

# The Ullman Dreamwork Method for Integration: We are Not in Kansas Any More. Kathy Schmidt, MATP

*"Dream is a personalized myth and myth is a depersonalized dream."  
-Joseph Campbell, The Hero with a thousand faces*

While the effects of psychedelics are often profound and life-changing, the integration of these experiences can be difficult, characterized by overwhelm, fear, and confusion. It is said that there is no such thing as a bad trip. Some psychedelic experiences can be difficult, and a bad trip can be protracted when the journeyer struggles to integrate their difficult experience. One way to support one another in community is to participate in peer-led psychedelic integration circles, which are groups led by a peer facilitator, and where participants share and learn from one another to make meaning from their psychedelic experiences. Integration, specifically, is where an individual uses their psychedelic experience to better understand themselves and form new patterns of behavior, beliefs, and practices that support their life in constructive ways. Keith Lowenstein (2021) describes self-integration beautifully in his book, *Kriya Yoga*:

"While their personality does not change, it integrates and becomes more radiant and compassionate and holds much less baggage, as it now recognizes the transpersonal connection." He goes on to explain the brain science of integration as "Neuroplastic changes in one system meet and connect with neuroplastic changes in another system... encouraging emergent properties to take hold through the association areas of the cortex." (p. 207).

## **Psychedelics and Dreams as Non-Ordinary States of Consciousness**

While Dr. Lowenstein was referring to the integration of yoga practices, integration techniques can be used for any non-ordinary state of consciousness (NOSC), including psychedelics, dreams, breathwork, meditation, ecstatic dance, journaling, fasting, art, etc. NOSCs are characterized by changes in perception, thought, and emotions, and a sense of time, self, and surroundings are altered. The messages received while in a NOSC come in the form of a story, metaphor, symbols, archetypes, felt senses, memories, and emotions, to name a few. Non-ordinary states of consciousness, from a transpersonal perspective, have the potential to unlock the mysteries of the unconscious psyche. Understanding the unconscious, including thoughts, memories, and emotions not in our awareness is often the goal of NOSC practices. When the individual can see their blind spots, patterns, and beliefs that hold them back, they may gain a better understanding of themselves leading to personal growth, healing, and the achievement of higher potential.

## **The Neuroscience of Dreaming and Psychedelics**

In both dreams and psychedelic experiences there is a sense of blurred boundaries of the ego, flexibility of mind, imaginative and open states, uninhibited creative energy, and even mystical experiences. In these states, the mind is open to different ways of being and perceiving. Because noradrenaline is suppressed in the brain during these two states of consciousness, the brain will not rush to quick conclusions or create immediate and clear solutions to a problem. Instead, new neural pathways are created in the brain that allow for divergent thinking, which in turn leads to alternative and less obvious solutions. Furthermore, in both dream and psychedelic states, there is a decrease in the activity in parts of the prefrontal cortex which is responsible for logical thinking, planning, and decision-making. This decrease in activity can result in a loss of control over one's thoughts and experiences, as well as a breakdown of the normal filters and constraints that the brain imposes on the experience. This can lead one to come up with solutions that do not seem logical. Lastly, in both the dream and psychedelic state, there is an increase in activity in brain regions that are involved in processing emotions and generating vivid imagery, such as the amygdala and the hippocampus. This can result in more intense and immersive experiences with creative visual images and storylines like a scene in a bizarre movie.

Changes in the neurochemistry of the brain explain the weird quality of dreams and psychedelic experiences: The field of view is open, and many alternatives may be considered without having to follow a logical pattern. Noradrenaline in the brain is helpful in waking life when coming face to face with a tiger, or more practically, when your boss at work demands a quick solution to a problem. In waking life, we are often unable to open our fields of vision and consider many options. Instead, we think quickly and choose from a narrow field with limited choices. The creative brain that does not limit thought, and allows a deeper understanding of self—all sounds good right? The problem is that during dream and psychedelic states, those open fields of vision and non-linear thinking may be so far-fetched that it can be difficult to interpret the meaning. Think of Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* encountering a scarecrow on the side of the road or being chased by flying monkeys. The ordinary-state-brain or waking-brain would be hard-pressed to think of these as solutions to problems.

## **The Ullman Group Dreamwork Method**

“The dreamer in us keeps urging us to greater wholeness... Dreams never give up on us. They are with us every night, urging us to face the issues that restrict and discourage us, or that limit our inventiveness.”

-Ullman & Zimmerman 1979

A group dreamwork method, popularized by a psychiatrist, Montague Ullman, was discovered as a way to understand dreams and integrate their mystifying messages into waking life. The method is based on the principle that working with dreams in a supportive group environment

helps one to gain a diversity of insights, perspectives, and viewpoints. These insights can unlock parts of the dreamer's unconscious thoughts, feelings, and motivations, leading to a better understanding of ourselves. Dr. Ullman asserted that working on dream meaning alone limits the possibilities of interpretation. The method is based on the idea that dreams are a way for the unconscious mind to communicate with the conscious mind through symbols. Key to the method is having others share ideas about someone's dream by sharing their thoughts about what the dream means for them, as an observer, and as if it were their dream. The truth is we can never know what someone else's dream means. We can only imagine how we might envision that dream experience through our own "eyes." In classical projection from a psychological perspective, an individual may unconsciously attribute their traits or emotions to someone else, because they refuse to accept them in themselves. By using the Ullman method the traits and experiences are consciously accepted as one's own experience and viewpoint.

Using this method, dream circle participants hear the details of the dream and then project the dreamer's experience onto their own experience, by prefacing their comments with the phrase "As my dream.....". By using this wording, the participants own their projections in a healthy way. The trick is to use "I" statements instead of "you" so that group participants are not advising and telling others what their dream means. Using this technique in the group process may even prepare the integration circle participants to be more aware of when they project onto others in their daily lives.

### **Using the Ullman Method for Psychedelic Integration**

The same group technique can be applied to psychedelic journeys. Both NOSC (dreams and psychedelic journeys) can have unclear messages and symbols. Dreams have multiple layers of meaning and are highly metaphoric, symbolic, allegorical, nonrealistic, illusory, and emotional. It is as if the unconscious mind knows the dreamer deals with rationally-based events in waking life and wants to catch the dreamer's attention by offering fantastical alternatives to unlock the unconscious mind, including thoughts, emotions, and memories not in awareness and often repressed. The waking brain is in the habit of thinking the same way every day. Michael Pollan compares this to a groove etched into a snowy mountain, where when used over and over it becomes deeper. This is the same for our synapses traveling through neural pathways. We get used to the same ways of thinking so that the neural networks become "etched" into the brain and it becomes difficult to use the other pathways. The dreaming brain shakes up the snow globe and opens up new pathways.

The unconscious mind is also dancing with the psychedelic journeyer much in the same way as dreams, where symbols and highly imaginative experiences play out. The psychedelic journeyer may find meaning in an intentional and ceremonial psychedelic journey with the help of a guide/sitter as well as in recreational experiences if the journeyer is open to the messages. For these reasons, the Ullman technique lends itself well to finding meaning in a psychedelic experience.

## Steps to using the Ullman Method for Dream/Psychedelic Integration Circles

There are some clear steps to using this technique. The most important direction that a group facilitator can provide to participants is to encourage them to own their projections on another's dream by prefacing their feedback with "As my dream/journey/experience. . . ."

### **1. SHARING THE EXPERIENCE**

- After welcoming members, announcements, and a centering exercise, the facilitator opens up volunteers to share their psychedelic experience.
- The sharer starts by sharing their title and intention for the psychedelic journey if they choose (note: Journeymen are encouraged to record their journey and title it).
- The sharer uses the present tense as though it were happening now. It is often helpful for participants to bring their journals in which they record their dreams, journeys, etc. and read directly from them so that no detail is skipped.
- The sharer may communicate anything else that needs to be said about the journey or the context in which the journey took place, including anything that might need to be shared about their life.
- The sharer lets participants in the circle know when they are open for reflection. (The sharer may also indicate that they simply want to share their experience and do not need reflection at this time).

### **2. LISTENING WITH AN OPEN HEART**

- Others in the circle listen to the experience for a felt sense within their being and an open, curious heart
- Others are instructed to notice how the individual shares non-verbally and the energy behind words and phrases used by the person. It is not uncommon in a dream circle for the participants to take notes while the journeyer is sharing to catch their exact phrases. If this is the case they may provide their notes to the journeyer at the end of the session to maintain confidentiality).

### **3. CLARIFYING QUESTIONS**

Other circle members ask questions to clarify what was shared.

- "For clarification, did you say you were with two people? Do you know those people?"
- "What does X (the person, the object, the place, the symbol, etc.) mean to you or what do you associate with those aspects of the journey?"
- "What were the main emotions or felt sense of the journey?" or "Where is the emotional charge in this journey?"
- "Is there anything in your waking life that resembles the experience?"
- "Where is the shadow (challenge, difficulty) in this journey for you?"

Note: Only during the clarifying step the participants will use the word "you."

#### 4. "AS MY JOURNEY" PHRASE

- Next, participants begin to associate freely with the symbols and metaphors of the journey by projecting their personal meaning onto the sharer's experience, using the phrase, "As my experience..." "If this were my journey..." "If this were my imagined version of this journey...I would wonder...I would see...I might be curious about...etc." Participants should refrain from using the word, "you" at this point and stick to "I" statements to indicate they are owning their projections. The participants may share the actions they would take as a result of the journey if it were theirs. For example, "If this were my journey, I might see the guru character as a mentor and seek out a mentor in my own life."

#### 5. CLOSING THE SHARE

Lastly, the person sharing the journey has the last word and is free to respond with their insights. They may share which responses they resonated with or what they might do next with the information gleaned in the circle. The goal here is for the aha moment, where the dreamer gets a message that relates to their life in a deep and meaningful way that they could not have done on their own.

#### 6. FOLLOW UP

Often, the facilitator opens each session asking those who shared from the last session to provide any further insights from the dream/journey or actions they have taken based on their experience and the group feedback.

### Continuing the Integration Journey

*"Until we make the unconscious, conscious, it will direct our life and we will call it fate."*

-Carl Jung

When the gifts from the journey come in many layers, those layers reveal themselves when the person is ready to integrate them. Some layers may include generational, spiritual, relational, physical health, early childhood wounding or trauma, past lives, etc. The individual may not always resonate with the shared projections in an integration circle. The individual is encouraged to sit with what they heard and see what emerges. The sharer may resonate deeply with the shared messages of the circle and use those to continue to work with the experience and their healing. Still, there may be layers left to be revealed if the individual continues to work with the journey. This may play out over days, weeks, months, and even a lifetime if the individual is open to remaining curious about the messages of the dream/journey. This ongoing work to make the unconscious conscious is what Carl Jung referred to as individuation.

The more diverse a group is, the more varied projections the journeyer has to work with. It is also true that these patterns have been deeply etched into our brains, possibly from the time of childhood. We spend years having thoughts that reinforce these neural networks (consciously

and unconsciously). This is why it can be helpful to have others share alternate perspectives on the dream or journey. It is equally helpful if the person sharing their NOSC is open to discovering and rediscovering aspects of themselves that they had forgotten. This can be difficult and the other circle participants must hold a safe container with compassion and respect. Peer-support integration circles are not therapy and individuals may see a therapist or coach concurrently to work through meaning-making experiences that may become overwhelming.

### **One Person's Experience becomes Everyone's Experience**

Using this method, not only takes the cross-talk and advice-giving out of a peer-led integration circle, it also provides benefits to those participants projecting. When one person shares what the journey means as their imagined version of the journey, they are doing their own work. For example, they may be owning their shadow rather than projecting it onto others. It is helpful for participants to pay attention to their feedback on another's dream. It can give them ideas on what may be going on for them and not just for the journeyer. Often one person's feedback will spark ideas for others and the discussion can get very rich. The facilitator may encourage the sharer to continue to go deeper as meaning-making continues to be revealed by group participants. The messages have the potential to become transpersonal, mystical, and deeply profound as the other participants play off of each other's ideas.

### **Meaning-Making through Symbols and Jungian Philosophies**

*"A word or an image is symbolic when it implies something more than its obvious and immediate meaning. It has a wider 'unconscious' aspect that is never precisely defined or fully explained. Nor can one hope to define or explain it."*

-Jung, Man and His Symbols

Through non-ordinary states of consciousness such as dreams, psychedelics, meditations, artistic expression, and flow states, the unconscious messages come to us as images, stories, metaphors, symbols, etc. These are more powerful than words can convey. Symbols go well beyond facts and they provide more than one meaning. Often the experience is ineffable, and can only be felt. When we try to put these experiences into words, we cannot help but engage the ego aspect of the self, and to some extent, lose the pure essence of the experience.

Carl Jung, an early 20th-century psychiatrist, believed that being curious about the images and characters in a dream was key to its understanding. Symbols in the dream are very personal to the dreamer and that is why it is often good to ask the dreamer, "What does X mean to you?" Jeremy Taylor states that the biggest mistake people make is seeing the dream on the surface level. Birth, death, marriage, and divorce, to name some examples, are symbols for aspects of

ourselves that may be birthing, dying, coming into union, or separating. It's fun to get creative with the symbols and metaphors of NOSC experiences.

As the group works together, they tap into the collective unconscious. Jung describes the collective unconscious as the deepest layer of our psyche, which is expressed through certain archetypes and shared cultural symbols. Toto in *The Wizard of Oz* is often seen as the trickster causing problems. Dorothy might have trickster energy in her waking life that is leading her to answers, albeit difficult and menacing along the way. According to Jung and many dream theorists, the symbols and characters in a dream are the dreamer's projections of themselves. These usually involve disowned aspects of themselves or shadows. Jung describes the archetype of the shadow as anything seen as negative by the conscious self. It can be difficult to see our shortcomings, but we can easily see them in others. It is helpful to ask the person sharing their journey to describe the personality traits of others that showed up in the dream/journey. This may reveal aspects of themselves that they have projected onto other characters. The dream or the psychedelic journey may be asking the individual to "wake up" to these aspects of ourselves that are not currently serving us. These are also known as shadows, the characteristics in us that create unproductive or destructive patterns in our waking lives. For example, the character of Dorothy, in *The Wizard of Oz*, may see the wicked witch of the West as an aspect of her personality, including hatred and anger that she has not owned in her waking life. Perhaps this anger is preventing her from returning home or returning to herself as the young woman who can be healed. Perhaps that aspect of her died in the dream, indicating she can release it in waking life.

It may be even more difficult to see our greatest qualities, or what Jung referred to as bright shadow projections. We may project our greatest qualities onto a highly regarded character in a dream. Think about Glinda the good witch giving Dorothy the ruby slippers. In her waking life, Dorothy could not fathom that she had this courage and inner wisdom. The dreaming brain shows her that she has the power to return home and that she had it all along. The popularity of the Ullman method in dream circles may be because we are often not yet ready to see qualities in ourselves. Other dream circle participants may help by offering their perspectives from their dream point of view as the shared experience is part of being human. The goal here is that the dreamer or journeyer resonates with the comments in a way they could not have done on their own.

Psychedelic experiences have symbols that show up repeatedly, and like the dream, these symbols may have unique meaning to the journeyer as they come from their unconscious mind. As the integration circle participants offer their ideas "as their journey," they may be unique to each individual on one level, and they may be tapping into the collective unconscious on another level. The person sharing their psychedelic journey may resonate with some ideas and not others. The goal is to obtain new information that provides a resonating meaning; what is known as the "aha" moment. Katherine Coder, the author of *After the Ceremony Ends*, states that, "When we come in contact with our personal truth and patterns, we are transformed. That

transformation is a key part of the meaning-making process specifically and part of the healing process more widely.”

Some qualities help to hold the space for sharing in an integration circle using the Ullman method. The facilitator may wish to reinforce some or all of these to maintain the integrity of the circle and the process.

1) Holding the space for others. The person sharing has agreed to share a very personal experience and this can feel very vulnerable—this means honoring others by holding the space with compassion. This also means sharing qualities of their projected experience without turning it into their share. Participants need to be careful not to hijack another’s dream/journey and keep the focus on the sharer’s experience.

2) Listening with a sense of curiosity. Participants should not assume they have the answers or that they need to get the meaning “right.” There is no right or wrong.

3) Owning projections – the feedback that participants provide is their own experience or imagined experience, and it is important to use this lens when responding to another about their journey/dream.

### **Advantages of peer-led support**

#### **1. Peer-led support levels the playing field**

No one person serves as the expert. The “leader” is a facilitator and a peer group member, meaning they come to share in the experience as well. Everyone in the group are peers in the sense that they share something in common with each member, in this case, a psychedelic experience or an interest in psychedelics. Combining the Ullman method with peer support allows others to share “as their own experience” so that they do not come across as an expert telling others what their experience means or giving advice as to what they should do.

#### **2. Vulnerability in self-disclosure**

As peers share their experiences, it provides a model and a safe place for others to share their experiences as well.

#### **3. Decreases isolation**

Many people who have had psychedelic experiences do not have others in their lives to share their experiences. This can be very isolating and for the individual that is already struggling in life, this can compound their sense of loneliness. Often parents, friends, and even mental health professionals may have preconceived notions about psychedelics as harmful drug use. Peer groups can bring shared values on some level around psychedelics without judgment.



#### 4. **Shared experiences**

While no one psychedelic experience is the same, there are many aspects of the experience that are common, including profound and cosmic experiences as well as feelings of overwhelm, fear, or confusion. To know that others have had similar experiences can be very comforting and provides a safe place to share without the fear of being judged.

#### **Resources**

Campbell, Joseph (1949). *A Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

Coder, Katherine (2017). *After the Ceremony Ends*.

Jung, C. (1968). *Man and His Symbols*.

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Taylor, J. (2009). *The Wisdom of Your Dreams: Using Dreams to Tap into Your Unconscious and Transform Your Life*. Tarcher/Penguin.

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