

Dreams and the Body

Stanley Keleman

Abstract

Dreams arise from our cellular depths and are the ways we speak to ourselves. They inform us about what is seeking to be embodied in the awake world of daily living. Working formatively with our dreams is key to the growth and development of a personal world.¹

Keywords

Dreams and the Body – Dream – Embodying Dream Figure

Dreams are a product of our body process. They generate information about the soma's relationship with itself and about its developmental journey from infancy to adult, from maturity to aging and fading away. They give us the opportunity to participate in the forming of the shapes and stages of our evolutionary development.

Dreams are anatomical events, pulsatory signals that are a chemical, electrical, protein-making process. They become a chain of excitatory communications from the body to the cortex, from the cortex to the body and from the cortex to the cortex. A dream is an anatomical dialogue between the body that is and the body that will be.

The body is dreaming about itself, its state and its development. Pictorial and sensorial images organized by the cortex are signals, communications that permit us to recognize and respond to our forming process. The dream experience arising from our body process is a call by the body to reorganize, to give more form and stability to that which is wanting to come into existence. Dreams show us the shapes that are seeking to disorganize and the shapes that are seeking to form.

The dream is a morphing anatomical drama, a dialogue between the brain stem that regulates our instinctual behavior and the cortex that regulates the voluntary organization of personal behavior. Waves of excitement reach out from the brainstem through the limbic system, through the thalamic pathway into the cortex. When these waves of excitation arouse the cortex, there is stimulation of neural pathways that travel within the cortex and back to the muscles and organs. The excitation is highly motile, it swells and peaks, becomes porous and diffuse. These excitatory states are the soma's developmental process seeking stability.

We experience motility and instability of excitation as fleeting images and sensations. When structure is unstable and porous, we have unstable and porous memories of our dreams. When structure has more stability, we have enduring memories. If excitation is of high enough intensity or long enough duration, the growth of new neural tissue will begin forming new connections and structures. We give stability to excitation that is fleeting and unstable by using the Formative method of voluntary muscular-cortical effort to give more and less form to a remembered shape from the dream.

The Formative method is based in the developmental evolutionary principle that shapes change form to incorporate experience. The dream and its figures offer a focus for us to participate in this universal forming process. The dream figure is a localized, highly motile, excitatory organization of information that is unstable. When we use voluntary muscular-cortical effort to organize the muscular shape of a dream figure, we give some stability and duration to motile excitement and we stimulate the cortex to make neural maps of the motor patterns. By repeating the effort of increasing and decreasing the muscular intensity of the shape, we are making layers of differentiation in a larger pattern of behavior and growing more complex neural maps in the cortex. Anatomical structures are created that become the basis of self-reference. Practicing the organization of behavior adds layers of complexity to our personal self. Our internal library of experience is enriched, and we have more choices of behavior and feeling.

Using voluntary muscular-cortical effort to work with a dream stimulates a brainstem-muscular-cortical dialogue. Over time, this anatomical dialogue gives stability to structures and increases the ability to voluntarily repeat behavior. There is a difference between having an experience and being able to repeat an experience. The ability to repeat the organization of a behavior gives more stability to structure, and it is this stable structure that we recognize as memory.

It is important to remember that the formation of anatomic structure *is* the organization of memory. To give stability to transitory excitement is to create new structures and new memories. Synaptogenesis occurs, creating structures that have never existed before. When we voluntarily participate in the forming of new anatomical structure, we are at the heart of the process of self-creation, the forming of our personal somatic self. Over time, we learn to grow a Formative relationship with the adult we inherit - the adult we are living, and the one we are forming.

I will briefly illustrate how I use the Formative method to work with a person and their dream. The body and its experience is always the reference. I am not interested in symbolic analogy or meaning. The protocol is to tell the dream in terms of experience rather than pictorial images; to organize the muscular shape of a human figure from the dream and then to increase and decrease the intensity of the muscular pattern. I look for transitional shapes in the dream figures. New form always starts with an ending because this is the nature of change. What shape is ending? What shape is seeking more form?

A powerful, dense, mesomorphic person tells a dream in which he is shrinking and making himself small and impenetrable.

¹ For this article I have selected from the opening talk of my annual program, Dreams and the Body, held in Berkeley, California, and in Solingen, Germany, in the Spring of 2006. In this talk I describe how dreams reveal our soma's innate forming urge and how to use the Formative method to participate in the development of a complex personal body.

SK: Tell me your dream.

Dreamer: I dream of gathering myself, of compressing myself. In my dream I am silent, sad, and resigned. I try to be a happy prisoner.

SK: Tell me the dream experience again and organize the muscular shape of your dream figure.

Dreamer: I am in a compressed silence. I experience myself pressuring myself and keeping my responses quiet. I am smiling a compressed smile. I am making myself small. It is familiar, a way to know me.

He shows me the shape of shrinking. He is clenching his fists and jaw; his torso is narrowed and compressed.

SK: Intensify this shape in three stages, minimum, medium and maximum.

A person makes a relationship between what is forming and what is ending by increasing and decreasing the intensity of the shape of a dream figure.

Dreamer: As I assemble the compression I feel sad, then mad, and finally at the maximum level, I feel resigned. As I disassemble my compression, I feel myself swelling, my hands and arms are wider apart. I experience this place of less pressuring as a diffuse, porous shape. It bothers me. I want to compress again. It's automatic. Compression gives me a sense of safety, a sense of me.

SK: I have a suggestion to help you differentiate the experience of compression. Wrap your hand around a closed fist and increase the pressure in three steps. Notice how you experience the variations of intensity. Disassemble in three steps. Repeat the sequence slowly until you notice how your experience spreads from the hands to the arms, to the torso, and finally to the brain.

Using the hands to experience compression evokes the general principle that a localized expression influences the whole pattern. When a person learns to use the hand and the fist to influence a local pattern of compression, this experience of influencing compression can be transferred to the whole body.

Dreamer: When I undo the compression there is softening, my hands are cupped and I sense this is a gathering, containing gesture.

SK: Keep this shape of gathering and containing, stiffen it a tiny bit with micro muscular rigidity. This gives firmness to the act of containing and minimizes the act of compression. Begin to use micro increments of muscular rigidity to make each step distinct and to minimize the urge to automatically engage compression. Notice the effort to sustain the distinct shape of containing. If you experience the urge to compress, intensify the compression a little bit then disassemble it. This gives density a porous layer.

Dreamer: I have a different experience of density when I follow your instructions. Changing the intensity of my density gives me choices. When I use my maximum, medium and minimum effort, it helps me feel myself. If the disassembling shape is too porous or diffuse it bothers me. When I give it some firmness, it pulses and I can contain it. Feeling this pulse fills me with myself. Knowing I can repeat the undoing of the compression and contain the porous shape gives me confidence that this personal me has duration. I contain a different me. I feel happy. I could get used to this.

Using the Formative method with dreams is a practical application of Darwin's conception of developmental evolution, which illustrates how organic life changes shape to embody its experiences over time. Throughout our lifetime, we are continuously changing shape according to an inherited plan. The ability to influence our inherited body and to grow a personal body is the gift of the human cortex. From the body comes the dream. From the body comes the ability to use muscle and cortex. Using voluntary muscular-cortical effort to influence our inherited body is how our soma participates in its universal and individual forming process to create shapes and behaviors that have not existed before. With practice and commitment, we can learn the skills of living and personalizing the cycles of our embodiment with vitality and emotional truth.