# A proposed methodology for online asynchronous therapeutic dreamwork

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*Summary*. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the acceptance of online "telemental" health as an alternative to site-based service delivery. Concurrently, therapists have adopted various asynchronous virtual mental health resources, such as bulletin boards/forums, delayed chat, and email, to supplement traditional practice. Asynchronous dream sharing, pioneered in the early 1980s, has since supported online conferences and ongoing dreamwork communities. However, the potential of *asynchronous therapeutic dreamwork* (ATD) still needs to be explored. This article reviews the evolution of asynchronous online dream sharing and proposes that combining it with "co-creative" dreamwork—particularly the FiveStar Method—may generate distinctive contributions while providing greater safeguards than content-focused interpretive methods, due to its phenomenologically descriptive, relational apparaoch and process-oriented five-step analysis. We provide an example of an asynchronous dreamwork exchange using the FiveStar Method.

*Keywords:* Co-creative dream theory, asynchronous dreamwork, counseling, psychotherapy, online telehealth, FiveStar Method

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted nearly every facet of our lives, with some changes producing surprisingly beneficial outcomes. Mental health providers urgently adopted technology to replace face-to-face services during the societal shutdown. Therapists embraced online asynchronous modalities such as email, delayed chat, and bulletin boards/forums, in addition to synchronous videoconferencing. Initially, only 2% of practitioners used asynchronous virtual mental health resources, but the adoption expanded broadly by 2023 (Lagera et al., 2023). These exchanges allowed practitioners to expedite intake processes, offer psychoeducation via online modules and e-tools, implement self-managed therapeutic activities (e.g., mindfulness, yoga), and handle psychotropic prescriptions with less delay. During the pandemic, about 80% of outpatient mental health facilities accepted *telemental health* (or *telehealth*) as an alternative to in-person services (Cantor et al., 2024).

## Evolution of Online Asynchronous Dreamwork

In contrast to the recent surge of online telehealth, the history of online dream sharing is much older. Anecdotally, online dreamwork began as early as the 1980s. Internet Relay Chat (IRC)—which required both users to be online typing simultaneously, much like a telephone—was one of the ear-liest platforms (Wilkerson, 1997). Unlike this synchronous method, regional Bulletin Board Services (BBS) enabled asynchronous networking, which were quickly adopted for regional dream sharing as well.

In 1991, Jack Campin set up a newsgroup for dreamers on USENET, a worldwide distributed discussion system, which can be considered the first true precursor to today's Internet forums with threaded discussions and time-stamped posts (Wilkerson, 2002). The online magazine *Electric Dreams* further pioneered the sharing of dreams online while developing well articulated dream-sharing ethics for public platforms. Rev. Jeremy Taylor's AOL-based "Dream Show" then popularized online dream sharing, featuring a 24-hour chatroom dedicated to peer-to-peer dream sharing. Other notable early adopters of online dreamwork were Jungian psychotherapists Robert Bosnak and Jill Foster, whose "cyberdreaming" trainings in the late 1990s used private, moderated forums for asynchronous dream sharing. Since 1997, Bosnak and Fisher (2014) "have been dedicated to building a dream community in cyberspace that centers around a common curiosity about dreams."

During the 1990s, John Herbert conducted some of the first research into asynchronous dream sharing (Wilkerson, 2002). He tested group dreamwork on the Internet, Delphi, Compuserve, the WELL, and AOL. Later, Herbert's dissertation (2000) compared online asynchronous group dreamwork to offline face-to-face dream groups. Using the Ullman method (Ullman, 1994, 1996; Ullman & Zimmerman, 1985), Herbert discovered that online dreamers reported "more meaningful responses than the offline face-to-face group" (Wilkerson, 2002), because the delays between exchanges allowed dreamers deeper reflection before responding.

*It is essential to the success of any online dream group that a member has ample time to reflect…before responding. As one dream group member commented, "I like being able to 'sit with' a response and ponder it at my own pace." (Herbert, 2000, p. 118)*

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Following Herbert's (2000) initial research, the International Association for the Study of Dreams (IASD) launched the Psiberdreaming Conference (PDC) in 2002. As the first-ever online dream conference (Campbell, 2020), the PDC ran for nineteen years, featuring asynchronous paper presentations, art shows, and moderated text-based dream sharing.

In addition, social media sites have popularized peer-to-peer dream sharing in the last decade. For example, the IASD hosted a Facebook group for dream sharing in 2007 after debating its advisability, safety, and effectiveness; this group was further made safer for users in 2020 so that only group members can access the group's content. Another popular forum is professional dreamworker Jason DeBord's Reddit group r/dreams, launched in 2008, accumulating over 430,000 subscribers. Robert Bosnak has continued to innovate online dreamwork through his TikTok channel, boasting over 130,000 followers. These platforms combine the values inherent to early internet culture (peer-to-peer communication and flexible possibilities for anonymity) with emergent multimedia technologies and easy-to-operate user interfaces, making online dream sharing a nearly frictionless activity that has entered the mainstream (Hurd, 2019).

## Ethical Safeguards Incorporated into Asynchronous Dreamwork

Practicing Ullman's dreamwork method, Herbert (2000) employed similar ethical safeguards in his online dream sharing. Meanwhile, the founders of *Electric Dreams* (Wilkerson, 1997, 2000) embraced strong ethical standards consistent with the Ethics and Confidentiality statement of the IASD:

*Ethical dreamwork helps the dreamer work with his/her dream images, feelings, and associations; dreams may have multiple layers of meaning. Systems of dreamwork that assign authority or knowledge of the ultimate meaning of the dream to someone other than the dreamer can be misleading, incorrect, and harmful. The dreamer is considered to be the final authority on the meaning of her/his dream (IASD, 2024).*

IASD's statement reflects the position embraced by the acknowledged founders of modern group dreamwork, Ullman (Ullman, 1994, 1996; Ullman & Zimmerman, 1985) and Taylor (1983, 2009). Ullman (1994) stated that, "Only he or she (the dreamer) is the final arbiter as to whether or not it [dreamwork] is done successfully." Taylor (2009) concurred in saying, "Only the dreamer can say with any certainty what meanings his or her dream may have. This certainty usually comes in the form of a wordless 'aha!' of recognition…and is the only reliable touchstone of dream work."

## The Criteria for Online Therapeutic Dreamwork

While online dream sharing has received considerable attention, justifying the use of asynchronous therapeutic dreamwork (ATD) entails satisfying three criteria:

**Criterion 1**: Establishing the efficacy of dreamwork in psychotherapy
**Criterion 2**: Establishing the efficacy and safety of online *synchronous* dreamwork
**Criterion 3**: Establishing the efficacy and safety of online *asynchronous* dreamwork

In regard to establishing the efficacy of dreamwork in psychotherapy (Criterion 1), a therapist can justify its use in contemporary practice on extensive empirical studies. Research shows that dream sharing in psychotherapy accelerates the therapeutic process (Provost, 1999), leads to more profound work in early sessions (Diemer et al., 1996), and produces superior client outcomes compared to self-esteem and insight work (Falk & Hill, 1995).

In a survey, Hill and colleagues (2008) found therapists claim to work with dreams with about half their clients, and within that subset, about half the time (Hill et al. 2008). The therapists were especially interested in incorporating dreams into practice when:

*…clients present recurrent dreams, are psychologically minded, are seeking growth, have troubling dreams or nightmares, are interested in learning about dreams, have recurrent dreams, are interested in working with dreams, have an adjustment disorder, have depression/anxiety, present a pleasant dream, have post-traumatic stress disorder, have a personality disorder, or have a substance abuse problem (p. 571).*

These themes resonate with a recent analysis, which found that "working with dreams in psychotherapy promotes session depth and insight into the dream" and also has well-cited benefits for nightmares as well as sleep disturbances and post-traumatic stress (Spangler & Sim, 2023, p. 383).

In establishing the efficacy and safety of online *synchronous* dreamwork (Criterion 2), there has been virtually no empirical research. Except for Herbert's online dissertation study (2002), outcome studies comparing dreamwork with standard therapy have relied on face-to-face sessions (Edwards et al., 2015; Hill & Goates, 2004; Malinowski & Pinto, 2021). Establishing the effectiveness of online dreamwork is critical, as telehealth introduces unique challenges to service delivery. These challenges have been addressed through more stringent security protocols by videoconferencing providers, additional privacy agreements between therapists and clients, and robust safeguards to offset reduced therapist oversight during crises.

Presumably, online synchronous dreamwork should present the same challenges as face-to-face meetings, but this hypothesis had not been tested until Sparrow, Shen, and Pintor (2025) investigated the efficacy and safety of synchronous videoconferencing for dreamwork. During the COVID-19 pandemic, they launched DreamStar Free Online Counseling using Zoom videoconferencing to host individual and group dreamwork alongside standard therapy. Graduate counseling students were initially trained in the FiveStar Method (Sparrow, 2013; Sparrow & Thurston, 2010). Some of them had been previously introduced to the method during their group counseling course. Once trained, some of the more experienced counselors provided training for incoming interns, thus creating a culture of continuous peer training and support, interspersed by group supervision with their professor.

Clients, who self-selected in individual and/or group dreamwork, were surveyed on two occasions. Eighteen months into the pandemic, clients receiving any type of dreamwork were compared with clients receiving standard therapy without dreamwork. The dreamwork recipients showed higher levels of "goals met." After adding more terminated clients to the survey at the three-year mark, dream-

work (combined modalities) continued to produce higher but statistically insignificant levels of "goals met."

The researchers also wanted to evaluate the potential interpersonal hazards of conducting dreamwork in online groups. In 2011, IASD permitted moderated peer-to-peer dream sharing on its official Facebook group page. However, after careful consideration, the IASD Executive Committee decided that IASD could not safely sponsor online dream groups through its Dream Study Group Program (Sparrow, 2018) due to its vulnerability without indemnification (Sparrow, 2025).

Against this backdrop of controversy, Sparrow et al. (2025) examined the incidence of especially meaningful and upsetting experiences among online dream group members. On average, each respondent attended ten sessions and reported an average of "four or more" especially meaningful events and one upsetting event. Narrative comments revealed that participants experienced a single unpleasant event on average. The events appeared to be low-intensity transitional events associated with group adjustment and development (Corey et al., 2017).

Sparrow et al. (2025) represented only a preliminary retrospective foray into online synchronous dreamwork research (Criterion 2). However, it provided some assurance that online therapeutic dreamwork can be considered at least as effective as online standard therapy while presenting only normal developmental hurdles in group development.

## Combining Therapy with Asynchronous Dreamwork

As far as we can tell, few, if any, therapists currently offer asynchronous therapeutic dreamwork (ATD). However, given the popularity of the asynchronous dream exchanges on open forums and the increasing availability of telehealth counseling, it makes sense that dreamwork-trained therapists may eventually combine them.

Herbert's (2000) early asynchronous work focused on using the Ullman approach (Ullman, 1994, 1996; Ullman & Zimmerman, 1985), in which dream group members provide their associations to the metaphors of the dream after listening to it. After observing Herbert's work, Wilkerson (2002) concluded with an implicit assumption—that the central focus in the dreamwork is to interpret the dream metaphors.

## The Hazards of Interpretation

Indeed, traditional dream analysis involves searching for the dream's "interpretation" by applying a theory that guides a therapist or dreamworker in unmasking the dream's presumed meanings (Kramer, 2006). In Western culture, dream interpretation has deep roots in classical hermeneutics, which involves interpreting created works, including dreams, that were deemed imitative of waking life (Sontag, 1966). Nevertheless, one might ask, *should* dreams be approached hermeneutically, as if they contain unrevealed meaning? Sontag's treatise *Against Interpretation* argues to the contrary, saying that Western culture rests upon an unexamined bias that treats art and dreams as veiled *content* to be unmasked (Sontag, 1966):

*The fact is, all Western consciousness of and reflection upon art, have remained within the confines staked out by the Greek theory of art as mimesis or representation ... it is still assumed that a work of art [or dreams] is its*

*content. Or, as it's usually put today, that a work of art by definition says something. (p. 4)*

## Ethics Concerns Arise in Response to Interpretation's Threats

Dream interpretation, with its emphasis on revealing veiled meaning, naturally invites subjective assessments that may impose assessment in conflict with the dreamer's opinions. To address this issue, Ullman (Ullman, 1978; 1994; 1996; Ullman & Zimmerman, 1985) suggested prefacing interpretive comments with *"If this were my dream…"* to underscore the subjective nature of interpretion. Taylor (2009) endorsed a stronger statement—*"In my version of the dream…"*—believing that dream workers inevitably internalize and personalize the original dream, making dream work highly subjective. While Herbert (2000) originally introduced Ullman's version, he revised it, too, believing that it could imply "If I were you, this is what you should do." Herbert thus preferred, *"In my dream,"* conveying an even greater internalization/appropriation of the original dream (Wilkerson, 2002, para. 15). Regardless of the variation preferred, these qualifying statements mitigate the invasive impact of interpretive projections and thus preserve the dreamer's ultimate authority over the dream's meanings.

To further protect the dreamer from invasive interpretations, the Ullman method discourages direct exchanges between the dream group and the dreamer during a stage when group members are otherwise free to speculate on the dream's meaning. By keeping the dreamer insulated from the dream group's explorations and preventing eye contact, Ullman supported the dreamer in processing the group's suggestions safely. Similarly, Herbert discovered that during online asynchronous dream sharing, the delays between the dream group's comments and the dreamer's responses supported the dreamer's personal processing of the group's contributions (Wilkerson, 2002).

## Risks and Benefits from ATD

Does asynchronous dreamwork rely inevitably on dream interpretation? 12th century Rabbi Maimonides once said that a dream is like an unopened letter, implying that some process of revealing the dream's "message" is necessary. The psychoanalytic approach to dreams reflects this bias toward dreams. Whether one embraces Freud's (1965) or Jung's (1966) view of the nature of dream content, both theorists approached dreams as, to some extent, inscrutable. They sought to interpret the dream's meaning, albeit from different theoretical foundations. Freud believed that the dream creation process ("the dream work") distorted and disguised the dream's true purpose to circumvent the dream ego's censor, requiring the analyst's assistance in discerning its covert impulses. In contrast, Jung believed that dreams expressed themselves openly, albeit in symbolic language that required translation. Thus, for different reasons both theorists believed that dream analysis required accurate theoretical knowledge to interpret a dream's veiled meanings.

Freud and Jung would probably have agreed that dreams can be interpreted, at least in part, without the dreamer. Freud would think so because he postulated that dreams were "strictly determined" (Freud, 1965; Kramer, 2006) by an unconscious process beyond the dreamer's experience

that concealed its subversive intent from the dream ego. Jung, while disagreeing that dreams were disguised, believed they could be difficult to understand due to universal or archetypal features unfamiliar to the dreamer. He believed that dreamers were necessary to amplify or illuminate the personal aspects of the dream, but dreamers would find the universal features inexplicable without knowledge of universal symbology. Jung (1966) acknowledged that the dream image can only be understood through the "reciprocal" relationship between the universal dimension of the dream and the ego's "momentary condition," and thus required the dreamer's input for a complete understanding of the dream's meaning.

> This constellation [dream image] is the result of the spontaneous activity of the unconscious on one hand and of momentary conscious situation on the other. The interpretation of its meaning, therefore, can start neither from the conscious alone nor from the unconscious alone, but only from their reciprocal relationship. (p. 386)

Despite emphasizing the dreamer's personal associations into dream analysis, in practice Jung seemed content to interpret dreams without the dreamer's participation (Delaney, 1993). Thus, both Freud (1965) and Jung (1966) would very likely find ATD acceptable, even though Jung believed the dreamer was ultimately necessary to provide the uniquely personal dimensions of the dream.

Kramer (2006) concurs with Freud (1965) that dreams are "strictly determined," and thus believes that significant information can be extracted without the dreamer's input from the *structure* of the dream. Like a family therapist who focuses on visible interactions between family members rather than unrevealed feelings and motives, Kramer demonstrated that a wealth of information could be gathered by studying the patterns evident in the manifest dream (2006). Kramer thus serves as a bridge between traditional interpretive theories and a new orientation that shifts the focus away from content and toward the patterns fully evident in the dream report. Hence Kramer's work supports the capacity of a therapist to conduct ADT without importing expert knowledge or invasive projections. Hill and Knox (2010) differentiate between dream interpretation and dream work:

> Although the more commonly used term in the literature is "dream interpretation," we use the term "dream work." Dream interpretation implies that therapists are the active agents in interpreting the client's dream. In contrast, dream work simply implies that dreams are a focus of attention during psychotherapy sessions, with both therapist and client actively engaged in exploring the dream. (p. 292.

While the terminology may differ, Hill and Knox imply that without the dreamer's participation, the dream worker assumes the role of interpreter, thus it is not clear how "dream work" avoids the potentially invasive aspects of interpretation. The underlying assumptions concerning the extraction of the dream's meaning appear to remain the same as traditional hermeneutical extraction.

Given these limitations, it is reasonable to wonder, at the other extreme, if individuals who interpret their own dreams would not fall into these traps, such as the potential for being led astray from invasive projections. In answer to this, dream and religion scholar Kelly Bulkeley (2001) suggests that the greatest challenge in dream interpretation is not the social complexities that arise between interpreter and dreamers, but the danger of self-deception. Morewedge and Norton (2009) also found in a collection of surveys that individuals are more likely to find meaning in their own dreams if the dream reinforces something they already believe. Further, individuals may be more motivated to even bother to interpret their own dreams when their current worldview, behavior, and personal mythology is not threatened by new information or fresh perspective. We believe, then, that the invitation for interpersonal exchange, even though beset with hermeneutic and psychodynamic dangers, can provide more insight and effect more change than leaving individuals to their own devices. As Jeremy Taylor says, we are uniquely blind to our dreams (1983). Yet the weighted focus on the meaning of dream content is not the only way to reveal significance and affect change for dreamers, bringing us to the benefits of co-creative dream theory.

## The Co-Creative Paradigm

*Co-creative dream theory* (CDT) offers a theoretical perspective recentered on the construction of the dream rather than the meaning of its content. Shifting the focus of analysis away from content interpretation toward a phenomenological-descriptive, relational analysis of the dream's structure and process enables dream worker and dreamer to view the dream through a different lens or paradigm; as Kuhn (1962) suggests, "when a paradigm changes, the world changes with it." This descriptive and relational focus is necessarily philosophical and existential. Craig and Walsh (1993) suggest:

> Paraphrasing the founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, we might say that, with respect to dreams, we are invited to look at dreams afresh to learn to see what stands before our eyes, to ask ourselves what is the meaning of the dream itself, as the very specific concrete human experience it is. Phenomenology therefore asks, why not let the dream be just what it is? Why not let it speak for itself? (pp. 104-105)

Further, this approach centers on the feelings and imagery as they directly relate to human difficulties and possibilities rather than dismissing them to preserve the dreamer's sleep (Freud, 1965) or symbolizing something less than obvious (Jung, 1966).

The dream's relationship to unfolding time is also challenged when considered as a lived moment in time. Globus (1987) argues for granting to dreaming its own lifeworld (i.e. *Lebenswelt*), a term coined by Husserl (1962). A lifeworld for a single subject consists of the belief structures that underlie the natural attitude of everyday life which enter awareness as the experience of meaning. By granting a lifeworld to dreaming, dream experiences are seen to actually happen in the moment, not merely as narrative reconstructions comprised of erratic imagery. Shifting the tense of the dream into the present, we are confronted with the dream as a potentially unfolding experience. This experience is continuously evaluated by the dreamer as it occurs; it is *a priori* and demonstrably relational. Ironically, this relational perspective actually harkens back to one of Freud's (1965) ideas that the conscious mind evaluates and then must cover up disturbing revelations that emerge from the unconscious mind, but places the two influences on dreaming experience on a more even playing field. The dream's

unfoldment is less of a cover-up and more of a real-time dance, or a dialectical process in motion.

Aspects of the classic Husserlian phenomenological model, especially the spontaneous aspects of dream life as possibility and relationality, are echoed in the contemporary theory of dreaming as simulation (Revonsuo et al., 2015). Windt (2021) explains:

> Dreams are here-and-now experiences; they have the structure of a self-in-a-world. Subjectively, we feel present in our dreams, much as we do in waking life. We feel that we can perceive objects, interact with other people, and move through the dream world. But unlike waking perception, which has a tight external stimulus correlation, the people and objects we seem to perceive in dreams typically diverge from our actual surroundings. Like all mental simulations, dreams are not in the business of representing how things are, but how they could be. And unlike immersive virtual reality, this experience comes about spontaneously rather than through external stimulation and technological means. (p. 6)

A phenomenological-descriptive and relational perspective of dreams assumes that dreaming experiences reflect past, present, and future possibilities. Instead of viewing the dream as a fixed narrative amenable to interpretation, the dreamer can view the dream as coalescing in real-time through the interaction between the dreamer and emergent dream content (Rossi, 1972; Sparrow, 2013, 2014, 2020, 2021; Sparrow and Thurston, 2010, 2022; Hurd, 2020). Thus, CDT views the dream as a relational event that can be analyzed as a *reciprocal exchange* depicted by its self-evident features, much like a family therapist evaluates *how* members interact in real-time rather than *what* they say (Nichols & Davis, 2016).

In shifting the focus of analysis from the veiled meanings of dream content toward the relationship between the dreamer and the dream, we lay the groundwork for working asynchronously and descriptively with the dream (Criterion 3). While the client/dreamer can add to the analysis through reflection and subsequent dialogue with the therapist, much can be done without the dreamer present. According to co-creative dream theory (CDT), the manifest dream contains the information deemed most valuable.

Co-creative theory does not dispute the added value in analyzing the client's associations with metaphoric content, even if the visual content is obscure. However, it shifts the emphasis to the surface dynamics between the dreamer and the emergent dream. Instead of treating the dream as a predetermined "given," it views the dream as a *contingent* outcome based on the dreamer's real-time reactions to the dream imagery and the commensurate impact on the imagery.

Interpreting an image in isolation freezes the action, permitting the extraction of meaning and reducing a moving process into a static product. While promoting insight, this extraction may overlook the interactive process that, if modified, may shape entirely different outcomes. By embracing the co-creative paradigm, one can see, perhaps for the first time (Kuhn, 1962), the dream not only as structured as Kramer (2006) asserts but also as an ongoing relational process in which the dreamer participates in an indeterminate exchange, just as in any waking encounter.

From this perspective, instead of attempting to unmask the dream's static message, one can ask what is happening in this dream? What is the dreamer doing in response to what is happening? How do the dreamer's responses impact the other dream characters and the dream's outcome? How is the dream content, in turn, responding to the dreamer? All these questions can be addressed non-theoretically and non-invasively by analyzing the self-evident feelings, actions, and relational dynamics depicted by the manifest dream. This analysis encourages the dreamer to identify parallel relational dynamics between the dream and waking scenarios.

## Discerning a Developmental Process Through Asynchronous Therapeutic Dreamwork

Psychologist Ernest Rossi (1972) was the first to use co-creative dreamwork to describe how the dream ego develops through a relational process toward *integration*, a term from psychosynthesis that Gerard originally defined as "the integration and harmonious expression of the totality of our human nature—physical, emotional, mental and spiritual" (p.161). CDT permits an asynchronous analysis of the dreamer's progressive and regressive actions (Sparrow, 2014) without inferring hidden meanings or esoteric knowledge. Similarly, Kramer (2006) identified developmental patterns in the manifest dream: the "progressive-sequential" and the "repetitive-traumatic" dream patterns. According to Psychologist Michael Schredl (2008, p. 284), "The first pattern reflects some kind of progression reflecting a successful coping with the problem…The second pattern repeats one topic without introducing successful coping strategies." A developmental framework becomes especially useful in psychotherapy, where the therapist endeavors to discover and support emerging client competencies while identifying attitudes and actions that may impede progress.

Ultimately, the dreamwork may come to a point when it is unclear whether a dreamer's action—such as violence against an assailant or intimacy with a coworker—represents a developmental or a regressive event. Thus, asynchronous therapeutic dreamwork must depend on the dreamer to conduct self-assessments of ambiguous behaviors, should any become evident. With this caveat in mind, one can see how the three criteria required to justify asynchronous therapeutic dreamwork (ATD) are satisfied, at least theoretically by adopting a dreamwork method based on CDT.

## Demonstration of Asynchronous Co-Creative Dreamwork Applying the FiveStart Metod

We have previously articulated a systematic dreamwork method based on co-creative dream theory, called the Five-Star Method (Sparrow, 2013, 2014, 2021; Sparrow and Thurston, 2010, 2022). To demonstrate its asynchronous adaptation, team member Kim Phetteplace (K. P.) conducted an asynchronous dreamwork exchange with Kimberly McKee (K. M.) from the DreamStar Community (https://dreamstar.community). The following email exchanges demonstrate how the FSM can produce helpful feedback without real-time interaction, as it focuses on self-evident features of the dream narrative without inferring veiled meanings.

### A Dream Emailed from K. M. to K. P.

*I'm in a house located in a park or forest. I become aware of bears lurking outside. Concerned, I check all of the*

*doors to make sure they are shut. I see a bear sniffing around one of the doors, so I warn the others in the house. They need to keep the doors closed. But somehow a bear has gotten in and I panic.*

*I try to run, but the bear grabs me from behind. At first, I try to fight, scream, yell, trying to get away. I can tell it's gnawing on my spine. So I try being passive, play dead, but it has ahold of me. So I reach back with my right arm. I'm scared that it will take my arm o , but I go ahead and grab its neck and squeeze the jugular as hard as I can. I don't let go until it lets me go. I can feel that I'm wounded. I go through the house complaining that some careless person opened the door (I actually point to the door). A mother approaches me with a suggestion to help me. She tells me there is a man who is an expert and he can look at my back. She tells me that he helped her with her sexual abuse trauma. Because I trust her, I am willing to have the man take a look. It feels really awkward though. I'm not sure what to do, should I sit down or stand up? I don't say anything to the expert, though. He studies my back with a magnifying glass, humming and commenting. Then I realize that he is only interested in learning about the bear, that he can't really help me so I walk away. I'm not quite disappointed, more like puzzled about the situation. I have the feeling of, "Now what do I do?"*

*Looking outside, I notice that it's raining and I also notice there are several bears around. I really want to leave though. It's time, too. But I'm also too frightened to leave. (K.M. 2/21/2025)*

## Asynchronous Dreamwork Demonstration by Kim P.

### Step 1: Sharing the Dream and Feelings

Step One of the FSM encourages the dreamer to share the dream with the dream worker (K. P., in this case) in the first-person, present tense, as was advocated by Perls (1969).

In co-creative dreamwork, sharing the dream in the present tense reinvokes its emotional intensity, which if tolerated facilitates and deepens the therapeutic work. If a client appears unprepared for the intensity of sharing the dream in the first present tense, we encourage them to recount the experience in the *first person past tense*, *third person present tense*, or *third person past tense*. If these distancing strategies prove inadequate, we advise the therapist to desist in applying the FSM. If the client can tolerate the sharing of the dream, listening to the dream as if is one's own permits the dream worker/dream group members to internalize the dream as their own experience, creating a shared "canvas" or emotional space between the dreamer and the dream worker. This rapport establishes a sense of participation in the original dream and thus increases the likelihood that the dream worker(s) will provide comments aligned with the dreamer's feelings and needs.

*K.P.: The first feelings that are evoked are alarm and concern (for myself and others), which then intensifies into horror and survival activation as the bear enters and attacks. Then I experience a reaching within to connect with my inner resources and resilience (as you strategically go passive, then assertively grab hold of the bear's jugular). This shifts to pain and upset as you/I recognize your wound and call for accountability. I feel some relief*

*and comfort with the mother's helpful presence and suggestion, as well as the sense of awkwardness of how to proceed with the "expert." This shifts to feelings of pointlessness as I realize the "expert" is only interested in the bear and a bit of confusion as you/I note, "Now what do I do?". As the dream ends, I have a sense of longing for release and forward momentum, and yet also the feeling of inner constriction and holding with my/your dual sense of knowing that it's time to go, yet feeling frightened and timid.*

During Step One, the dreamer and dream worker(s) express their emotional responses to the dream sharing via email—different from the procedure in face-to-face sessions. This sharing usually reveals considerable similarities, but it can also reveal differences that may stimulate insight on the dreamer's part concerning what might have been missing in her experiencing of the actual dream.

### Step 2: Process Narrative (content-free summary of the dream)

Step Two of the FSM offers a content-free process narrative (PN) of the background story line or theme (Sparrow & Thurston, 2022), remaining "agnostic" about specific content associations or waking life parallels. However, dreamers often spontaneously provide associations previously unknown to the dreamer worker upon hearing the PN for the first time.

*K.P.'s version of the PN: Someone becomes aware of something threatening and warns others, but is nonetheless assaulted and must be resourceful and persistently assertive. Now aware of the painful consequences to oneself, someone offers assistance that at first seems trustworthy, but with further awareness, the dreamer recognizes that it's not helpful. Considering how to proceed, someone knows what to do next, but feels constricted to do so.*

### Step 3: Dreamer Responses & Imagery Change Analysis

Step Three of the FSM analyzes the dreamer's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to the emergent content and their impact on the imagery. This step represents the core premise of the co-creative paradigm: dreamers actively interact with the dream content and make choices, whether they realize it or not. By shifting away from interpreting the meaning of content toward examining the dreamer's beliefs, assumptions, and actions, the dreamwork effectively pinpoints the existence of dream ego agency or the lack thereof. This step also reveals chronic responses, or emergent competencies (Sparrow, 2014) that can be highlighted for the dreamer's benefit. As a therapeutic intervention, Step Three focuses on what the dreamer is doing, can do, and wants to do differently, thus having a future orientation.

K.P.'s application of Step 3:

*You have considerable awareness which unfolds throughout the dream, including your initial awareness of the bears, the need for the doors to be secured, awareness of wounding, that the "expert" is actually interested in the bears, and that it is time to "leave," as well as other subtle points of awareness throughout. You have a series of responses dealing with the bear attack, from panic to passivity to assertiveness; your assertiveness included not only your final effective assertive "handling" of the bear but also using your voice in a call for accountability*

*following the bear attack. You accept help and are initially compliant and cooperative, but "walk away" when you discover the "expert's" true intent and lack of helpfulness. You pause to consider and connect with you own "knowing," yet are inwardly constrained.*

*It seems to me that much of these responses are quite adaptive, and I'm curious which are typical for you and which might be new developments. There seems to be a spectrum of effectiveness represented, particularly in the shifts that occur while dealing with the bear attack. While this entire series of unfolding responses is worthy of consideration, I'm particularly drawn to your final dreamer response of knowing it's time to go yet being frightened and timid. Is this typical for you, and how might you prefer to respond given another opportunity? Regarding imagery changes, I notice, in particular, that when you use your voice and call for accountability, a nurturing figure appears offering help and a suggestion.*

### Step 4: Imagery Analysis

Step Four of the FSM involves the dreamer and dreamer worker(s) providing their respective associations to the dream metaphors. In asynchronous dreamwork, this activity becomes especially challenging because the dream worker provides their associations to the dream content initially in the absence of the dreamer. These contributions provide potential insight but carry the risk of imposing subjective projections that might be jarring to the dreamer.

The potential for harm has been a perennial concern for contemporary dream workers, leading to two different perspectives. Ullman (Ullman, 1994, 1996; Ullman & Zimmerman, 1985) prioritized protecting the dreamer from invasive projections, separating the dreamer from the group process as a safeguard. He also required the group members to use qualifying language to preserve the dreamer's autonomy. While Taylor advocated similarly for qualifying language, he believed projection was unavoidable since we can only work on the dream that has been subjective constructed within us (2009). Indeed, Taylor believed that the dream worker's projections provide a rich substrate of meaning that can only be accessed by embracing a reasonable level of interpersonal risk.

Since co-creative dreamwork focuses principally on self-evident, relational aspects of the dream, the risk of imposing invasive projections is minimized but not entirely eliminated. In respect for the dreamer's autonomy, any interpretive comments are qualified by using the language recommended by Ullman, Taylor and Herbert.

K.P.'s application of Step 4:

*Several images in this dream seem ripe for consideration. While I will offer my initial thoughts, please do take time to consider your association with each of these and with any other images that are evocative for you. In addition to your associations, perhaps consider giving a voice to any of these. What would they say to you if they could speak?*

*Of course, the bears—particularly the one that attacks you—are poignant and significant to this dream. "If this were my dream," the bears seem charged with primitive, aggressive and even vicious energies, and completely inconsiderate of boundaries. The doors, in turn, seem to me to suggest boundaries that can be opened or closed. I'm noting the apparent contrast in presence and ener-*

*gies between the nurturing, helpful mother and the analytical, not-actually-helpful "expert," and I'm curious what each of these bring up or evoke for you. I'm also very intrigued by the rain outside when you pause to consider your next move. For me rain is generally soothing and cleansing, but can also elicit a sense of sadness, as in tears from heaven or a "rainy day."*

The features of K. P.'s comments in Step Four that are essentially "co-creative" are the suggestions she made for K. M. to give voice to the dream images (i.e., use Gestalt) to discover what they might say to the dreamer. This activity allows the dreamer to imagine the impact of alternative responses on the dream imagery and development. While Gestalt, as practiced by Perls (1969, 1973), is a relational methodology congruent with co-creative theory, it may be limited by its here-and-now re-enactment to activate "organismic self-regulation" instead of promoting further discussion and analysis. In Sparrow's experience as a therapist, tracking the relationship as it arises and unfolds through the dream can not only offer rich immediate exchanges but may also provide cognitive insights into the choices that the dream ego made, did not make, and may need to make in future encounters of a similar nature.

### Step 5: Application

Step Five of the FSM shifts to an exploration of how the dreamer can apply the dreamwork, particularly in devising a plan for responding to future dreams and waking scenarios that parallel the dream exchanges. K. P. advocates for "dream reliving," an intervention initially developed as a lucid dream induction strategy (Sparrow, 1982), which has become a central component in the final step of the FSM. The use of dream reliving resembles various dream rescripting strategies developed in recent years for resolving trauma-related nightmares.

K.P.'s application of Step 5:

*And now we move to the final step in which we consider what you will bring into and apply in your waking life from your work with this dream. This dream seems to emphasize your capacity toward awareness, not only in what you recognize in your situation, but also as you consider your actions. However, it seems to end with a challenging "invitation" to further action. If this were my dream, I might take some time to fully appreciate my own capacity toward awareness and my capacity to deal with challenges. Connected to this inner resourcefulness, I might then relive the dream in reverie equipped for a more adaptive response as the dream concludes. I suggest you give this a try.*

Asynchronous Dreamwork Response by Kimberly M.

*Thank you for sharing the work on this dream. In general, I feel that it has greatly benefitted me and I don't see any corrections or clarifications that need to be made. In my response, I would like to provide some context and background.*

*In Step 3 you ask if my response at the end of the dream is typical and would have I preferred to respond differently. In the dream, I have ambivalence about leaving, however, the stronger feeling was the urge to leave. So why was it that I wouldn't or couldn't? In waking life, I*

*typically go with my urges and I am not risk averse at all. I believe I couldn't leave because of my response to the "expert" (more on this later).*

*In Step 4, you accurately compare the doors to boundaries. As you are aware, I practice energy and chakra balancing and healing (self only, not as practitioner). I see the greater context of this dream to be related to energy/vibration.*

*Here is some waking life context and background:*

*A few days prior to this dream, I decided that it was time to break a negative social pattern. I engaged in a practice to access Akashic record. In my mind, I thought, "This is enough, I am done with this and it is time to end this cycle." I gained much insight and awareness and immediately the work situation that triggered this was effortlessly resolved and is no longer of concern for me. This experience made me curious though, and I began to consider past life regression. I have believed for years that past life trauma included being stabbed in the back, particularly since I have been stabbed (literally) in the back in this life and was treated for some time for PTSD.*

*The mother appears after I fight off the bear and I completely trust her, as indeed, I trust my intuition in waking life. Of course I will let the expert help me! However, my feelings of awkwardness distract me, and I interpret his interest as unhelpful and I feel analyzed. This dream pointed to something I needed to become aware of in waking life in addition to a healing that I needed. I have experienced chronic pain in my upper back on and off my adult life, and it became more acute in the past six months.*

*When I awoke from the dream, I instantly realized that my back pain was gone. It has not returned and since then I belief my psychic perception has grown.*

*For Step 5, when I relived the dream in reverie, I asked myself, "Why didn't I leave?" It was so perplexing! The realization came that it was because of my response to the "expert." I asked, what is another way to perceive that situation? What opportunity did I miss? I replayed that scene in the role of an observer to see if it would give me a new perspective. Instead of scrutiny and analysis, I saw "intellectual curiosity." I believe I have always been intellectually curious, particularly with nature and spirituality, since I was a child exploring my world. My initial thought, "He isn't interested in me, but only the bear," showed bias and distrust. If I had tried to engage with him instead of walking away, I believe I would have left the house. I think that it is fine that I stayed in the house, however, something was definitely calling to me out there.*

*This was confirmed in another dream sequence a couple of nights later in which a marriage took place, and I realized that intuition and thought (analysis, etc.) are not mutually exclusive and I felt a wholeness. I also set the intention to engage with every dream character, so I had quite some experiences in subsequent dreams.*

*In waking life, I am much more conscious and tuned to my thoughts. I also am staying "intellectually curious." I believe this has led to some new non-physical experiences and more importantly, new ways of relating to people, events, and the natural world.*

### Kim P.'s Second Response to Kim M.

*It is very heartening, Kimberly, to hear that the FSM exchange has been beneficial for you. Your commitment to your own understanding, waking life applications and personal growth is evident from your detailed and thoughtful reply to my input. The context you've provided does appear to bring forward the deeper layers of what is unfolding for you, which is precisely what we hope for with dedicated dreamwork. I believe your waking life attitude of "intellectual curiosity" is also serving you well, and I encourage you to continue in the cultivation of your own personal agency through co-creative dreamwork and its waking life applications.*

### Discussion

Ultimately, asynchronous dreamwork lacks the immediacy and reciprocity of face-to-face dream exploration. The therapist in real time can attend to nonverbal reactions and provide timely feedback and prompts indispensable to a deepening process. Further, the therapist can convey a sense of reassurance and safety for a client recalling a nightmare or a traumatic waking memory activated by the dreamwork. Nonetheless, the asynchronous exchange between K. P. and K. M. reveals how focusing on the dreamer's subjectivity and relational dynamics can provide reflective and non-interpretive feedback using the FSM. This analysis, while probing and evocative, stops short of attempting to "unmask" the hidden meaning of the dream content. By deprioritizing the extraction of meaning and the reduction of dream images to waking equivalences, the approach permits the dreamer/client to reflect privately and gain insight without exposing sensitive content or evaluating the interpretive comments.

Kramer (2006) says that dream interpretation involves applying some theory, yet the FSM—as an expression of co-creative dreamwork—avoids theorizing about content. Instead, it views the dream's construction in real time, describing what occurs in the dream unfolds. FSM also invites the dreamer to speculate on the impact of alternative responses on future dreams and parallel waking scenarios. Meaning is forged by examining relational dynamics on full display and engaging the dreamer in discriminating between functional and dysfunctional responses to the dream content, and in ascertaining whether a developmental process is underway.

Relevant to the question of whether asynchronous therapeutic dreamwork can be justified, co-creative dream theory (CDT) permits a less subjective analysis of the dream by focusing predominantly on phenomenological-descriptive dream dynamics. By analyzing the dream's largely self-evident features without imposing a theory of dream content, CDT can facilitate asynchronous therapeutic dreamwork (ATD) with less risk of undermining client autonomy. No doubt that future studies can tease out further considerations of safety for asynchronous dreamwork with particularly sensitive clients, such as, for example, working with Post Traumatic Stress nightmares. Additionally, CDT is fully congruent with many current functional theories of dreaming that value relational, spontaneous aspects of dream life and their parallels to waking life concerns, including continuity theory (Domhoff, 1996, 2017), dreaming as social

simulation (Revonsuo et al., 2015), and dreaming as play (Bulkeley, 1993, 2019).

In summary, we believe that one can justify using asynchronous therapeutic dreamwork based on (1) Herbert's (2000) asynchronous dreamwork and (2) recent indications that synchronous online therapeutic dreamwork could result in effective and safe outcomes (Sparrow et al., 2025). Thus, adopting asynchronous therapeutic dreamwork (ATD) seems justifiable when adhering to the ethical standards developed by Ullman, Herbert, and Taylor—and further enshrined in the IASD's Ethics and Confidentiality Statement (2024). Finally, by viewing the dream through the co-creative paradigm—as an interactive, relational process—the dream worker(s) can remain focused on what is fully evident in the dream rather than presumed veiled meanings. Thus, the dream worker can make synchronous or asynchronous contributions alike without interpretive projections that might jeopardize the therapeutic relationship.

In the absence of empirical research, one cannot determine if the FSM offers a superior approach to ATD than content focused methods (Freud, 1965; Jung, 1966; Kramer, 2006), re-enactment strategies (Perls, 1969; 1973), or embodied dreamwork approaches (Bosnak, 2007; Ellis, 2016; 2019). Actually, the FSM incorporates features of these esteemed methodologies in a multidimensional approach. In conclusion, our case sample illustrates how the FSM remains true to the noninvasive ideal of modern dream work and thus may, in time, become a valuable tool in asynchronous psychotherapeutic exchanges. As one professional participant in a recent IASD conference said, "I am excited about the theoretical implications of the FiveStar method. The dream is not a fixed text but a relationship in the making."

## Acknowledgements

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