

# WITTGENSTEIN'S DREAMS

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Wittgenstein recorded in detail two dreams from a period of great conflict and transition in his life. His biographer has offered a classically Freudian view of these dreams, which I have tried to reinterpret along other lines, particularly those suggested by Self Psychology.

In addition, I have used Wittgenstein's life to illuminate problems of the pursuit of the Ideal vs. immersion in the ordinary as central to understanding what occurs in spiritual and therapeutic practice.

I recently had the pleasure of reading William Warren Bartley III's biography of Ludwig Wittgenstein, first published in 1973. Wittgenstein was one of the most charismatic and influential philosophers of this century. Of Austrian descent, he arrived at Cambridge University in 1911 to study with Bertrand Russell, who quickly proclaimed him to be "perhaps the most perfect example I have ever known of genius as traditionally conceived, passionate, profound, intense and dominating." However, Wittgenstein scorned the traditional life of a university philosophy professor. After two years, he left Cambridge to spend a year in seclusion in Norway, living in a hut he built himself, working on the beginnings of his first book. At the outbreak of World War I, he enlisted in the Austrian Army. He completed his book, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, while on military leave in 1918, and spent the last year of the war interned in an Italian prison camp.

Immediately following his release in 1919, he "disappeared" from the world of philosophy for a decade, leaving to teach grade school in small villages in his native Austria, before eventually returning to philosophy in the last decades of his life. It is these "lost years" which Bartley set out to uncover, and in doing so, produced a remarkably intimate portrait of an intense and tormented man. Of particular interest to me was the importance Wittgenstein himself placed on two dreams from 1919 to 1920 for determining the future course of his life. Wittgenstein had at that time some

familiarity with Freud's writings and interpreted his dreams along classical analytic lines, as does Bartley in his account of them. I would like to take a fresh look at this dream material, as well as what is known of his life, in the light of self psychology, in order to both understand Wittgenstein in a new way, and to emphasize certain treatment issues raised by present day patients.

Ludwig was the youngest of seven children born in 1889 into one of Austria's wealthiest families. His father, Karl, was the founder of the nation's prewar iron and steel industries and was a great patron of the arts, in a manner perhaps reminiscent of America's Andrew Carnegie. Ludwig's childhood ambition was to become an engineer like his father, and throughout his life maintained considerable mechanical interests and skills. Indeed he first went to England in 1900 to study aeronautical engineering, where he then became progressively fascinated by the mathematical underpinnings of engineering and then by the philosophical and logical roots of mathematics.

Bartley does not record any details of Ludwig's early childhood, but his adolescence was punctuated by the suicides of significant figures in his life. The first was Hans, his eldest brother and known as a musical genius in the family, when Ludwig was 13. Then, the third son, Rudolf, killed himself when Ludwig was 15. And finally at 17, the physicist, Ludwig Boltzmann who Wittgenstein idolized and with whom he had already made plans to study, killed himself.

Wittgenstein later described his adolescence as one of terrible loneliness and depressions, and repeatedly contemplated suicide himself. One might presume that this period also saw the emergence of the homosexuality which Bartley learned was the source of extreme conflict and anguish for Wittgenstein by the time he first arrived in England. Wittgenstein referred to his homosexuality as "a demon" he could barely control. He felt himself in the grip of a compulsion, and indeed for many periods in his life engaged in repetitively promiscuous and anonymous sexual encounters in such homosexual hangouts as Vienna's Prater.

The two dreams of 1919 and 1920 were interpreted by him to directly bear on sexual conflicts and in the second, point out the direction he must take to resolve them. The first dream is as follows:

"It was night. I was outside a house whose windows blazed with light. I went up to a window to look inside. There, on the floor, I noticed an exquisitely beautiful prayer rug, one which I immediately wanted to examine. I tried to open the front door, but a snake darted out to prevent me from entering; I tried another door, but there, too, a snake darted out to block my way. Snakes appeared also at the windows, and blocked my every effort to reach the prayer rug."

And the second:

"I was a priest. In the front hall of my house there was an altar; to the right of the altar a stairway led off. It was a grand stairway carpeted in red, rather like that at the Alleegasse\*. At the foot of the altar, and partly covering it, was an oriental carpet. And certain other religious objects and relics were placed on and beside the altar. One of these was a rod of precious metal.

But a theft occurred. A thief entered from the left and stole the rod. This had to be reported to the police, who sent a representative who wanted a description of the rod. For instance, of what sort of metal was it made? I could not say; I could not even say whether it was silver or gold.

The police officer questioned whether the rod ever existed in the first place. I then began to examine the other parts and fittings of the altar and noticed that the carpet was a prayer rug. The border was lighter in color than the beautiful center. In a curious way, it seemed to be faded. It was, nonetheless, still strong and firm."

The first of these dreams occurred shortly after his release from the Italian prisoner of war camp. The preceding year had seen the suicide of still another of his brothers and the death of both a favorite uncle and a close university friend.

By the time of the second dream, Wittgenstein had taken two drastic steps—he gave away his considerable fortune and he abandoned academic philosophy to become a school teacher. Thus the sequence of the dreams may show both a representation of his conflicts and the intrapsychic shape of his later attempts at resolution. But first of all, let us look at Wittgenstein's own recorded associations and interpretations of these dreams.

Wittgenstein straight forwardly interpreted the snakes in the first dream as symbolizing his uncontrolled sexuality and his vain attempt to sublimate his drives to be represented by his inability to reach the prayer rug.

The second dream, Wittgenstein regarded as "a good dream" and it was one he cited as an indication he had a religious calling and should perhaps become a monk. He regarded the rod as a phallic symbol, but also associated it with a "pestle", as in the mortar and pestle used by chemists and alchemists, and thought it as part of a theme of transformation in the dream. He associated the theft of the rod to the Promethean theft of fire, and interpreted the police as the voice of parental authority. However, Bartley reports Wittgenstein never felt he could comprehend the dream as a whole.

For both Wittgenstein and Bartley, looking at these dreams from a classical drive based perspective, the intensity of his homosexuality was a given, even if the object choice conceivably was not. However, Bartley does

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\*— Wittgenstein's family home

not record Wittgenstein ever having attempted heterosexual relationships nor even any long-term stable homosexual relationship. For Wittgenstein sublimation was the only solution, since conscious suppression (and unconscious repression) had failed. The image of himself as a priest signified this sort of sublimation to him, as did the turning of the phallic rod into the transformative pestle, and his eventually turning to the prayer rug at the end of the dream.

Self psychology offers the opportunity to look at dreams in terms other than the vicissitudes of drive representation. Kohut (1977) described as “self-state dreams”, those which allowed us to visualize the dynamics of self-cohesion—how the self is maintained in the face of the dangers of overstimulation or disintegration. Since in Kohut’s view the Self is conceptualized in a supraordinate position over the tripartite structural model, all dreams may reflect the state of self cohesion as well as reflect conflicts at the level of modulation of strong affects (i.e. “drives”). I would not so much as contrast self state dreams with structural conflict dreams as *types* as suggest they represent different levels of interpretation of any dream.

Although Wittgenstein’s dreams do not present any images of overt disintegration or dissolution of the self, they do suggest to me a picture of an enfeebled self unable to structurally modulate strong affects. These strong and eventually sexualized affects may take on two distinct roles. Initially they may be used to stimulate an enfeebled self out of a sense of emptiness or depression. In the face of the repeated losses of his adolescence, one also imagines Wittgenstein’s homosexuality arising in an attempt to reconnect with the missing male selfobjects.

But this attempted solution is ultimately unsatisfactory and in itself gives rise to a new set of difficulties. It unleashes strong affects in attempts at self stimulation, but these then threaten to overwhelm an understructuralized self. In addition, they come in conflict with another attempted solution—the creation of an idealized grandiose self which through its perfect genius will rise above the need for others and the experience of their loss. The images of the priest, and the even more abstracted prayer rug, I believe represent this idealized self.

Thus in the face of the loss of the phase appropriate connections with idealized male figures, Wittgenstein dynamically attempted two opposing solutions. On one hand, the reconnection with males via sexuality and on the other a transcendence of any need for connection via the idealized priestly role. Having lost the middle ground, two opposing solutions from the extremes remain.

Wittgenstein needed to regain the middle ground of ordinary, appropriate relationship, but instead made it his task to reduce his need for the sexual by actualizing the idealized priestly role. His giving away of his inheritance (which had provided an income equivalent to nearly \$200,000 per year) is perhaps the most striking example of this attempt to purify himself. Throughout his life he lived in marked ascetic surroundings. Norman Malcolm (1958) described his rooms (in 1946, after his eventual return to Cambridge) as "austerely furnished. There was no easy chair or reading lamp. There were no ornaments, paintings, or photographs. The walls were bare. In his living room were two canvas chairs and a plain wooden chair, and in his bedroom a canvas cot."

What could provide a real solution then, if not the priest or the phallus? Kohut (1977) describes the laying down of compensatory structure as one real correction to self pathology. However he only treats this process as occurring within the psychoanalytic framework by the means of what he calls "transmuting internalization". Obviously, Wittgenstein did not have the opportunity for a Kohutian analysis, but this is not to say that compensatory structure building does not occur in other settings. An idealizing transference relationship might find its parallel in a mentor relationship. Wittgenstein throughout his adolescence was repeatedly disappointed in this attempt by the successive suicides of significant men in his life—presumably repeating an unrecorded earlier failure in his relationship with his father. He may have sought, and to some extent found, such a mentor in Russell, but at that point neither could be available to the other in a way that would suffice Wittgenstein.

However, I believe compensatory structure is built up in ways other than transference relationships, something that Kohut, in focussing on technical analytic issues, does not sufficiently address. For Kohut, the gradual disappointments of the idealizing transference permits transmuting internalization—the gradual replacement of dependence on an idealized other, with the solidification of internal ideals and values, typically in the form of a new devotion to meaningful work and future oriented goals.

I think Kohut's concept of internal ideals is, however, too future oriented and underplays the importance—and structure building function—of a wholehearted devotion to the ordinary details of life as lived in each present moment. An enfeebled self, seeking escape from emptiness, consistently spurns precisely this experience of each moment as too ordinary—too lacking in intensity or grandiose meaning—to fulfill itself. But a prolonged immersion in the ordinary activities of each present moment, will gradually

begin to restore the middle ground of experience whose original lack gave rise to dependence on more extreme measures.

I think that this is what Wittgenstein managed to achieve in his school teaching years. He was severely hampered, however, by a persistent confusion between the ordinary and the ascetic. Nonetheless, he managed to sustain significant long-term relationships with his students, if not his fellow villagers. On his favorite students he would lavish extra attention and after-hours tutoring. He even attempted to formally adopt one student in an attempt to insure him a continuing education outside the village. There is no indication that these were homoerotic relationships. Rather Wittgenstein seemed to try to be to his favorite students the kind of mentor or father he himself needed. (I am reminded here of Kohut's description of Mr. M's relationship to an adolescent boy.)

I think the most important lesson to be learned from all this material is that we must not join our patients in making Wittgenstein's mistake—the creation of a false dichotomy between an idealized self image and a more dystonic symptom like homosexuality. The attempted actualization of the grandiose ideal can only lead to failure, self recrimination, and an increase in other symptoms as alternate defensive pathways. Our patients, like Wittgenstein, however may persistently confuse actualizing this idealized self with compensatory structure building (or sublimating) activity. We must look for the school teacher in our philosopher patients. Wittgenstein's own grandiose contempt for the life of a university professor was one way he cut himself off from the healing possibilities of the ordinary in such a setting, and was only able to find satisfaction in the ordinary after pursuing it in admixture with the ascetic. It is our task with our patients to help them discover the aliveness of every-day life that they have discarded in the pursuit of the ideal.

## References

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