

# The Transforming Power of Hypnotic Dreamwork™

by Randal Churchill

Working with the subconscious mind gives us the potential for deep transformation. One of the vitally important functions of the subconscious mind is dreaming. Dreams are direct existential messages from the subconscious. To enter the dream and work with it directly is an opportunity for profound subconscious shifts.

Although it has not been generally understood, the methods of Gestalt dreamwork tend to initiate or deepen a hypnotic state. This is a major reason why Gestalt methods are so effective. I began consistently adding additional hypnotic techniques to Gestalt dreamwork 40 years ago, and have found them to be an ideal match. By further utilizing this spontaneous entrance to the subconscious, we can add even greater value to the methods of Gestalt.

## **Dreamwork from the Gestalt Perspective**

The vast majority of therapy procedures used to discover the meaning of dreams is interpretive. The role of the therapist is to analyze the dream or, in some cases, to help the patient or client analyze it. The overwhelming number of books about dreamwork attempt to help the reader understand how to interpret dreams.

Gestalt methods, on the other hand, do not analyze or interpret. Rather than understanding intellectually, the purpose is to experience the dream and feel significant aspects of it at a core level. Dr. Fritz Perls, primary founder of Gestalt therapy, said “Lose your mind and come to your senses.” Rather than analyze it, *become* the dream and all of its different parts. The deeper meaning of the dream is found with Gestalt methods through your heart, your gut, your senses and feelings.

Most people have had the experience of waking up from a particularly intense or frightening dream with a pounding heart or gasping for breath. Dream images can produce physiological effects similar to those that would be produced by an actual event in real time. As Perls pointed out, when a dream is taking place it is absolutely real to the dreamer. In its own way, it is reality while it is happening.

Your dreams are metaphors for your existence. They are even more than that. Your dreams are direct messages that express your subconscious experience of yourself and the world. The Gestalt perspective of dreams is that every part of your dream is a part of yourself. This not only refers to the different persons in the dream, but all places, animals, objects, body parts, moods, weather and so forth. These parts have been fragmented or projected onto the world. By becoming the part you are taking back the power of the part. Perls, who focused primarily on dreamwork in the last years before his death in 1970, said, “You are greater than your wildest dreams.”

Gestalt helps us own all the different parts of ourselves. Anything you dream about has certain qualities and potentials you may not have been fully accepting. Persons may not be in touch with their eyes, their ears, their centers, their sexuality, their spontaneity, and so forth. Anything that you become aware of in a dream, even atmospheric conditions or time, is a different part of you that you have projected to one degree or another onto the world. Even a character in the dream which is apparently immoral or repugnant has something of value which the dreamer can incorporate. By becoming the parts and dialoguing between different parts, we take on a certain power that each character has and become so much more than we are when we project those parts externally onto persons or things. Some Native Americans have traditionally identified with different animals or birds and felt the power inherent in that symbol. There are certain advantages or strengths in any character, whether it be survival, cleverness, creativity, playfulness, ability to hide, etc.

Gestalt is an existential therapy predicated on awareness. Using our heads takes us away from the here and now, which we experience externally through our senses and internally through body awareness and emotions. Understandings can and do occur during Gestalt, but are a result of the direct experience of becoming dream characters, interacting with other dream characters, and experiencing our spontaneous physical and emotional processes.

Many who are considered dream experts have stated that there is still so much that we don't understand about the meanings of dreams. But in fact your own creative subconscious mind, which formulated your dreams, knows exactly what they are about, and Gestalt dreamwork is a powerful tool in accessing these personal insights.

Dreams convey information specific to the dreamer. A formal interpretation could be wrong, or not as important as other aspects of what the dream is about. Unlike some methods of dream interpretation that say a house always means this or falling always means that, in Gestalt dreamwork, dreamers are led to experience what it means for them. The most important meaning is the truth of one's experience. As the therapist, if you feel your client might be missing something obvious you can encourage staying with the feeling and noticing if there is also something else. But again, that is turning it over to and trusting the dreamer's subjective experience, rather than giving (or requesting) analysis.

Many persons have gotten value from various methods of dream interpretation. My statements regarding interpretation are in the context of Gestalt dreamwork strategies. These methods provide us with non-analytic tools which steer away from interpretation and are consistently effective in giving us deep understanding of our dreams and solutions to the issues the dreams address. When used properly, Gestalt dreamwork methods produce meaningful revelations time and time again. And they keep the client tending toward hypnotic states as opposed to analysis, which tends to bring the client out of hypnosis. Avoiding interpretation keeps us focused on direct access to the wisdom of the greatest ally and potential therapist of all, our own subconscious minds, and also allows the potential for deep healing by way of the increased suggestibility inherent to hypnotic states.

## **Basic Gestalt Dreamwork Methods and their Hypnotic Effects**

The first step for the therapist is to have the client describe the dream in present tense while vividly imagining it. Often this is best done with the eyes closed. Occasionally I may ask the dreamer to describe the dream again more expressively. I sometimes encourage the client to make gestures and movements to experience the dream more intensely. Very significantly, this revivification of the dream brings the person's full attention right into the subconscious, the part of the mind that created the dream. As discussed in my book, *Become the Dream*, the key to profound, deep therapy is to work with and effect the subconscious mind. By definition, any method that gives us direct access to our inner minds while awake is hypnotic. In other words, an important aspect of this first step in Gestalt dreamwork is as a hypnotic induction, and it is typically effective as such.

If hypnosis, or at least a hypnoidal (borderline or light hypnotic) state, does not begin to occur during this stage of Gestalt dreamwork, it will usually begin to manifest as the further hypnotic procedures of Gestalt unfold. (During many traditional hypnotic inductions, a client initially opens to the subconscious mind through methods that develop a passive relaxation. Gestalt dreamwork is one of the many alternative forms of hypnotic inductions.)

Next, the therapist has the dreamer describe being one of the characters of the dream, emphasizing to stay in touch with his or her feelings. If the description is brief, some elaboration may be encouraged. The therapist will usually then have the dreamer become at least one more additional character. This increased identification with specific parts of the dream frequently further deepens the hypnosis.

A major Gestalt dreamwork procedure is to have different characters dialogue. A dialogue may also occur between one or more dream characters and the person who is doing the dreamwork (oneself within the dream as a dream character). The dialogues are communicated directly in the first and second person, rather than talking to the therapist about the other character. Using the imagination to communicate between aspects of the dream tends to keep the client in a hypnotic state or deepen it.

The Gestalt dialogue is traditionally done while sitting in one chair and facing an empty chair, communicating as if the other character is on that chair. When the initial communication is complete, the person gets up and switches chairs to become the other dream aspect and respond. Most people are able to make the physical switches within a Gestalt dreamwork dialogue without it having a significant deleterious effect on the hypnotic state.

When you dialogue between the different parts, switching and becoming first one part and then the other, this gives the opportunity to work through struggles between conflicting parts (and/or increase communication and appreciation between complementary, harmonious parts), integrating characteristics of each part into a more balanced whole. Questions between the characters are to be avoided or turned into statements. A question is considered a form of manipulation, a way of not taking

responsibility. It also is usually a request for an intellectual explanation, which tends to diminish the hypnotic state.

Another Gestalt practice is to periodically have the dreamer describe his or her physical awareness. This is especially good when a person has begun to tap into an emotion, whether or not there appears to be resistance to that emotion. Going inward will tend to take people deeper into hypnosis and deeper into the experience. As the client describes his or her inner feelings you might turn to an inner dialogue to further develop that experience. For example, if physical movements have begun to occur you can encourage exaggeration of those movements, then to become the part of the body that is doing that, in the same way the person would become a direct character in the dream. That could lead to a dialogue between the client and the body part or between different parts of the body, or between one aspect or emotional response of the client and another.

Keep working with dialogue between characters until you complete the communication or get a natural coming together of some of the characters. It is important that the therapist not take sides. What usually happens as you stay with a person in dreamwork is a gradual appreciation and integration of the different sides. The appreciation is automatic with wish fulfillment dreams, but in frustration dreams you initially emphasize the clashing parts and work with those, letting them have total space to be themselves. You encourage each part to express and be itself, whether the part is upset at the other, or afraid, or whatever the feeling is. If the dreamer becomes ready to complete this process, a mutual respect and acceptance often develops between characters at the conclusion of the dialogue.

Most dreams for almost all of us are frustration dreams or have significant elements of frustration. Both frustration and wish fulfillment dreams are valuable and have their advantages. Working with a wish fulfillment dream, for instance, can be very healing when the subconscious mind finds a discovery or solution, or immerses itself in the joy of its power and sense of accomplishment, or success, freedom, peace or whatever the relevant feelings are. You can also work with a brief dream segment in which it may not be clear at first if there will be something frustrating or challenging to work with. You simply find out by having the person do the dreamwork process.

### **Combining Further Hypnotic Processes with Gestalt Dreamwork**

Most people are able to do Gestalt dreamwork in the traditional posture, making movements and switching chairs as they switch characters, and so forth. Some persons find this distracting and may become more responsive after receiving a more formal hypnotic induction. Also, the dream may be experienced more deeply and emotionally by some after an initial hypnotic induction, which is one possibility for bypassing resistance or to help someone who is using Gestalt dreamwork methods but having difficulty identifying with the parts of the dream. The subconscious connections of this deeper state can bring the dream more to the surface and make it more vivid.

If I do dreamwork after a hypnotic relaxation induction I don't have the person get up and switch chairs because that would be difficult and distracting. Instead of switching chairs,

I can tap a person on the shoulder, wrist or hand as I encourage each switch to a different part. That is a bit more powerful than just saying, “switch.”

With the integration of hypnosis, we can take traditional Gestalt work further in myriad ways. My first step upon reaching the conclusion of the traditional Gestalt portion is usually to apply a few brief hypnotic deepening techniques. The deepening can prepare for a hypnotic exploration or intensify suggestibility, and it can also be a signal for the client to become more passive and receptive. Additionally, hypnotic deepening can be used to increase the effectiveness of the process at any stage of the dreamwork.

After brief deepening procedures, Hypnotic Dreamwork™ can include further integration with direct and/or indirect post-hypnotic suggestions. Traditional Gestalt therapy focuses just on the person’s process, but there is so much you can suggest for further integration of the process while the subconscious mind is open to suggestion. (Note that the subtle support throughout of the person’s process, including encouragement of full expression of each character, is a form of indirect suggestion that is also a part of traditional Gestalt dreamwork.)

After avoiding direct hypnotic suggestions or keeping them to a minimum during the process of the Gestalt dreamwork, I typically follow up with various kinds of positive suggestions for reinforcement and further integration. Hypnotic and post-hypnotic suggestions can include, for example, a deep appreciation of each aspect of the client in this dreamwork process, encouragement that integration continues to deepen and manifest in the client’s life in the days and weeks ahead, and in healing dreams. The transcripts in *Become the Dream* include a wealth of examples of the integration of hypnotic suggestions into dreamwork.

However, in special circumstances the hypnotic support can take place at different times during the process, not just during the concluding sections. Normally, the only time I would consider adding direct hypnotic suggestions before we complete the traditional Gestalt dreamwork portion would be when working with a wish fulfillment dream.

Hypnotic Dreamwork can, in some cases, develop directly into regression. When dreamwork transforms in this direction a range of modalities may be integrated into the work, including the affect bridge, Gestalt regression methods, brief self-hypnoanalysis, etc. This can add significant complexity and can be such an important development during Hypnotic Dreamwork that I have dedicated an entire chapter in *Become the Dream* to discussing the subject, and have included transcripts and commentary of such sessions throughout the book.

Any additional form of hypnotherapy can be integrated when appropriate. For example, there are various ways ideomotor questions can be used to request information or get feedback from the subconscious. Some of the ways indirect suggestions are used is by tone of voice, body language, etc. Another example is after the hypnotic deepening the client could be guided in a relevant symbolic healing fantasy. Other hypnotic tools may include grounding and centering techniques, hypnotic metaphor, bioenergetics, time distortion, bibliotherapy and inner child processes.

Furthermore, if a client wants to work with dreams and hasn't been able to remember a recent dream, the therapist can move right into doing a hypnotic induction to create a hypnodream. A dream that is elicited in hypnosis can also effectively take us to direct subconscious connections to issues.

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*Randal Churchill was the first president of the ACHE and is completing his third term as president as of publication of this article. He is Founder (1978) and Director of the Hypnotherapy Training Institute in Corte Madera, CA, near San Francisco: <http://hypnotherapy.com>, which draws students from around the world each semester. He is the author of the award-winning books *Become the Dream and Regression Hypnotherapy*, and the acclaimed *Catharsis in Regression Hypnotherapy*.*