Creative Writing

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Virtual Dream Stories

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DESCRIPTION

Some stories become most "real" when they are least realistic. Inspired by the rich narratives of nocturnal dreams, virtual dream stories involve requesting that clients, without forethought or planning, spend between eight and ten minutes in session writing a projective story, which can then deepen reflection on the themes of loss it addresses. As a scaffold for the exercise, therapists or workshop leaders commonly suggest that writers include, in whatever way they choose, an assigned list of six elements, two of which typically refer to the *setting* of the narrative (e.g., a mountain trail, a tragic loss), two of which are *figures with* "*voice*" or intention (e.g., a crying child, a talking animal) and two of which represent potentially *symbolic objects or events* (e.g., an empty house, a rusted chest). Elements can be selected to correspond to a loss experienced by a specific client or group of clients, but should be left sufficiently general to invite many interpretations. For example, each participant in a bereaved parents support group might be invited to write a virtual dream story that contains the following elements: (1) a violent storm, (2) an empty playground, (3) a lonely wanderer, (4) a whispering wind, (5) a candle, and (6) a full moon. (See Table 14.1 for further sample elements, although elements also can be drawn from other sources, such as being selected

Table 14.1 Sample virtual dream elements

Situations/settings	Figures/voices	Symbolic objects
A wasting illness	A wise woman	A red 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	A glowing angel	A strange mask
A secret room	A white dove	An empty bed
A cool brook	A whispering serpent	A closed door
An unearthly light	A wrinkled elder	A wooden coffin
A steep precipice	An overheard song	A naked sculpture
A dark cave	A strong man	A treasure box

from an assigned or favorite poem at the client's discretion.) The resulting story can then be shared with the therapist or with other members of the group, being read aloud by the author or by another person at the author's discretion. Such stories nearly always reflect important themes in how the authors have dealt with loss, even if the literal plot of the story differs greatly from their own. It is often an emotional experience writing and especially reading the dream-like stories, during which authors commonly associate to losses they themselves have suffered. The respectful listening of others then provides a sense of affirmation, and insights and steps in healing can be further consolidated through any of a number of optional extensions, as noted later.

The *Mustard Seed Project* is a series of intensive weekend workshops designed by the second author to help participants accommodate the suffering that often accompanies "unwelcome change." A distinctive feature of the workshops is that they make use of poetry and creative writing in conjunction with Buddhist teachings on suffering and renewal. Workshop leaders set a context to deepen awareness of impermanence, mindfulness and compassion toward oneself and others. At a recent two-day workshop in New York City, the authors were joined by a Zen teacher and 18 other participants, diverse in gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, and spirituality, all of whom were grieving the loss of a partner, child, career, health, and other life-defining people, possessions or possibilities. After a brief introduction, group members paired and shared their lives and losses for several minutes, after which various members took turns introducing their dialogue partners to the group a few at a time throughout the weekend.

In an opening round of writing, group members then read aloud the poem *Two Cats* by Katha Pollit (http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php?date=2009/10/06), which stimulated discussion of the nature of human and nonhuman consciousness, and then individually selected six words or phrases of their choice from the poem, and incorporated them into a virtual dream story along with the phrase *a door closes*. Several members then read their work to the group, leading meaningfully into a further discussion of the transformation of what we regard as "loss" through a deep acceptance of change and impermanence. Underscoring words from the poem, one 67-year-old woman named Jill wrote as follows:

In Our Flannel Pajamas

My sister and I sat on the *sun porch* on a cold January day—an odd concept made possible by the brilliance and heat of the sun shining in a clear blue sky. The beauty of the calm day followed days of tempestuous weather that had *shredded* any remaining dry leaves that had clung to the trees surrounding the house, so that new bare branches lifted up to the sky, the sleeping trees giving no indication of the spring that was to come.

We laughed and reveled in the warmth, ate *chocolate,* and whatever else remained of our food supply and waited for what was sure to happen—the restoration of telephone service, the snowplow that would break through the drifts, ending our time of enforced *solitude* and the return to our separate lives, changed by our brush with death; the fear of freezing if we could not keep the fire going or ran out of wood for the stove.

We were changed by our *souls*' shared terrors and the truths we had told each other to keep ourselves awake. Our *dreams* were sure to contain memories of these days.

The snowplow came. We packed and said goodbye, packed our cars and *closed the door* to our mother's house for the last time.

After sharing the story with the group, the writer acknowledged its emotional truth, reflecting as it did the reaffirmation of sisterhood in the wake of their mother's death, though the plot and setting

of the story were fictional. Animated by the embrace of present-moment awareness and Buddhist teachings on impermanence and no-self, the workshop concluded the next day with a second use of the virtual dream prompted by the poem *On Living* by Nazim Hikmet (http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/on-living/). Adding the phrase *a door opens* to her choice of six words from the poem, Jill wrote:

Bucket List

"You want to do what?!" she said, *laughing* so hard that tears ran down her face. "You can't even walk and you want to . . . what?" Her laughter was curiously filled with *anger* as she incredulously took in—or not—the final item on my bucket list. "I can do this," I insisted, "I can. I am still alive and I will, I will live every moment of my life until it is done. No one can say I spent my life *dying*. I can do this and you have to help me."

"No I don't. I won't. I won't help you do this ludicrous thing. I will not help you waste the last days of your life . . ." "*Living?*" I interjected. She sighed and made the calls while I conserved what little strength I had.

It took weeks—but as I waited in the space shuttle's air lock for my walk in empty *space*—no, not empty, anticipating *stars* in profusion—my heart leaped in joy. And *the door opened*.

Laughter greeted the surprise ending of the story, energizing a discussion that validated the essence of each participant's experience, affirmed hope and deepened the group's appreciation of both the beauty and tragedy of life in light of its impermanence.

VARIATIONS AND ADAPTATIONS

Virtual dream stories can be solicited from adolescents and adults contending with a variety of losses, and processed intuitively or systematically through any of several extensions of the method. For example, clients can be encouraged to write "feeling words" they associate with particular elements and then use these to formulate personal goals. In Jill's case, she might be asked in connection with the first story, "How does a *sun porch* feel?" She might respond, "Warm," and be further asked if warmth was something she was seeking more of in her life. She could then be encouraged to formulate a personal goal relevant to that feeling that she might pursue following the workshop, perhaps by spending a summer day out of doors, or inviting intimate conversation over tea with a trusted friend. Other ways of processing the virtual dream can involve fostering a further dialogue between two figures in the story, with the client alternately taking the part of each in an "empty chair" enactment in therapy or in a series of journal entries as homework, alternating between the two voices. Several additional variations of the method can be found in the references.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Research on large numbers of virtual dreams offers an impression of how they are commonly formulated by their authors. For example, Neimeyer, Torres, and Smith (2011) found that over half of writers identify themselves as the protagonist of the story, and nearly 60% cast the secondary figures in a benevolent supportive role, while less than 10% describe them as malevolent or neutral. Virtual dreams evoke stories covering a wide range of losses, and are more likely to conclude on a note of optimism (over 40%) than despair (under 30%). Nearly 60% of stories are progressive, in the sense that the action moves toward preferred outcomes, with far fewer representing regressive or ambivalent narratives, respectively. Neimeyer and

his colleagues (2011) provide more extensive discussion of virtual dream stories including numerous examples, and further offer data on their structure and content as well as extensions that enhance their therapeutic use. As part of a broad repertory of narrative techniques to explore emotions, meanings and possibilities in grief therapy (Neimeyer, 2012), the virtual dream can make a novel and creative contribution to our attempt to reconcile with the reality of unwelcome change.

REFERENCES

Neimeyer, R. A. (Ed.) (2012). *Techniques of grief therapy: Creative practices for counseling the bereaved.* New York: Routledge.

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