

BODY DREAMWORK

Eugene T. Gendlin

Introduction

Dream interpretation is famously controversial. There are many theories, and even practitioners of the same theory usually differ about a given dream. The mere dream report cannot be interpreted without the participation of the dreamer. But the dreamer's interpretations are not reliable either.

The purpose of Freud's free association and Jung's daydream was to engender something to break through "directly from the 'unconscious.'" Working with the body is a further development of their methods.

The body responds to attention. With a little training people can learn to put their attention inside their bodies and to let a *physical quality* come there. What comes might be expansive, or constricted, heavy, jumpy, or no word for it, just . . . *this* quality.

Then, if the person thinks of something else, the quality changes. The body responds with a uniquely different quality to anything, whether large or tiny. The question *How is my life going these days?* will bring a unique bodily quality, but so will *noticing this little crease on the dress*.

If one attends in the body and awaits a unique quality until it actually comes, then little steps come *from it*. They can answer questions.

Where did you ever see a door like that?

Nowhere.

Wait for the quality it makes in your body.

(silence) . . . Oh, it's like the door at my grandmother's.

A whole field of information is implicit in that nameless bodily quality. Very strikingly, what one answers from within the body can be utterly different from what one said before.

This variable, the bodily quality called the "*felt sense*," was first identified in the Philosophy of the Implicit (Gendlin 1997; 1986; 2009; in press). It led to a widely used research instrument, the Experiencing Scale (Klein et al. 1969; Hendricks & Cartwright 1978).

Speaking from attention in the body is observable. People speak, then pause and say "Hm. Is that right? Hm .. (silence . . .) No, it's not what I said, it's more like . . ." Then: "Let's see, is *that* right? (silence . . .) "Yes," (audible exhale) "that's what it is." Then, "Oh, another thing about it is . . ." More specific detail comes up.

This ***bodily*** checking is quite different from mere talk or self-doubt. It requires some actual time, 5-30 seconds. The pacing of speech and silences is characteristic. The glance becomes distant. As long as people continue to look right at you, they are not attending in the body.

Why does a bodily-felt quality contain so much more information than one knows? Our bodies interact directly in our situations in many intricate ways that we don't (aren't able to) think about

separately. The word “body” is acquiring a much wider meaning, not only what physiology defines.

Why are dreams special? They process our situations on a primitive level where perceptions of trees, animals, and stones are still being formed. But our individual history and situations also participate in the formation of the images. This “very odd chair” and this “oddly behaving pig” are freshly formed by the self-healing impetus of the basic organismic process. That is why in bodywork the images go beyond our stuck problems (Gendlin 1986; see theoretical appendix).

The practice works observably regardless of theory. We ask questions; we show people how to let the unique quality come, and to wait for answers that come from it.

One's usual energy may be (for example) constricted, or constantly agitated, largely immobile dragging oneself along, or a guarded withdrawal. A sudden shift to a positive life-forward energy is quite observable in body posture, face, and breath.

People tend to interpret their dreams very negatively, but we find that a dream is code for a hidden life-energy that leads to solving life problems. It opens a direction that we cannot otherwise provide.

The new energy is often invisible within the dream. It comes when the conscious person lives bodily from the dream images.

Letting the life-forward energy actually come in the body is the chief purpose of body dream interpretation. When it comes, we work to insure that it is fully experienced, and can be taken home and practiced. Then, if the dreamer wants, we go on interpreting.

The questions

We derive questions from many sources, especially Jung and Freud.

First we let the dreamer freely tell associations. Then most safely, we begin with the place in the dream. If no place was mentioned (some people report no detail), we ask:

Where did this happen?

I don't know.

Was it in a room or outside?

An ordinary living room.

Where were the windows?

Tall windows on the right side.

In your body, please get the feel of that room.

Then we ask:

Where did you ever see a room that felt like that, with tall windows on the right side?”

How to use questions

Dreamers first answer, “Nowhere. I don't know. Nothing comes.” So we explain:

We aren't really asking you. The question is for you to take down and ask your body. Let the feel of that place come again. Then wait and see what the question brings down there.

Until they experience the bodily coming a few times, people can't be sure they are doing this.

When a place is remembered:

What happened there? What was it like to be at your grandmothers house?

When an earlier time is mentioned:

What was happening to you during those years?

Maximizing and practicing the new energy

Actually having and keeping the new energy requires special work. After a minute the energy might no longer be here, only remembered. We need to let it come again and again.

We say:

Come around to it again. You said . . . and then we asked . . . and then it came. Lead up to it again and let it come again in your body. This time stay with it for a little while.

Before we end, we let it come again:

Can you have it again? Come around to where it came.

Then:

With that image and those steps do you think you can let it come whenever you want, and practice it?

Getting help from the dream

If we go to the most troubling spot right away, we work as if there were no dream. We want the help of the dream before we tackle the problem. In bodily terms “help” means anything that brings life-forward energy.

In a dream, what sort of things bring help? Anything beautiful, also children, animals, anything

living and green. Also, very odd objects unique just to this dream. We ask about those early on.

Tell me more about those funny bowls.

They were sculptured with animals and plants that stuck out . . . (more detail followed)

Now, in your body, BE the sculptured bowls with animals and plants sticking out from you.

Help can also come unexpectedly. For example:

Where did you ever see a bed like that?

I don't know, um . . . (long pause) Oh, it's like the bed I used to go and sit on, while my parents were fighting. I was safe there.

Now please go and sit on that bed. Feel yourself sitting on that bed as we work further. Let the being safe flow through your whole body. Take a few minutes just for that.

When no help is found, we can ask for the body's positive version directly:

How would your body be if this changed and were just right? Don't make it up; wait.

Example:

There was a sick turtle going down a road with its entrails hanging out, dragging on the road behind it.

(*This was in a dream group. Some people gasped at the vivid horror of that scene.*)

The questions brought no help. So we asked directly:

What would a healthy turtle be like?

A healthy turtle? (*She straightened up.*) A healthy turtle?

Her whole body changed. A new energy flowed visibly through her body. We worked to keep it, then went on to the next person. Suddenly she interrupted:

I want everybody to know my turtle is up on her hind legs, and she's dancing!

Another example:

Can I tell you only just a part of my dream? (*Then shaky voice*) It's about something painful.

Sure, but have the whole dream with you.

When the questions brought little,

In the rest of the dream is there perhaps an animal or a plant, or a baby, or some living thing or some beautiful thing?

(silence) There was a child.

Yes, that's what I mean. A child is always a good thing.

I think there were more children.

Can we have those children with us as we go on? Maybe could we have them ALL AROUND US? Would that be all right?

(Sigh.)

Her whole body changed. It eased from her extreme tension. Then she said:

I could use a whole army of children around me!

Working with the dream characters

Safely and gently:

What does Bob mean to you? How does he make you feel in your body?

More effectively:

Could that person stand for a part of you that you don't know very well?

How is that person your opposite?

What would come in your body if you had a little bit of ...? Not really that, but something in that direction?

What new way of being in your body might come?

People often dream of someone chasing them, or of a beautiful but fearsome animal. By being it bodily they can feel it as a part of them.

Most effectively:

Let's say you are acting in a play -- next week. Now you're only preparing. It's theater for children; everything is exaggerated. Imagine yourself standing in the wings, ready to come on stage.

*Now, in your body, **BE that person.** How would you come on stage? Would you march, crawl, stomp, sneak . . . how? Don't tell me yet. Do it inside first.*

By not asking people to act visibly, we avoid performance anxiety and merely inventing what to say. Our way was Stanislavsky's training for actors. But we do ask:

Please sit forward on the edge of the chair. (We model this). Loosen your body and move a little bit.

Once people become experienced, a short phrase replaces the elaborate instructions. We just

say:

Please BE that. Or: Could you body that?

Anything can be asked about in this way:

Wear the necklace. How does it feel in your body?

Be your body with this dress on.

Example:

What does your brother bring now in your body?

He always does whatever he wants. My parents let him get away with everything. Not like me. I was the good one.

What would it feel like in your body, if you had a little bit of doing whatever you want?

Please body him.

(Visible shift) In all these years that never occurred to me.

Another example:

The others in the club asked me to let Bill sleep with my wife. It was supposed to be a birthday present for Bill . . . That dream is really crazy. I wouldn't let them ask me something like that. I don't know what club this is.

What's Bill like?

Bill does only the part of a job he likes. He is unscrupulous and imposes on everybody.

One theory says everything in a dream is part of you. Of course we don't know if that fits here. See in your body, might there be a part like that?

That part of me? Well, yes (*laugh*). But I don't like that. I'm glad I'm not like Bill. But, um, sure, there is that part of me . . . I'd run over everybody . . . I don't let it come up much, even inside.

Now he fills that into the dream story:

She should sleep with that part of me? (*silence*) Hmm . . .

Now he feels that part active in his sexuality.

The dream story

The story plot needs to be summarized in *three* parts: What first happened, how the dreamer responds, and what then happens. This lets one see one's typical patterns as determining the outcome.

For example:

Lying on the seat was a child's ring with different color stones. I knew it wasn't worth anything, it was plastic with glass stones. It was definitely a child's ring. It then slipped down between the seat and the wall. I left it there.

Story: Can it mean something if we say: First there was a colorful ring. Then you thought it wasn't worth anything. Then it slipped down.

Now he feels how the colorful ring could continue,

Let the dream continue

Be inside your body and have that image before you. Now let the dream continue. Wait and see what will happen.

For example:

There was a dead man lying on his back on an altar . . . I know, that's my creative spirit. It's dead.

Wait, Let the dream continue. Watch and see what he will do.

. . . He got right up!!

Various important considerations

- ~ A broader method ("Bias Control," not discussed here) enables interpretations of one's own dream.
- ~ Sixteen dreamwork questions are in use. Each is a formula for countless questions, since countless specifics can be asked about in any dream
- ~ Awakened during REM, people report a flood of material. "Home dreams" are the organism's selection which "lab dreams" miss.
- ~ This life-forward process from the body has been used in advanced trauma work and hands-on bodywork. While working from outside, it is more effective to work also from *inside* the body (Vanderkooy & McEvenue 2006; Levine 1977).
- ~ Dreams can seem to picture just what one already knows. But the odd images and figures can indicate a new direction.
- ~ An archetypal devil in your dream knows your particular situation. For Freud all energy is sexual. For Jung sexuality provides analogies for other problems. Your individual body can say how the universals function in this dream.

- ~ Looking to a dream to make the right decision can be badly misleading. Dreams react to the previous day. Today's dream might seem to favor one side; the next dream may favor the other side. But the hidden positive energy points to a new constellation, a change in the person, not the decision.
- ~ Many people spend life stuck at the edge of a life-forward change. They may envision the change as unsafe or losing essential needs. The new constellation is different.
- ~ For inexperienced people a safe relationship with their dreams is most important. More dreams will come. We help them love the dream, admire its intricacy and uniqueness. That's a wonderful dream! we exclaim when we feel it. Or, That's so interesting!
- ~ Dreaming is a living process, not just frozen pictures. When we let the pictures bring their bodily quality, dreamwork continues the living process.

.....

REFERENCES

Bierman, Ralph. "Focusing in Changing Abusive Fighting to Constructive Conflict Interactions." Paper presented at the 11th International Focusing Conference, Ontario, Canada. <http://www.focusing.org/rwv/article/rwv-presentation.html> (cited March 3, 2011).

Gendlin, Eugene T. *A Process Model*. New York: The Focusing Institute, 1997. Also available at <http://www.focusing.org/process.html> (cited March 4, 2011).

Gendlin, Eugene T. *Let Your Body Interpret Your Dreams*. Wilmette, IL: Chiron Publications, 1986.

Gendlin, E.T. "Implicit Precision." In Z. Radman (Ed.) *Knowing without Thinking: The Theory of the Background in Philosophy of Mind*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan (in press). Also available at http://www.focusing.org/gendlin/pdf/gendlin_implicit_precision.pdf (cited March 3, 2011).

Gendlin, E.T. "What first and third person processes really are." *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 16, 10–12 (2009): 332–62.

Hendricks, M. and R. D. Cartwright. "Experiencing Level in Dreams: An Individual Difference Variable." *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, 15(3) (1978). Also available at http://www.focusing.org/research_expdream.html (cited March 4, 2011).

Klein, M. H., Mathieu, P. L., Gendlin, E. T., & Kiesler, D. J. *The Experiencing Scale: A research and training manual*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Extension Bureau of Audiovisual Instruction, 1969.

Levine, P. & Frederick, A. *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma: The Innate Capacity to Transform Overwhelming Experiences*. North Atlantic Books, 1977.

Van der Kooy, A. and McEvenue, K. (2006). *Focusing With Your Whole Body*. Toronto:Marlborough, 2006

This “Body Dreamwork” piece will appear in

McNamara, Patrick & Barrett, Deirdre (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Sleep and Dreams*. Praeger Press.