

The Phenomenological Use of Dreams In Psychotherapy

P. ERIK CRAIG

*Center for Existential Studies and Human Services,
Worcester and Cambridge, Massachusetts*

This paper focuses on the application of phenomenological perspectives, principles and methods for the use of dreams in the psychotherapeutic situation.

Upholding the appeal of the European philosopher and "founder" of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, "to return to the things themselves," existentially oriented psychotherapists (e.g., Binswanger, 1963; Boss, 1958; 1963; 1977; Craig 1987a; 1987b; 1988; Stern, 1972) seek to illuminate the meaningfulness of dreams by inviting patients to explicate in detail the concrete episodes of their manifest dreamt existence. As the two partners of inquiry, the therapist and the patient, continue open-mindedly to observe the specific events and elements of a particular manifest dream, the once obscure meaningful forms and structures of that dreamt existence gradually reveal themselves directly. Such an "unambitious reading" of what dreams themselves disclose does not require symbolic interpretations which rely more on the authority of the clinician's theory than on the authorship of the dreamer him- or herself. Indeed, for phenomenologically oriented clinicians theoretical-symbolic interpretations are in general highly suspect with reference to their existential validity for the patient.

But, it may be asked, what is it that is seen with this kind of unpretentious, phenomenologically discriminating observation? The answer is simply those possibilities of existence, of being-there-in-one's-world, to which the dreamer was him- or herself open while dreaming.

The critical and clinically significant point with this perspective is that, while dreaming, individuals tend to be more open to certain of their own existential possibilities than they are while they are awake. Thoughtful observation of dreams usually reveals that, during dreaming, individuals seem to select certain, typically fairly limited, domains or topics in their lives and then examine these relatively defined areas under microscopic light. Although the sequestered domains under consideration often appear magnified in such bold, vivid relief that the original concerns are barely recognizable, the intensive microscopic seeing of the dreaming eye offers a paradoxically wider and richer vision of things than is usually possible in waking when an individual cannot afford the luxury of such close-up laboratory-like investigation.

The first challenge for the clinician is therefore simply to discern the particular meaningfulness of the individual's dreaming existence precisely as it was given to the dreamer. The second challenge is to identify those features of this dreamt existence that announce the dreamer's own existential constraint as well as his or her heretofore unclaimed possibility. Psychotherapeutic readings of the dream therefore trace the ever changing borders between freedom and constriction in the existence of the dreamer, pointing always to both sides of the existential frontier: retrospectively to the ways in which the individual has lost touch with his or her own inheritance as a human being and prospectively to ways in which he or she might still lay claim to a more fully realized authentic existence of his or her own.

References

- Binswanger, L. (1963). *Being-in-the-world*. New York: Basic Books.
- Boss, M. (1958). *The analysis of dreams* New York: Philosophical Library.
- Boss, M. (1963). *Psychoanalysis and Daseinsanalysis*. New York: Basic Books.
- Boss, M. (1977). *I dreamt last night* . . . New York: Gardner Press.
- Craig, E. (1987a). Dreaming, reality and illusion: An existential- phenomenological inquiry. In F. van Zuuren, F. Wertz and B. Mook, *Advances in qualitative psychology: Themes and variations* (pp. 115– 136). Lisse: Swets & Zeitlinger; Berwyn, PA: Swets North America.
- Craig, E. (1987b). The realness of dreams. In R. Russo, *Dreams are wiser than men* (pp. 34–57). Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.
- Craig, E. (1988). (Ed.). Psychotherapy for freedom. Special issue of *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 1(1).
- Stern, P. (1972). *In praise of madness*. New York: W.W. Norton.