picture to be taken.*
- Learning and exploring about self cannot come from a place of power, a book or from someone else's experience. The feminine emerges from one's own embodiment
- We are frightened of the powerful and shut the door to that path, but in reality, it is harmless. When we are near them, we are safe

The Way of Learning

- Learning from the workshop requires effort and use one's own resource. One size doesn't fit all.
- The workshop offers a holistic way to life- feelings of joy, gaiety, happiness. Learning and exploring the feminine means attending to the unconscious along with addressing regular tasks. *Dreamer is rushing home because she has to make a mandala as it is full moon.... suddenly she sees a beautiful reflection of the mandala made somewhere on the ground...the design is flower of life....and then starts a show...one by one gifts fly from sky to ground...*

Unconscious Processes in the Group During the Retreat

During the 5-day event. women worked together to explore and connect at 3 levels - self, to the other and to the community - to emerge and be in touch with the special medicine each will bring in to the world.

From day 2, an SDM of 30 minutes was held every day. The women shared 2 or 3 dreams they had the previous night with their associations. The themes from the dreams and

associations were gleaned out and discussed. The themes presented here emerged over the slow development of the group and reflects the process of the women coming in to their own power. The design of the day evolved slowly in a process-oriented way. The facilitators aimed at the overall focus of the day. The themes that emerged from the dreaming matrix gave the leaders an inkling of the impact of the previous days processes and the anticipation for the day emerging from the group's unconscious.

Day 1 was entry in to the retreat, setting the agenda, the guideposts for the gathering, the norms, the basic model for the 'Women as Medicine' retreat. Messages from the associations to the dreams leading up to the retreat was shared. The themes were discussed by the group at length.

From **day 2** the retreat started with a social dreaming session in the morning. Dreams and associations in 4 days carried the following themes that emerged in the group.

Self- level Processes and the Fear of Outcomes

There is a feeling of being unsafe, a fear of the unknown and fear of hidden parts being exposed; a longing for love. Masculine is in charge more often than the feminine. Masculine needs and takes support from the feminine.

A small dark room has a small lamp. Two women, one the girl friend and the other the boyfriend. Someone wants to kill the boyfriend. The girl friend gives a lady's dress and the boyfriend wears it. Door opens men come in with rifles. Boyfriend runs out and hides in the 2nd house wearing a burkha and in the 3rd house in a dark corner. The boyfriend is afraid and starts crying.

Discomfort about the masculine exists and there is difficulty in breaking through from an old programme to something new. Desperation of the corrupt feminine, meaning the one which is divisive/ excludes does not connect to the other. She is trying to find ways to survive. She is running away from the present but can't escape. Though the present seems dangerous it has possibilities and is ultimately safe.

Huge anxieties of can we do it? Can we be the medicine?

There is a feeling of a lost girl in the group, as though they don't know anything; Wanting to set things right and see that there is a threat of attack and danger to one's feminine. Birthing is powerful but not natural. It is in a mechanical automated way and they are losing connect to the process. Minds are also connected elsewhere and not to themselves. What is the new born feminine which is rebirthing and what is dying within? There is a self-doubt about their own process.

Science experiments to replace humans by human robots are being conducted. Being covered as experiment for cancer research to increase age for human beings (under the garb of cancer research they are experimenting something else? So scared. Time is ticking. Babies start dying and so much blood around. Dreamer is figuring out how to ease process for real human being.

There is movement- the feminine is ready to take charge

We are taking charge of our own life in a feminine way but accessing the masculine within too, by finally getting behind the steering wheel of one's own life.

Dreamer was in a car with her husband sitting next to driver. Suddenly driver puts his face below seat, dreamer is trying to control- after a time takes it to a safer place in a petrol pump- there is only one place for parking and manages to park there – sigh of relief.

There is a certain exhaustion with the masculine, had enough of it. Need to claim our true nature. Willingness to risk it and finding that she was always held!

Getting ready to take charge, drop inhibitions - *Childhood dreams – have come naked to school, climbing the stairs of churches-* and learn new ways of working. The feminine is ready for being resourceful in collaborating with nature. She is waking up with a safe energetic good sense of looking forward.

The anticipation of the New Me

Awareness of relationships and readiness to change. In touch with the mother and father part in me and not expecting it out there. In touch with the disorientation and reconstruction of parts of me. We are in transition and ready to face everything.

Scene of the movie matrix- in and out of rooms

The process is showing the path of transformation.

We are carrying seeds and spread it farther

Different parts of our Masculine- changing and ready to change.

Not afraid of heights- dreams of jumping over mountains.

Concluding Observations

This first retreat on 'Woman as Medicine ' was charting new paths and had the space to explore new ways of working with the group of women. Working with these women was a first, despite being aware of their struggle to connect and take up socially conscious change

roles. The process-oriented self-work and their eagerness to work towards discovering their own power was helpful.

Method: The SDM is an exciting method to access the unconscious processes in the service of the group process. Once learnt, the group process in working with dreams flows smoothly and helps learning and reflection. Though SDM was a new concept, we were sure that the women would willingly work with their dreams and confront the messages from unconscious. I have been asked, how a “particular association is chosen as the best fit when many associations are possible., especially during the pre-workshop stage.” My answer is, it is not a question of what is best, but what comes up in a particular container of the group. The purpose for which the group has come together determines the container and the dreams would reflect that purpose. I draw upon Mannie Sher who says, *“spaces for social dreaming are temporary and no single dream provides a definite statement, an answer to questions; it is the democratic sharing of a multitude of dreams that offers multiple insights of social phenomena. Social dreaming can be considered as the ultimate form of the democratic ideal”*

Unconscious processes to be attended to emerge as Woman as Medicine: The dreams leading up to the retreat reflected an anticipation to connect to the sacred feminine within, in order to achieve wholeness. It was clear that confronting patriarchy within was a necessary step to emerge as Woman as Medicine. There were huge unexpressed and unacknowledged anxieties that could hinder the emergence of Woman as Medicine. While there was fear of the unexpected to surface, there was hope that the women’s circle will be able to 'hold ' the safe space for deep exploration to happen. The clear message was the unconscious had to be attended to now. The masks of the corrupt feminine had to be torn down, learnt inhibitions shed and come in to their true power. There is an existing discomfort and exhaustion with the

masculine and also the necessity to transform from the corrupt feminine to the divine feminine. Though difficult, the call to give birth and emerge as the Woman as Medicine was felt deeply. This is just the beginning.

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