

Mood and its significance as the decisive factor in dream interpretation

Daseinsanalytic dream interpretation is bound to the phenomenological method. What this means in practice, Boss summarizes as follows:

“The phenomenological approach strives to keep strictly to the actual phenomena, in order to detect more and more precisely their connotations and references, until the very essence of them is fully recognized.”<sup>1</sup>

This is the instruction which Medard Boss gave for a phenomenological dream interpretation. It sounds simple but, when trying to put it into practice, we meet with unexpected difficulties.

Experience shows that all the manifold connotations, some of them even controversial, every consistency easily can get lost. Daseinsanalytic seminars on dream interpretation, where the participants investigate all connotations which come to their mind in regard to a dream phenomenon, therefore - though very animated and inspiring - nevertheless seldom arrive at a consistent interpretation corresponding a therapeutic aim.

An example: military service refers to quite different things such as, on the one side, war and on the other side to conformity and subordination.

To determine the specific meaning primarily concerning the dreamer at that particular point in time it is necessary to narrow down the great variety of connotations. For this, we need a guideline. This also was a matter of course for Medard Boss. The abundance of meanings and references which can be detected in a dream phenomenon, if one looks closely at what the phenomenon itself reveals, Boss demonstrates on the example of a dream dog in his second book on dreams<sup>2</sup>.

A dog, he states, refers to nature and animal life, meaning an instinctive acting with restricted openness and restricted possibilities to relate, more accurately a doglike life, meaning domestication and servility. But much more than this: a dog refers inherently to the earth on which it stands, to the sun, the darkness, the sky's winds and rain to which it is exposed, and as a living creature, it refers to the divine - only too rich an abundance, which

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<sup>1</sup> Medard Boss (1975/1991 page 15)

<sup>2</sup> Medard Boss (1975/1991 page 35 ff)

has to be reduced to obtain a valid interpretation. We see that, in interpreting a dream, we first need to be open for a wide range of possibilities, taking care not to jump to rash and unambiguous symbolic interpretations. But then it is just as important to focus on a core that essentially concerns the dreamer in regard to the dream phenomenon. This capacity of seeing what is qualitatively essential in the encountered phenomena, a skill which is a prerequisite for a genuine appreciation of dreaming, needs long and patient exercise, states Boss<sup>3</sup>.

But how can the essence of a phenomenon be determined? How does Boss proceed in focussing on that which is of essential concern? By stressing the fact that a dog, in contrast to human beings, is limited to a single potential way of unfree, instinctive relating, and by describing the nature of a dog as a domesticated, dependent and enslaved way of Being, Boss makes his guideline clear. He interprets the dream phenomena by the criterion of more or less openness and freedom. Thus the infinite meaningfulness of a dog is reduced in such a way as to focus on its unfree mode of relating and behaving as the essentially concerning meaning. Correspondingly Boss questions the reawakened dreamer about possible connections of his dreaming of a dog with doglike unfree features of his own existence.

This fits in with the pejorative terms he chooses when describing the nature of a dog: cringing and enslaved. In using these labels he illustrates the direction of his interpretation: such an extremely dependent behaviour is also a possible way of behaving for human beings, but it is not up to the standard of an open and free existence - Boss understands animal nature as a primitive form of human existence.

The focus on a dog as a cringing and enslaved creature focuses only on primitive aspects, namely a lack in openness and freedom. All positive connotations of a dog's nature are disregarded. However, when we focus not on the bondage but on the connectedness of a dog, highlighting devoted attachment and loyalty instead of dependency and subservience, this completely changes the mood in which the dream dog appears. The restriction of the realm of openness now does not appear under the negative aspect of deficiency but under the positive aspect of focussing on a particular, valuable and highly

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<sup>3</sup> Medard Boss (1975/1991) page 39

estimated mode of existence. Thus, emotionally, the realm of openness now does not appear constricted. We see: the mood in which a phenomenon appears determines its interpretation.

I find it strange that here, where Boss introduces his concept of phenomenology, he does not mention the impact of mood on the interpretation of a phenomenon. Only much later in the book he stresses the important part of mood in interpretation. There he states: "in any phenomenological examination it is best to begin by clarifying precisely the mood that prevails. It is important to consider the mood to which the existence of the dreamer as a whole is attuned, for it is this mood that determines the characteristics, the breadth or narrowness, of the perceptive realm which the existence is able to hold open and as which the dreamer "exists" at that given moment"<sup>4</sup>. A bit later he explains: "As mood determines the state of world-openness of the Dasein, an understanding of mood is important for the therapeutic worth of any sound theory of dreaming. When dreaming, a dreamer often experiences with an intensity new to him an existentially important attunement that, though present in waking life too, had then been concealed by the multitude of diverse relationships of daily routine. This mood, that is not adequately admitted when awake, can then predominate and call forth corresponding dream phenomena into an often uncomfortable closeness. When in therapy the patient becomes aware of the impact of such dream happenings, he can no longer overlook the impact of the mood to which his existence is attuned basically even in his waking life"<sup>5</sup>.

So only at this point does Boss describe how he lets himself be guided phenomenologically by observing the predominant mood of the dreamer and of the dream. For a daseinsanalytic interpretation of dreams, which claims to reveal the essential and existential core of a dream, this is crucial. In the following I am going to discuss the reason for this.

By observing the predominant mood, the wide spectrum of meaningfulness of a dream happening is narrowed down to just those aspects, which the dream mood as a whole focusses on. The interpretation takes place in a hermeneutic circle: the single dream phenomenon refers to the dream mood as a whole and the dream mood as a whole, on the

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<sup>4</sup> Medard Boss (1975/1991) page 61

<sup>5</sup> Medard Boss (1975/1991) page 66

other side, determines the single phenomenon. Therefore a dream report is not complete without a precise description of the mood in which the phenomena are experienced.

To demonstrate this I now want to look closer at an example given by Boss<sup>6</sup>.

A depressive young physician with severely disturbed relationships dreamt that he had been called out on an emergency. The patient is a boy maybe five years old who is lying at the edge of a raised sidewalk, in danger of toppling into the street and of being run over by a car. The boy appears to be very sick, he can't speak any more, only groans. His abdomen is swollen and hard as a rock, a perilous situation. Expertly the dreamer examines the boy and begins an irrigation of the stomach, whereupon the boy regurgitates large lumps and immediately feels cheerful again, starts to talk and thanks for the help. However there still can be felt a hard resistance further down in the abdomen, which will have to come out some time, but which at the moment does not present an immediate danger. Suddenly the sidewalk, on which the boy has been lying is transformed into the stands of a circus. The dreamer and the boy are now watching a performance of trained white horses.

The interpretation of Boss:

The dreamer dreamt this dream after his first interview with his future analyst, in which he had forced himself to reveal a number of until now closely guarded secrets of his life history, which he had been carrying around inside like burning coals. After telling them, he had felt a strong, painful burning sensation right down to his abdomen. This intensive experience in waking-life had found its manifestation in the dream. Dreaming he first and foremost experiences his own existence as that of a successful and skillful physician, who expertly deals with an emergency situation. That's how he sees himself. His attention, however, is drawn to another existence, which concerns him much more urgently. It is a child-like mode of existence, an existence suffering from a life-threatening blockage and self-restraining holding back, an existence dependent on help, in an insecure situation, where it is not possible to relax. The dreamer experiences himself in the course of a therapeutic work that is life-saving but not yet completed. Therefore it is not surprising, Boss continues, that now the dreamer and the boy experience themselves as mere onlookers, watching circus horses which have been drilled to perform, horses in captivity rather than free running, wild horses.

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<sup>6</sup> Medard Boss (1975/1991) page 119 ff

Additionally the horses are white. The colour white, he continues, is not to be interpreted as a symbol for something else (as Freud did, when he interpreted the white of the wolves in one of his famous dream accounts as a symbol for the parental white bed linen). According to Boss, white, when seen in its own full meaning, speaks of innocence, purity and cool distance.

After waking up from this dream the dreamer realizes that he himself is to a large extent boy-like, and that he himself suffers from a blockage in the sense of a self-restricting holding back of his whole existence. In addition, the insecure position of the boy reminds him of his own persistent feeling of slipping in an extended sense, and of his fear of being run over by his fellow human beings.

In the therapeutic application, according to Boss, the dreamer is merely to be encouraged to give away still more of his previously withheld, personal secrets.

The interpretation of Boss aims at the issue of lack of freedom in existence which concerns the dreamer. The life-threatening blockage points to this as well as the fenced-in white horses under strict control, which later call for attention.

Boss thus gives a concise and uniform interpretation - an interpretation resulting in a clear therapeutic direction: the call to let out still more withheld secrets.

However, in letting himself be led by his main interest, the width or narrowness of existence, Boss disregards quite some aspects that do not fit the straightforwardness of his interpretation. The fact that the dreamer himself seems to act freely in the dream is barely paid any attention. Apparently Boss does not consider this of any further significance in need of interpretation, probably because in his waking state the dreamer too is a skilful physician who has no problem with his professional work. But still, he dreams himself as such a competent doctor. Secondly, a usually primordial meaning content of circus horses is disregarded: elegance and beauty, controlled power, extraordinary artistry. In the perspective of the predominant mood of restricting retention, the "circus-horse-aspect" has to be interpreted merely as a privative, not as a specific existence, or even one worth striving for. The interpretation of the white colour also follows this pattern: virginity, purity and cool remoteness – this is not the complete meaning content of the white colour, but

only one among many other possible meanings, specifically the meaning corresponding to the constriction of a restrained existence. Boss's interpretation of the white colour overlooks and/or masks the fact, firstly, that white is the most common colour of circus horses and therefore least requires interpretation and, secondly, that in the light of a circus mood white precisely does not point to reserve, but quite contrary, to bright shining lights and spectacular show.

The interpretation of this second part of the dream therefore does not seem to make sense: the interpretation of circus horses limited to the negative aspect of constraint, imprisonment and cool remoteness from life is unconvincing. One may wonder why circus horses, of all animals, are to illustrate such a tormenting constriction of existence, instead of, for instance, a captive polar bear or some other being pointing to a painful experienced deprivation of freedom, in particular because the dream report unfortunately does not mention in what mood the two observers see the horses. Could it not be that the two are watching them in a joyful circus mood? That would match the cheerful and grateful mood due to the successful salvation from the emergency - even though that would still not explain the strange appearance of circus horses - of all animals.

Now then, does this interpretation truly cover the dream in its whole complexity? That the dreamer, in the first part of the dream, is concerned with his own almost deadly reserve is obviously an essential topic of the dream. But what does the specific type of restraint, represented by the circus horses, which appears in such a different mood, refer to? The interpretation has to take this difference in mood into account. In the following we shall see that it is possible to find a convincing meaning for the second part of the dream that is also in tune with the dream context.

But to do so, a different guiding question is required. In seeing mood as the leading moment in dream interpretation Medard Boss has broken new ground, but Boss does not fathom the possibilities of his pioneering approach. Mood seen as determining merely the range of openness and not the specific existential feature does not get us any further.

I now want to present a different approach to dream interpretation which also sees mood as the leading moment, but takes up Heidegger's understanding of attunement in its deeper dimensions as unfolded in "Being and Time". Here, each mood does not merely open a certain section of one's own existence, but, in that section, moods focus on what is problematic in one's own existence. Concerning moods, we are always relating to the "burdensome nature" of our existence as existence, as Heidegger states. This does not refer to freer or less free ways of behaving – e.g. not some individual, reserved holding back – but something much more fundamental. It is all about certain conditions of human Being per se, which are experienced as a "burden" with which we struggle subliminally, and with which we try to cope in responding. Mood discloses our relationship to our own Being at that particular point in time: which condition of human Being challenges us as fundamentally difficult; how difficult does it appear to us at that moment; how capable to handle it do we feel? That is the ontological inclusion of our basic mood; that is the issue of our dreams; that is, what is on the dreamer's mind, both in dreaming as well as in the waking state, in reference to his/her Being. In this daseinsanalytic approach developed by Alice Holzhey it is thus possible to interpret a much more fundamental point of reference to our mood-based disposition than is possible for Boss. If mood is interpreted in this way, this leads to an understanding of dreams which is not mainly concerned with the scope of openness, but with the specific, existential fears and wishes of the dreamer, with which he is concerned in a more or less constricted manner.

I would now like to elucidate this with Boss's example we discussed above. While Boss examines the whole dream under the perspective of a restriction of existing which is relevant for the dreamer – in our case the self-restricting reserve - my interpretation is directed at a deeper level: it addresses the existential problems which concern the dreamer in such a demanding way that he cannot cope with them "normally" – meaning in a free way – but in such a specific defensive manner that a conspicuously "abnormal" acting, in this case self-restricting reserve, results. Thus the reserve is the dreamer's answer to a condition of human existence that "challenges" him in a special way.

Let us now interpret the first part of the dream as a concretely manifest mood:

With regard to his existence, the dreamer feels as if he were hearing an urgent call to intervene to save a life. He sees the danger in a blockage, in a hardening, in a tenseness due to excessive reserve and retention, as well as in the insecurity of a sloping ground. With skill and artfulness, a largely successful intervention ensues. The mood, narrowed down corresponding to the feeling of the most extreme distress, widens into a liberated, grateful mood. Up to here, the dream probably illustrates precisely the mood into which the dreamer had got in his coming to grips with his decision to begin therapy and in the first analytical talk: The torment caused by his excessive control; the effort it cost him to partially let go of this control, and the ensuing feeling of liberation – these are vividly shown by the dream. Up to this point, my interpretation corresponds to that of Boss. However I enquire further; I also ask for the reason of this frightening self-control. Which condition of Being challenges the dreamer in such a demanding way that such symptoms can ensue? If the excessive control is interpreted as a defensive response to a certain existential anxiety, then this anxiety must concern the basic uncontrollability of life. This anxiety is the reason why the dreamer fears that in being out of control, in letting things happen, in entrusting himself to someone else, he might lose his hold and footing and deliver himself to deadly dangers. His corresponding excessive wish for control has evidently led him to an emergency situation he experiences as just as deadly. Facing the fact that an excess of control is life-threatening he feels the necessity to give up control and to venture into confiding himself to someone. Implicitly, he becomes aware of the ambiguity of controlled behaviour: its *vital necessity* has always been a matter of course to him, and as a responsible physician, he is proud of having everything under control professionally. Its *enmity to life* only becomes evident to him now, in the context of his decision to go into analysis. Were the dream to end here, with the promising beginning of therapy, its message, at first glance, would seem as unequivocal as the analyst's suggestion: I must relinquish control even more, I must "let go" even more.

But the dream continues, with the seemingly inappropriate appearance of the circus horses. If we now interpret this second part under the point of view of a struggle with the problems of a life to be led under control, the meaning of the circus horses might be found precisely in the polarity of the two contradictory possibilities of interpretation. On the one hand, a controlled life meaning a life lacking freedom; on the other hand, a controlled life meaning



an art worthy of admiration. This end of the dream might point to the fact that the dreamer is asking himself whether or to what extent he should actually force himself to give up even more of his control. This would also match the fact that there is no mention in the dream at this point of either a joyful or a distressed mood. Perhaps here it is above all a matter of considering the problem in a sober way, the problem as the dreamer experiences it now, as it concerns him right now. The question here no longer seems to be one regarding life or death, but a question concerning his life concern. The question on his mind might be: am I ready to give up the possibility of such an extraordinary and admirable self-control for more freedom (in the sense of spontaneity, relaxedness, serenity)? Or the other way around: am I ready to pay such a high price in lack of freedom (in the sense of constriction, stress, tenseness) for extraordinary self-control?

I see such a basic dilemma as the ultimate ground of what Heidegger calls the "burden-nature" of Being. In my view, each dream is based on such a dilemma, sometimes totally hidden, sometimes more or less clearly evident. Consequently the dream can be understood as the expression of one's dealing with an *existential question*, a question that has to be answered time and again, anew, and in a very personal manner, without ever finding a conclusive answer.

Unlike Boss's interpretation, my interpretation does not lead to a clear, therapeutic instruction, but only to working out a fundamental question which concerns the dreamer with regard to his own Being, and which he has to face. Thus, the therapeutic work consists of the joint analysis of this fundamental question and the dreamer's current response to it.

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