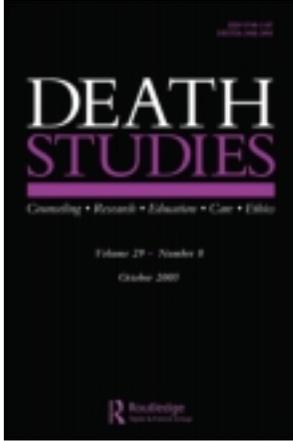


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The Virtual Dream: Rewriting Stories of Loss and Grief

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THE VIRTUAL DREAM: REWRITING STORIES OF LOSS AND GRIEF

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In this article, the authors introduce the virtual dream, a technique that entails writing a brief, spontaneous dreamlike story on themes of loss, using a flexible set of assigned elements of setting and characterization to scaffold the writing. After providing several examples of virtual dreams written by workshop participants, the authors analyze the frequency of important narrative features in a diverse sample of 143 stories to demonstrate the feasibility and reliability of coding such accounts for clinical or research purposes. Finally, we conclude with some remarks on the therapeutic use of the virtual dream, whether as a prompt for personal reflection on themes of loss, as an exercise in the context of grief workshops or support groups, or as a homework assignment in grief counseling or therapy.

The symbols of the process of individuation that appear in dreams are images of an archetypal nature, which depict the centralizing process or the production of a new centre of personality . . . I call this center the “self,” which should be understood as the totality of the psyche. The self is not only the centre, but also the whole circumference [that] embraces both conscious and unconscious; it is the centre of this totality, just as the ego is the centre of consciousness.

—C. G. Jung (1971, p. 324)

Like other social animals, human beings characteristically develop intense attachment bonds and, with them, a propensity to grieve

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when those bonds are sundered by long separation or death (Bowlby, 1980). But unlike other social animals, human beings live in a richly symbolic world as well as a literal one and, hence, register loss at the level of meaning as well as in terms of physical separation (Neimeyer, 2001; Neimeyer, Prigerson, & Davies, 2002). It is therefore not surprising that contemporary bereavement theory and therapy emphasize meaning reconstruction in the wake of loss (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Klass, 1999; Neimeyer & Sands, 2011) in addition to reorganizing attachment ties to the deceased and engaging grief at biological, behavioral, cognitive, and social levels (Stroebe, Hansson, Schut, & Stroebe, 2007).

Our goal in this article is to make a practical contribution to work in meaning-making in broadly therapeutic contexts concerned with loss, whether these take the form of professional grief therapy, less formal bereavement support, or reflective processing of one's own loss, perhaps in the form of a personal journal. The method we will describe, illustrate, and analyze represents a special adaptation of narrative methods, which offer a creative trove of possibilities for helping grieving people make sense of their experience, identify key themes in their life stories that have been disrupted, and find ways to reestablish a sense of continuity while embracing necessary change. We will first offer a brief theoretical backdrop for this technique, termed the *virtual dream*; will then describe its practical procedures; and next will offer some preliminary descriptive data regarding the narrative structures, plots, and themes it typically evokes. Finally, we will conclude with some simple extensions of this basic method that we hope will suggest its usefulness in a variety of applied contexts and that will encourage further research and application to enhance its relevance to people struggling with a broad range of life transitions, with a central emphasis on the loss of a loved one through death.

Loss and Reconstruction: The Narrative Turn

Building on a long tradition in existential philosophy and humanistic psychology, contemporary constructivism views human beings as inveterate meaning-makers, actively shaping and structuring their experience to give it personal and social significance (Kelly, 1955/1991; Neimeyer, 2009). Borrowing and adapting the tropes and themes of their culture, individuals assimilate the

twists and turns of their personal biography into a story that is uniquely their own. The result is a *self-narrative*, defined as “an overarching cognitive-affective-behavioral structure that organizes the ‘micro-narratives’ of everyday life into a ‘macro-narrative’ that consolidates our self-understanding, establishes our characteristic range of emotions and goals, and guides our performance on the stage of the social world” (Neimeyer, 2004, pp. 53–54). However, troubling or traumatic life events can challenge the integrity of the self-narrative, disrupting its basic life assumptions and, with this, the survivor’s ability to make sense of critical life events or to maintain a sense of coherence in his or her identity over time (Neimeyer, 2004, 2006), generating in turn a wide range of negative emotions (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006).

A good deal of recent research on bereavement accords with this view. For example, evidence suggests that sudden and traumatic forms of loss, such as the death of a loved one through suicide, homicide, or fatal accident, can launch the bereaved into a crisis of meaning and, with it, a complicated and prolonged course of grieving (Coleman & Neimeyer, 2010; Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2006; Davis, Wohl, & Verberg, 2007). Moreover, the ability to make sense of the loss in personal, philosophical, or spiritual terms mitigates disabling grief symptomatology in a variety of populations studied (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998; Holland, Currier, & Neimeyer, 2006; Uren & Wastell, 2002), and also predicts well-being, confidence, and pride as much as 4 years later (Coleman & Neimeyer, 2010). For example, the ability to find some sense in the loss emerges as the strongest predictor of bereavement outcome in parents following the death of a child, accounting for 3 to 15 times the variance in grief symptomatology as other factors such as the number of months since the loss or whether the death was violent or natural (Keesee, Currier, & Neimeyer, 2008).

In keeping with this view, a number of theorists and therapists have advocated the use of narrative procedures to help people give voice to their unique stories of loss, and to find affirmative meaning in them. Such methods can entail various forms of personal journaling (Pennebaker, 1996), restorative retelling of the loss narrative (Rynearson, 2006), expressive arts modalities (Neimeyer & Sands, 2011; Rogers, 2007), or music therapy techniques (Berger, 2006) that convey one’s journey through grief analogically. Although

the evidence base for the efficacy of some of the more general narrative methods for ameliorating the pain of bereavement is equivocal (Neimeyer, van Dyke, & Pennebaker, 2009), recent research points to the efficacy of specifically tailored narrative techniques that focus on retelling and processing the story of loss from a novel perspective, whether done orally or in writing (Lichtenthal & Cruess, 2010; Shear, Frank, Houch, & Reynolds, 2005; Wagner, Knaevelsrud, & Maercker, 2006). Our aim in the remainder of this article is to add to this growing fund of creative methods (Neimeyer, 2002) by describing in some detail a procedure—the virtual dream—that invites the metaphorical articulation and further processing of a loss narrative.

The Virtual Dream: Basic Procedure and Illustrations

As devised by one of the authors (Douglas C. Smith; DCS), the virtual dream is a dreamlike short story. A person is asked to write a brief narrative that has within it several specific elements, writing the story as quickly as possible, typically in 8 to 10 min, so as to promote spontaneity of expression rather than elaborate outlining and revision. The person is encouraged to be creative and to write without concern for editing or the reactions of others. The result is typically a short story of approximately one paragraph to one page in length, whose general focus is determined by the assigned plot elements—specific figures, characters, objects, or circumstances around which the story is built. As the opening epigraph to this article from Jung (1971) suggests regarding literal dreams, we take these symbolic elements to be *archetypal* in the broad sense that they typically have general relevance in many cultures but are nonetheless amenable to being given a personal reading or significance. For example, in its application to the issue of sudden or tragic loss, the assigned elements might include (a) a traumatic loss, (b) a crying child, (c) an empty house, (d) a talking animal, (e) a mountain, and (f) a sunrise. How and in what sequence the writer uses these elements is left to his or her discretion, but the writer is encouraged to use all of them to provide a minimal scaffold for the story that emerges. The virtual dream that results typically retains much of the symbolic resonance of actual nocturnal dreams, though its greater structure has the advantage of focusing attention on relevant themes—in this application, themes of loss—in a way

that invites a creative collaboration between the person's conscious and less conscious ways of making meaning of the circumstance framed by the elements used.

Virtual dreams promote client disclosure. When therapists ask their clients to share their attitudes regarding their own death and the deaths of loved ones, they can easily meet with resistance, in part, because attending to looming or actual losses is typically threatening and, in part, because words can be elusive in giving voice to the deeply personal grief, fear, and hope that surround such topics. Yet people seem to enjoy talking about their dreams, even when the feelings and issues they address are potentially quite deep and revealing. The same is true for virtual dreams: In our experience people enjoy talking about their creative stories, stories that often reflect their deepest yearnings, anxieties, and sensed possibilities, of both a temporal and spiritual nature.

Of further note regarding client disclosure, Jung and many other dream theorists claim that a dream is an expression of who we are—our physical, emotional, social, and spiritual selves. These theories suggest that everything within the dream is a part of our total personality; every element of the dream comes from our conscious or subconscious selves. Of course, not everyone remembers dreams, and probably no one remembers all of his or her dreams, and every element within each of those dreams. That problem is eliminated with virtual dreams. We can all have a virtual dream, and we can clearly see and examine each element within it. Also like regular dreams, any virtual dream, any story that has been produced through our creativity, is an expression of who we are, our conscious or subconscious selves, our physical, emotional, social, and spiritual selves. Every element within our virtual dream is a part of us, and in disclosing parts of our virtual dream, we are disclosing parts of ourselves—often to ourselves as well as to others with whom we might share it.

For example, consider the following virtual dreams written in response to the “tragic loss” elements enumerated above in the context of workshops on grief offered by two of the authors (DCS and Robert A. Neimeyer; RAN). In each instance the writer was given 8–10 min for this group exercise, after which he or she would join with three to five other participants to read their stories and discuss the feelings, associations, and meanings they evoked, without any intent to solve the “problem” the story addressed.

Small groups then reconvened in a plenary format to share their observations and insights and to contribute a copy of their virtual dream for further study at their discretion.

Johana's virtual dream:

A little one sits in an unfamiliar empty house. Taken away from the place she belonged. Taken away from the only one she felt connected to—a gentle, present, watchful, talking elephant. Taken away.

She is surrounded by full houses, full of connection and stories and laughter and memories and other animals that reflect love.

She is alone in her empty house.

The sun is rising over distant mountains. She can just see some friendly faces—little talking ones—a rabbit, a puppy and teddy—each choosing to walk toward her.

Perhaps safe connection is possible. Perhaps one day this strange house will be filled with stories of reflected love.

In processing this symbolic narrative, Johana noted with surprise that she “initially balked at what to do with the talking animal, but in the end all of the ‘connected’ people in my life became represented as talking animals! This activity helped me face old pain—of being uprooted as a child (7 years old) as a refugee from Uganda at the time of Idi Amin—and leaving behind my African nanny, my Aya. Her loss has had a deep impact on my life that I have only recently been able to acknowledge. The little animals are my children.” Overall, the story is a personal and progressive (if tentative) narrative, one marked by tragic separation, loss of a familiar world and loneliness, but also by germinal hope of restored connection in the next generation of a relocated family. Johana seems to be using the virtual dream to further her work on a recently excavated legacy of loss, long dormant, for which she is seeking new meaning on metaphoric levels.

Barbara wrote,

The Thanksgiving weekend claimed my two brothers. Thanksgiving and death—the juxtaposition of the incredulous. It was as if a huge black bear carried them off to her den, without a trace: “I have devoured your brothers.” The playful squeals of a happy child turn to tears—playmates no more. From some deep, empty place, unbidden, a Psalm bursts forth: “I lift my eyes unto the mountain, from where shall come my help? My help will come from the Lord.” Will it? The house stands empty: My place of welcome is no more. How can the sun rise when there is so much darkness?

In discussing this literal loss in her own childhood, Barbara explained that she was the youngest child in a family of three children when her older brother died suddenly one Thanksgiving of a heart attack, and her other brother died 2 days later of a broken heart. She noted that each of the assigned and original elements of the dream seemed to “work” for her, presenting her with “surprise connections” she could not have made at the time or even long after. For example, spirituality “jumped out at her” in the form of a Psalm, but she shied away from its easy consolation, observing that to have “gone there” prematurely would have “blocked the reality of the painful darkness” that she needed to be with for a time. She closed by reaffirming her “resilience” in the face of these tragic deaths, but also noted how the Thanksgiving weekend inevitably flooded her with images of the double loss even 15 years later.

Although many virtual dreams function as veiled autobiographies, the relation of the narrative to the writer’s experience is sometimes more thematic than literal. For example, Terry wrote,

The house is nestled beneath the mountains. Huge grey mountains loom over it either in menace or with the protective leaning-in of a mother bent over a hunched and crying child, seeking a glimpse of a face beneath the cascade of untamed hair.

The house is empty now, stark and barren and full of echoes. Voices like ghosts calling unheard, gliding in endless repetitions along the empty hallways, speaking words without substance, without voice.

It is dark now, dark and shadowed. The sun has risen, but behind the mountain, whose shadow steals its warmth to leave the valley in waiting darkness. Although the sunsets are long and glorious, the new day’s beginnings are always delayed, a sense of night lingering over this house, even as others are opening and turning their faces to the morning light.

When the sun’s warmth arrives, it softens the courtyard first—a courtyard somehow untouched by the corrosion of loss, the statues clean and white, free of moss and lichen. In the center stands a marble horse and rider—the horse proud and fierce, the rider upright in the saddle, eyes on the horizon. What do they see ahead that they yearn towards with such resolute gaze? If this horse could speak . . .

Little in this virtual dream hints at the factual nature of the writer’s loss, and indeed even the typically animate figures in the narrative—the crying child, the talking animal—are rendered as inanimate metaphors for the relation of the mountain and house or as statues with a story to tell “if only they could speak.”

Nonetheless, the writer certainly conjures an emotional tone of desolation and emptiness and a posture of perpetual waiting, waiting for something delayed or unarticulated. In this sense, the elements in the virtual dream signal a mood more than a story, seemingly collaborating with the writer in maintaining the confidentiality of its content.

As in the above illustrations, most writers of virtual dreams tell them from a third-person omniscient perspective, or occasionally from first-person vantage point, anchoring them in clearly autobiographical details of their self-narrative. In contrast, other writers use the stories to convey a first-person subjective experience with few objective markers, as in Pam's story:

The sun rises, crisp and still cold over the thick forest. What have I lost? That sense of darkness, that emptiness I felt walking in the mountains—solid, old, apparently forbidding, yet filled with experience and meaning on closer inspection. But I have left that mountain now, walked through that forest. A child cries and I must attend to it. And there remains a barren and empty house where my heart once stood. The bird on my shoulder speaks.

Here the landscape the writer conjures is almost an entirely psychological one, and the journey invoked in the virtual dream is one that involves an ambivalent loss, perhaps of the wisdom embedded in now-faded grief as the writer turns her attention somewhat mechanically to the practical demands of the world. Only the bird's presence signals the prompting of a voice from that other dimension, one that might be teased out in dialogue with a curious and respectful listener or reader.

Deconstructing the Virtual Dream

Any responsive reader of virtual dreams like those sampled above is likely to be struck by their richness and openness to elaboration if approached with an attitude of respectful curiosity. Indeed, the step from the creation of these evocative vignettes to their clinical processing is typically a short one, and this is precisely why they easily invite deeper exploration of the writer's metaphoric or literal story of loss in a group or individual therapy context. Often, clinical intuition alone is enough to guide the inquiry, which might involve asking Johana, "Taken away... What, essentially, were

you taken away from, and what was taken away from you?”, or prompting Barbara, “What answer might you give to your closing question from your perspective in the present: ‘How *can* the sun rise when there is so much darkness?’” But clinical intuition also can be refined by a consideration of narrative forms and features, any of which can provide a starting point for further elaboration of the virtual dream story. Here we will briefly describe a taxonomy of these narrative dimensions which has been discussed at greater length and in more clinical detail elsewhere (Neimeyer, 2000). We will then offer some preliminary data on the structure and content of a large sample of virtual dreams, to give the reader a sense of their variety, to offer a comparative frame for distinguishing between common and unusual patterns, and to investigate whether they can be analyzed reliably for purposes of research. Finally, we will conclude with a few simple procedures that extend the possibilities for creatively processing virtual dreams in clinical contexts, providing a brief illustration of their application.

Points of View and Voice

As stylistic characteristics of narratives, the kindred concepts of points of view and voice establish the perspective from which the virtual dream story is told, as well as the mood or tone in which it is related. One useful taxonomy for organizing the former (Moffett & McElheny, 1995) distinguishes between subjective narration, detached autobiography, and anonymous narration (among other forms), all of which can be seen in the construction of virtual dreams. The first two points of view represent first-person accounts, in which the author transparently relates the self-narrative from the standpoint of an experiencing “I,” whether in a loose and shifting stream-of-consciousness style or in a seemingly more impartial then-versus-now perspective, as in detached autobiography. Conversely, anonymous narration adopts an apparently objective and often omniscient stance, in which the relation of the author to the characters or plot remains unstated. In the examples of virtual dreams given above, Pam’s meditation on her lost “darkness” comes closest to subjective narration, whereas Barbara’s account of her brothers’ deaths around Thanksgiving more closely exemplifies a conventional autobiography. Terry’s abstract rendering of the overshadowed house and statues

exemplifies anonymous narration, as does Johana's story of being "taken away," although the latter account moves toward a memoir or autobiography when she discloses her identity as the central character in her further processing. Clinically, the different points of view might suggest something of the distance writers prefer to impose between themselves as authors and their story of loss, and prompting them to rewrite the story from a more immediate first-person or more distant third-person perspective can be one way of fostering greater emotional engagement with or control over its content. Finally, although it is not formally a point of view in the technical sense, poetic expression using a convention of short lines and stanzas, typically unrhymed and unmetred, is sometimes adopted for conveying virtual dreams, a genre that is sufficiently distinct to merit its own category.

Voice refers to the related notion of the mode of expression in the narrative, irrespective of the perspective from which it is written (Neimeyer, 2000). Less easily categorized than points of view, vocal mood conveys the author's implicit intention, which could be signaled by the note of angry protest in the story, the cathartic outpouring of grief, an attempt at problem solving, or a bid for understanding of the seemingly incomprehensible. Voice can also encompass the tense in which the narrative is written, whether as a chronicle of past events, an account in the present, or a projection into the future. Distinguishing these voices can allow the therapist to consciously foster the development of the author's initial voice (e.g., anger or grief) as a prelude to prompting the engagement of another (e.g., problem solving or meaning-making), or to suggest movement beyond a past or present problem or impasse toward a future resolution.

Narrative Forms and Features

Whereas points of view and voice distinguish between one individual's virtual dream stories and those of another—although a shift from one form or voice to another is sometimes observed in a single account—narrative forms and features describe characteristics all of which are commonly present within the same story. These include the setting, characterization, plot, theme, and fictional goal of the narrative, which jointly determine its structure (Neimeyer, 2000).

Setting refers to the “where” and “when” of the story, the context for whatever transpires. In virtual dreams the contexts can be realistic, as in Barbara’s description of Thanksgiving losses or Terry’s depiction of the house in the shadow of the mountain, or mythical, as in Johana’s parable of separation from and reconnection to a series of talking animals. Use of aspects of setting to draw the reader into the account helps conjure a “possible world” within which the actions that follow make sense and sometimes invites a suspension of disbelief so that different outcomes, meanings, or solutions can be envisioned beyond those that seemed plausible at the time the loss itself occurred.

Characterization refers to the “who” of the story, the multiple agents—whether human or nonhuman—whose actions and intentions animate the story. Although the personalities, motives, and emotions of each of the characters can be described directly by the narrator, they can also be conveyed indirectly through a variety of subtle literary devices, such as Terry’s description of the mountain “stealing the warmth” of the sunrise from the empty house or Pam’s attribution of cruel dialogue to the black bear of death, growling, “I have devoured your brothers.”

Plot refers to “what” transpires in the narrative, the sequence of actions that give the story its unfolding structure. At root it represents the human attempt to organize sometimes radically disorganizing experiences in a form that they can be symbolized and communicated to oneself or another, a foundational “act of meaning” basic to our species (Bruner, 1990). Often the plot of the virtual dream poses a problem to be solved by or for the protagonist, as in Johana’s story of exile and reconnection. Occasionally, however, it depicts the incomplete struggle to articulate what has transpired, as in Pam’s conscious questioning and flicker of resignation in losing touch with her own dark knowledge and the sense of purpose and meaning in life it conferred. Common plot structures in virtual dreams revolve around various types of loss (e.g., of family members or significant others) and types of death (e.g., natural vs. violent), which commonly have special meaning for the author.

Theme refers to the “why” of the narrative, the explanatory underpinnings that give the episode its significance. In the sample of virtual dreams offered above, the reader can discern themes of hope, despair, connection, isolation, uncertainty, longing, and

questioning, among others. Not infrequently such stories will conjure a once taken-for-granted set of life themes (e.g., of innocence, justice, invulnerability) that are cruelly shattered by tragedy, so that the author is forced to seek a new assumptive foundation for the central character or for the story itself.

Finally, the *fictional goal* of the story refers to the “wherefore” of the narrative, its projected endpoint, whether progressive (moving toward a valued conclusion), regressive (moving farther from a preferred outcome), or ambivalent (displaying aspects of both, or no movement at all). In these terms, Johana’s reconnection with other beings in the form of her animal-children would reflect a virtual dream with a progressive, forward-looking fictional goal, whereas Barbara’s rejection of the saccharine solace of the Psalm inclines in a regressive direction. In comparison, both Pam’s shifting internal dialogue and Terry’s static statuary, forever waiting, suggest more ambivalent outcomes.

Neimeyer (2000, 2004, 2009) provided numerous specific examples of narrative methods for working with aspects of setting, characterization, plot, theme, and fictional goal in a way that can be readily applied to the processing of virtual dreams, although space considerations preclude elaboration of such strategies here. Instead, we will use the space that remains to summarize some preliminary data on the occurrence of these dimensions in virtual dreams we have collected and then conclude with some initial extensions of this creative narrative procedure in the clinical context.

Some Relevant Data

To provide an initial assessment of common characteristics of virtual dreams, we first collected stories written by 143 participants in grief and loss workshops we (DCS and RAN) offered to diverse audiences, ranging from lay persons to groups of helping professionals. Groups were also diverse with respect to nationality, comprising mainly American, Australian, British, and New Zealand participants with a smattering of other nationalities, although groups were more homogeneous with respect to ethnicity (approximately 85% were White) and gender (approximately 75% women). No claims are intended regarding the generalization of these findings to specific groups of respondents, as genuinely normative data

on the structure and content of virtual dreams and their relation to other measures of interest (e.g., type of loss suffered, bereavement outcomes) await more systematic research. Instead, our goal here is more humble: to demonstrate the feasibility and interjudge reliability of coding virtual dream stories on several of the above dimensions of content and structure and to provide some clinically useful data on general trends that characterize a reasonably large and diverse group of authors.

Virtual dreams were solicited using the same six elements used to elicit the stories illustrated above (a traumatic loss, an empty house, a crying child, a talking animal, a mountain, and a sunrise), and participants were given 8–10 min to complete their stories. Narratives voluntarily contributed by participants after the workshop at the invitation of the presenter were read carefully by the second author, who coded each for the presence or absence of each of the structural characteristics described above. In addition, a subsample of 59 of stories was independently coded by the first author to assess the interjudge reliability of these ratings, and the small discrepancies in ratings were resolved by consensus. The results of these analyses are summarized in Tables 1–3.

Point of View

Table 1 reflects the good reliability ($\kappa = .65$) with which point of view was coded by the raters, as well as the frequency with which various perspectives appeared in the sample of 143 stories. Just over 40% of the virtual dreams were written as anonymous narration, typically from the standpoint of an omniscient narrator who could convey the characters' feelings as well as their actions. However, a quarter of the stories took the form of subjective narration by authors speaking for themselves in the first person in a stream-of-consciousness fashion, giving voice to the shifting thoughts and feelings that played out for them in the real or imaginary context of the story. Explicit autobiography anchored in actual life events was less common, occurring in approximately 1 of 5 cases. Poetic forms of expression were rare but occasionally occurred, allowing the author to relax narrative structure and focus on symbolic or emotional exploration as a primary goal.

Tense

Table 1 also conveys the excellent reliability with which the tense of the virtual dreams was coded by the two raters ($\kappa = .93$). Nearly 80% of the stories were written in the past tense, with most of the remainder representing present tense accounts, as if the story were unfolding in “real time.” Stories in multiple tenses (e.g., then and now, or present and future) did occur, but quite rarely, perhaps partly as a function of the brevity of the stories imposed by the limited time for their creation.

Characterization

Table 2 presents data on the excellent reliability ($\kappa = .90$) and frequency with which different narrative features of the virtual dreams were coded. Approximately 60% of the stories featured animate characters and the remainder inanimate.

Type of Loss

Type of loss was also coded with good reliability ($\kappa = .67$). Losses were distributed across several categories, with the death of a parent (in 25% of the stories) from the standpoint of a child, followed by the death of a child from the standpoint of a parent (in 11%), being the most frequent. However, as Table 2 depicts, a variety of other losses also found expression in the virtual dreams, including the deaths of siblings, partners, pets, and grandparents, as well as unique losses such as loss of some aspect of the self,

TABLE 1 Points of View and Voice in Virtual Dreams
($N = 143$)

Narrative characteristic	%
Point of view ($\kappa = .65$)	
Subjective narration	25
Autobiography	19
Anonymous narration	43
Poetry	3
Tense ($\kappa = .93$)	
Past	78
Present	19
Multiple	2

TABLE 2 Narrative Features in Virtual Dreams ($N=143$)

Narrative feature	%
Characterization ($\kappa = .90$)	
Animate	59
Inanimate	37
Type of loss ($\kappa = .67$)	
Death of parent	25
Death of sibling	6
Death of child	11
Death of a partner/spouse	3
Death of a grandparent	1
Death of pet/animal	7
Loss of part of self	3
Other loss (home, displacement, separation)	27
Unspecified	15
Cause of death ($\kappa = .70$)	
Natural anticipated	6
Natural sudden	6
Accident	12
Suicide	2
Homicide	5
Unspecified	69
Theme ($\kappa = .76$)	
Despair	29
Hope	42
Ambivalence	7
Reminiscence	10
Reunion	6
Epic journey	1
Fear/Anxiety	1
Fictional goal ($\kappa = .71$)	
Progressive	57
Regressive	24
Ambivalent/Ambiguous	19

displacement from one's home, environmental devastation, or temporary separation from loved ones. In 15% of cases the nature of the loss was unspecified, as the author focused only on its effects.

Cause of Death

Table 2 indicates that cause of death was also reliably rated ($\kappa = .70$). When the loss took the form of death of one of the

characters, the cause was unspecified nearly 70% of the time. However, the most frequently conveyed cause of death was an accident, followed by natural death and homicide. By comparison, suicides were relatively rare in the virtual dreams sampled.

Theme

Themes of virtual dreams were also coded reliably ($\kappa = .76$). Table 2 documents that over 40% of the stories built to a theme of hopeful anticipation of the future, whereas nearly 30% evoked a dominant theme of despair. Reminiscence characterized 1 in 10 stories, with anticipated reunion featured in another 6%. In 7% of the cases, narratives conveyed ambivalence, often by communicating a sense of resilience even in the face of ongoing distress or signaling a mixed outcome entailing loss and gain. Other emotional themes were also observed, such as those involving conflict and fear.

Fictional Goal

Finally, as Table 2 evidences, the fictional goals of virtual dreams were coded reliably ($\kappa = .71$). Over half moved progressively toward a clearly favorable outcome, whereas approximately one quarter developed regressively toward some nonpreferred state of affairs. The remaining narratives were ambiguous in this respect, melding features of both or depicting a static plot with no movement beyond the current circumstance.

Protagonist

Table 3 presents the strong reliability ($\kappa = .83$) and frequency with which various assigned elements of the virtual dreams are used in particular ways, beginning with the central protagonist. The self-revelatory character of the stories is underscored in over half the stories from a first-person standpoint, projecting the author into the story as the main character. Children are depicted as the protagonists in one quarter of the stories, with an animal being featured as the central figure 1 time in 10. The remaining stories center on adult humans, but these account for only 6% of the accounts.

Talking Animal

Table 3 conveys the adequate reliability of coding for the talking animal's qualities ($\kappa = .68$), as well as the tendency for nearly 60% of the virtual dreams to cast the animal as a benevolent character who comforts, guides, or companions the protagonist on a healing journey. However, the animal is malevolent in 6% stories, representing a threatening presence or the agent responsible for the loss suffered. Approximately 1 time in 10, it is neutral, simply dispassionately informing the protagonist of the loss or playing an incidental role in the action. Interestingly, nearly one fifth of the time the animal's "talk" is presented in "as if," illusory fashion, as when a puppy "speaks with his eyes," a cuckoo clock announces the hour, or an eagle swoops into the scene "as if to warn." Rarely, the author suggests a more complex communication scenario with illusory overtones, as when a wolf speaks to console a crying child, but all that the child hears are growls.

Sunrise

Finally, as Table 3 indicates, three quarters of the time virtual dreams use sunrise as a setting feature to denote the opening of a scene or the passage of time. However, in most of the remainder the sunrise takes on a more symbolic meaning of a new beginning following a period of loss and desolation.

TABLE 3 Uses of Virtual Dream Elements ($N = 143$)

Virtual dream element	%
Protagonist ($\kappa = .83$)	
Explicit self	53
Child	25
Adult	6
Animal	11
Talking animal ($\kappa = .68$)	
Benevolent	59
Malevolent	6
Neutral	9
Illusion/As if	19
Sunrise ($\kappa = .96$)	
New beginning	22
Time marker	75

The Virtual Dream in Clinical Context

As a novel method for eliciting stories around themes of loss, the virtual dream has several potential uses, including as a research method for detecting less conscious thematic expressions of attitudes toward death and loss (Feifel & Nagy, 1981; Neimeyer, Moser, & Wittkowski, 2003) that could correlate with or predict complicated grief or resilience, or as a semiprojective technique for clinical assessment in the tradition of the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT; Geiser & Stein, 1999), whose guidelines for interpretation could prove valuable for virtual dream stories. However, our main interest in the present context is exploring the clinical utility of the virtual dream to foster further personal, therapeutic, or group processing of loss experiences with the goal of their affirmation and possible transformation. To this end we will share some basic recommendations for the use of this method in clinical settings, defined to include personal journaling, bereavement support, and personal awareness workshops in addition to grief counseling and therapy per se. In a later article we will offer a more thorough discussion and illustration of advanced practices using the method, which could prove most relevant in settings that permit professional guidance and support.

Many dream theories speak of the “compensatory” function of dreaming. Dreams, in and of themselves, without any exploring, without any interpreting, without any verbalizing and processing with another, can be therapeutic; dreams, even without our cognizance of them, can have a therapeutic function. Dreams can bring various elements together, working out relationships between those elements usually not experienced in “accepted reality”; they can “finish” some “unfinished business” (with those in our present life, with those in our past, and even with the dead); they can allow us to make fun of that which we normally take too seriously, and to take seriously that which we normally do not; they can allow us to transcend social, cultural, and “logical” barriers. All of this can be adaptive and all of this can be done by simply dreaming, without explicitly exploring, interpreting, verbalizing, and processing the dream material. Likewise with virtual dreams: Just creatively constructing a virtual dream can have therapeutic value.

As mentioned earlier, a basic use of the virtual dream simply entails inviting clients or workshop participants to do such writing,

incorporating a suggested set of elements, either in a 10-min assigned period during the contact or in the form of “homework” afterward. Subsequent sharing of the story, read aloud by its author in the presence of the therapist or (a subgroup of) other workshop members, easily bridges into discussion of the themes, challenges, fears, strengths, and forms of problem resolution envisioned in the writing, and how this reflects or complements the author’s own experiences of loss. Beyond this informal use of the method, however, a few practical guidelines can enhance its usefulness, as suggested below.

Selection of Elements

Tailor the assignment of dream elements to the loss to be explored. As suggested by the broad range of settings, moods, plots, themes, and goals that characterized the sample of virtual dreams analyzed above, use of the canonical elements assigned can give wide scope to individual expression and creativity. However, a nearly boundless range of elements could be chosen as alternatives to those used above for purpose of illustration. For example, Table 4 presents several possible situations/settings, figures/voices, and objects that have been suggested by participants in workshops featuring virtual dream work, a judicious selection of which (usually two from each column) could help focus participants on particular topics of shared concern. For example, a support group for parents who have lost young children to cancer might be invited to write a story that would include such elements as (a) a discarded toy, (b) a terminally ill child, (c) a hospital, (d) a talking bird, (f) a rainbow, and (g) a deserted playground. Table 5 suggests some element groupings that address other forms of loss, although the reader can readily enough select or devise elements appropriate to other unique contexts.

Feeling Words

A natural extension of the virtual dream method is to explore the resources contained in each element, bridging from feelings to goals. What we have been describing as the “elements” of a virtual dream might be referred to more poetically using the Mackenzie Eskimo word *keyugak*. A *keyugak* is a “helping spirit.” Every element of the virtual dream is potentially a “helping spirit,” a *keyugak*, which can help us become aware of some part of our total

TABLE 4 Sample Virtual Dream Elements

Situations/Settings	Figures/Voices	Objects
A wasting illness	A wise woman	A rose
A violent storm	A mysterious stranger	A burning fire
A troubled sea	A booming voice	An ancient chart
An early loss	A choking sob	An ambulance
A long journey	An angel	A mask
A secret room	A dove	An empty bed
A cool brook	A serpent	A closed door
An unearthly light	A wrinkled elder	A coffin
A precipice	An overheard song	A naked sculpture
A cave	A strong man	A treasure box
A hidden loss	A strong woman	A hanging bridge
A fork in the road	A blind beggar	An operation table
A thunderstorm	A wandering monk	A candle
A clap of thunder	A cleric	An open book
A flash of lightening	An officer	A knife
A kitchen	An old friend	A letter
A painful death	An unborn child	A child's toy
A set table	A being from the future	A broken doll
An open window	A voice from the past	A magic wand
A sandy beach	An inner dialogue	A cradle
An open field	A fervent prayer	Music
A clearing in the wood	A mischievous raven	A family photo
A stone-lined circle	A white horse	A tarnished ring
A mossy bank	A dragon	An empty bottle
A starless night	An elfin child	A compass
A cemetery	A physician	A rusted key
A crumbling castle	A nurse	A sewing machine
A frozen tundra	A mythical beast	A lock
A green pasture	A teacher	A paintbrush
A loss of memory	A childhood companion	The moon
An ongoing loss	A talking toy	A dark closet
A physical handicap	A hunter	A clock
An unknown village	A small family	Leaf mulch
A tunnel	A large group	A boat
A bedroom	A scribe	A weeping willow
A dusty library	An antagonist	A potent drug
A tangled garden	An intimate partner	A special memento
A rocky ridge	A secret message	A sacred scroll

personality. For example, the “loss of a loved one” virtual dream reveals that we all have within us “an empty room,” “a lost loved one,” “a seemingly insurmountable barrier,” and “a sunrise”; each

TABLE 5 Sample Element Groupings for Virtual Dream Scenarios

Scenario	Elements
Loss of a loved one	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. An empty room 2. A lost loved one 3. A seemingly insurmountable barrier 4. A sunrise 5. A talking horse 6. A distant land
Loss from sudden death	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A traumatic death 2. A crying child 3. An empty house 4. A mountain 5. A talking animal 6. A sunrise
Finding strength	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A wish or goal you have 2. A supportive person 3. A seemingly insurmountable barrier 4. A nonsupportive person 5. A hidden strength you discover 6. A congratulations party
Issues of addiction	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Yourself 2. Your drug of choice 3. Someone who is crying 4. Someone who is angry 5. A fortune teller 6. A teaching moment with a child
Your spiritual mission	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Yourself 2. A boat 3. A dangerous voyage 4. A holy woman on an island 5. Her message to you 6. A voyage home
Facing ethical dilemmas	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. You as a hospital chaplain 2. A nurse who has stolen some narcotics 3. A pharmacist who is being blamed for the theft 4. A voice from God 5. A stormy night 6. A rainbow
Your last hour	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Yourself in your last hour of life 2. A well-worn memento from your past 3. A talking mirror 4. A bridge 5. Someone who has already died 6. A flower

of these is a potential “helping spirit.” If I want to grow, I can do so by becoming aware of those various elements of my self and understanding how I perceive and relate to those elements.

When using virtual dreams, sometimes a *keyugak* might take the form of a person, animal, place, or thing that makes its way into the short story that is not one of the originally suggested five or six elements. It might also be important to examine a suggested element that the short story writer somehow forgot to include—this too can be a *keyugak*, a “helping spirit.” A straightforward “feeling word” exercise can be used to find meaning within a *keyugak*.

First, choose a *keyugak* (person, animal, place, or thing) from your virtual dream. Then write down three to five feeling words you associate with being this *keyugak*. If you were this person, animal, place, or thing (especially as it is represented in your virtual dream) what would be your primary feelings? Write down these feeling words as quickly as you can, with as little pondering as possible.

Then, take each feeling word and compose a sentence written in the form of a personal goal. This goal would be related to improving some aspect of yourself. For example, suppose your virtual dream has an empty room in it. As an empty room you might feel “lonely.” A goal statement might then be, “I choose to lessen my feelings of loneliness by joining a gym, signing up for a group exercise program, and committing to talking to at least one person each time I go.”

After writing your goal statements, explore, process, discuss, and/or meditate upon (a) the importance of each of these goals, (b) the feasibility of each, (c) your commitment to achieving them, and (d) how you might assure your commitment.

Seeing with Different Eyes, Walking in Different Shoes

Begin by choosing a *keyugak* from your virtual dream. Then imagine how your virtual dream would appear through this “helping spirit’s eyes,” walking in this “helping spirit’s shoes,” experiencing this “helping spirit’s reality.” For example, if your virtual dream has a crying child in it, how would this child perceive the various happenings in this story? How might this crying child react to all the other people in the virtual dream? How might this crying child feel around the various animals, places, and things that it includes?

Next, write the entire virtual dream as it would be viewed from this helping spirit's perspective, using the personal pronoun "I" as if you are the *keyugak* (e.g., "I feel . . .", "I see . . .", "I experience . . ."). Be especially conscious of how this *keyugak* perceives "you," the original maker/observer of the virtual dream.

Finally, explore, process, discuss, and/or meditate upon (a) what you enjoyed and did not enjoy about being this *keyugak* and (b) what about this *keyugak* might enhance your personality, knowledge, or ability to deal with loss.

A Case Illustration

Barb completed the virtual dream exercise in the context of a grief workshop, using the "loss of a loved one" elements listed in Table 5. She then accepted the invitation to do the "feeling words" exercise on her own and share the results with one of the authors (DCS) via email. To illustrate the use of these methods, we will present her virtual dream story, along with a summary of her responses to the follow-up exercises. Barb wrote,

Once upon a time, in a distant land called Esteronia, there lived a talking horse. The horse only showed itself at sunrise, and people came from all over to see the horse.

Once, a man came who wanted to ask the horse a very important question about a lost loved one he was grieving. The story went that this horse could help with sorrow and pain over losing someone that you loved.

The man had to cross a huge mountain with no lasting trails—a seemingly insurmountable barrier—but he was willing to do this. If he didn't get help, all he could do was stare at an empty room.

So he kept trying until he reached the horse, who did indeed help him learn some important truths.

The *keyugak* Barb was drawn to explore was the "mountain," which she associated with the feeling words *isolated*, *confused*, and *stuck* and which somehow spoke to an essential sense of impasse and indecision at this juncture in her life. She then crafted a goal statement relevant to each of these core feelings:

- I choose to lessen my feeling of *isolation* by joining a singing group that I learned about at the conference.
- I choose to lessen my feeling of *confusion* through reflection, reading and journaling, which I commit to doing 3 days each week.

- I choose to get “*unstuck*” by changing something in my daily routine: I will drive to work a different route the rest of the week and jot down how it feels.

Next, Barb reinforced each goal by writing about its importance, its feasibility, and her commitment to achieving it:

- The first goal, I think, is relatively important, because many of my friends would never see me as *isolated*. Yet, I think I’ve been more of a loner. It’s very feasible, and I have already said I am coming to the next singing practice. I am considering a job change too, so reaching out to do things I find meaningful will be important.
- The second goal I feel I already am in the process of pursuing. It is very workable for me; the only problem is sometimes I feel I should do something “bigger” on more days. I think my *confusion* is pretty normal, trying to reconcile aging and losing my mother this year. I’m looking at how to make each day meaningful.
- The *unstuck* goal I think is feasible, and I purposely made it easy just to do something symbolic. I think we should play little tricks/games on ourselves to get ready for bigger changes. Again, the job change is pretty much the big “unstuck” I have planned, if I get an offer.

In summary, Barb readily accepted the invitation to produce a virtual dream story in response to the “loss of a loved one” prompt, an invitation that had personal relevance in light of her own recent loss of her mother. Quickly finding in the symbol of the mountain a representation of the seemingly daunting obstacle she faced toward moving forward in the face of aging and loss, she recognized the need to blaze new trails that would carry her through the challenging terrain to a restored sense of meaning and community on the other side. Barb’s acceptance of this imaginative invitation to explore her loss analogically seemed fully coherent with her equally playful tendency to “play little games with herself”—like driving a different route to work each day—in order to free herself from “stuckness” and prepare herself for bigger and bolder changes, including a change of career. She therefore used the virtual dream as a reflective prompt for her journaling, as well as guide to action to bring about the very changes that the mountain *keyugak* seemed to signal.

Conclusion

As we have used the virtual dream technique with literally thousands of participants in grief workshops, in professional training,

and in individual and group counseling and psychotherapy, we have been repeatedly struck by the power of this simple method to let people explore complex legacies of loss, typically while donning the protective mask of make believe. Not uncommonly, people begin the writing as an imaginative exercise about hypothetical characters and situations but quickly discover that at the level of plot and theme, they are also addressing important features of their own experience. Sharing these accounts by reading them aloud to the counselor or other participants in a grief support group or workshop seems to provide appreciative affirmation of individual stories and opens the door to discussion of the personal losses to which they often refer.

Part of the utility of the virtual dream method is its openness; with a few simple elements to scaffold the story, people construct richly personal and creative dreamlike accounts that let them articulate not only the problems or challenges associated with the loss, but also real or potential solutions. In our experience both outcomes are equally valuable, in the first instance providing further grist for the mill of personal reflection and self-change efforts or professional counseling and in the second suggesting analogical solutions to real-life problems. In this article we have tried to suggest some preliminary steps for “unpacking” such stories in therapeutic ways, deferring a description of advanced applications of the method to a later article that allows more space for their consideration and illustration. We hope that this attempt to sketch the contours of the method, to demonstrate the reliability with which it can be coded for research, to document some of the characteristic content it evokes, and to hint at its clinical applications will awaken your own sense of intrigue about its use in helping people explore the dreamlike frontier between their conscious and unconscious stories of loss, in a way that enhances the meaning of their grief journey and their resilience as travelers.

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