family. Dr. Petschauer may be contacted at petschauerpw@ appstate.edu.

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Healing the Nightmare

Valerie Rose Brinton—Sharedfield Healing Arts

It makes little difference to the nightmare whether you are tiny and helpless or mature and sophisticated: still its most cunning ruse is to isolate its victim. Even when you wake to a reassuring face, a kind voice, and the blissful reality of your own familiar bedroom, your confused feelings of dread, disgust, or defeat cut you off from the lot of normal human beings (Sandra Shulman, *Nightmare: The World of Terrifying Dreams*, 1979, 143).

As I know from my own experience, nightmares are hard, intrusive, and demand attention. In contrast, the power of empathy is yielding, receptive, and responsive. When these two forces come together, change is inevitable. This is the case whether the nightmare is a personal one that thrusts us from the depths of sleep or a mass horror or a cultural nightmare that throws us collectively into terror and out of our habitual assumptions and expectations for daily life. The nightmare's compelling demand for attention is clearly an attempt to communicate. The most effective response is the deep receptive listening of empathy. Yet the most common reactions are to freeze, flee, or fight. These reactions grip us inside of the nightmare and then often continue to be our habitual responses after waking.

I remember a moment in the early morning of September 12, 2001, waking with an awareness of the horror we had all seen and felt the day before. Swept into the nightmare of so many others who had all suddenly and almost simultaneously lost husbands, wives, children, parents, dear friends, and companions, my hand reaching out slightly ached, as if I were one who could not reach the hand of a lost beloved. I froze. My now husband lay beside me. But in those few moments I was so alone in my bed. This subtle momentary resonance with shock, pain, and loss was enough to temporarily wipe out my awareness of the rich web of human con-

nectedness around me. Even I in California, thousands of miles from the actual event, needed to be brought back into the fold, returned to relatedness. This is the power of empathy. This is empathy in the sense of being with, of voluntary resonance with, the suffering.

The first impact of a nightmare is suffering in the sense of feeling distress, but within an empathic response this becomes suffering in the sense of enduring, tolerating, and allowing. An empathic response to a nightmare is no easy task. It is not merely a kind tone or a friendly intention. It means being a strong and resilient container, able to withstand the various wild elements of the nightmare, so they can be re-experienced in connection, rather than isolation. This can be a challenging proposition whether we are helping another, dealing with our own nightmarish experiences, or attempting to respond helpfully to horrific collective catastrophes. We can, however, find opportunities to develop our ability to utilize empathy in these extreme moments by recognizing the small terrors, petite daily nightmares in a sense, that occur throughout our waking lives and our more peaceful dreams. In dreams these are the troubling, distressing moments that we recall on waking, but that—unlike the full blown nightmare—do not wrench us out of sleep. In our waking life, it is those same troubling, distressing moments within our interactions or within our solitary struggles.

Moving into an empathic response may involve initially finding ourselves in the midst of a creative combination of flight/denial, fight/rejection, and freeze/dissociation. We have all been thoroughly introduced to these reactions. So very often a child's nightmares are pushed aside with the reassurance that "it is only a dream." Nothing, of course, is further from the truth; it was a dream, yes, but "only" a dream, no. Eruptions of horror do not arise from thin air; nor are they products of happenstance. Ironically, whereas elements in other dreams are often dismissed as meaningless because they seem trivial, minor, or unimportant, the nightmare is dismissed for opposite reasons. It is too awful, too horrible, too overwhelming to own. In these attempts we are trying to regain connection with the horror by getting away from or overpowering the nightmare. It is so much more effective and powerful to regain connection with the nightmare in place.

As we forego avoiding or overpowering and instead turn receptively toward the nightmare, we can begin to value its place as a harbinger, not of doom, but of redemption. The doom within the nightmare is the horror of what is already wrong. The power of the nightmare is to call us to the core of the problem. Whether personal, interpersonal, or collective, "The nightmare portrays the essence of what is traumatic about the trauma" (Melvin R. Lansky and Carol R. Bley, *Posttraumatic Nightmares: Psychodynamic Explorations*, 1995, 8). In this way, the nightmare is truly awful in both meanings of the word: extremely bad, dreadful, terrible, and impressive, inspiring awe. It can be an avenue for the healing of otherwise out-of-reach troubles, if we can be with it.

Here, I find it very helpful to include the awareness that the elements of experience evoked by the nightmare, endemic to the nightmare, may be personal or transpersonal and are most likely both. With this understanding, it becomes easier to allow a resonance with these awful feelings without rushing to judgment. It may be my panic or someone else's. It may be our rage, or the rage of those who attacked us. It may be my patient's horror, or many generations of horror that he is heir to but does not entirely own. My experience tells me that it is not essential to know whose nightmare it is. It is only essential that it be recollected and brought back into someone's loving embrace. That is how I experience empathy—an open heart and mind, a loving embrace that enfolds the entirety of what is felt.

Valerie Rose Brinton *is a psychologist practicing in Fillmore, California, who was born into a radical union organizing family. She utilizes a method of resolving persistent distress through transpersonal resonance. Her research on this can be found in the dissertation Opening Pandora's Box: A Depth Psychological Understanding of Projective Identification available online at http://gradworks.umi.com/33/61/3361019.html. She can be contacted at valerieroseis@hotmail.com.*

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