

# About three “self-state dreams”

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**Summary.** Heinz Kohut suggested that ‘Preservation of the self’ is fundamental to human development. Kohut identified “self-state dreams”, which describe, name and correct moments of narcissistic injury which are dangerous to the self. They are one of the ways by which a person self-regulates, defends and enables the development of his or her self. In this paper, I would like to observe how the self is preserved and evolves through three self-state dreams: a patient’s dream presented in therapy; the phantasy of Peter – the hero of Prokofiev’s musical story ‘Peter and the Wolf’; and the composer himself whose work – I would like to suggest – functions as a “self-state dream” as well.

**Keywords:** Self-state Dreams, Heinz Kohut, Self Psychology, Dreamwork, Peter and the wolf, Serge Prokofiev

## Introduction

Not long ago, I was invited to speak in a therapists-seminar whose topic was “the journey of a hero”. I was asked to choose out of a list of several children’s books. Intuitively – and without really knowing why – I chose Prokofiev’s musical story “Peter and the wolf” (1936). Re-meeting with the work was a true joy to me. The music took me back to my own childhood, and I remembered the wrapping of the record which I used to listen to over and over again. I was excited and impressed with the wonderful music, whom I hadn’t met for quite a long time. I remembered the fear looking through the book, bumping into the horrific picture of the wolf’s teeth just about to swallow the poor duck. Even now, as an older reader, I was awaiting anxiously the happy ending of the story. While preparing the lecture, I realized that my intuitive choice has to do with the idea of preservation of the self, of which I am engaged with in the last few years, and that I met lately through a beautiful dream of Anna, a young woman in therapy.

Heinz Kohut claimed that preservation of the self is a milestone in the development of the child. The simple and fascinating idea, is that the self is placed in the center of the development of our personality, and that we – human beings – strive in different ways to preserve it. In fact, preservation of the self is our driving force. Re-meeting “Peter and the wolf”, I recognized it as a story about the construction of the self and its evolution. More precisely, the story seemed to me as a kind of a “self-state dream”. Kohut defined these kind of dreams, which were meant to describe, name, and consequently mend states which are dangerous to the self. Furthermore, they have a self-constructing function as well. These dreams are one of many strategies in use in order to preserve the self and to enable its involvement. Peter’s story, quite like Anna’s dream, seemed to me as if it were functioning as self-preserving and self-constructing.

The intersection between Anna’s dream, “Peter and the wolf” and Kohut’s perspective of dreams, resulted in this paper, in which I would like to address the idea of “self-state dreams”.

## Dream-work in service of the self

Before Kohut turned to self-psychology, in the last decade of his life, he thought of himself as a classical psychoanalyst and as Freud’s successor. Both his identification with “classical” psychoanalysis and his turn towards other directions are evident in his concept of the dream. Kohut recognized two kinds of dreams: the first, expresses verbalizable latent contents and serve, basically, “Freudian” functions, that is as a “royal road to the unconscious”. Freud (1900) said that:

*...in waking life the suppressed material in the mind is prevented from finding expression and is cut off from internal perception owing to the fact that the contradictions present in it are eliminated—one side being disposed of in favor of the other; but during the night, under the sway of an impetus towards the construction of compromises, this suppressed material finds methods and means of forcing its way into consciousness (p. 603).*

Quite like Freud, Kohut (1977) thought that these dreams express “verbalizable latent contents (drive wishes, conflicts, and attempted conflict solutions)” (p. 108-109), and that they can be addressed in therapy in the conventional way, through free associations.

However, Kohut recognized another kind of dreams, with which “classical” dream-work doesn’t result in revealing unconscious layers. He named them “self-state dream”. Kohut claimed that these kind of dreams – through the use of imagery – express and contain the non-verbal tension of different traumatic situations that are dangerous to the self (either because of over-stimulation of the self, or because of the danger of its falling apart). In these dreams, the healthy part of the patient reacts anxiously to a disturbing change in the self’s state (Livingston, 2001). Kohut (1977) felt that the soul “works” in the dream in favor of preserving the self, and thus reduces the danger of its actual dismantling:

*with the aid of verbalizable dream-imagery, [the dream tries] to bind the nonverbal tensions of traumatic states (the dread of overstimulation, or of the disintegration*

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Submitted for publication: September 2018

Accepted for publication: December 2018

of the self [psychosis]). [Self-state dreams] portray the dreamer's dread vis-a-vis some uncontrollable tension-increase or his dread of the dissolution of the self. The very act of portraying these vicissitudes in the dream constitutes an attempt to deal with the psychological danger by covering frightening nameless processes with namable visual imagery (p. 109).

Self-state dreams are, in fact, a “royal road” – not necessarily to the unconscious, but, as Stolorow (1978) mentions – “to the invariant organizing principles and dominant leit-motivs which unconsciously ‘thematize’ a patient’s subjective experiences” (pp. 473-474). As such, the dream is ‘an expression of itself’, and not necessarily a camouflage of something else (Fosshage, 1989). It seems that a self-state dream serves not only as regulating and mending the self, but also as an aid in its developing and flourishing:

*The supraordinate function of dreaming mentation is the development, maintenance (regulation), and restoration of psychic processes and organization. More specifically, dreaming mentation may function to envision and, therefore, develop and consolidate emergent psychological configurations, such as changes in self and object images. Dreaming may contribute to the momentary resolution of intrapsychic conflict either through the restoration of primary organizational patterns or through a creative and newly emergent reorganization. And dreaming may contribute to the regulation of self-esteem, as well as sexual, aggressive, and other processes wherein wish-fulfillment (instead of a discharge or defensive operation) is viewed as a regulatory process (p. 4)*

Thus, it functions as a healer of the fracture in the self, and also escorts and enables a developmental process.

### Anna's dream in service of self-preservation

Anna, a young woman in her twenties, was a firstborn to a five-children family (three older sisters and then two younger brothers) and a therapist herself. During the first few sessions she seemed a bit shy, but nonetheless appeared to be an intelligent, sensitive bright and serious young woman. Anna dreamed the following dream several weeks after our therapy has begun:

*I'm walking in an amusement park at night. It's dark, quite a scary atmosphere. I'm riding some kind of a “roller coaster” – a small train on tracks that travels between the different parts of the park. At some point, I realize that my sister was left behind. I am quite uncomfortable that she was left behind and didn't climb the roller-coaster, but although feeling a bit guilty – I am not that sorry about it. I realize, during the ride, that I have to be now at the booth in which teddy bears are given as a prize for winning a game, and at this same time I must operate the Ferris wheel. At the end of the dream I know that the train has reached the Ferris wheel. I sit at its top and feel accomplishment, satisfied that I got to ride the Ferris wheel, that I am an adult, big and successful.*

At the beginning of our conversation about the dream, Anna started to speak of her relationship with her sister, who is just a year younger than herself. “Her life”, Anna said, “is non-paved. Life is hard on her and she was – and still is – left behind a bit”. In contrast, Anna's life seem to her as easy: “I have always felt competent and optimistic, and had the idea

that if one makes an effort, one succeeds. Effort and success are compatible that way.” This was a perspective on her sister that wasn't yet presented in therapy, and we are engaged with her relationship with her sister which seemed, up till now, to be only a supportive one during childhood and also these days. The dream revealed the difficulty “being the older sister of my sister, with her learning disabilities, who married late, who has a hard time getting pregnant, my sister that takes everything to heart and that everything is hard for her”. Guilt was apparent, and at this stage, the dream functioned in a “Freudian” manner, clearing a path to the unconscious – the same unconscious that up to now stashed away the uncomfortable feeling towards the sister. Anna even said that leaving her sister behind means – in her opinion – “as if as my sister was dead”, and that the dream expresses a wishful thinking not to have to carry her sister's burden in reality as well as in her soul. After quite a long silence, Anna started telling me how when she was young, her father used to take “the girls” – herself and her two younger sisters – to the amusement park. It was a treat reserved only to the bigger siblings of the family, or as she said with a smile – “the chosen ones!”. She went on telling me that her father didn't like to ride the Ferris wheel, and due to the park's rules, only a girl “big and old enough” could ride without dad. “The best visit ever”, she went on, was on the year that she was the only one let on the Ferris wheel since her sisters were too young. Climbing the wheel was associated with feeling competent. At this point, Anna commented that she thinks the “heart” of the dream is actually the ride, the journey from standing beside her sister, through riding the train in this frightening-magical place, up to sitting at the top of the Ferris wheel.

Kohut's understanding of the dream's function, implies a few principles to working with dreams (as depicted for instance by Fosshage, 1989, and Stolorow, 1978), two of these observations made by Livingstone (2001) I will address in this paper: The first suggests that an “expert interpreter” is not required. If the dreams aim is to describe the state of the self through imagery, then the analyst's job is to be an “imagery amplifier” (p. 17). Therefore, instead of an interpretive authority, the analyst is responsible for amplifying and mirroring meaningful patterns that are expressed in the dream. Following this conception, I commented on a few images which I felt that were most powerful, and that made an impression both on both Anna and me: I mentioned the rides in the Ferris wheel and in the roller-coaster. We noticed that she is riding both of them alone, “beating” the others and enjoying her sister being left behind. Anna responded to this observation by remembering that she forgot to tell me about submitting a proposal to lecture in a big professional conference. She was sure her offer would be accepted, but eventually the conference-committee rejected her proposal. She went on telling me that a member in this committee is a woman who used to study with her in university, and that she is upset that this woman was the one who rejected it, witnessing (and responsible of) Anna's professional insult. She went on saying that she keeps remembering it, especially when waking up at night – emphasizing the quite-big effect the incident has on her. One principle deriving from Kohut's understanding of the dream – the amplifying function of images – was mentioned above. The second principle of working with dreams addressed here, implies that even if the dream appears to contain conflictual and defensive components, they are, most probably, an “arrangement” of

the self in the best possible way, considering the threat to its well-being. Based on this understanding, Anna left behind (or destroyed, one could even say in the dream's symbolic language) her competition, her sister. At the same time, the dream reminded her of her competent place as a “big and adult” child, the only one who can ride the Ferris wheel. Anna's dreamwork served the preservation of her self-value and self-image. The dream offered comfort in a moment of insult and injury to the self.

### The story of “Peter and the wolf” as a fantastic journey in service of the evolving self

A bit like Anna, the hero of “Peter and the wolf” also dreams in service of the self. While Anna's dream engages mainly in mending a broken moment of the self, Peter's story demonstrates also the developmental aspect, the growth and construction encouraged by self-state dreams. A few words about the musical story of “Peter and the wolf”, written and composed by Sergei Prokofiev in 1936. Peter, an energetic, creative and competent young boy, leaves one morning his grandpa's house into the meadow. There he meets a cat, a duck and a bird. He observes the animals and makes friends with some of them. At a certain point, grandpa sees that Peter went out on his own and angrily leads him back home. He stresses the danger in a potential encounter with the wolf. From his safe zone in the yard, Peter indeed spots the wolf. Vigorously he climbs a tree which is situated inside the backyard, on the verge of the meadow, and with help from his friend, the bird, he courageously grabs the wolf's tale and ties it up, even before the hunters arrive. At the end of the story, Peter leads the march escorting the wolf to the zoo. This beautiful work was written for a full symphonic orchestra as well as a narrator. Every character in the story is represented by a musical instrument, which is playing a musical theme – leitmotiv (a term used above by a psychoanalyst theoretician in the technique of working with dreams) – played whenever the specific character appears in the story. “Peter and the wolf” had great popularity over the years, it was played many times in various performances, translated to many languages and was visually-interpreted by numerous book-illustrators. When listening to the story, one might feel that Prokofiev recognized a substantial moment in a person's psychology, a moment of operating within the world's restrictions from one hand and its potential from the other. “Peter and the wolf” presents this depth-moment graciously, sensitively and with grate charm.

The story has two parts, between them Peter is evolving, growing up while “nurturing” the leading part of his personality, the hero inside himself. In the beginning, young Peter goes out to the meadow as an observer. Peter might have not “needed” the fantastic part of the story in order to keep the evolving of the self. Alas, grandpa arrives – terminating the first part of the story – and he is angry with Peter: “The meadow is a dangerous place! If a wolf should come out of the forest, then what would you do? You would be in great danger!” (Prokofiev, 1936, no page numbers). Grandpa's intervention is a crucial moment in face of Peter's inner-movement, his creativity and free spirit. Not only is he cross with Peter, but he also brings fear, hesitation and insecurity to the picture. In extreme circumstances, a moment like this can lead to a fracture in the self. Here, grandpa's intervention casts doubt as to the strength of the self, which in its turn awakens anxiety from a possible fracture in the self. At

this moment, grandpa's insult collides with Peter's fear from the wolf, and the two discard the self's sense of ability and competence.

Had Peter given up the confrontation with the wolf, fear might have taken over and the self would have been diminished. But in fact, Peter is facing fear, and narrates an inner story against the limitation and restriction of self's spontaneous gesture – and he tells himself a fantastic story, “creates” a dream. Thus, in the second part of the story, Peter's part in the plot is of almost-grandiose nature. The characters from the first part of the story evolve in this part to becoming “characters in service of Peter's self”: thus, the cat seeking to catch a bird in the first part, becomes a wolf hunting a duck. Peter, who's fear from the wolf results in a restriction in the first part – becomes a brave and clever hunter who knows no fear in the second part. The bird, although small and vulnerable, represents a very potent part of Peter, the gate and wall of the garden don't restrict her (him, in some versions of the translation) and she can skillfully and fearlessly fly and do whatever she pleases. On the other hand, the duck who leapt out of the pond and was being swallowed (alive) by the wolf, demonstrates the danger of reduction, of engulfment. The concrete threat and danger represented by the wolf, glorifies Peter's brave deeds. Who could ask for more in order to restore a fractured self? During fantastic moments of curiosity, playfulness, spontaneous gesture, a sense of vitality, greatness and courage, as well as interaction with the animals who are proud of him and love him, Peter overcomes the threat on the wholeness of the self, directed to him from the outside (grandpa's restrictions) – and from inside (the fear from the wolf). Overcoming both of these obstacles is in itself a developmental move of growing up, expanding the self and evolving to becoming a leader, a hero. The music implements the preservation of the self as well: at the end of the piece, all of the instruments play the musical theme which represent Peter, and Peter's leitmotiv is being played now by the whole orchestra – e.g. all of the “supporting cast”, serving the preservation of Peter's self and its restoration, his evolving and developing.

### Last thoughts – “Peter and the wolf” as Prokofiev's self-state dream

Anna faced a danger to her self-value due to an insult of a colleague. With the help of a self-state dream, she managed to mend the self and restore its place as the first and preferred among the “sisters”. Peter, who's self was also endangered to reduction from outside as well as from inside, “dreamt” himself (omni)potent, and consequently not only preserved the self but even expanded it. Likewise, we might think of Prokofiev as dealing – through writing “Peter and the wolf” – with a danger to his self: in 1918 Prokofiev left Russia. 15 years later, in 1933 while living in Paris, he started receiving tempting invitation from Russia to compose some new and substantial works (Ben-Zeev, 2011). A year later, he decided to come back to his homeland and settled in Moscow. Thus, leaving the question of why he came back without answer. The assumptions range between Stalin's tempting him with diverse promises, through his decreasing popularity in Paris up to longing for Russia. He re-entered a terrible political and social reality, including shortage of food and medicine, a dark and cruel regime which among other things, violently censored his works and revoked others (Savkina, 2006). In these professional and personal

pitiable conditions, Prokofiev writes and composes the rich and spectacular “Peter and the wolf”. Maybe, like Anna and Peter, in this manner he found some kind of an answer to the traumatic fracture endangering his self under the difficult circumstances. He does it in two ways: first – through the allegoric text giving voice to that which can’t be spoken of directly – e.g. the reality of writing behind locked gates, with close inspection of “grandpa”, whilst a concrete and emotional threat to life and creativity. In this spirit one might mention additional interpretations of Gary Lemco (2013) also pointing in the symbolic-allegoric direction, relating to “Peter and the wolf” as an allegory to USSR’s political condition in the 30’s of the 20th century, the different characters symbolize either the relationship between the different USSR’s republics, or the relationship between the different European states; Peter represents Russia and the wolf – Nazi Germany. Second – through the music, transforming the threat and the danger into a beautiful and joyful work, thus bypassing – in fact – the creative restrictions. In this way, through his writing and composing, Prokofiev could express political and personal underground motions, hidden from view, nameless and frightening. The specifics of the creative process (writing this specific text and composing this exact music), organized and regulated the tension and danger in which the self was situated in, lurking and giving it meaning. Whilst doing so, he brought this whole and wonderful work into the world.

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