

*Accessing the Unconscious Labyrinth of
Couples through Their Dreams*

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A short essay on dreams and development to set the stage

Dreams are the unconscious poetry and prose of the internal object world. They are art and truth that take form as hidden mysteries, echoing individual and relational narratives, whose understanding is so vital to an integration of past life with future possibilities. Our vulnerability to unconscious limitations stems from limited insight. Consciousness about life is overestimated as sufficient for adequate functioning and ambition, much in the way a materialistic world is preferred over an ambiguous and shadowy inner world. In the dark world that lies beneath our trappings, available during sleep, our vulnerabilities are at their peak. There is great potential to melt the darkness, and to illuminate the precious and precarious parts of self and object world. If ready, the multitude of unacknowledged concerns, longings, dreads, and search strategies emerge, at first in the form of vague awarenesses, or in scary nightmares, which we are so glad to awaken from. We pinch ourselves in reassurance “it was *only* a dream”. If these echoes, presented to us at first as vague and inchoate, are grounded in a proper language and environment for exploration, the sounds and images can be decoded for deep personal understanding.

But, not so fast! Do we really want to know what lies within? There are the nightmares, so sudden in shock and disturbance at the beginning of childhood, reflecting the developmental push, or impulse to consciousness of not quite repressed aggressive, sexual, and familial tumults. Re-repression is the customary outcome unless the child is forced to share the sources of the nighttime distress. As the child cries out, partly asleep, but dimly awake in the night's terror, the parents, who are partly the sources of the disturbance, are called upon to comfort and soothe so as to ameliorate the internal calamity without tampering with it. The child's emotionally charged secrets are returned to the innocence of sleep. Not so in the analytic process, whose aim is self-consciousness. No sleeping allowed in analysis.

Objectives

I am going to illustrate two dimensions of couple therapy process that are enhanced by dream work: The first dimension is the elaboration of the unconscious matrix of the couple relationship, and the second concerns transference material that informs the therapist on how the therapy is going. There is in dream work the dream space, the room space, and the life-space.

The dream space is the intrapsychic container which can have the properties of symbolizing unconscious process, and deadening psychic process by concrete operations. The room space is the therapist as a receptive object with the couple providing reverie for the potential mentalizing of the dream from the unbearable to the symbolic. The life-space refers to here and now and there and then references in the dream identifying the developmental catastrophe, and search strategy for going on being in the individual and the couple. Dreams also illuminate individual and couple transferences by identifying couple developmental issues and conflicts stirred up in the therapeutic triangle. The clinical usefulness of couple dreams is in deepening the treatment. Several vignettes will be offered to illustrate how each spouse uses the method of free association in working with dreams. Transference-countertransference valencies will also be discussed.

The clinical usefulness of couple dreams

Dreams are tools in object relations couple and family work as they provide a richness of unconscious relational material in an accessible form. Freud made the time honored point that, "*Dreams are the royal road to the unconscious*". Applied to couples, I would augment the above with:

“Dreams are the couple’s intersection of collective affective unconscious process”.

Dream material amplifies the couple’s interpsychic narratives, particularly as revelations of therapeutic process, through shadow, mystery, and complexity. Individual spouses often have dreams during the course of treatment, and on occasion, both spouses will have dreams that overlap or amplify individual and couple issues. Dreams produce images and affects in couples in contrast to the concrete presentations in sessions. Dream material affects the senses of all participants. Dreams bring forth aspects of individual and couple cultures. In marriage each partner’s unconscious intergenerational inheritance shapes attitudes, beliefs, and moral proscriptions. A couple that fails in producing shared meanings relies on fixed beliefs as modes for relating. Each partner’s culture must be re-visited and re-negotiated with concessions made for the sake of a new system. Dreams open up and alert the couple and the therapist to personal identifications and loyalties to ancestors disguised as ghosts that pre-empt intimate couple. Individual histories were not previously considered as factors (objects) that prevent mutuality and satisfaction in the marital relationship. Instead, accusations and criticisms may abound as to the other partner’s shortcomings with little awareness of what is being carried in the

self that drives the differences. This phenomenon of splitting characterizes mild to severely regressed couples.

We explore how dreams represent the internal object worlds of self and family, past and present. Shared unconscious objects abound in the marital relationship in the form of projective identifications. The labyrinth of couple unconscious object relations is available through each spouse's dreams and analytic work can go deep when experienced in a sitting up narration of what spouses cannot easily decipher when lying down. What one spouse dreams usually involves the partner, the marriage, and other significant pairings. As we shall see dreams would include the therapist-spousal triangle,. Analysis of couple dreams has a multi-dimensional value: the dreams of one spouse can illuminate the projective matrix of both. Each spouse may dream on the same occasion, adding breadth to the over-all meanings to the marriage relationship. Lastly, couple dreams may ameliorate resistances due to the tamper proof nature of a dream.

The couple's interpsychic continuum seeks expression. Split off aspects of introjected subject-object dynamics live as the subtext of dreams for each spouse. Linkages can be made between couple projections and multiple

unconsciousness. The depth and breadth of these internal communications may represent in part: underlying psychic conflict, elaboration of repressed affects, a shift from one developmental level to another, a dramatization to master anxiety and control flooding, longings, hurts or failures in development, transferences, to the therapist, or the spouse, and the refinding of lost objects. The reporting of dreams in the company of one's spouse brings to the couple system projective identifications that can become known through the dreamer's interpretations, the spouse's responses, and the therapist's further analysis of the couple intrapsychic-interpersonal narrative. Dreams freeze the action so that a more dispassionate inquiry is possible that uncovers the power of the unconscious. Since the dream is the property of the dreamer, and imagination is hard to refute, playing with dream material becomes contagious. They are neither true, nor false; hence there is a freedom for the couple to make mental mudpies, as the threat of a persecutory super-ego is reduced.

Following the Affect in Dream Interpretation

Midge and Tom had been living together for two years and trying to work through in couple therapy their aversion to getting married. Four months into

the treatment Tom reported a dream in which he was driving with Midge to my office. He said that they had driven up and down steep hills, with sharp turns, and he really had to push the car to make it up the hills. Coming down was much easier. Near the end of the journey, coming down the last hill the car began to speed up and Tom found that he couldn't break fast enough. He said that as he and Midge neared my office, there suddenly appeared a stone wall, and he had to crash into it to stop the car. The car was damaged, but we they were O.K. I came out to help them out of the car. Once out of the car Tom saw that there were cliffs below. He concluded and if he and Midge hadn't hit the stone wall they would have plunged into the ocean.

I approach dreams at first through the associations of first the dreamer, then the spouse; if I have something to add I speak last. When I am mentioned in dreams as a particular figure in the life of the spouse or couple, I examine my countertransference to their portrayal of me, so as to locate what type of object I represent-- an ego ideal, a deprecated part of the self, a frightening intrusion, an exciting or elusive object, an Oedipal parent, or a buddy. Tom said that the dream had disturbed him; he awakened perspiring. He woke Midge up and they cuddled, but they did not discuss what he had experienced. He chose to wait until the session. This was typical of Midge

and Tom who tended to veer away from areas of worry, in favor of the physical comfort they received from each other and valued highly. In the session, however, Tom was eager to continue. He elaborated on the sense of responsibility in as the driver. Midge was in his car and he was endangering her life. It occurred to him that the frightening ups and downs of the steep hills represented marriage, and that the outside world represented challenge and danger. The car was the real culprit, however, since he could not push it hard enough up the hill, or stop it on the final descent.

Hearing his associations, Midge could not contain herself with excitement. She thought that the dream dramatized Tom's fear of inadequacy. She said that it not only held him back in his work life, where he was overqualified for the job he did; it also interfered with his getting married. Tom responded by saying that he wasn't sure if he could remain committed to marriage, since his parents had divorced and two of his three brothers were in disastrous marriages.

I said that Tom was in touch with the meaning of the part of the dream where the car went out of control: it signified to him the return of his terror that he would destroy them both, if he married and impregnated Midge.

Referring to a recent session in which Tom had chuckled playfully about having children with Midge and being a good father, I added that the part of the dream where the downhill road seemed manageable could represent his openness to marriage, after a period of strain and toil in therapy. Tom remembered that in that session Midge had expressed reservations about how she could deal with motherhood, given her background of neglect and deprivation. This comment helped me to see that Tom and Midge had a shared view that marriage would lead to disaster, and yet they had demonstrated a shared willingness to face their fears. The symbolic meaning of the stone wall brought a mutual acknowledgment. They responded by pointing to the stone wall in the dream: They concluded that therapy might have been a good barrier against disaster, but at the same time their fears and doubts had been stonewalling the therapy in case analytic exploration would lead to greater imagined danger.

It was time to examine my countertransference to the dream. I felt like the man who could not prevent the couple from crashing the car. Nor could I remove the threat of the ocean, and their ultimate terror, death. I told them that the issue of feared dependency was embedded in the dream, speaking to them in the session, and they saw me as one to help them, but almost too

late. They were questioning the holding and containing function of the therapist. Tom made the point that remaining single, but cohabiting with Midge insured independence for them.

In my countertransference to the dream I felt I could not prevent the couple from crashing the car. Nor could I remove the threat of the ocean, and their ultimate terror: death. True I helped them out of the car, but I could not help it that they had gone on a harrowing journey. Still, they did make it to the session, but at great risk. At that moment I questioned my adequacy and holding function. Then I realized they were doing better with analyzing the dream than I was. For Tom and Midge the dream had activated the encapsulated unconscious; far from depressing them, it was enlivening them and their capacity to work together. At first I failed to recognize this accomplishment, because I became over concerned about analyzing the symbolic meaning of the dream and neglected to take in fully the cathartic experience of the dreamer in telling the dream, or the alleviation of anxiety that the couple felt because of working with it. No matter how well aspects may be dissected and analyzed, the full therapeutic potential of the dream cannot be realized until the affect of the dreamer and his spouse during the telling of the dream is appreciated.

I now saw that the dream was enabling Tom and Midge to confront and master their desperate need for safety and their fears of breakdown and catastrophe. Embedded in the dream was their fear of depending on each other and on me. I said that they saw me as one to help them, but they were afraid that it was almost too late and so might lead to the death of the couple. Tom said that he now realized that he had been living with the fantasy that remaining single, even though cohabitating could ensure independence and therefore a measure of safety for each of them. Working on the dream took Tom and Midge over the wall of their resistances to further work on securing their commitment to remaining a couple.

Discovering the Interpersonal Meaning of a Dream

The wife Linda reported in her dream she is making succotash, otherwise known as lima beans and corn. A friend walked in, and she said to her friend she must be surprised at what I am making. Linda noticed that she felt tense in the dream. She went on to give me her first association. She said that she liked corn and her husband liked lima beans.

It occurred to me that both vegetables retain their individual forms even after prolonged cooking. The word “succotash” makes it sound as if the beans have softened and become mush. Like the beans, Linda and her husband Rob, retained their own individual forms, unmodified by the marriage.

Linda went on to say that she and Rob were incompatible in many ways. It seemed to her that her dream referred to her conflict over the marriage, and to her guilt about her wishes to leave Rob. She was further reminded of the powerful guilty feelings she had experienced after her grandmother’s death, when she developed a long-standing phobia. She feared that if she left Rob, the guilt would cause the phobia to return. Rob responded that he did not want to be with her if he was just there to prevent a phobia. They went on to talk about the fierce competitiveness between them over the years, which prevented intimate connecting.

I suggested the failure to combine their two personalities like two vegetables for a new flavor in the marriage was the couple’s major disappointment. The retaining of separate selves vs. achieving a reliable dependency signaled much anger. They agreed sadly and went on to voice regret about the wasted years.

For couples in trouble, excessive independence may hide deep-seated fears over being controlled by the spouse. Fears of domination are dynamics presented and repeated in the therapy. Dreams relax resistances to understanding as they bring out the intrapsychic bases for the distrust in the marriage. They surface when there is a proper holding environment, and when the unknown qualities of inner experiences are sought. When we solicit dreams the spouses cross the border from the privacy of the individual unconscious to the interpersonal realm not previously available in the spousal relationship

Dream revealing hidden affects of a narcissistic-masochistic projective marital matrix

Background:

Seth and Julie (60 and 54) were in couple treatment for three months with me, and Seth was in individual sessions as well, which began four months ago, while Julie was in ongoing psychoanalysis before couple work began. S. presented as an essentially schizoid individual and began sessions with the concern over what to do as the family business was being sold since it

was losing money, and he, as CFO did not want to go to work for the European company buying them out. The CEO was his brother-in-law (wife's brother) and they had never gotten along in 30 years and hardly communicated unless absolutely necessary. Seth referenced Julie in most of the early sessions pointing out that she wanted to continue working after he retired. This fact seemed to make the decision as to how to plan for himself less dependent on her availability, although paradoxically he felt she would still want to spend a lot of time doing things together, which he was ambivalent about. Whenever a couple relationship fills the individual sessions I will ask if the other spouse might be invited in. Seth was interested in the idea and shared it with Julie. Julie reported through Seth she was reluctant since she believed I would be partial to her husband, having seen him for four weeks; but she had heard from several colleagues that I was pretty good about not taking sides, so she was curious to see for herself.

He was a soon to be retiring executive while she was actively engaged in a consulting practice. Seth had a ten-year analytic therapy, ages 42-52, with an elderly male analyst that focused on his early childhood father-son relationship, which included his parent's marital separation of five years, starting when S. was five, and ending when his father returned to the family

when S. was ten. An only child, he hated him for many years but grew to appreciate his father's weaknesses during the ten years of analytic work. No appreciable affect was shown during these early sessions. No dreams were analyzed during the prior treatment, and little evidence was present that mother-son work was accomplished, or any exploration of the family triangle. Julie was a wounded child having been molested by an uncle on father's side, and in general she felt her family role was to serve men and her rather insensitive mother. She recalled cutting her thigh with a razor blade at age 18, with some blood flowing in her parent's bathroom; this was her way of feeling in touch with her pain, so overlooked in her life. The couple had two boys (27 and 29) who lived on their own, in another state, and neither was in a serious relationship as far as they knew.

Initial impressions and history revealed a couple that had drifted apart over the years, each living in a separate world of work, with little close communication, although it was Julie who insisted she wanted to be close. Seth preferred internet pornography, whose usage increased as the business came closer to be sold. There was increasing concern for the future. Seth's preoccupation with pornographic sites featured young teens or adults, with both genders built slender, and with the women small boned and small

breasted. Television and internet porn were his outlets when at home. He knew it was probably not good for him, but he could not give it up, or would not, and Julie was helpless to interfere.

Julie largely initiated the couple's sex life, and lately S. was having difficulty maintaining an erection through intercourse, although in individual sessions he said he was as hard as a rock when using the Internet. In a general sense I felt sad for them. I internally felt they shared an unconscious longing for closeness that was blocked by long standing individual child based fears of being re-molested, displaced, and exploited. Neither parent represented a reliable and nurturing object. In Julie's situation she was the eldest and only girl, with two brothers, the younger being mother's favorite and confidant. Her father had been a powerhouse owner of the company, which Seth married into knowingly, as this was his way of getting a new family and a male parent he could look up to. He initially viewed Julie as a dependent person who he could take care of; but his motives were primarily driven by the hunger to correct the impoverished childhood yearnings for a father-figure who he could respect, and who would guide him.

Prelude to the dream

In the prior couple session I had referred to Julie as “your wife” in soliciting her response to Seth’s current reference to her as often saying confusing and stupid things, showing an interest in how this may have affected her. Julie had turned to me in a tense and hurt manner and mentioned that I had not called her by name, and she was worried that I could not treat her as an individual, but only could see her as his wife.

The Dream

The dream was Seth’s, and it followed my recent request that the couple report any dreams for us to explore in order to enrich the work.

Seth reported that he and J. went to a foreign country for Andy’s bar mitzvah (Andy is the son of Seth’s nemesis brother-in-law and CEO). In the dream Andy is not a child, and Seth’s brother in law and soon to be former partner is there and is driving a white BMW, and they are in France, or Italy (I drive a white SUV and am Italian). He needs a passport to stop at the border. He is supposed to take public transportation, a train, but has no tokens, and the train doesn’t stop at the border and he gets into trouble. His brother-in-law

tries to purchase two tokens, for site seeing. Seth gets passport from a fortuneteller, and a transit worker takes it into the back. He comes back and says, "You are under arrest". If Seth tells the truth and his brother in law gets into trouble, or if he doesn't tell the truth, how will he meet him in the city they're supposed to meet? Seth does not think he turned in his brother in law, and he doesn't believe he was interrogated either, and then released.

End of dream.

I first asked Seth to comment first on what the dream might suggest. He bitterly said that Andy and Julie's youngest brother were recently invited to his brother in law's new expensive home on Nantucket, and he wasn't. He was also approaching his 60th birthday and does not want to invite the brother in law to his party; in addition he does not want to go to Andy's actual bar mitzvah but wants to be invited anyway. He was concerned about retiring since he had nothing planned. He had been to a financial planner with Julie recently and worried he would not have the money he planned on because the stock was almost worthless (I had two silent associations. He would be left with a token of what he had invested for so many years; and, if he seriously took stock he would feel worthless). He went on to say with uncharacteristic animation that he walked out of a meeting with the

perspective buyers, their competitors, after he found out that their employees would be badly compensated if there were a takeover. He expressed rage over how the partnership with his brother in law was to end, with the bad character in his brother-in-law showing through at the meeting. Seth said that he had a rough night last night, and was bitter over getting no support in the past seven years; that it didn't matter how moral you were, you still get screwed. He said, in a kind of eulogizing way, that Julie was the only member of her family who was not self-centered. She was bred to satisfy others.

I turned to Julie, whose mouth was open in disbelief as to what she was hearing. At first she related that sharing the dream was very important to her. She tearfully related that Seth had been very anxious last night, and would not say anything. She felt that the dream had to do with crossing the boundaries from working to retirement, from being important to the employees, and devalued by the family. She said she was particularly moved by feeling close to the inside of her husband; an area he never allowed her near. I asked her about Seth's direct comments about her character, as compared to her brother's. She said Seth always blamed her for the family

she came from since he had regarded them as his greatest hope in marrying her.

I wondered about the dream's further meanings. I first commented on the animation, and that it appeared that Seth became very expressive when discussing being victimized. I offered that he was fighting against being overwhelmed at losing his position of value. I wondered if there were also some sad and lonely parts of him under the rage. I picked up on Julie's idea that boundaries were involved, but I offered the observation that Seth was moving from individual therapy into couple therapy, and so was Julie except she had two therapists and could have separate experiences. Using the language of the dream, in the context of their individual histories could they be merely "tokens" of other's uses of them? Another theme in the dream was reflected in Seth's paradox of ratting on brother in law and then fearing he would not get to be with him at their destination (I did not say this but Seth's history included his mother's confiding in him during father's long absence that she might re-marry and he was incensed. Ratting on father meant being mother's only, and he was on tenuous ground after father returned home).

I did say that the boundary worries could be about me, as Julie worried about sharing me in a way that would be fair to her in the last session, and this could be Seth's concern about fairness too. How would the therapy reach a good destination? Would I be reliable for each of them? Julie cried and said her mother always referred to her all through life as her daughter, or her girl, and not by her first name. She had forgotten that until now.

Some additional associations and deciding what to do about them

None of the associations, or potential insights I have about a dream would be shared wholesale during a particular session. I hold them and await the couple's responses, building where possible on the story lines and themes about current or past life, and I particularly look for transference dynamics, related to shared couple anxieties, hopes, or dreads about the therapy. All the while I am tracking each spouse's responses to the dream telling as in vivo elaborations of resistances or openness to the unknown but slowly emerging internal life of the couple relationship, and I look for revelations of all significant pairings pertaining to the marriage difficulties. I may choose to comment on any dream contents that illustrate developmental threats originating in early childhood, or adolescence, and I will discuss in relation

to the sexual and emotional conflicts or arrests of either spouse, that may be affecting the marriage.

The major technical issue in a new therapy is how to hold, contain, and directly discuss the couple's defenses and anxieties about sharing the therapist; spouses may consciously expect betrayal, favoritism, or being ignored. They may anticipate gender bias, unconsciously fear hostile oedipal rivalry, and harbor deep longings for the dyad. When present I would select the dream elements that would most effectively promote understanding the threats to trusting each other, the therapy process, and me. By highlighting the contextual transferences, and empathically relating to them with the couple through the dream, we might detoxify the powerful impediments to collaboration.

Working with symbols

**Tokens—Transit Worker—Passport—Getting Arrested-Bar mitzvah-
Foreign Countries-Borders**

If we consider dreams as representing integration, synthesis, and mastery, (Fosshage, 1983) they can be viewed as modifications of, and revelations of,

psychic process, reflecting re-organization of object relations undergoing disorganizing change. Interpersonally, the symbols within the dream may point to attempts at anxiety regulation, and can imply preoccupation with defenses. Each spouse may have a stake in these processes while one has the dream experience.

For example, Julie is concerned about whether she is a token in the marriage and perhaps will be in the treatment with me. She is not alone in this, as Seth was comfortable in individual sessions, and now has to share me with Julie, but is also expected to reveal himself in her presence. He may trivialize the couple sessions and give a token response, preferring to take the role of *site-seer* (voyeur, or expert).

Seth is in a forced retirement, a transition for which he is unprepared.

Therapy means getting help, but it also means revealing very private dependency conflicts. Hence, the passport is needed but unreliable. Having brother in law buy tokens for site seeing implies a frivolous approach to Seth's concerns about needing a passport to cross the border. This image is related to the business experience and relationship that Seth is so bitter about over the years, in which he was trivialized and bypassed in most company

decisions. Getting arrested may mean arrested development during early adolescence in that religious rituals signify movement into adulthood; if he was forced into a pseudo-husband role with mother, it is accounted for in the dream by having Andy as an adult.

There is a perverse narcissistic preoccupation with porn sites featuring erotic attractions to early adolescent male and female forms with blurred sexual distinctions; adolescence represents travel to alien or foreign countries not easily gotten to in order to enter the adult world. The inability to get to the bar mitzvah could be a refusal to enter adult sexuality, as this may be a phobic reaction to overstimulation from mother prior to adolescence in the five years father was out of the home. Hence, he may be an oedipal win child and terrified of mother-son incestuousness.

For Julie the dream illustrates that Seth is preoccupied with introjected fears, disowned, abandoned, trivialized, devalued, and degraded selfobjects. Julie carries similar feelings about her, and seeks to repair Seth through self-sacrifice and trying not to need him too much. Bearing her own suffering characterizes an aspect of how she copes. The dream indicates that Seth is troubled by himself, and in relation to male figures, even though there are

legitimate hurts and angers at her brother. His sharing the dream and revealing that he had anxieties during the night may lighten Julie's load, and allow her to confront her anger with him instead of falling into depression, or abandonment fears when Seth projects blame into her. On the other hand she is not in the dream, which may fill her with dread she may not be important in his life, except as a salve for his wounded self.

Concluding points

I have illustrated that therapists who are willing to work with the multiple meanings of dream material afford the couple a unique experience within an atmosphere of involved curiosity in how the unconscious world influences couple life and adaptation. Not only are couple dreams apt to enlarge the field of enquiry, but their study taps into affects associated with individual and couple projections, and dreams illuminate projective identification in the therapy triangle.

The exceptional position of dreams in our daily work is underscored by the following quote from Freud: *“Whenever I began to have doubts of the correctness of my wavering conclusions, the successful transformations of a senseless and muddled dream into a logical and intelligible mental process in the dreamer would renew my confidence of being on the right track.”* (Freud, 1933).

In this paper I expanded the range and application of dream work to couples. I have observed that when couples examine each other’s dreams they potentiate the observing of interpersonal and intrapsychic processes. The uncovering experience of dream reporting and interpretation reduces resistances, and the atmosphere improves for a deeper engagement in cooperative understanding. Freud’s method of free association is the cornerstone of dream work and psychoanalysis. We have broadened free association to the couple as a small group. The task of comprehending the dream and its multiple meanings offers the couple and the therapist access to individual and couple transferences, here and now references to the there and then of dynamic histories, and previously hidden traumas and deficits frequently disguised in couple fighting.

Of the many tools available in psychoanalytic practice I propose that dream work is especially useful in couple, group and family treatment. Why we do not embrace this time-honored tool is a subject for another discussion concerned with contemporary analytic training. Perhaps the influence of hybrid approaches to treatment has put interest in the unconscious to sleep.

When I need reconfirmation of the importance of locating phantasy in myself and my patients I return to Winnicott and re-visit Klein's play therapy method, to appreciate that imagination and imagery are as important in work with adolescents and adults, couples and families, as with children. Bion's beta bits, the sensory experiences lying just beneath human persona, with the array of primary process, and the patient's psychic retreats, are shadowy and full of dread and wonder. They require a safe space to emerge into the interpersonal world for meaning making and working through. I hope I have created a play space for us to consider analytic work with couples through their dreams. Dream on!

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