WHEN THE DREAMER GETS THE DREAM WRONG
– The Hidden Value of What Is Not Understood –

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ABSTRACT: Analyzed is the case of a dreamer in an Ullman experiential dream group in Taiwan who had a dream about her Yi-Guan Dao religion that the author felt she got wrong. The case is significant because it (a) allows us to evaluate and question the phenomenon of some person in the Ullman group other than the dreamer making such a judgment about a dreamer’s work with her dream, (b) shows that even in those cases where the judgment might be largely true, it is most certainly not the larger part of the truth, for it fails to consider the hidden transpersonal undercurrents that are the principal benefits of working with one’s dream in the Ullman group, and finally (c) affords a view of those undercurrents.

KEYWORDS: Montague Ullman experiential dream group, dreams, religion, religious fundamentalism, Yi-Guan Dao, Taiwan.

While it is true that only the one who dreams a dream can tell us what it means – not some outside theory, no matter how brilliant or true; and not some high-flying expert, no matter how great that person’s expertise (Siivola, 2011; Ullman, 1980, 1982, 1996; Ullman & Zimmerman, 1979) – we must also acknowledge that not all dreamers are equally able to make sense of their dreams. Between one individual and another we find gaping disparities in this regard. Some, without missing a step, dance limberly through their entire dream, from metaphor to metaphor, coming up with connections no one else could possibly have supposed lay hidden there in the images – so that the dream is enabled to speak out bluntly and shed dazzling new light on the most unsuspected waking misconceptions (Stimson, 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2010; Stimson & Wang, 2004; Wang, 2008). Other individuals, though outwardly brilliant, professional, and accomplished, when approaching their own dream suddenly show themselves to be so out of touch with who they are and what they feel – and so utterly under the sway of mistaken conventions – that they cannot respond meaningfully to the dream or access the wealth of wisdom and insight packaged into its images. At best they might reify some of its principal metaphors and, without thinking to look deeper, block out the dream’s potential to transform their lives by imposing on it some shallow, literal, and merely intellectual interpretation.

Between these two extremes of dreamers, of course, we find a seamless continuum of every possible intermediate. In this article I wish to present the case of a dreamer who on that continuum occupies a position closer to the second extreme than to the first – this is a dreamer whom I initially felt did not “get” her dream, or got it wrong. The case is significant because it (a) allows us to evaluate and question the phenomenon of some person in the Ullman group.
other than the dreamer making such a judgment about a dreamer’s work with
her dream; (b) shows that even in those cases where the judgment might be
largely true, it is most certainly not the larger part of the truth, for it fails to
consider the hidden transpersonal undercurrents that are the principal benefits
of working with one’s dream in the group; and finally (c) affords a view of
those undercurrents.

LOOKING FOR TIN, FINDING GOLD

At Taiwan’s National Chi Nan University, professor Herng-Yow Chen directs a
small program called The English Corner, whose purpose is to provide students
with an English-speaking environment. Dr. Chen’s field is computer science but
emerging research on language acquisition has awoken in him a passion to
improve Taiwan’s approach to teaching English. I was astonished, when I talked
with him, to discover how closely his ideas about the way people really do
acquire language dovetailed with the work I do with the Ullman dream group.

Using the Ullman group method to work with dreams has a lot in common
with foreign language acquisition. Our own dreams are not immediately
intelligible to us for the simple reason that they present themselves to us in a
language that is utterly foreign to the one we use in waking life. Of course this
foreign language they use really is our own original native idiom (Fromm,
1951). This idiom is comprised of pictures of the truth of our situation
(Campbell, 1949; Freud, 1900/1965; Jung, 1933; Jung, 1952/1974) – as
perceived by modalities operative in us of which we are not normally aware.
It is not just pre-verbal, this forgotten language we all have built into us – it is
post-verbal. It did not just come before language in our phylogeny and
ontogeny, even today it goes beyond our most adult and professional language
in that, like authentic religious experience, poetry, and art – it arises from
places in us far deeper and more virgin than even the most advanced language
can fully reach. When it overflows into such powerful waking expressions as
art, poetry or instances of religious enlightenment, or even when it just
overflows into dreams, it informs our waking language and develops it. The
waking language needs this because it is still so partial, and still so foreign to
our deepest transcendental nature, that it leaves out and cannot express a great
deal of what we are. We work with dreams in the Ullman group in order to re-
discover some measure of this that has been left out of our self-concept – and to
re-own it so that we may more fully become what we are and reconnect with
each other and the world around us in ways that are more true and sustainable.

The Montague Ullman experiential dream group is the method of choice for
working with dreams because it eschews any acquired or imposed ideology and
does not inflict any mode of interpretation upon a dream. Rather it views the
dream itself as the truth about the current life of the person who dreamed it. In
other words, it does not try to reduce the expansive language of the dream to
the cramped and confined constructs of our waking idiom (= dream
interpretation) but instead attempts to blow apart the petty constraint of this
waking idiom by means of a series of steps that allow a whiff of the deeper
truth of the dream’s language to be perceived so that it can exert its healing
effect on the soul (= dream appreciation).

The steps of the Ullman Process are simple, essential, and well known. The
entire process needs to be followed and it needs to be followed to the letter –
not in the small-minded nit-picking sense of strictly enforcing the rules, but
rather in the fun, free and creative sense of always adhering to, and discovering
in an ever-deeper way the spirit of the endeavor. Group members almost
always quickly make sincere efforts to abide by the rules the moment they get
an intimation of the deeper genius of the process. (The details of the process—
including information regarding its development and field testing—are offered
as an appendix, which the reader may want to access before or during the
reading of this article.)

Dr. Chen and I quickly came to the conclusion that the Ullman dream group
would be perfect for the English Corner because dreams are so interesting and
the work on them so intense, captivating, and fast-moving that there can be no
time for anyone to think about speaking English correctly, or to be afraid of
making mistakes. With the conscious mind diverted completely by the Sherlock
Holmes search for clues connecting a dream with a dreamer’s life, the soaking
up of English and the speaking of it become entirely an unconscious function.
Instead of being shackled with having to perform in English, the students are
suddenly freed in the dream group to actually acquire English in the way a
language can best be acquired – unconsciously, spontaneously, and in a context
that is safe, engaging, interesting, and fun. Of course, the participants must
know enough English for this to work; but in Taiwan this is not a problem
since for so many years Taiwan’s ruthless teachers have so doggedly drilled
into each of them the dead mechanics of the language.

When I did start leading dream groups in the English Corner I made it clear to
those who came that I did not intend to talk about English at all and that so
long as everybody else understood what someone was saying it did not matter
whether they said it correctly or not. English proficiency, I emphasized, was the
least of what they would get from the dream group. “You might have come
here looking for tin,” I said, “But you will go away having found gold.” It
proved to be true. Every student who stayed and became a part of one of the
groups did end up walking away with rare treasures of self-understanding.
They also all ended up chattering away in English freely and comfortably.

A LITTLE GIRL IN A DREAM GROUP OF GROWN UPS

“Will you let my little girl into your English Corner dream group?” read an e-
mail I received from a man I assumed to be a faculty member at the university.

“I would be glad to have her in the group,” I e-mailed back. I assumed the
man’s daughter was a student there at the university. To my surprise an eleven
year-old elementary school student showed up the following week. I will call
her Yu-Li, though that is not her real name.
The dreams of the graduate students and undergraduates in the group at times dealt with matters Yu-Li had not yet learned about. “What is rape?” she asked, for instance, in one of the first groups, when the word came up in connection with a graduate student’s dream.

I had to think fast. “It is when someone forces you to do something you do not want to do,” was how I put it.

That Yu-Li did not know what she did not know turned out not to be a problem – for she proved to still know so much that the rest of us had forgotten. Whenever she spoke up, everyone was delighted and listened.

Following the work with one dream she was the only member of the group who did not offer an orchestrating projection. Since she always did try to contribute something at this stage, I did not want to go forward without her getting a chance. “Did you want to say anything this time?” I asked.

“The others already said everything I wanted to say,” she replied in a sunken voice.

“Sometimes,” I suggested, “It is useful still to try to say it anyway in our own words because when we do it comes out a little bit different from the way anybody else put it, and maybe it turns out to be just what the dreamer needs to hear.”

“O.K.,” she said. She looked through her notes, gathered her thoughts, and told the dreamer what she thought.

“What Yu-Li said strikes me as the most essential meaning of this dream,” the dreamer said when her turn came to speak.

Whenever Yu-Li shared one of her own dreams, the group learned about her mother, whom the dreams depicted as being overly pushy in getting Yu-Li to do what she thought was good for her. “She feeds me a juice that she makes fresh every day,” Yu-Li told us, for example. “She even puts yam leaves in it. It is green!” she shuddered as a look of disgust came over her face. “She makes me drink it so that I will grow tall.”

**Yu-Li’s Mother Comes to the Dream Group**

Before long Yu-Li’s mother – I will call her Ji-Lan, though that is not her real name, contacted me. She said her daughter strictly observed the dream group’s commitment to confidentiality and had not divulged a bit of what went on there, but she gave off the feeling that very interesting things were happening. “Is there space for me in the group?” she asked. I checked with Yu-Li first; then admitted her mother into a dream group that met on a different day.
The mother turned out to be as enthusiastic about dreams as the daughter, but quickly showed herself to be the person I was acquainted with from the little girl’s dreams. For example, a dreamer only had to begin groping for the right word, and Ji-Lan would instantly supply it.

“We do not want the word someone else thinks the dreamer is going to say,” I explained. “We want the word the dreamer herself comes up with, no matter how long it takes her to find it.” Ji-Lan really tried to master the uniquely un-authoritarian etiquette of the Ullman group, but found it difficult not to play the authority again and again. For instance, once a graduate student – a young woman brilliant and gifted with dreams – shared a dream about her major professor, whose nit-picking criticism was killing her passion for research. Before I could stop Ji-Lan, she interrupted the dreamer and rose to the professor’s defense. Offering herself as an example, she said she was so brutally critical of her own graduate students’ work that often she feared one of them would attempt suicide – but emphasized she did it for the student’s own good. The group process moved rapidly forward. I did not get a chance to tell Ji-Lan she had violated the process. I could see I was not about to change her personality anyway.

Besides, I saw how sincere and meaningful the work was that she did with her own dreams. In bringing out the previous-day’s context for one of them, she paraphrased a passage she had read in a scripture of her Yi-Guan Dao religion:

> You can see thing with bright mind very clearly, but at the same time you should have the mind to tolerate something you don’t like. If only bright mind, make you more sensitive, but easy to get angry, without tolerance. [i.e., Practicing Yi-Guan Dao, you attain a bright mind that is acutely sensitive. You see very clearly what you don’t like. The danger at this point is that you become vulnerable to intolerance and anger.]

“This passage is very helpful to my current situation,” she told us. It seemed to me she was confessing to us that in reading the passage in the book she had recognized what we ourselves had seen in her behavior – that there was the intelligent, critical part of herself which she had developed to a high degree and was connected with. It could see what was wrong with others and felt it could tell them what they should do to correct themselves. But then there was another, more highly developed and important part of herself that she sensed she was not yet sufficiently connected with. She did not appear to know exactly what that other part was, but seemed to feel it would be more compassionate and tolerant of the way people were, and that it would also be more effective in behaving in a way that enabled them to change.

I came to sense that of all those in the group Ji-Lan needed this work with dreams the most and might very possibly in the end put it to the best use. More than once she told us she was ready for something more in her life. She wanted to live deeper and go beyond mere professional advancement. She was touchingly grateful for every tiny insight she got from working with her dreams. When once the group proved unable to make any headway at all with the dream she had shared, she came back the following week to tell us that...
having worked with that dream in the group turned out to be deeply meaningful to her in an unsuspected way. She did not elaborate.

Something was stirring in this woman.

**Ji-Lan’s Dream**

A few weeks after this, when I called for a dream, no one in the group came forward. We sat in silence almost ten minutes, waiting.

“I have a dream,” Ji-Lan finally said. It’s a short one. It’s from this morning.”

She told us the dream:

_A Dao Transmitting Master asked me, “Where did you get this book?” I tell her White Water Old Man give it to me. He gives the books to four people. I am one of them. She replied, “He was dead.” I told her, “His soul is in somebody’s body and this media gave the books to me on his behalf.” It’s my honor to receive this book from him._

“Are any of the people in the dream real?” we asked.

Ji-Lan said:

_The Dao Transmitting Master is a real person. If we want to become a member of the Yi-Guan Dao we need a Dao Transmitting Master. There’s a ceremony. Must be there. He will represent our holy teacher to give us three treasures. Our holy teacher is the Living Buddha. Was a monk in the Song Dynasty. Unless we become a member of Yi-Guan Dao, these treasures we cannot tell anyone. Only Dao Transmitting Master can tell us. She is a woman over 60 years old. Looks not so friendly but I know she is friendly. Usually she encourages people in Yi-Guan Dao. Use the way to blame them and correct them something, point out very directly someone’s mistake. She thinks she has a better way and will propose her way very strongly. Has a good purpose but uses stress way. Force herself also use the same way [i.e., she is pushy towards herself in the same way she is towards others.]

“Is anyone else in the dream real?” we asked.

She said:

_White Water Old Man is a real person. He passed away. He has a good habit. He didn’t like any drink, only water. Sixty years ago when Communists occupy Red China, White Water Old Man came to Taiwan and spread Dao. Kuomintang didn’t allow any other religion spread in Taiwan. He separate[d] from his wife and kids and came to Taiwan alone. Gave up his family to help more of us to receive Dao. To receive the Dao means we receive the three treasures [i.e., the Mystic Portal, the True Scripture or Wordless_
Scripture, and the Hand Seal, we learn how to cultivate ourselves. In our religion we worship Ji Gong Living Buddha, even though he passed away in Song Dynasty. If people receive the Dao, [they] have opportunity to become a Buddha one day. When he [White Water Old Man] passed away our heaven mother want[ed] to give him Buddha name but he doesn’t want. He just wants his name White Water Old Man.

“And the medium, we asked, “Is that a real person?”

She said:

The medium is not a real person.

“What were your feelings in the dream?” we asked.

She said:

I feel very pleasure. Is my great honor to receive this book from White Water Old Man. We respect him very much and try to act like him. He is a role model in our Dao Society. Because the Dao Transmitting Master use[s] stress way to encourage people. When she ask[s], “Where did you get this book?” I feel very proud because I get something she never had [i.e., I received something that she herself never received.] She looked surprised. What I got was beyond her expectation. The four books were the same [i.e., identical]. I received one of them.

The group took the dream and explored it for feelings and metaphors. Afterwards Ji-Lan responded:

I always have a question why I came to earth, what is purpose of real life? Not just my position and work here at the university, what can I contribute to this world? Something meaningful. Last Thursday [the evening just before the dream] I attended a study group in Dao society. I haven’t attended such a study class in more than ten years. It’s the first time I did so here in Puli. I seldom approach Dao Chin [= fellow practitioners] I haven’t met Dao Chin in Puli. First time I came to the temple to attend the study group. Feel relaxed. Sit and listen to lecturer speak. Look at picture of Buddha. Feel my mind is peaceful. Also observe many people making … progress, making effort to cultivate themselves. I should cultivate myself aggressively. That’s what happen[ed] before I went [to] sleep. Meaning of dream? I feel special, important. I have some sense of that. Feel maybe I’m the selected one, also is a burden to me, means you promise something. I still wonder why four books; I’m one of the receivers? When I wake up I felt my surprise I didn’t intend to do such things beyond them include my Dao Transmitting Master and White Water Old Man. I didn’t have such passion like them. I just want to imitate them as my role model, just want to follow them. The subject of the lecture was about four saints in ancient China:

1. Confucius
2. Yen Hui
3. Tzun Tze
4. Mong Tze

I know why four books in the dream because I attended study class. They introduce four saints. Reflection is I should re-read history of these four saints again. Actually I don’t agree [with] this way. I’m affected by …Chinese history. But when I grow up I don’t think that’s a good way if we want to have an independent thinking [i.e., an independent way of thinking for ourselves]. I don’t think that’s a proper way. But after I attend the class I think I should re-read history again and get something good from that.

“‘That’s all,’” she said.

“Would you like to go to the next stage, where we set the dream aside and look at what happened the day before?” I asked.

“‘Yes,’” she said.

“Do you want to say anything about whatever thoughts might have been running through your mind that night just before dozing off to sleep?” I asked.

She said:

After I went home my daughter Yu-Li asked me “What did you learn from study class?” I told her about the four saints. When I mentioned Confucius Yu-Li said, “He is the man; I want to go back and blame him because I’ve got to memorize all the filial piety bible and to recite it in public at school.” She hates it. This filial piety bible was made by Confucius. I told her the filial piety was to educate his students but [he] didn’t ask them to memorize. “‘Your school is wrong,’” I told her, “‘But not Confucius.’” The last thoughts I had before going to sleep: I feel calm. I don’t think that much. I think I made a good answer to Yu-Li.

“Do you want to say anything about anything that happened earlier that day?” I asked.

She said:

Feeling before going to study class: Is good for me have something different, new coming into my life, let me think I still have something to pursue. I want to have something change that night. I don’t think to work at this university can… Not just read textbook… Not enough to me to fulfill my life. [i.e., Just to work at this university, read textbooks, etc. is not enough to fulfill my life]. I also want to be rich in my mind, not just rich in my pocket.

“Do you want to say anything more about what you mean by ‘rich in my mind’? I asked.
She said:

*I think if you cultivate yourself you will observe that life is change, you cannot hold on; freeze the beautiful moment. I [am] wondering why I came here. I feel I am satisfied at my current physical life. I don’t have to worry about money, family. But I’m lacking in my spiritual life.*

*pause*

*I’m a person [who] doesn’t want to chase a lot of money. I have enough money to spend. I am lucky. I feel I am lacking in my spiritual life.*

“Do you want to say anything more about what you mean by ‘spiritual life?’” I asked.

She said:

*Should the dream group provide another way to let me go back to heaven?*

*pause*

*When I pass away I don’t want to go to the hell.*

I asked if she wanted to go to the next stage, the playback, in which we present the dream back to her, bit by bit, and, in light of everything she has shared, she tells us now how the dream connects with her real life, and what new insight she finds in it.

She said yes.

A group member read: **“A Dao Transmitting Master asked you, “Where did you get this book?””**

Ji-Lan said:

*>The Dao Transmitting Master affected me a lot when I entered the [Yi-Guan Dao] order. I think I have some similar personality with her. When I see something good I like to use a pushy way [and] force people accept it, even though I know he or she will not like that at the moment. But in the future will find [it] is good for them.*

It is always an exhilarating moment when a dreamer catches in the dream’s opening image, like this, a direct connection with her waking life. This dream addresses the trait of pushy and helpful authority Ji-Lan displayed in the dream group and that characterized her in her daughter’s dreams in the other group.

The group member read the next piece of the dream: **“You tell her White Water Old Man gave it to you. He gave the book to four people you are one of them.”**
Ji-Lan started out:

The book means I need to study.

Then, flaring for an instant with inspiration, she added:

When we read a book we open a window to other worlds, see something different.

Here she swings deeper into her dance with the dream. The dream tells her there is a different way she can look at the world. When a dreamer, who only minutes ago had no clue about her dream, turns to it now in the playback stage like this and pours out associations that no one else in the group ever possibly could have guessed were there, we see real dream work going the way it should. Only the dreamer can do this, no one else. All the rest of us can do is sit there amazed and dazzled, waiting for what the dreamer says next.

The dream is short and contains essentially four metaphors (the Dao Transmitting Master, the Book, the White Water Old Man, and the “Medium”). It presents a puzzle consisting of four interlocking pieces. Ji-Lan has half the picture already in place: A window is opening that enables me to see in a new way. The aggressively helpful part of me has never experienced this so cannot understand. The implication is: I have grown beyond that part. Figure 1 is the intuition that jumped to my mind from everything Ji-Lan had brought forward up to this point in working with this dream, from the previous dreams she had worked on in the group, and from what had emerged from her
daughter’s dreams in the other dream group. It seemed this was the dream Ji-Lan had been working towards ever since she joined the group. An excitement ran through the group as everyone waited for Ji-Lan’s next words.

They were:

\[ \text{I want to read more Chinese history.} \]

She takes the metaphor of book as window into a new way of seeing and being – that points perhaps to a wonderful personal transformation – and reifies it into a literal representation of book as authoritative Yi-Guan Dao gospel, along the lines of what she had said before, “The book means I need to study.” In doing so she turns away from the rich multi-dimensional (metaphorical) language of dreams, poetry, and lived religious truth and takes up instead the shallow one-dimensional (literal) language of authority and institutional dogma.

Ji-Lan proceeded to reify the dream’s next metaphor as well:

\[ \text{We admire and respect the White Water Old Man. He has lung problem and should die. But our holy teacher gave him a chance would he want to spread Dao. He said yes and his lung disease recover[ed]. [He] live[d] for more than 57 years old. When I want to do something for God maybe the bad thing will get away from me. [She mentioned a hip problem she has.] White Water Old Man gave book to me means I have some opportunity to get away from bad things and have new life. I had operation, surgery; cannot sleep well. After returning from America not feel so well, easy to get angry. I just want to have easy way, like when I was younger. Want to be energetic, not sick person. I would rather to help people outside not just stay home to be a sick person.} \]

The dream’s rich metaphor of the White Water Old Man brings in the possibility of real personality change, and the discovery of a real Yi-Guan Dao. But Ji-Lan does not look at the image as metaphor. She aggressively forces upon it a literal meaning instead – a trite entry-level misinterpretation of religion that can only have been formed back at an earlier stage of her development when she first encountered the White Water Old Man narrative and imagined it to contain the formula:

\[ \text{Religion = Do something for God so I can get something for myself.} \]

She pushes this idea onto her dream, not noticing how much more superficial and trite it is than the dream or the religion; and not noticing that it even violates the narrative itself – for the historical White Water Old Man certainly did NOT do what he did in order that “God” would reward him with a healing.

We see that, just as the dream suggests, the pushy, authoritative aspect of Ji-Lan really is in the dark and really does not have a clue. It is as fake as it is ignorant – not just in her but in us all. Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu, and the Buddha
all say as much about the conceptual self and its many machinations. The White Water Old Man in Ji-Lan’s own dream conveys the same message by presenting her directly with the book instead of conveying it through the Dao Transmitting Master. The wonderful dream is so small and so crystal clear that the first two metaphors suffice to illuminate the whole.

Not noticing, Ji-Lan plods blindly on in the same literal vein:

*I have been translator when Philippine people come to our temple. Bought lots of books Chinese / English. When I read these books I am also making a progress. I can read more truth that help[s] me to purify myself.*

[pause]

*I will be the great person when I pass away.*

[pause]

Maybe I should not limit myself. Maybe I have a chance to be great.

Like religious fundamentalists the world over she is reading “eternal” to mean “forever,” and so forcing upon her thinking a dualism that is not seen to exist in reality by the individual capable of a direct religious epiphany – which can reveal the eternal in the moment, and the afterlife to be that which happens in the here-and-now when one is “reborn” with a heart that transcends the opposition between sacred and profane, and can begin living and acting in a manner that glimpses and honors the sacred in everything and everyone previously seen as profane.

The way she thinks about or believes in her religion is, of course, her own business – except that at this particular moment she happens to be confronted with the imagery of her own dream, which presents quite a different picture than the one she is presuming to be true. In the dream the White Water Old Man is dead, as the Dao Transmitting Master points out. And yet for Ji-Lan in the dream he manages to operate like a living presence, and to open up in her what promises to be a new way of seeing the world and everything in it. What is dead is alive. The (White Water Old Man’s) “afterlife” is happening for her in the dream “right now.”

The group member read the whole rest of the dream back to her: “She replied, He was dead. You told her, His soul is in somebody’s body and this medium gave the book to you on his behalf. It’s your honor to receive this book from him.”

Ji-Lan says:

*At that moment I feel the Dao Transmitting Master doesn’t believe me. That’s only say was dead [i.e., that she only says that he was dead]. Also means it’s not possible you can be the great person in the future.*
She accords some individual sitting up in the Yi Guan Dao hierarchy an authority over the unknowable mystery of her own innermost unfolding – which is sacred and cannot be known from outside itself. In pushing Yi Guan Dao beliefs so aggressively upon herself she loses sight of the real Yi Guan Dao that, if we are to believe this dream, is already flowering inside her. She misses this important development by looking for it where it is not to be found.

Confucius would be proud of such blind piety towards established authority as she evinces. Recall that the evening just before Ji-Lan had the dream, when her precocious little girl Yu-Li blurted out her misgivings about Confucius – “He is the man I want to go back and blame him!” – Ji-Lan concocted a spurious argument to dissuade the child from doing any such thing. And then, Ji-Lan’s last thought as she dozed off to sleep afterwards, the night she had the dream was, “I think I made a good answer to Yu-Li.” Could it be that this dream arose in the night from Ji-Lan’s most enlightened inner core to disagree – and reveal that piety towards traditional authority is not the way to what she seeks; the real Yi Guan Dao, and everything she needs to transform herself, can be had by merely dipping down into the deeper levels of her own being?

Ji-Lan’s final words in the playback are not even about the dream but about proselytizing her religion and the difficulty she experiences in trying to convert people:

> Sometimes when I [am] trying to help people use the way I learn from Dao society, but I feel difficulty [i.e., but I feel the difficulty of doing this]. Not everyone agree[s] [regarding] the truth [of] our Dao society. When I encounter difficulty maybe I stay there or didn’t go forward. [i.e., when I run up against difficulty maybe it’s because I’ve gotten stuck somehow or ceased to progress in my cultivation of myself.]

The dream makes no mention of spreading religion to other people. It is about her own conversion from the superficial worship of outside authority that she is pushing on herself and everyone else to a realization of that greater truth which comes as a gift from her innermost enlightenment.

Ji-Lan had finished with her playback. She looked up at me.

I put one final question to her: “In the dream, when you tell the Dao Transmitting Master it was the White Water Old Man who gave you the book, she objects that the White Water Old Man is dead…”

Ji-Lan looked at me blankly. She did not get what I was driving at.

“You have to tell her that his soul entered the body of a medium and this medium gave you the book…” I went on.

Ji-Lan kept staring at me with that same uncomprehending look. She still did not grasp the point.
I tried to spell it out: “Why would you have to tell her this? She is the Dao Transmitting Master. If anyone should know this is how White Water Old Man works, it is her.”

A light suddenly dawned in Ji-Lan’s eyes. She said:

Maybe he was dead means I think it’s another test. She want[s] to know if I have enough wisdom to answer such a question and to prove it if I [am] qualified to get this gift. In our society we should follow our senior, follow her way.

“What would make the Dao Transmitting Master think she had a right to test you,” I fired back, “When the plain reality that you possessed the book was clear evidence you had already passed the much higher test of a much higher master and authority than her, the spirit of the White Water Old Man himself, which alone could give you such a book?”

Ji-Lan sat there wrapped in silence. She began to fidget and look uncomfortable. I saw she had gone as far as she could with this dream – and also that she had begun to sense, perhaps from the tenor of my questions, that there was something she was not getting, or that I thought she was not getting. I saw that I had made a mistake by pressing her on this point.

“Would you like to go to the next stage and hear what others think?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said.

One after another members of the group told what they thought. Finally a woman of about Ji-Lan’s same age, who was not even a member of the university community but worked in a nearby five-star mountain lake resort hotel, came forward. I will call this woman Mu-Ping, although that is not her real name. Mu-Ping had worked with two of her own dreams in the group but she had been exasperatingly close-lipped. Every time anyone put a question to her she sat looking straight at the person and said nothing. At the end she held her cards close to her chest and did not share with us what she thought. “I’ll think about it,” was all she would say. Her dreams, like Ji-Lan’s, had depicted a spiritual ripeness and a life on the cusp of a mid-life transformation. So perhaps it was not surprising that Mu-Ping came forth with a terse but crystal clear take on Ji-Lan’s dream that, in its own simple way, hit on the nerve of the view outlined above and illustrated in Figure 1. Finally, when I spoke I expanded on what Mu-Ping had said. I noticed Ji-Lan fidgeted and became uncomfortable so I stopped

“You have the last word,” I said.

She said:

At first I don’t think it’s an easy dream to let me understand the true meaning.

[pause]
I know it’s a big chance for me to start my new change.

The dream group had come to a close.

DOID JI-LAN GET HER DREAM WRONG?

Ji-Lan is only one individual and has only one life, one family, one job, and one religious affiliation. But two different influences (Figure 2) struggle to play themselves out at this point in that one life, that one family, that one job, and that one religion. In working with her dream in the group she gets hopelessly tangled between the two. She started out working with the dream one way, switched to working with it another way, and ended up grabbing at straws to try to make sense of it.

Does it follow that she got the dream wrong? Only if the assumption (Figure 1) is that only one of those two narratives represents Ji-Lan’s true story. But Figure 2 shows that this is not the case. It is the tangle that reflects who she is—and it is the tangle that the dream so aptly depicts. To get it right, to be truthful to the dream, and to act the dream’s truth out in the presence of the dream group, Ji-Lan had to get tangled up like she did.

DEEPER CURRENTS AT WORK

Only by truthfully showing and being who she is, can a dreamer possibly change. What the dreamer may come to see or know, recognize or
concentrate, by working with her dream does not matter as much. The paradox at work in the Ullman process is that when a dreamer reveals to the group where she is stuck – with her dream, with her life, with her self – she unknowingly releases the very deepest currents of healing that alone can set her life in motion again. This is why so often in the dream group it is the big failure that may produce the big success, the dream gotten badly wrong that in the end may be the catalyst to make the dreamer’s life go powerfully right.

The Ullman dream group is an environment where, standing naked in a sense before others, a dreamer can truthfully be herself in the presence of what is even more truly and nakedly herself than she is – her dream. Transformation does not come about by a dreamer’s ability to intellectually see and express in language what her dream or behavior in the group reveals. To see intellectually and express verbally, so useful out in society, is not a human’s greatest capability. Rather, as Ralph Waldo Emerson gleaned so long ago (Emerson, 1841/1936), and as all the wisdom traditions have told us from the earliest times, the intellectual self labors in the service of a higher faculty. This higher faculty is our most essential nature and, just as all our other faculties – the body has its playground and gym, the intellect its library and university, the creative spirit its film studio and art center – this highest faculty of ours needs an environment where it can come out and express and refine itself and discover itself and connect with itself in others; and form a community with them in which it is free to evolve and emerge. The earliest local gatherings of all the great religions once served as such environments – but these religions were bent by lesser individuals over the centuries to the lesser purposes they mostly serve today. The Ullman dream group is an ideal modern secular environment for the emergence and expression of the highest human faculty. Its advantage is that a dream, and not some intermediary person, body of persons, or ideology, governs the process. This is as it should be for every dream is a direct spontaneous and unconscious expression of this highest faculty. The moment the dreamer bends the dream to lesser purposes then in so doing she nakedly reveals the part of herself that needs to be seen so it can be healed. Individual by individual we heal in this way a society that has grown sick throughout and has ceased to function in a way that maximizes human potential all around.

We might fault a dreamer’s failure to see intellectually or express verbally what a specific dream “means.” But as to the higher faculty at work in the process and the methods deployed in that task – it is not for us to judge what we cannot know. This level of the work with dreams is not about knowing.

STILL DEEPER CURRENTS

In stepping all over her dream’s toes the way she does, Ji-Lan dances with it in the only way she knows how – and truthfully reveals to all present who she really is and how she steps on her own toes and those of everyone she gets close to with her pushy authoritarianism. To one extent or another we are all of us bad dancers like her, and we all of us do to ourselves and others what she does. So a truth, a teaching, a touching story, is revealed in the group that
illuminates not just her, but others in the group as well. And herein lies yet another healing current of the Ullman group, and yet another powerful way it releases the higher faculty. Somehow in spite of Ji-Lan’s understandings or misunderstandings, or our own, we in the group come inevitably, as the result of working with her dream, to appreciate her in a deeper way. We cannot help it. We have been given a glimpse of the greatness in her, even though she herself may remain blind to it. We see it in her because she has made us know it in ourselves. Her dream brings us Figure 1 and we recognize in it who we really are. And so the group as a whole is brought closer together in appreciation of what is most real in us all. The group owes this to her. She cannot help but feel its gratitude and its increased esteem for her. She responds with unimaginable growth. Her growth is not for us to dictate. It may not even be for us to know. We can only appreciate the capacity for it in her, and by doing that we do not just share in that capacity – but we actually provide the environment for it to begin to unfold its fruits – not just in her, but in others as well.

Mu-Ping, the woman about Ji-Lan’s same age who worked in the hotel and was so tight-lipped when she worked with her own dreams, stopped coming to the group sometime after Ji-Lan’s dream. She reappeared the very last day the dream group met and told us that she had spent much time thinking about the last dream she did in the group and she had talked the dream over with her husband. She said she knew she had not been forthcoming in the dream group but that as a result of what the group did with her second dream, and because of being in the dream group, she had quit her job, withdrawn her daughter from a prestigious and expensive boarding school and brought her home. Before going out to find a job that better suited her, she was taking off the entire summer. She had signed up for a seven-day meditation retreat at a nearby Buddhist temple and was spending the whole rest of the summer with her daughter. She said in the fall she would enroll her in a regular school nearby, perhaps the one Ji-Lan’s daughter attended.

Did Ji-Lan’s openness and honesty about her life, the powerful images of her dream, or the way she showed herself to be stuck, somehow help nudge Mu-Ping in the direction of making such significant moves in her life? I do not doubt it. It takes a certain weight of truth to release any life into motion. A single individual alone may not be able to come up with quite what is needed, but in the Ullman group supporting truths of the deepest sort emerge abundantly from the other individuals as they work on their dreams.

Despite what most people think, the Ullman dream group is not primarily about what individual members can get from their dreams, though they derive much. It is really about what they can give to others in the group by sharing their dreams and the truth of their lives, whether or not they themselves get anything from the experience. When that vein of truth that lies deep down within each and every one of us is opened up to any degree at all, or even scratched at, someone in the group is bound to go away transformed, changed, or deepened to some degree. Whether or not the dreamer is the one potentiated to transform is of little importance compared to the certainty that someone in the group will be, whether the group ever finds out about it or not. This is the
transpersonal junction of the process and in this deepest sense of the work with dreams, Ji-Lan certainly got her dream right. Nothing else really matters.

We do not guide this Ullman process and we are not in the group to heal or change the dreamer. The dreamer is the one who guides the process. If she is honest, if she is open—if she is willing to let herself show us who she is (and Ji-Lan was all these things); and if, in addition, she engages in the difficult art of grappling in our presence with an interesting and profound dream (like Ji-Lan did) then she activates in our midst that which joins us all deeply and thus has the power to unite us with what is more true in ourselves. This coming alive in our presence operates like a charged field which can transform human life, move it closer to its real measure. If it is her own life that moves or does not move, or the life of someone else in the group – if no one’s life is transformed at all, or if someone’s is – does not matter. She got to that point, and getting there she brought us with her. She went as far as she could. She touched a vein that throbbed also in our lives. She did it in a way that was open and true. Perhaps something always happens when this occurs, something we cannot so easily see. This particular time something happened that we could easily see; but it happened to another person, not her. Since she did it, how can we not view her work with the dream as successful?

REFERENCES


What follows is a brief summary and explanation of the stages, processes, and necessary skills that distinguish the structured group process for working with dreams that Montague Ullman, M.D. developed with psychiatric interns in Sweden in the 1970s and that he honed and perfected during the next twenty years in America with mixed groups containing professionals and lay persons. Over the years the method has been field tested with mothers of young children on Long Island, NY (Dodd, 1999); with pastoral counseling groups in the Church of Sweden in Scandinavia (Hedenrud, 1999); and with groups from a wide variety of other contexts (Ullman & Limmer, 1999). In Taiwan the method has been field tested with undergraduates at an elite medical university (Chiang & Lin, 2004), with counseling professionals and others (Wang, 2008), and with university faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates (Stimson, 2009b, 2010; Stimson & Wang, 2004).

The skills necessary in the Experiential Dream Group.

There are two skills involved:
1. **Listening:** The main challenge for most people is to put all of their own brilliant ideas to one side, disregard them utterly, and listen purely and simply to what the dreamer is saying. This is not easy for people in general and it is not easy for people who have been trained in the helping professions. Frequent mistakes beginners make include

(a) **Cutting a dreamer off when she is speaking to introduce an idea of their own.** It is hard for people to realize their own ideas do not matter and that nothing is more important than what the dreamer herself has to say.

(b) **Offering supposedly helpful suggestions when a dreamer struggles to find a way to express herself.** Putting words in the dreamer’s mouth is not helpful. When the dreamer opens her mouth and is silent, what we want to hear is not what someone else in the group supposes she is about to say next. We want to hear the words that come when the dreamer finally does find a way to express herself. In the experiential dream group we put up with silence for longer, sometimes, than many people are comfortable with. It is the same with tears and laughter. More often than not they signal that something has gone right – not wrong. We do not try to rush forward and comfort the dreamer unless we are invited to do so. The group functions instead to open the dreamer up to self-expression and to allow that expression.

(c) **Disregarding what the dreamer says because they feel they know better than the dreamer what the dream is about.** Usually the dreamer knows much more than she realizes she knows. The highest skill is to listen to what the dreamer says but does not hear herself say and then share with her what you have heard. In other words, each of us in the group is called upon to listen to the dreamer even more closely than she listens to herself. This is a tall order. Most people simply cannot get away from their own brilliant ideas long enough to really hear what the dreamer is saying.

2. **Knowing how to ask a question:** In this kind of dream group we do not allow any group member to take control away from the dreamer. The dreamer alone determines the extent to which she wishes to open up to the group, what information she is willing to offer to the group, and in what direction she chooses to take the process. Consequently:

(a) **No information demanding questions are allowed.** “What were your feelings when your parents died?” is an “information-demanding question” – a question that demands the dreamer provide an answer. This kind of question intrudes into the dreamer’s private domain and is not permitted. Instead, we ask “information-eliciting questions.” “Is there anything more you would care to say about how you felt during this period?” is a proper question. It demands nothing of the dreamer but is an invitation for her to say anything else that comes to mind. Thus, it functions to elicit information. An open-ended question like this gives the dreamer the freedom to
follow her own inner promptings. She stays in control and leads the process.

(b) No “leading questions” are allowed. “Don’t you think that little old lady in the dream was your mother?” is a leading question. A leading question is a hypothesis introduced under the guise of a question. It takes control of the process away from the dreamer and subjects the inquiry into the dream to the preconceptions of a group member. Such questions will be stopped immediately.

(c) No questions are allowed about areas of her life not already introduced by the dreamer. The dreamer may have a boyfriend but she said nothing about him at all. No one may ask about the boyfriend or any other piece of information unless the dreamer introduces it first. The very crux of this process is that the dreamer alone controls the level of sharing. Of course if she shares almost nothing at all, she will get very little of value out of the process. It is in the nature of the group work that there is an inevitable tradeoff between the safety factor and the discovery factor. A dreamer who makes herself completely safe might discover very little. On the other hand a dreamer who discovers a lot might not feel entirely safe. Only the dreamer can decide what balance to strike.

The Stages of the Process

The creative process, whether it be the opening of a flower, the growth of a child or the writing of a novel, happens in discrete stages. At each stage something needs to happen in order for the next stage to kick in successfully. The Experiential Dream Group is a succession of very different stages that serve to keep the dream and the dreamer opening more and more fully to each other throughout the entire process. The group has no other agenda.

Obtaining a dream: No one in the group is obliged to offer a dream. The group leader invites anyone who wishes to share their dream with the group to come forward. If two or three people volunteer, then the leader sits back while those individuals decide among themselves which one feels a more pressing need to do their dream. In the case where more than one individual wants to do their dream, a coin is tossed.

“When did you have this dream?” the leader asks before the dreamer tells her dream. To know when the dream occurred is necessary for a future stage in the process.

Stage I: The dreamer tells the dream slowly as members of the group write it down. Members of the group may then ask clarifying questions. Common questions are “What were the feelings in the dream?” “Were there any colors in the dream?” “Were you your present age?” “Were any of the people in the dream real people?” The questioning should not go on too long. It is important that the group have an accurate picture of the dream in their minds. But to try
to get too precise is a waste of time. Dreams, by their very nature, are vague and hard to pin down exactly.

Stage II: The leader invites the dreamer to sit back, listen and take notes. He instructs the group to ignore the dreamer, not to make eye contact or speak to her. The group starts playing “the game.” Each member pretends the dream is her own.

There are two parts to this stage: feelings and metaphor.

(1) Feelings: Any member of the group who wishes to, speaks up and expresses the feeling that she has during a certain scene in the dream or because of a particular image. “The dark cloud makes me afraid,” one group member may say. Another might follow, “The dark cloud makes me laugh because it looks so stupid.” A third member might say, “The dark cloud makes me angry.” These are all only projections. Nobody but the dreamer can know what the dark cloud ultimately means. This stage functions to offer the dreamer a multitude of possibilities. Often the dreamer will have no clue at all why the dark cloud was in her dream. It may be something a group member says that’s completely wrong that finally gives her the clue. “No. I was not afraid. That’s the thing. I realize it now. I felt in the dream the dark cloud was not real. I didn’t believe it.”

(2) Metaphors: After the feelings in the dream have been sufficiently fleshed out the leader asks the group to shift gears and begin looking at the images of the dream as metaphors. “I feel the dark cloud is a metaphor for camouflage, like a squid’s ink,” one group member may say. “It’s hiding something.” Another member may say, “I feel the dark cloud is a metaphor for me finally showing my feelings – revealing out in the open what was there all along.” These metaphors, like the feelings, are only projections. They’re very useful because they open up the dreamer’s own imagination. The dreamer might decide, “The dark cloud that was blowing past was a powerful metaphor for everything in the situation that has nothing whatsoever to do with me. I just stood there and it went right by. I didn’t need to get involved. And that’s the attitude I need to take with this impossible situation I’ve described at work.”

Stage III: When the dream images have been sufficiently fleshed out, the leader thanks the group for its help and invites the dreamer to come forward and comment on the dream in light of all the different possibilities that surfaced during the “game.”

(1) Dreamer’s Response: This is a time when the dreamer can say anything she wants about anything. She can talk for as long as she wishes and can remain quiet and think for as long as she wants before starting to speak again. The only thing she has to do is tell the group when she is finished, when she has said everything she has to say. The leader asks the dreamer, “Would you like to go on to the next stage?” The dreamer is in control of the process and can stop it at any point if she
feels threatened or unsafe. If the dreamer does feel safe within this process then she will opt to go forward with the exploration of the dream.

(2) **The Dialogue between the Dreamer and the Group**: At each previous stage of the process either the dreamer or the group has been active. During the dialogue the group and the dreamer interact.

(a) **Search for Context**: The group now questions the dreamer about the real-life events leading up to the dream (Open-ended questions only! No leading questions! No questions on material the dreamer has not already introduced!) “Could you say anything about what was going through your mind as you were going to sleep that night?” is a good start. From there the group stretches the timeframe slowly back to include the evening and then the entire day. It is sometimes helpful to stretch the timeframe back further to include the past several days, the entire week, the month, or even “this general period of your life.”

(b) **The Playback**: When enough of the context has been fleshed out, then the leader asks the dreamer if she wishes to continue with the work on the dream and go to the next stage. If the dreamer says yes, then someone in the group reads the dream, scene by scene, back to the dreamer in the second person (“You saw a big black cloud on the horizon, etc.”). The dreamer is asked to relax and view each successive scene of the dream as if it were a film on a screen. The purpose here is to put a distance between the dreamer and her dream so she can sit back and, in light of everything that has been said so far about the dream images and about her recent life, look at the dream in a fresh way. The dreamer can interrupt at any moment to offer any new insights or connections that arise. Also the group members can bring to the dreamer’s attention any discrepancies between the waking feelings and the imagery of the dream. Or, the dreamer may be invited to look deeper into the dream imagery or deeper into the events of the day. The dreamer may simply be asked to notice some peculiarity of an image in the dream that comes to light now. “You say the dark cloud in your dream was not black. It was purple,” some member of the group might say, holding the image up to the dreamer. “Yes,” the dreamer might suddenly say, “At work my boss always wears purple.”

The playback is a powerful stage. The imagery of the dream has been explored; the recent emotional experience of the dreamer has come to light. In the playback these two come naturally together, like two tributaries, to make a mighty river. The dreamer, the group, and the leader all play active roles in this stage. This is the time when the dreamer and her dream often open to each other and connect.

(c) **The Orchestration**: The leader asks the dreamer if she wishes to go to the next stage. If she says yes, the leader invites any members of the group who wish to come forward now and offer the dreamer their view of what the dream is saying. This affords each member of the group the only chance they’ll have to tell the dreamer what they think the dream means. Now they can say something like “I think your dream of the dark cloud means that your boss has made such a big
stink over this situation that everybody in the company sees what she is now. She’s not going to stay in that position for long. The dream suggests your best bet is not to do anything. You are safe.”

The “views” the various group members come up with are called “orchestrating projections” because they attempt to “orchestrate” or bring together in a harmonious way all the disparate and discordant bits of information that have come forward during the process and because they are only projections. Nobody can know what somebody else’s dream means. The dreamer, by this stage, often pretty well knows what her dream means, and so it might be useful to her to see what other people think.

(d) **The dreamer has the final word:** Symbolically and factually, it is important that in this process the dreamer has the final word. The leader invites the dreamer to say anything more she cares to say. Almost always the dreamer says something like, “I just want to thank all of you so much!” or “I never imagined that such a simple little dream could mean so much and be so important to me!”

The real dream work does not actually go on in the group but in the dreamer’s own privacy after she leaves the group. The images, ideas and events raised in the group keep working together, like the ingredients in a cake that is slowly baking. The insight as to the deepest import of the dream might spark in the shower the next morning, or on the way to work two days later. And so, in an ongoing group, there is one final stage to the process.

(e) **At the next group meeting, the dreamer is invited to share any further ideas or insights about the dream.** It sometimes comes out that the dream was about something completely different than everybody thought and that some little thing that happened later caused to dreamer to realize its true meaning. This is an opportunity for the dreamer to share this with the group.

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**The Author**

*William R. Stimson* trained for many years under Montague Ullman, M.D., who originated the Ullman experiential dream group process. At Ullman’s instigation he began leading dream groups himself in New York City. When he followed his wife, Dr. Shuyuan Wang, to Taiwan, together with her, he introduced the Ullman dream group as a course at the university. Besides his ongoing work with the dream group at National Chi Nan University, he leads monthly all-day dream groups in Taiwan’s three major cities that are open to anyone and free of charge. His signal achievement in Taiwan is that he has discovered so many individuals who are better at dreams than he is. It is the work of these unknown “dream geniuses” that he tries to do justice to in his research papers on dreams.