Dreams and artwork in my cancer journey

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Summary. This study examines the relationship between dream content, creative artwork, and the trajectory of a breast cancer diagnosis, treatment, and recovery. Using Hall and Van de Castle content analysis alongside Jungian hermeneutic interpretation, dreams were analyzed across three phases: prior to diagnosis, during cancer, and post-cancer. Artwork produced during these same phases was also reviewed for symbolic parallels. ChatGPT was used to compile both the Hall and VandeCastle results and to do a Jungian-informed artificial intelligence interpretation. Results indicate marked shifts in dream report frequency, thematic content, and symbolic imagery, alongside changes in art production. Findings are discussed in the context of individuation processes and the impact of life-threatening illness on the unconscious psyche.

Keywords: Dreams, art, cancer, case study, artificial intelligence, Jungian interpretation

1. Introduction

There is considerable research into how to cope with cancer. This personal inquiry covers two techniques used by the author, dream work and artwork. While the author used various other healing and coping devices (i.e., group support) she had a life time history of using these two modalities thus the emphasis on them in this inquiry. Past research has identified relationships between dreams, art, and experiences of illness. This research review will examine past inquiries into dreams and cancer. This is followed by research into the relationship between creative expressions and cancer or healing. Finally, previous use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is discussed as that was the research tool used herein.

Dreams and Cancer

Several studies have examined the relationship between dreams and cancer from slightly different perspectives. Directly related to the present inquiry is a study by DeCicco et al. (2010) who compared the dreams of breast cancer patients with those of individuals engaged in group dream work but without cancer. They found that breast cancer patients' dreams contained more illness-related elements such as medical figures, pain, death, and disease references.

Wellisch and Cohen (2011) reviewed 30 studies on nightmares in cancer patients and concluded that healthcare professionals commonly encounter recurring nightmare themes, including threat assessment and attempts to actively engage with threats; concerns about dependency, passivity, and dread; and the relationship with oncology professionals.

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Green et al. (2000) reported that outcomes in breast cancer patients were predicted not by treatment variables but by demographic factors, trauma history, psychiatric diagnoses, life events, and social support. More directly to this inquiry is Bahri et al's (2019) report from a search of the literature that, "history of stressful life events slightly increases the risk of breast cancer (p. 53)". This was supported by Wang et al (2023) who found that one or two stressful life events increases the odds of getting cancer. It can be seen in Table 1 that these findings resonate with the author's own life circumstances. In the three years between mammograms, she experienced two family deaths, a major stroke that left her sister with dementia, and estrangement from one of her children.

Finally, the kinds of content that might constitute warnings about breast cancer were considered by Burk (2015). He examined the dreams of 18 breast cancer patients. He found: the five most common characteristics of warning dreams in descending order of frequency reported in the survey were:

1. a sense of conviction about the importance in 94%;
2. the dreams were more vivid, real or intense than ordinary in 83%;
3. an emotional sense of threat, menace or dread in 72%;
4. the use of the specific words breast cancer/tumor in 44%; and
5. the sense of physical contact with the breast in 39%.

Art and Cancer or Healing

Barnett and Vasiu (2024) found that creative engagement was associated with emotional regulation which is important in recovery from illness. In a review and metanalysis Puetz, Morley and Herring (2013) found that "Exposure to CAT (creative art therapy) can improve anxiety, depression, and pain symptoms and QOL among cancer patients, but this effect is reduced during follow-up (p. 960)." However, in a later study Ünal and Erdoğan Yüce (2025) found that art-based interventions were effective in reducing anxiety and depression in cancer patients but had no effect on fatigue or quality of life. Nainis et al (2006) used the Edmonton Symptom Assessment Scale and found reductions in most symptoms associated with cancer and its treatment after

Table 1. Breast Cancer Journey: Medical Key Points.

Medical Key Points
• In the three years prior to this diagnosis the author experienced the death of her mother, a stroke resulting in dementia in her only sibling, the death of her brother-in-law and serious relationship issues with one of her children.
• Mammogram Feb 28, 2024 (suspected cancer as compared to mammogram taken 3 years earlier)
• Ultrasound and Biopsy March 18, 2024 (confirmed cancer)
• First Lumpectomy and sentinel lymph node removal May 10, 2024 (both breasts)
• Bone scan, CT scan, MRI, and PET scan (June and July, 2024) (because all 3 sentinel nodes cancerous)
• Second Lumpectomy with lymph node removal July 29, 2024 (18 more nodes removed and 12 cancerous)[1]
• Radiation Oct 14 – Oct 31, 2024
• CT scans clear of cancer (Nov 2024, Jan 2025, and Aug 2025)

Note: [1]The author was told by my surgeon that chemotherapy was not called for as it might kill me due to my age and general health condition. That led to my decision to begin naturopathic recommendations including taking off brand products (i.e., ivermectin and fenbendazole) and 10 sessions of intravenous Vitamin C. This was with the guidance of a retired radiologist and a naturopathic doctor.

a one-hour art therapy session. These symptoms included reductions in pain, tiredness, nausea, depression, anxiety, drowsiness, appetite, and breathlessness.

In a lovely first-person interview article by Pernambuco-Holsten (2019) the author found a creative style used by a cancer patient that is very close to her own creative work during her year of cancer. Ellen used to be a jewelry maker but when she had to get a bone marrow transplant it was clear she wasn't going to be able to continue with her art. However, she explains,

> *One day a staff member gave a demonstration on doodling. It was creativity at its best for me. It reminded me of being taught as a child that everything in the world is based on 12 basic shapes and that anyone can draw anything based on those shapes. And so I began to doodle, one shape at a time. Being creative helped me to go deeper than words. It helped me to express the dialogue that was going on in my head (para. 13)*

In the picture of her doing her doodles on a guitar, the author was struck by how similar her work looked to her own.

Artificial Intelligence and Dreams

The use of AI to do dream content analysis has been previously explored and is used in this research. McNamara, Duffy-Deno, Marsh, and Marsh (2019) used an AI algorithm trained on a 35,000+ dream reports. They replicated many known dream-content themes directly linking the Hall and Van de Castle ontology. They also found gender differences, and were able to identify themes predictive of self-reported positive or negative dream mood. Another large body of dreams were examined using AI by Das et al. (2025). They studied over 44,000 dreams from Reddit and found emergent themes beyond traditional scales. They validated their topics against the Hall and Van de Castle scale, and found new patterns (e.g., indoor location settings appeared more often than previous work suggested) and noted variation over time/major events (such as pandemic, war). Bertolini, Consoli, and Weeds (2025) offer a meta perspective: how well large text models handle dream reports and whether they reflect measurable group differences (gender, impairment, clinical status). These studies showed how modern AI methods allow a shift from manual coding toward "big data" dream analysis.

While the use of AI in dream content analysis is warranted there are several caveats that need to be kept in mind. AI models emphasize scale, thousands of dreams, but lack the depth of symbolic analysis. While various very large data sets are used they tend to be self-posted (i.e., Reddit) and thus may be younger and English speaking. Classification of dream contents does not mean interpretation although they can be merged as is attempted herein.

Finally, the use of AI system to evaluate creative work has begun but does not appear to be as robust as with dream content analysis. Yanag et al., (2023) proposed a new task in which an AI takes a visual creation and tries to interpret the creator's psychological state. Similarly, Adi and Aljunaidy (2024) described how AI has been used to analyze visual art pieces for emotional/therapeutic content. These tools suggest that AI can extract features from artworks (color, composition, style, object content, maybe inferred emotion) and then map them to meanings (e.g., "creator seems anxious", "image evokes sadness"). As with dream content analysis, there are limitations using AI systems. These interpretations may seem shallow, can be misreads, and AI systems may lack depth in symbolic, unconscious, cultural and uniquely personal meanings.

In this first-person inquiry all analyses are done using AI through ChatGPT-5 (OpenAI, 2025). That is, both dream reports and artworks done alone at home were AI analyzed as a function of three phases of the author's cancer experience. These were the three months prior to diagnosis, the 8 months of treatment, and the three months after being told she was cancer free. For dreams both quantitative and qualitative AI approaches are taken, while for the artwork only qualitative assessment is reported. Finally, an integration of dreams and art as a function of time of the cancer cycle are presented.

2. Method

2.1. Data Sources

All dreams and artwork were recorded and executed spontaneously without any concept of an empirical analysis of the material. The idea for this paper came after the third CT scan concluding the author was cancer free. Even the three months of post-cancer dreams and art were executed and collected prior to the decision to examine them more systematically which was in the spring of 2025. Dreams were spontaneously recorded as part of a regular practice of dream recording. This dream recording was in support of being in Jungian therapy for the last decade, although dreams were recorded spontaneously for much longer.

For this inquiry, dreams were grouped into three phases: Phase 1: 24 dreams from 3 months prior to diagnosis (December 2023–February 2024); Phase 2: 96 dreams from the 8 months during diagnosis and treatment (March–October 2024); Phase 3: 18 dreams from 3 months post-cancer (November 2024–January 2025).

The author has been a lifelong amateur artist and thus pretty much continually creates art of various sorts. The vast majority of the art works were created independently from the dreams, with very few representations of a dream. Therefore, the collection of art as a function of date was less systematic than with dreams, but what could be identified as being created during her cancer journey was also grouped into the same three phases: Phase 1: 29 images; Phase 2: 39 images; Phase 3: 25 images.

2.2. Procedures

Dreams were coded both quantitatively and qualitatively by ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2025) as guided by the author. There is precedence for using ChatGPT in dream analysis (Baber, Hamilton, & Gratton, 2025). ChatGPT was selected due to its ease of use and because the author had been using it occasionally to examine her own dreams for about a year prior to doing this research project.

ChatGPT-5 was used for qualitative (Jungian and artistic) and quantitative (Hall and VandeCastle) analyses. APA style tables were generated based on these analyses. Some background sources were gathered by ChatGPT-5 and a preliminary writeup was framed in Chatgpt-5 based on a detailed PowerPoint presentation written by Gackenbach (2025, September). It was written for presentation at a regional dream conference and included the basics of this study. That is, abstract, brief review of relevant background research, details on procedure, basic results and discussion. There was also a reference page at the end of the presentation. The slides are available online (Gackenbach, 2025, September).

Dream-work and artwork analyses were checked by the author both for accuracy (i.e., reliability of Hall and VandeCastle analyses) and logic. It should be noted that using ChatGPT-5 is like working with a student. That is, there are many exchanges with the AI to try to "teach" it what is desired. Even at that, the final outcomes often required extensive revisions by the author.

Table 2. Reliability of ChatGPT vs. Student Scoring on Hall and Van de Castle Aggression and Friendliness Scales.

Category	Subcategory	ChatGPT-5 Code	Student Code
Aggression	Aggressor Count	13	11
	Victim Count	27	25
	Bodily Injury	9	8
	Physical Aggression	4	2
	Verbal Aggression	6	5
	Aggression Failure	15	19
	Aggression Between Characters	34	31
	Aggression Directed to Self	8	9
	Total*	116	110
Friendliness	Friendly Interaction Count	9	6
	Friendly Initiations	16	17
	Friendly Responses	3	1
	Reciprocated Friendliness	16	19
	Unreciprocated Friendliness	14	18
	Self as Source of Friendliness	4	2
	Self as Target of Friendliness	3	1
	Total**	65	64

Note. *Pearson correlation (r) = 0.998 and Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC[2,1]) = 0.996 between all subcategories of aggression.
**Pearson correlation (r) = 0.992 and Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC[2,1]) = 0.993

2.2.1 *Hall and Van de Castle Coding*

Dreams were coded for characters, social interactions, activities, success and failure, settings, objects, and affect. Female home norms (Hall & Van de Castle, 1966) were used for comparison. A considerable amount of exchange occurred between the author and ChatGPT in order to get clear coding. In the case of the Hall and VandeCastle (HVDC) reliability was examined against dreams coded by a student for his undergraduate honors thesis (Wijeyaratnam, 2016). This is shown in Table 2 for the 78 dreams from the student's honors thesis and the 138 dreams of the author. Statistics in the table footnotes indicate excellent reliability between the ChatGPT-5 codes and the student codes - near-perfect agreement in magnitude and pattern across the nine items for aggression and similar result for friendliness.

2.2.2 *Jungian Dream Analysis*

Dreams were interpreted within a Jungian framework emphasizing symbolic rather than literal meaning. Following Jung's (1966) view that dream narratives were treated as symbolic products of psychic transformation during illness. Lockhart's (1990) mythological approach to cancer provided a lens for recognizing archetypal themes of death, descent, and renewal that recurred across dreams. Hillman's (1979) imaginal perspective guided the analytic stance toward entering, rather than explaining away, the dream's underworld motifs—blackness, confinement, and metamorphosis—as essential movements of soul. Together these sources supported a triadic interpretive structure in which dreams were read as symbolic processes of individuation, allowing the illness experience to be reframed as a psychic initiation rather than a purely medical ordeal.

This was the instruction given to ChatGPT for a Jungian analysis:

> *Please do a Jungian dream analysis of each of the three batches of dreams just uploaded. Make any relevant comparisons.*

ChatGPT responded:

> *Thank you — I'll approach this carefully and keep the analyses structured, batch by batch, then draw comparisons across them. I will integrate Jungian symbolic analysis, with reference to archetypes, individuation themes, and personal complexes, without drifting into generalization.*

Dreams were interpreted thematically for archetypal content including shadow, anima/animus, death/rebirth, and mandala symbolism. A summary (Table 7) of ChatGPT's Jungian analysis of the dreams was shared with the author's Jungian therapist who confirmed that it was aligned with his impressions of our therapeutic dreamwork during the author's cancer journey.

2.2.3 *Cancer Dreams: Predictors, Diagnosis and Prognosis.*

Burk's (2015) five major findings of characteristics of cancer warning dreams were examined as a function of the dream content analysis by ChatGPT in exchange with the author. Personal subjective impressions of dream importance were selected by ChatGPT but decided upon from those selections by the author. Importance to the author was also pointed to in dreams not selected by ChatGPT. Finally, the cancer dream set were explored for dreams suggestive of diagnosis and prognosis along Burk's other four dimensions (vividness, threat, specific illness words, and breasts).

2.2.4 *Art Works Analysis*

Both text (dream records) and images (authors artworks) were interpreted through a single Jungian framework by ChatGPT-5 (Open AI, 2025). The software worked within the principles of analytical psychology, i.e., the psyche expresses itself symbolically across multiple representational modes. Jung (1966) held that dreams and artistic images arise from the same unconscious source and serve the same symbolic function—each mediating between conscious and unconscious through what he termed the transcendent function. Thus, a painted image and a written dream were treated as parallel manifestations of the psyche's imaginal activity, differing only in medium but not in psychological status. Hillman's (1979) notion of the image as a *mode of being* rather than a representational sign further supports reading visual and verbal material within one hermeneutic field. Lockhart's (1990) view of illness as archetypal transformation provided the thematic anchor, while formal correspondences—color, composition, and movement in the artwork. The continuity across modalities thus reflects Jung's principle of symbolic equivalence rather than methodological conflation.

3. Results

The first set of analyses is the Hall and VandeCastle (H&VdC). Jungian dream analyses then follows. The final dream analysis based on Burk's (2015) findings of dreams as warning, diagnosis and prognosis are considered. Finally, the authors artwork is analyzed using Jungian principles by ChatGPT.

3.1. Hall and VandeCastle Analyses

For all HVDC analyses the percentages in the tables represent the percentage of a characteristic present in all dreams within a phase of cancer journey. These were analyzed line by line, that is for each dream. In the data individual dreams were lines in the excel sheet. Each dream record began with the date of the dream. This approach of percent of all dreams within phase of the cancer journey allowed a clearer comparison across time, which is the point of these dream content analyses. Did dream content differ as the experience of cancer unfolded from not being there (Phase 1), to identification and treatment (Phase 2) and finally to being gone (Phase 3)?

To assess whether percentages were considered "stable" across phases, we applied an a-priori threshold of ±5 percentage points. This conservative criterion was chosen because it approximates the standard error range reported by Hall & Van de Castle (1966) for medium-sized dream samples ($n \approx 50$ dreams per condition), and it represents roughly one-tenth of the typical range of variation found between normative male and female samples. Thus, changes smaller than 5 points were treated as fluctuations within normal variability, whereas larger shifts were considered directionally meaningful.

When comparing the present data to Hall & Van de Castle norms, differences exceeding 10 percentage points were interpreted as substantively divergent, consistent with the convention used in subsequent norm-comparison studies (e.g., Domhoff 1996; Schredl & Piel 2008). Because individual phase dream counts were limited, formal chi-square testing was not performed; instead, observed-to-expected percentage differences were described qualitatively, with attention to whether they exceeded these established effect-size thresholds.

3.1.1 *HVDC: Characters and Animals*

Thus as shown in Table 3, male characters were stable across phases (46–50%), closely matching the female norm of 48%. Female characters rose during cancer (38%) before declining post-cancer (33%), though still below the norm of 52%. Family members were consistently higher than normal (32%), peaking during cancer (45%).

Table 3. Hall and Van de Castle Character and Animal Categories Across Phases.

Category	Phase 1 (Pre-dx)	Phase 2 (During)	Phase 3 (Post)	Female Norms
Male characters	46%	49%	50%	48%
Female characters	29%	38%	33%	52%
Family members present	42%	45%	33%	32%
Animals (any)	33%	35%	28%	18%
— Cats/Kittens	21%	26%	0%	5%
— Dogs	4%	1%	0%	5%
— Horses	4%	7%	0%	2%
— Bears	4%	1%	6%	1%
— Snakes	4%	1%	0%	1%
— Birds	8%	1%	0%	3%
— Other animals	8%	18%	22%	3%

Note. Female norms from Hall & Van de Castle (1966).

Table 4. Hall and Van de Castle Social Interactions and Outcomes Across Phases.

Category	Phase 1 (Pre-dx)	Phase 2 (During)	Phase 3 (Post)	Female Norms
Familiar home setting	17%	21%	44%	25%
Aggression (any)	38%	38%	56%	47%
— Physical aggression	8%	12%	6%	8%
— Verbal aggression	8%	9%	33%	14%
— Self as aggressor	0%	3%	6%	11%
— Self as victim	4%	8%	11%	10%
Friendliness/Affection	38%	40%	39%	44%
Sexuality	21%	25%	28%	12%
Success/Achievement	42%	22%	22%	29%
Failure/Frustration	25%	31%	22%	15%
Good fortune/Positive events	17%	26%	33%	16%
Misfortune/Negative events	25%	26%	28%	21%

Note. Female norms from Hall & Van de Castle (1966).

Animal presence was strikingly above the norm (18%) in all phases: 33% pre-diagnosis, 35% during cancer, and 28% post-cancer (Hall & Van de Castle, 1966). Cats and kittens dominated early phases but disappeared entirely from post-cancer, while other animals increased. This pattern reflects both personal symbolism (i.e., the author has two cats) and a shift toward archetypal animal imagery (Van de Castle, 1968).

3.1.2 HVDC: Social Interactions and Outcomes

As shown in Table 4, overall aggression was steady in the first two phases (38%) but rose sharply post-cancer (56%), above the norm (47%). Verbal aggression was especially striking: 8–9% pre- and during cancer, but 33% post-cancer, more than double the norm (14%). Friendliness was stable (38–40%) and close to norms (44%). Sexuality rose from 21% to 28%, well above the norm of 12%. Success acts dropped after diagnosis, while failure and misfortune remained elevated compared to norms.

3.1.3 HVDC: Activities and Emotions

As shown in Table 5, strenuous physical activity was highest pre-diagnosis (38%) and declined afterward. Mental activity was far above norms across phases, though steadily decreasing from 83% to 61%. Fear/anxiety was stable, while anger and confusion rose post-cancer. Joy and sadness were consistently above norms, reflecting the emotional intensity of the illness trajectory.

3.1.4 Jungian Analyses of Dream Reports

It can be seen in Table 6 that the Jungian analysis focused on four categories of dream content; animals, eros/sexuality, death/misfortune, and archetypal imagery. There were shifts in animal types from the ordinary to the symbolic. Breast cancer seemed to have resulted in shadow dream imagery during the active period. Not surprisingly death was most dominant during the active cancer phase of the dreamers cancer journey. Finally the archetypal imagery was most obvious in the active cancer and post cancer periods.

[Insert Table 6 about here]

3.1.5 Jungian Analysis of Art

ChatGPT-5 only allowed 10 images to be uploaded with each query. Therefore, the author randomly picked 10 from each of the three time periods. To accomplish this the author ordered them by image name (generated by Apple software with meaningless letters followed by sequential numbers) and picked every third image if the total was 30, and so forth. This also allowed some distribution across time within each phase of the cancer journey. Thus, the sample analyzed by ChatGPT-5 was smaller than what was available, but somewhat random. Figures 1, 2 and 3 show one sample image from each phase of this inquiry.

In Table 7 the summary of ChatGPT5's Jungian themed analyses of the art are summarized as a function of time. Since almost all of the authors art is abstract finding meaning can be a challenge. Nonetheless, ChatGPT-5 saw the

Table 5. Hall and Van de Castle Activities and Emotions Across Phases.

Category	Phase 1 (Pre-dx)	Phase 2 (During)	Phase 3 (Post)	Female Norms
Strenuous physical activity	38%	23%	22%	28%
Mental activity (thinking, deciding)	83%	74%	61%	44%
Emotion: Fear/Anxiety	25%	22%	22%	19%
Emotion: Anger	13%	20%	28%	11%
Emotion: Sadness/Grief	21%	20%	17%	8%
Emotion: Joy/Positive	29%	35%	28%	29%
Emotion: Confusion/Surprise	0%	14%	22%	6%

Note. Female norms from Hall & Van de Castle (1966).

Table 6. ChatGPT-5 Analyses of Jungian Dreams from Before, During and After Cancer.

Themes

• Animals:
  • Precancer: animals as fragile companions (kittens, bird, snake).
  • Cancer: animals endangered, larger, archetypal (cats threatened, panthers, horse, giraffe).
  • Postcancer: animals as more symbolic/archetypal (bear cub as surrogate, yellow cat, veins as snake-like).
  → Movement from personal attachment → shadow confrontation → symbolic/archetypal embodiment.

• Eros/Sexuality:
  • Precancer: emergent, joyful, some intimacy (Erik, shower, motorcycles).
  • Cancer: explicit, conflicted, tied to shadow (ex-husbands, masturbation, affairs).
  • Postcancer: distorted, ambivalent, often frustrated or furious.
  → Trajectory: from personal longing → confrontation with eros-shadow → eros as psychic battleground.

• Death/Misfortune:
  • Precancer: illness, threats, but survivable.
  • Cancer: pervasive death, funerals, bloody incidents.
  • Postcancer: death less literal, more symbolic (nigredo, decay, blackness).
  → Movement from personal vulnerability → collective confrontation with mortality → symbolic alchemical death.

• Archetypal Imagery:
  • Precancer: still rooted in personal relationships.
  • Cancer: mythic/archetypal figures appear (royals, celebrities, science figures, archetypal death).
  • Postcancer: strong alchemical imagery (boiling pot, palace room, shiny corn, symbolic transformations).
  → Movement into deeper collective unconscious material.

Table 7. Jungian Informed Analysis of Artwork as a Function of Period of Time.

Phase	Artistic Function
Before Diagnosis	Exploration and playful experimentation. Wide symbolic range reflects openness and curiosity.
During Cancer	Shift inward toward cellular/bodily forms and looser, more somatic structures. Introduction of animal symbols reflects instinctive forces and survival energies. Overall tone feels like an active process of working through the experience.
After Treatment	Artistic language becomes distilled and purposeful. The patterns have been translated into ritual form, now appearing on bowls (containers). Symmetry and repetition express integration and perhaps even a sense of protection or blessing. It is no longer experimentation — it's embodiment.

first phase of art as playful moving in the second phase, cancer treatment, included some animal imagery and the AI concluded that the overall tone was of psychological management of stresses. The final phase was characterized as moving from experimentation to embodiment.

Finally, the number of dreams recorded per time period and the number of art works executed in the same time periods are presented in Figure 4. This showed a shift during the cancer period from an emphasis on art to one on dreams.

3.2. Cancer Warnings, Diagnosis and Prognosis

Finally, a question that primarily motivated the author to undergo this project regarded dreams warning of cancer and/or offering diagnosis. When thinking about the 24 precancer dreams these two came quickly to mind as warning dreams:

> *12/15/2023 — Tsunami hits.*
> *Sudden overwhelming force/flow—often shows up before major diagnoses or life-threat events. You seal the car window "in time," and damage is limited—fits a pre-event alert pattern.*

Figure 1. Art created during the precancer phase (Dec. 27, 2023).

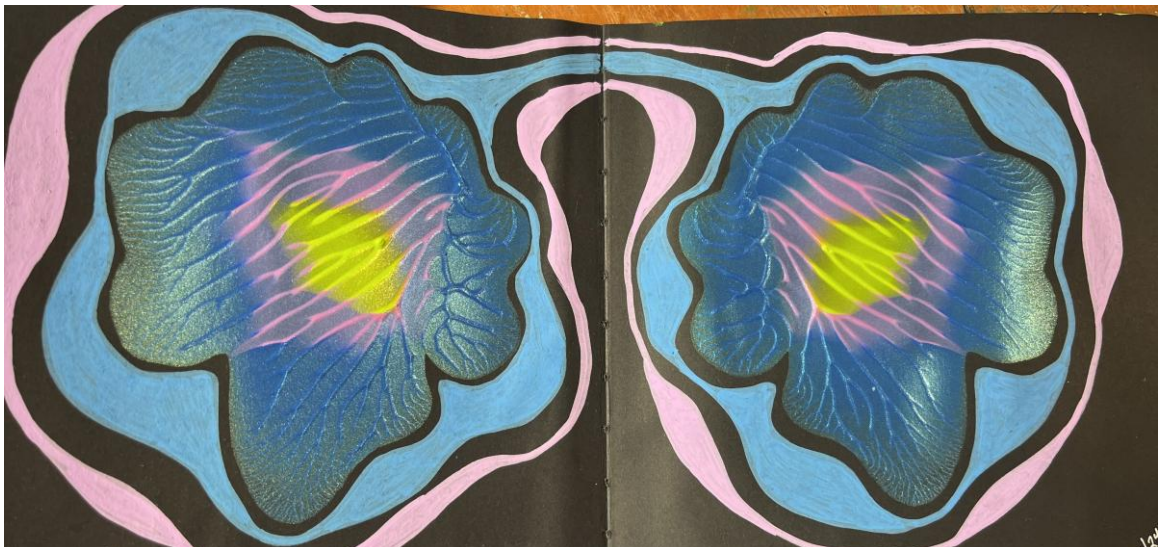

Figure 2. Art created during the cancer phase (March 23, 2024)

1/31/2024 — Kitten's nipple bursts, blood; vet needed. Direct breast/nipple injury and bleeding + urgent care—very on-the-nose as a somatic warning symbol.

The Tsunami dream because the author had one very similar in the week before 9/11 and thus, she was alerted to the role Tsunami in her unconscious. The kitten nipple bleeding was directly about breast cancer and occurred shortly prior to diagnosis. The kitten dream fit into the case made by Burk (2015) and the Tsunami dream less so, if powerfully for the author. While these two dreams included Burk's ideas of threat, importance, and vividness, only the second one also included breasts. But these were only two of two dozen dreams thus the author asked ChatGPT, "I'd like you to scan batch 2 (precancer) for any dreams that you consider warning of cancer. I have in mind a few. The one with the tsunami and the one with the kitten whose nipples were bleeding. Are there others like these two that might suggest warning dreams?" While the prompt included examples, which had characteristics consistent with Burk's findings, ChatGPT was not prompted with Burk's characteristics to assess this. This is a limitation in discussing what we do not know about the criteria ChatGPT used to identify warning dreams, neither what determined its level of confidence about diagnosis or prognostic related elements.

The machine intelligence identified these as well as four additional dreams as likely candidates for warnings:

1/26/2024 — Swollen feet / "Edema."
2/5/2024 — Alien merges with me.
2/9/2024 — Amputation of arm (and leg).
2/24/2024 — Overflowing toilet, rising water over your head behind glass.

The Tsunami dream was somewhat far in advance of the diagnosis while all the rest of the warning dreams were within a month of the presence of cancer being discovered. The author's reactions to these additional warning dreams at the time she had them were minimal. Her only strong concern was with the Tsunami and Alien merging dreams. So, while there does seem to be some warning the author didn't

Figure 3. Art created during the postcancer phase.

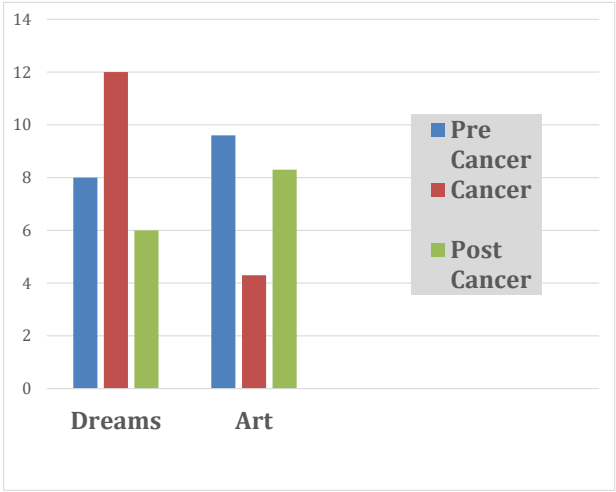

Figure 4. Number of dreams and art work as a function of time of cancer journey.

Figure 5. Art work illustrative of chaos.

connect any of these to breast cancer. Even the last one of the kittens bleeding nipples concerned her, but the author had no symptoms of cancer, breast lumps, thus she did not make that connection, including in the therapy session about the dream.

Related to cancer warning is the question, can dream offer diagnosis and prognosis? ChatGPT5 was again consulted as a software tool (OpenAI, 2025) with this question about the dreams during the eight months of cancer treatment. It came back with this definition of the search terms, "diagnostic (pointing to site/nature of illness or an as-yet-unseen complication) or prognostic (hinting at course, danger, or recovery)." Then in an analysis of all 96 dreams of the cancer period it coded each dream along a five-point scale ranging from 1 - not at all present to 5 - high confidence of presence of cancer. The sum of diagnostic coding was lower (130) than the sum of prognostic coding (191). Here are some examples of each category:

Diagnostic-leaning with specific mention of Burk's fifth common characteristic:

- 6/17/2024 — Ex-husband fondles breasts; "it hurt," pushes him away — Diagnostic (breast) — Direct report of breast pain/tenderness within a breast-focused scene. Confidence: High.

Prognostic dreams don't all point in the same direction. Some lean negative (danger, decline, mortality) while others lean positive (rescue, containment, survival, renewal). Here are some examples:

Prognostic-leaning (risk, mortality, strain)

- 7/23/2024 — Waist-deep water in underground garage; "Does God want me to die?" — Prognostic (existential risk) — Submerged, underground, explicit death appraisal. Confidence: High (as a mortality-salience marker).

Prognostic-leaning (survival/recovery, containment, aid)

- 7/19/2024 — Cat flushed; you hold tight and save it from being pulled down — Prognostic (rescue/retention) - Strong counter-suction survival image; holding on until it survives. Confidence: High (positive trajectory symbol).

ChatGPT-5 offered this synthesis:

- Negative prognostics cluster around summer–early fall 2024: graves, storms, drowning, infestation, degenerative joints.
- Positive prognostics emerge in late spring and again in August–September of 2024: rescue of animals/children, ability to adapt to "big problems," finding safe alternatives.

During the summer of 2024 I had two surgeries to remove cancer and discovered that most of the 21 lymph nodes removed were cancerous. The time periods associated with positive prognostics were just after the surgeries in the summer and just before radiation which occurred in Oct of 2024. ChatGPT-5 summarized, "your dream psyche gradually moved from diagnosis and confrontation with mortality toward adaptation and the possibility of recovery/living with the illness (OpenAI, 2025)." It can be argued that this result is nothing more than the idea of physical sensations being incorporated into dreams (Neilsen, McGregor, Zadra, Ilnicki, & Ouellet, 1993). However, in an interesting parallel ChatGPT-5 highlighted this dream as diagnostic leaning:

- 9/11/2024 — Scar/feather laid across right eye; cancer-care checklist on the base of the spine — Diagnostic (treatment/body-map) — Overt cancer-care reference + a scar motif placed on the face/head axis (later bone-of-forehead focus). Confidence: High.

The author found out in August of 2024 from a bone scan that she might have cancer on her left frontal skull. Whatever that lightened up spot is, it's been static since its initial discovery, and my radiologist is watching it but is not really concerned.

4. Discussion

The present study combined quantitative dream content analysis (Hall & Van de Castle,1966), qualitative Jungian hermeneutics, and artwork review across the trajectory of a cancer diagnosis, treatment, and recovery. In a single case study these perspectives illuminate both convergences and divergences in how the author's illness was reflected in her dream reports and artworks.

Integrating Hall & Van de Castle and Jungian Findings

Several quantitative findings align smoothly with symbolic Jungian themes. The surge in verbal aggression post-cancer resonates with dreams of asserting boundaries—psychologically interpreted as shadow confrontation and individuation, consistent with Jung's notion of confronting unacknowledged psychic content (Jung, 1975). The rise in anger and confusion reflects liminal states, which Jung (1966) associated with transitional struggles between unconscious impulses and conscious order.

Animal imagery was consistently above the HVDC female home norms across phases. Jung saw animals as carriers of instinctual and archetypal energies, often mediating between the conscious ego and deeper layers of psyche. In this study, some of the animals shifted from personal and

fragile (kittens) to collective and symbolic (bears, serpentine forms). Empirical literature also supports this: Hall and Van de Castle (1966) documented high aggression rates associated with animal dreams, and Van de Castle (1968) linked animal prevalence to aggression, misfortune, and conflict.

While aggression was not manifested in the author's real life, there was a period of increased anger as the process evolved. This convergence suggests animals embodied psychic turbulence as transformative potential. This may be representative of the role of anger in grieving (Fisher, 2023; Kontosm Miller, Colantonio, & Cott, 2014). The author does recall feeling angry about getting cancer after the initial shock and processing of this experience passed. That would be more towards the end of the cancer journey.

Integrating Dream Analyses with Artwork

As far as the author is concerned her art during this period mostly looks the same. That is, its all-abstract designs. She points out that she has shifted styles over the years but during the cancer period it was all about abstract, almost always symmetrical designs in a wide range of colors and shapes. In support of this first-person perspective, in 2023 the author gave a talk to IASD about her dreams and art and after a lengthy quantitative analysis decided that there was no relationship. But in a qualitative analysis, looking at art on canvas rather than on art journal pages, the author reported several striking examples of how art was clearly representative of the dream (Gackenbach, 2023).

In a fascinating essay about dreams and art, Forrer (2021) claims "all creativity is rooted in dreams, that in fact, life is governed by our dreams, then all works of art must have the same source and intent whether they are sacred or secular (p. 176)." The many creative efforts on display at each dream art show in the annual conferences of the International Association for the Study of Dreams certainly attests to his claims. In fact, in some of the shows there were as many dream inspired art works as there were other types of submissions.

When comparing dreams and artwork, fewer direct correspondences emerged. As noted, this cancer survivor's dreams revealed dynamic increases in aggression, animal imagery, and confusion, while her artwork remained relatively consistent in style—abstract, symmetrical, mandala-like. This assessment is in the eye of the artist (i.e., author). The most striking quantitative change was a reduction in artistic output per month during illness, paralleled by an increase in dream reports per month and dream measures of misfortune and failure.

Yet according to ChatGPT post-cancer artwork showed a strong return to order and ritual symmetry, echoing Jung's description of mandala symbolism as the psyche's attempt to restore balance (Jung, 1950/1968). With some exceptions, her artwork did not reproduce dream motifs directly (e.g., kittens, aliens, or shadow figures), but as Figure 5 shows it paralleled the transition from chaos (image from cancer period) toward integration (see Figures 2 and 3), supporting Jung's (1966) view of art as a vehicle for unconscious compensation. Insert Figure 5 about here. ChatGPT-5.1 (OpenAI, 2025) concluded that "as the ego becomes destabilized by illness, the unconscious provides symbolic material—often structured, centering, or mandala-like—to counterbalance distress and facilitate psychological reorganization."

Cancer in Dreams as Warning, Diagnosis, and Prognosis

This project was motivated by the question of whether dreams can warn of cancer and provide diagnostic or prognostic insight. Two precancer dreams which were spontaneously perceived by the author as clear warnings—a tsunami and a kitten's bleeding nipple—both occurring shortly before diagnosis. ChatGPT-5's review of the precancer batch supported the author's reaction to these two dreams and proposed four additional symbolic warnings. The author did not connect any of these dream images to cancer at the time.

Extending the inquiry to 96 dreams during treatment, ChatGPT-5 found more prognostic than diagnostic elements, with diagnostic dreams referencing breast pain and prognostic dreams alternating between risk (death, drowning, decline) and survival (rescue, containment, recovery). Positive prognostics clustered before surgeries and radiation, mirroring hopeful treatment phases. One striking diagnostic dream in September 2024 symbolically matched a later medical finding of a skull lesion. Overall, the analysis supports the continuity hypothesis (Schredl, 2003; Nielsen et al, 1913) while also suggesting meaningful synchronicities in how dreams paralleled the trajectory of illness and recovery.

Divergences and Explanations

Not all findings converged. For example, success acts decreased after diagnosis, whereas Jungian interpretation emphasized psychic work and individuation. This mismatch highlights limits of either system in capturing symbolic depth. Differences between dreams and artwork may also reflect the distinct functions of each medium: dreams, involuntary and nightly, may mirror immediate psychic struggles; artwork, requiring volition, may provide containment and stabilization when the unconscious is turbulent. But along these lines it would be expected that artwork would increase during cancer and not decrease, which appears to be the case.

Another explanation is pragmatic: illness reduces energy and capacity for art production, limiting its responsiveness to inner turbulence. Cancer related fatigue is one of the most prevalent and impairing symptoms during treatment, with broad effects on motivation, physical stamina, and initiation of activities, especially effortful, time-consuming ones like making artwork (Bower, 2014). Nonetheless, while dreams revealed upheaval, artwork retained continuity of form. This divergence can be seen as contradiction but complementarity—two channels of unconscious processing, one disclosing turbulence, the other sustaining ritual order.

5. Limitations

Beyond the obvious single case study limitation there are other potential problems with this inquiry. While there were many benefits to the use of ChatGPT there are also limitations. Specifically, it often takes many exchanges to get what the author is looking for. This can be in terms of a data analysis or something as simple as looking up a source and then citing it correctly. As noted earlier, working with ChatGPT is like working with an enthusiastic but limited student. One gets quick and elaborate responses but they can be wrong. Monitoring ChatGPT's responses is a con-

tinuous challenge to the user. Another limitation is the risk of prompting it to find what the author wants. This was evidenced when the author instructed ChatGPT to examine sets of dreams for prognostic imagery and used two dreams that the author thought were prognostic in the prompt. But it could be argued that in a qualitative approach to analysis the give and take from the source material to the analytic software is not only normal but an authentic way to examine material.

6. Conclusion

Taken together, HVDC dream content and Jungian qualitative approaches converged on themes of boundary-setting, aggression, and archetypal transformation. Artwork diverged in content but paralleled in timing, declining during illness and returning to order post-cancer. The findings suggest dreams and art serve complementary roles in unconscious processing: dreams may dramatize psychic upheaval, while artwork may embody symbolic containment and restoration. The former is completely unconscious, no instances of lucid dreaming, while the latter is experienced by the author as a knowing centered in the heart area by a felt sense of expansion. When that knowing is ignored the art process is unpleasant as is the product. The artist smiles and the heart feels expanded and warm when the product has followed the hearts knowing. In contrast, for the author she was more often than not confused upon awakening with a dream. Thus therapy, personal dreamwork, art making, and this research project have helped her integrate the phases of her journey through cancer. .

Notes

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Parts of this paper were presented at two IASD regional conferences, east and west coast, in the fall of 2023.

AI Statement

ChatGPT-5 was used for qualitative (Jungian and artistic) and quantitative (Hall and VandeCastle) analyses (OpenAI, 2025).

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