

*Herbert Hahn*

## **Synchronicity, Social Dreaming And Surprises**

### **Abstract**

This paper gives an account of the author's ongoing interactive engagement with Social Dreaming in the context of his own professional and personal journey. Beginning with an account of surprise inclusion of Social Dreaming Matrix in a workshop, shortly after reading Gordon Lawrence's first published paper on his method (Lawrence, 1991), it goes to register and explore subsequent co-created endeavours and developments.

### **Preamble**

My childhood in South Africa at the beginning of the second world war as the firstborn and male of an immigrant orthodox Jewish extended family included experiences of being spat on as a 'jew pig' or 'dirty yid' by peers whose parents were members of the pro-Nazi 'Ossewa Brandwag' political party; and being deferentially addressed as 'master' or 'baas' by African adults whom some whites contemptuously called 'filthy kaffirs' or 'black swine'.

During the apartheid era, as a post-graduate psychology student my dissertation was inspired by a liberally minded and psycho-analytically informed mentor (Prof. I. D. Macrone). It explored the similarities between a man who had been psychiatrically diagnosed and hospitalised as 'paranoid'; and the views of our then Prime Minister: The hospital patient's symptoms related to his pervasive fear and suspicion of 'the blacks'; and the Prime Minister's policies were based on his stated belief that all black people were mentally inferior, sexually primitive and socially dangerous. The dissertation evoked keen interest from two of my peers, one of whom wanted to draw on it to attack the government; the other turned out to be a paid state informer.

Later as a clinical psychologist seeking further training, I was encouraged by the London trained Independent Group Psychoanalyst Sam Stein, to train abroad. Arriving in (and escaping to) London in 1961, the shadow side of my good fortune in finding work at a psychoanalytic therapeutic community (the Cassel Hospital), and being introduced there to brief therapy and Balint groups (Tom Main) and at the Tavistock Clinic to Child, Adolescent and Adult Therapy (Martha Harris and Bob Gosling), was my bad luck in being referred to, and mistakenly staying stuck in, a 9 year personal analysis with a neo-Kleinian psycho-analyst. I internalised the relationship with her to the extent of narrowing my range of theories; knowing that all clinical work other than my analyst's version of dyadic five times weekly analysis equated to mothers feeding babies on watered down milk; and believing that my dreams belonged with my analyst, as did the money with which I paid her fee.

It took a subsequent analysis with Donald Meltzer, many years of supervision, including with Donald Winnicott, work in career guidance (Herbert Phillipson), learning about and delivering Group Relations and Management Selection and Development Programmes (Eric Miller and Harold Bridger), Group Analysis (Meg Sharpe and George Renton) and Management Education (On the staff of the

European School of Management Studies) to be able to read with hope, inspiration and enthusiasm, Gordon Lawrence's 1991 paper about his systemic and democratic way of sharing and engaging with dreams.

Later when working on a book Anna Chesner and I co-edited, we included Social Dreaming both in our group meetings with chapter contributors and as part of the process of writing our editors introductory chapter (Chesner, A and Hahn, H. 2002).

My continuing professional journey has included staff membership of the Centre for Psycho-Social Studies at UWE, engagement with Relational Psychoanalysis, leading the leader's group of the Institute for Psycho-sexual Medicine, training in Reiki (Sarah Maude); working with the Spirit-Mind (Bert Hellinger), dialogue with Independent Psycho-Analysts (Patrick Casement and Neville Symington), and, thanks to Eve Steel, linking mind, body and spirit under the aegis of the Scientific and Medical Network, where I was introduced to a range of links between mind, body and spirit including a Sufi perspective which was furthered in dialogue with Kunderke Kevlin. These learning opportunities have come to co-creatively bridge the interpersonal, group, systemic, societal, aesthetic and transpersonal dimensions in therapeutic, educational, managerial and business contexts, especially in the roles of Mentor and Group Facilitator (Hahn, 2007; Clarke, Hahn and Hoggett, 2008).

Attendance at and engagement within recent presentations at a London conference of US Relational and UK Independent Psychoanalysts both provided an opportunity to dialogically learn more from Jessica Benjamin and her American Colleagues about the 'co-created thirdness' of relationships; and for synchronicity of networking with Maria Gilbert which enabled me as author and her as editor to co-create this paper.

### **A Beginning**

Shortly after reading Lawrence's 1991 paper, a surprise opportunity arose to try a Social Dreaming Matrix during a two day workshop for a cohort of 15 trainee humanistic counsellors on 'psychodynamic viewpoints'. During the first day of our workshop, we explored key psycho-analytic concepts. The work seemed to go well-enough, but did not develop the level of dialogic participation I had hoped for; and I found myself reflecting aloud at the end of the day that taking an interest in our own dreams could be another useful way to learn about unconscious processes.

The next morning when someone asked if she was the only one to have had a dream the previous night, all but two said they had. I then spontaneously suggested we try the Social Dreaming Matrix as described in the paper I had read. We then proceeded to re-arrange our chairs in the recommended snowflake pattern and share our dreams, associations and elaborations, without recourse to interpretation or active engagement with interpersonal or group dynamics. The aim was to let our dreams engage with each other and for us to also be open to discovering, rather than imposing, themes which emerged (Hahn, 1998).

As our dreams and associations unfolded, the process began to develop its own rhythm, somewhat like musical improvisation. One of the participants who had previously thought he had not dreamt the previous night, spontaneously also recalled and shared his dream. Towards the end of the Matrix, we came to realise that there was also an overarching theme which linked the variety of dreams we had shared: they all included a focus on some aspect of being on a journey. We could then also link this shared external reality of their training coming to an end and being about to begin professional

practice.

After a short break, our next activity was a lively engagement in live supervision. Surprises were forthcoming and some said that the social dreaming had freed them up. For example, at one point the way in which the presenter had managed to creatively pick up on an apparently obscure remark of her client, one of the group noted that she had tuned in to something just as we might in that moment tune into the tone of distress being expressed in that moment by the birds outside our open window even though we could not see what was happening and were not experts in bird language.

Written feedback posted to me after on our workshop also referred to the usefulness of the Social Dreaming Matrix in enhancing their interconnection with each other. This, I was told, had also been noticed by the two group members who had been unable to attend the workshop. Overall they felt that they had learned something useful about psycho-dynamics but also found new links with each other in a way which enhanced the usefulness of their fortnightly experiential groups.

### **Subsequent Work With Dreams**

For a many years I found myself firmly separating my work with dreams brought into the context of therapeutic work from those which were invited in Social Dreaming Matrices, and while this still has truth, there are a variety of situations where the range of my ongoing personal and professional learning and experience interact. For example, when an NHS multi-disciplinary psychotherapy team I had been facilitating decided to invite their secretary to join our meetings, and she, spontaneously brought and voiced her dreams, I mediated the initial anxiety of the rest of the team about this being 'inappropriate' and explored the possibility that the secretary, who had daily contact with all staff and patients might be dreaming on behalf of the service as a whole as well as in her own right. This also paved the way for a subsequent meeting where one of the therapists began with a dream of her own about having been criticized by her supervisor (who was also the consultant head of the team, normally at our meetings, but absent that day). With my encouragement, the team's associative way of Social Dreaming also led to someone else's dream finding a place. The meeting went on to explore various interests and concerns. Then right at the end of the meeting, she reflected spontaneously that during the course of our meeting she had come to the realisation that the critical supervisor she had dreamt about existed primarily in her internal organisation, and that she thought she could now deal with, and modify, its impact. And indeed subsequent meetings produced some evidence of her growing feeling of professional confidence and increased leadership effectiveness.

Soon after my first Matrix experience with the Counsellors, I signed up for a week-end Matrix run by Gordon Lawrence and his colleagues. My experience as a participant was similar to that of the student counsellors. I also had a dream while there which has stayed with me as a deep link with what I have come to think of as transpersonal or in Bion's terms, a glimpse of 'the ineffable' (Bion's O): In the dream I was presented with a profoundly mysterious yet strangely simple imaginal awareness that the beginning and end of the universe were aspects of a whole way which illuminatingly conveyed that both starting and ending were both facets of one system. An association which came to mind was a question in the I Q testing which was part of my regular work as a psychologist:

'How are first and last the same?' With the required answer being that they are both positions on a continuum. The psycho-analytically minded might conceptualise the question as having a bearing on a capacity to move beyond 'splitting' processes of the 'paranoid-schizoid position' to the capacity to

bear the emotional pain of the 'depressive position'. The 'right' answer also has a link with Einstein's conceptualisation of 'relativity'; and poetically perhaps might move one on, like Rumi, to conceive with 'fierce wisdom' of engaging with a space or place 'beyond right and wrong'... It took a further dream years later in my internal Social Dreaming Matrix (whose participants include people externally credited above) to develop the theme:

I am at a point of interchange on a journey which involves passing through a tunnel and emerging at the required platform. While unsure, I saw a colleague I knew sitting at a nearby cafe whom I could ask, but I did not want to expose my ignorance to him. Instead I asked an official at the tunnel entrance, who then gave me simple directions, which I nevertheless got lost in trying to follow. Again at a loss and back in the tunnel, I saw and approached another uniformed official standing available to 'help'. I was mindful all the time that everyone else was swiftly and purposively traversing the tunnel. The official responded to me in a relaxed and friendly way and giving what I heard as clear and simple guidance. However when I tried to 'follow' the 'directions', I once more became 'lost'. Then I paused, reflected and came to the realisation that I had missed the point of what they were telling me because I assumed they would be giving me directions for where to go next en route to my destination: What they had actually been communicating was that I had already arrived at my destination; that there was nowhere else to 'go' – I was already in life's journey – in the continuum between birth and death – there was no need to be so busily searching and all that was needed was to be mindfully present.

### **Humanimals**

A recent Social Dreaming Matrices Day with the staff of a Counselling Service, began with a dream in which a father was about to kick away a calf which was coming too close to his lying-on-the-grass baby. An older child tried to restrain her father while his wife stood by. In the course of the day and the sharing of other dreams, associations and elaborations of this first dream also emerged, and came to see the man intent on kicking the calf as wearing shoes of calf leather in a way which widened our awareness of our human primitiveness and animal civilisation. This elaboration of this theme also brought a deeper understanding to another member of our matrix of the first dream she had brought to her training analysis.

The mood at the end our day was relaxed and thoughtful: an outcome of having allowed and enabled our dreams to interact with each other without trying to control, manage, censor or interpret them. The day reminded me of having held a fortnightly dream matrix with a handful of interested people over several months, during which time we came to notice that in our dreams the clear cut distinction between humans and animals had disappeared and the beings in our dreams often had both human and animal features and qualities. Time was also increasingly non linear and occasionally also included events which had not yet 'happened.'

### **Working with Dreams in South Africa.**

In 1994, invited to run a workshop for members of the helping professions, just after South Africa's first ever democratic elections, I chose to draw on both the Tavistock Group Relations approach as developed by Harold Bridger and Social Dreaming Matrices. Permeated by the country's tumultuous political transition and the demise of the previously politically all powerful Afrikaner dominated racist Nationalist party, our workshop floundered into a confrontation between the two Afrikaans people in our membership: She screamed that he had physically abused her; he asserted that he had been

outrageously provoked, and had just given her a gentle slap. Attempts at understanding, mediation and containment were swamped by adversarial polarisation which spread to our membership. Our workshop was rescued from disintegrating by the Social Dreaming Matrix. This was the gist of the first shared dream:

'I had just arrived at a party where I did not feel safe and could not see anyone I knew. Then I noticed a man beckoning to me from across the room, I uneasily wondered what he wanted: sex or drugs? Then I recognised him as my ex art teacher with whom I had previously felt safe, so I ventured cautiously across the crowded room. As I drew nearer, he indicated for me to follow him. I did so, keeping my distance, and was led out of the house and its adjacent garden and onto an overgrown pathway which had not been used for a long time. Keeping my teacher in sight, as we crossed plains, traversed slopes and rounded bends, we eventually came to a place where he halted and he beckoned me to come and stand alongside. I did so slowly and warily. When I was finally standing beside him, he pointed ahead. I looked and was amazed to find myself gazing onto a vast pool on whose surface was reflected the beauty of the heavens above.'

All present had become totally absorbed in this dream narrative and just as it came to an end, one person, putting a finger to his lips to maintain our silence pointed for us to look at a specific spot on the skirting board. There, emerging from its hole was a small grey mouse. Enraptured, we silently watched as it came into the room, scampered across between our feet, and disappeared into a gap by the doorway.

Our silence was broken by a group member confiding with amazement that this was the first time in her life she had not screamed on seeing a mouse. Other associations which followed were spoken in the spirit in which we were experiencing and sharing both our dreamer's mouse's journeys.

We left the Matrix in a spirit of mindfulness, wholeness and silent connection.

The following morning's program started with a pre-breakfast Social Dreaming Matrix, which opened with the following dream:

'I have always been curious about other people telling their dreams. I have not in the past ever remembered having any dreams and thought I never would, but last night I felt as if I was awake even though I was asleep, so I supposed I had a dream. In it I was standing in a courtyard exactly the same as the one we have at this conference centre but with one difference: it was completely upside down with its branches disappearing into the earth and its roots were reaching into the sky.'

The associations and elaborations and responses to this dream were multi-faceted and myriad. There were shared associations about the image of a country being uprooted and stood on its head in a way many had not even dreamed to be possible. There was also mention of the oak tree being an alien British tree and that the indigenous Baobab tree's twisting and twining branches visually resembled the roots of other trees; another association was the banyan tree under which the Buddha had sat.

The workshop ending included a heartfelt hug between the couple who had fought and an enthusiasm for Social Dreaming which found subsequent local applications (Hahn, 2007.)

I engaged in subsequent Social Dreaming Matrices in South Africa with Art Therapists, Psychotherapists and Counsellors, Academics Organisational Consultants and multi-disciplinary and

multi-racial groups.

One of these was part of two day workshop, some five years ago, and as often transpires the first shared dream, carried and held an ongoing presence in the ensuing matrices. It told of an experienced research scientist who could not, despite trying every way he knew, and much time spent in his dark room, develop and print crucial research photos he had gathered.

Many of the associations and subsequent dreams spoke to the pain and complexity of South Africa's post-apartheid era. Then the very last dream shared on the following day turned out to be reminiscent of the transformative dream which had had such a profound effect some ten years previously (as described at the beginning of this section of the paper).

This was again in the voice of a committed researcher who was again reaching a total impasse with a problem which resisted 'development'. In total frustration, well past what should have been the end of his working day, he stepped out into the night air where instead of lighting up a cigarette, he happened to look upwards. To his surprise, and as if he was seeing them for the first time, he apprehend the wondrousness of the heavens, and came to a profound loving realisation and understanding both of the beauty he had never before seen in the heavens above and of the way forward with his research. Associations focussed on the centrality of accessing both beauty and love in all their fierceness and toughness in turbulent times.

#### **And Elsewhere**

A range of situations and contexts come to mind where Social Dreaming Matrices made a creative contribution:

With the descendants of the perpetrators and victims of death camps where shared dreams illuminated unconscious aspects of transgenerational suffering, and freed the way for the healing space provided by the inclusion of Median Groups.

In a week-end workshop on Working with Love where shared dreams revealed aspects of the dynamics succeeding and failing in creative transformation.

A University based Learning Community where the Social Dreaming Matrices opened the way to a freer and more creative dialogue between academics, therapists and organisational consultants,

A national conference on ethics, where the shared dreams deepened subsequent dialogue and understanding by revealing the multi-faceted underlying dynamics.

Guy Fawkes day 2007 provided an opportunity for exploring the theme 'Celebrating With Fire' of a one day public workshop at a Community Creative Arts Centre at which Social Dreaming Matrices revealed themes which were then creatively elaborated in costume, collage, poetry and drama vignettes.

And Dreamwork followed by Creative and Reflective space were also drawn on in team building with the Staff of a University Department, a theological college, a G P practice, and a therapeutic community.

The journey continues

Sleep well en route to dreams and discoveries!

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<sup>1</sup> This was shortly after the death of Melanie Klein herself who famously said to Betty Josephs and Wilfred Bion: 'I am not a Kleinian', at the time when the 'controversial discussions' were raging in the British Psychoanalytic Society between groupings which identified themselves as Kleinian, Independent or Freudian. \_\_