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Module 11: Active Imagination

DREAM SCHOOL EDITED TRANSCRIPT

Joseph: In this module, we're going to discuss working with dreams while awake—the process of active imagination. Jung recorded his experiences in the *Red Book,* and they helped him develop active imagination as a therapeutic process. We'll also explore the transcendent function, Jung's concept of how the conscious and unconscious mind interact to create a new experience and knowing.

Lisa: This is an important topic, because although our modules so far discuss ways to approach and work with dreams, there are times when those techniques only get you part of the way. Sometimes when you've had a dream, especially one that feels important, you would like to mine it further for its full significance. Turning to an imaginal technique can help to honor the message of the dream and unlock its wisdom.

Deb: Active imagination takes us out of our heads and into an experiential mode. There are ways we can use our bodies and an altered state to have an experience versus something, instead of trying to 'think' your way through.

Joseph: Jung found active imagination a powerful tool in the process of maturation. He felt that if we understood how to access the imaginal world, we could resolve a lot of our psychological suffering on our own. One's personality can grow exponentially through a living connection with the unconscious.

Lisa: Active imagination is not limited to dreams. You can start with any inner image as a focus of exploration in active imagination, and it is a powerful way of working with dreams.

Deb: Jung gave simple, specific instructions on how to do active imagination. He was writing to a 'Mr. O,' and wrote: "The point is that you start with any image. For instance, just with that yellow mass in your dream. Contemplate it and carefully observe how the picture begins to unfold or change. Don't try to make it into something. Just do nothing but observe what its spontaneous changes are. Any mental picture you contemplate in this way will sooner or later change to a spontaneous association that causes a slight

alteration of the picture. You must carefully avoid impatient jumping from one subject to another. Hold fast to the one image you've chosen and wait until it changes by itself. Note all these changes and eventually step into the picture yourself, and if it is a speaking figure at all, then say what you have to say to that figure and listen to what he or she has to say. Therewith, you gradually create the unity of conscious and unconscious without which there is no individuation at all."

I remember reading that and saying to myself, “that sounds a little too good to be true.” And then, "Okay, Dr. Jung, you're on." I went outside on a summer day, sat in an Adirondack chair, and selected the image of a tiny pond we'd seen the day before on a walk through the woods. In my imagination, it had watercress greenery around most of it. As I held the image, the pool became the face of a girl, and I leaned down and brushed some of the cress away as if it were hair on the face of a sleeping child. Then a frog came to the surface, looked at me and dived back down. I dived in, following the frog underwater to an underground cave and a surprising encounter. I don't know how long this experience took—a few minutes or fifteen minutes--but nobody has ever been as surprised as I was to find out that what Jung wrote to Mr. O is exactly the way it works. The image changed spontaneously, just as it does in a dream, and interacting with it was vivid and powerful. This doesn't happen every time, but it works just as Jung said.

Joseph: The image was changing in a way that surprised you. It let you know that the unconscious acts autonomously.

Deb: And it made for a fully felt meeting between spontaneous unconscious contents and consciousness, because in active imagination, one is awake. It's a very real experience, not something that engages only ego or cognition.

Joseph: Jung said that because the ego is fully awake, active imagination is dreaming with eyes open—consciousness is engaged. The ego is directly affected by the image. When dreaming, the ego is a more passive, or truncated, version of the waking self. When I introduce the idea of active imagination to clients, people usually have a feeling of doubt, just like you did, Deb. They worry that they'll just make something up or experience something insignificant and disappointing. We need to overcome the feeling of doubt about the relationship with the unconscious. How did you sort that out for yourself?

Deb: That first time I went into the experience with a kind of ‘give it a try’ attitude. I didn’t have any particular expectations. This may have helped me bypass ego, which has a way of insisting its in control. Afterward, it was clear that ‘I,’ my ego, did not create this experience--I couldn't possibly have done so,

any more than I (or any of us) design dreams. But there was a felt difference from night-time dreams—my waking self, ego, was fully present. There's value in that, as there is in holding a dream image and writing or imagining it onward. When I do that, my ego is in charge, but in my active imagination experience something else rose up, met me, and provided the content. I haven't told the entire story of this active imagination experience, but enough, I hope, to convince our dream students that when the unconscious acts autonomously in partnership with the waking mind, they will know it.

Lisa: You're both raising an important point, and it's one that often comes up when I suggest active imagination to people: even if consciousness is controlling the process, it contains new elements.

Joseph: Yes, even if the waking personality initially constructs it, we will still be using psychic material that can inform us further. For example, maybe you recall a dream in which there was a cottage with a thatched roof. You can use will and volition to reconstruct that cottage, and land it in a conscious place in your imagination. After that, the process is one of progressive relaxation without losing sight of the image. This lets something new emerge.

Lisa: We offer some specific ways to dip into dreams imaginably in this module. You may find some of these easier than others.

Deb: We have to experiment to see what works. With active imagination, as we've just described, consciousness takes the lead to focus on an image--a cottage or a pond. Ego then extends an 'invitation' to the unconscious by holding the image in mind until something happens spontaneously. That's just like what happens in night-time dreams. We don't 'think them up,'--they occur because the unconscious has autonomous creative power which can be moved closer to consciousness through active imagination.

Joseph: It's as if the ego constructs lattice work, or scaffolding, for the unconscious to animate. Let's take a moment to go back to Jung's world. Active imagination wasn't part of the canon of psychological technique, let alone treatment, prior to Jung's discovery. Earlier psychologists had observed people's intense experiences of autonomous images as psychosis, which Jung was familiar with from his experience at the Burgholzli, a psychiatric hospital. Around 1913, following the painful separation from Freud, Jung fell into a deep depression with tremendous anxiety and disorientation. He experienced visions and dialogued with internal images. Eventually he decided he would listen to whatever his unconscious wanted to tell him, yet reserve the right to believe or not, question or not. This allowed Jung to take a difference stance toward altered states, for he could maintain enough awareness to interact with inner figures, and even take notes. Jung seems to have suspended disbelief, fully entered an inner

dimension, and encountered beings with independent personalities. Accepting that helped Jung experience their powerful transformational impact. He attributed his theory of the unconscious to these encounters, experiences he recounted in a series of black notebooks that have recently been published—the *Black Books*. Later, Jung used this material to create an illuminated manuscript, the Red Book, an amazing, utterly unique, and beautiful work. Jung never published it and his family kept it private for a long time. However, Jung had shared it with select people and some parts were copied. Sonu Shamdasani, a Jungian scholar and historian, discovered these excerpts and sought the Jung family's permission to publish it with all the care it deserved, and now we all have access to an exact reproduction.

Deb: Recounting this story is important. The *Red Book* is physically large, and Jung's illustrations are incredibly artistic renderings of his psychic experiences. It's possible to see in the *Red Book* what active imagination can create. It shows that the dialogue between conscious and unconscious is not only possible but astonishingly creative and abundant.

Lisa: Let's apply the technique of active imagination more directly to a dream experience to see how it works. Here is a dream I had many years ago that I used active imagination to work with: *I'm in a shop in a foreign country. My parents are there and there are beautiful handbags, just exquisite, but they cost $900. I can't make the saleswoman understand that I don't want to buy the bag. She keeps asking if I am going to leave my credit card now or come back with it later. I keep saying, "no, I can't afford $900." It isn't a question of coming up with the money--this seems to be a logic she can't comprehend. The only thing that matters to her is that I have fallen in love with the bag. In the dream my parents suggest, "well, maybe you could find a similar one that's cheaper in another store." And I kept saying, "no, no, even that would be too expensive."* I decided to do some active imagination on this dream, and so first I made sure I was alone and wouldn't be disturbed. I got out my journal and entered a contemplative meditative mindset and imagined this saleswoman. I could picture her very clearly. She was petite, young and beautiful in the dream, and of foreign nationality. I let myself conjure her up and begin a conversation with her. In the dream, I was aware of feeling exasperated with her so I started by asking, "What don't you understand? I can't afford $900." And she kept saying, "Yes, but you love this bag and that's a commitment. There is nothing else you can do [except buy it]." We had it out in this conversation. Then I journaled about my experience and understood that falling in love with the bag was a kind of commitment, just as she said. She was holding a value other than the one held by my conscious personality. For her, cost didn't matter. I would have to go into debt to afford the bag and she said, "Okay, so go into debt. Of course, you're going to do that. There's nothing else you can do." I don't know that I really understood the dream at the time, even after the active imagination, but I did know there was a value my conscious personality was not

acknowledging that mattered. I had this dream about six months before I allowed myself to wonder about becoming an analyst. Looking back, I wonder if that's what it was anticipating.

Deb: That's a good example of how we can experience something that matters by engaging in active imagination. You also touched on having a ritual before you engage in this process: a quiet place with no distractions so you could settle into yourself. There could also be an object you hold, or something you look at that facilitates centering.

Lisa: I light a candle.

Deb: Your special place, your special chair, and a ritual. Then consciousness can extend the invitation and say, *I'd like to re-enter the dream and talk to the saleswoman* and see what rises up to meet you.

Lisa: I didn't know what this dream was about even after the active imagination except that financial cost is not the only standard by which to assign value. Sometimes we can learn more of what a dream means by doing active imagination, but not always. That doesn't really matter because we've experienced a new reality. We have also communicated to our unconscious that what it has to say matters. We are listening and connecting, and that furthers the individuation process.

Joseph: All the images in a dream or active imagination hold a quantity of life force, or libido. It's as if they're batteries. When the ego interacts with these images, certain amounts and qualities of energy are transferred to the ego that helps it move along a developmental path. Lisa, for you to go back into the dream and engage the saleswoman about the bag is important. The bag was a symbol. Your work wasn't about coming to a conclusion, it was about engaging the image--and something shifted about value.

Deb: The experience of active imagination includes and engages affect--it is *felt*, so we know something in a way that is not limited to cognition. Jung emphasizes that affect must be included for a dream, active imagination, or other significant experience to have a lived reality and impact. We know what we live, just as we know when we bump into a wall or taste something new.

Joseph: That active imagination gave you an opportunity to experience the purse as a living symbol, an expression of the transcendent function, one of Jung's important concepts. Jung would notice a tension in a dream, like the tension in your dream between 'you' and the saleswoman, and how, from that, an image offering a creative resolution could emerge. He recognized the symbol's therapeutic value. All symbols mediate the tension between the conscious and unconscious mind. The ego, which we think of as real and

rational, is often in opposition to the unconscious, which is mythic and non-rational. Our tendency is to align with one side, usually the rational side. Lisa, you could have understood the dream as supporting your practicality and frugality. But by working with the dream in active imagination, you were able to engage the non-rational part of yourself: the salesperson advocating for feelings and desires. The purse then became a symbol that validated and united financial responsibility and emotional resonance. The opposites retained their distinctive qualities but were no longer split apart. Both had their say and were included.

Lisa: This dream illustrates what's often true in dreams: two opposing energies. In my dream there was the frugal conscious attitude and the attitude of the foreign saleswoman who cares about loving the bag. That the salesperson is foreign indicates that this is an unfamiliar attitude. Joseph, you just added the concept of the transcendent function and how honoring both conscious and unconscious energies fosters the development of something new. Another way to work imaginally with dreams is with the physical body: first, find the two opposing impulses. In my dream it would be the conscious attitude of *I can't afford that*, and the 'foreign' attitude, *it's exquisite so you should buy it*. Locate one and then the other of those sensations in your body. This may take a little practice. You might say, *where is the,* I can't afford it *in my body?* Maybe that feels like a tightness in your chest. You could even stand up or walk around and see what posture and movement embodies that feeling. Then say, *where is,* but I love it *in my body*? Maybe that feels like a fluttering in your stomach or some physical gestures that express loving it. Just notice both sensations. Then notice if the bodily feelings shift, and if they do, return to the dream imagery and see if you feel a difference.

Deb: Another way to use our bodies in this work is the two-chair Gestalt technique. Using your dream as an example, the dreamer would sit in a 'me' chair and speak aloud all the ways she can't afford it--really make the case for practicality. Then she would get up and move to the 'saleswoman' chair and argue for why loving it means she should buy it. The person would move back and forth between the chairs, letting those two parts of herself have it out with one another. Physically moving like this can help embody the dream characters and their viewpoints--the dreamer's inner conflict. It leads to a newly felt "knowing" as voice, emotion and body come into consciousness more fully. This is about immersing yourself in the tension between two attitudes and experiencing what comes up. It's surprising what this can yield. Sometimes, if a dream figure is wearing red, for example, it helps to don something red. The point is to live it out in the waking world more fully and safely.

Joseph: Another technique to facilitating dialogue between any two positions in a dream is a writing exercise. I might ask a client to put a pen in her right hand and write down what the dream ego would like to say to the salesperson. It might be something like *why are you pressuring me into buying this bag?* Then transfer the pen to the left hand and wait for the saleswoman to reply. As the person begins writing, unexpected ideas appear on the paper. The person can shift the pen from the right to the left hand as if middle of the body is a translator. At the end, read it aloud. It's often a fascinating and informative dialogue that facilitates conversation between two perspectives using dominant and nondominant hands.

Deb: There seems to be a neurological and physical substrate in these techniques that can be engaged in active imagination.

Lisa: Although active imagination can lend itself to interpretation, it's more about having the experience of inviting the unconscious to participate and dialogue with consciousness.

Joseph: Jung was very explicit, as his work with active imagination matured, that we should let the images have a life of their own. They develop according to their own natures and expand us, which is very appealing. It's not about 'making a decision.'

Lisa: Another way to work with dreams imaginally by honoring them through a ritual of enactment. An analysand had a dream that culminated in her asking if it was okay to wear lipstick. In the dream, this was a very involved process. She had to write a long document to make this request. As you might imagine, she wasn't someone who wore lipstick in outer life. We talked about the symbolic meaning of this request, and then we wondered together if it made sense for her to buy some lipstick—to experience it. This was not concretizing the dream, as if dreaming of a new car means you should buy a Ferrari. It's taking a symbol from a dream and experiencing it consciously, not about starting to wear lipstick or not.

Deb: There are things you can try in the external world that serve the active imagination process.

Joseph: Physical representations can also be used. For instance, if the person dreamed of a Ferrari, she could buy a toy Ferrari and have it in a special place, even talk to it. Jung practiced talking to objects. Everything in his environment became an animated extension of his psyche, so we might talk to one of the pots when we're cooking. His world became ensouled, and so can ours. This is another way of working symbolically--with the outer world…

Deb: …and connecting the two realms, inner and outer. Would you think that a kitchen pot was literally alive? No--it's a way of personifying ordinary objects in our lives. *Pot, how do you feel as I put these ingredients in you and stir?* This is a way of imagining the life of a pot or a flower or putting on lipstick and seeing what happens inside. These techniques are all ways of facilitating movement back and forth between conscious and unconscious. I'm suddenly aware that we haven't mentioned drawing or other forms of expression through art.

Joseph: Painting or drawing a dream image translates it from imagination to hands to waking world reality, experience, and reflection. It allows an image to inhabit more of you.

Lisa: People often depict their dreams in drawing or painting. You can also make something with clay, make up a dance, or simply move. These are additional ways of inviting a dream to come alive and express itself more fully in conscious life.

Deb: The point of drawing, painting or sculpting a dream image isn't to do a good rendering. The point is to enter the feeling and let your hand or body go where it will. You might find yourself selecting a color that wouldn't be typical, or using art materials that aren't familiar, such as crayons, pastels, or watercolors. This is about experience, not producing a product.

Joseph: I'd like to share a dream as another example of enacting a dream experience. After analysts complete their training, it's common to have a kind of postpartum depression, and I did. I felt lost and couldn't find my energy after so many years devoted to training. Then dreamed: *I'm in the dining room of my house in Virginia Beach, looking out through the glass door to the backyard. There's an enormous deluge of rain, an epic storm. As huge raindrops pummel the backyard, I begin to notice divots developing, about eight or ten inches in diameter. After the rain stopped, I was curious and went into the backyard to look into the holes. As the water receded, I saw creatures about four or five inches in size in the bottom of each hole. They looked like toads crossed with polliwogs and some other kinds of things. They had a fantastical quality and were at least as large as my hand. They had been drowned by the saturation of the ground and I felt it was very mysterious.* I woke with this odd image in my mind. Because I was in such a difficult place in life, I was motivated to seek whatever additional help the unconscious might provide through active imagination. I put myself in a relaxed state using rhythmic breathing, which is my way to drop down, and then I replayed the dream from the beginning. I hoped that if I replayed each image, I would calibrate my psyche to find that particular inner state again, much like following the sequence of images on a map leads you to a destination. In my imagination I returned to the yard and sat on my haunches next to one of the holes with one of these dead creatures. As I did, I felt a

gentle grief that I hadn't felt in the dream and wept. When I returned to full consciousness, I noticed that my depressed feelings had left. I've thought about that dream over the years, and have come to feel that at the end of analytic training, I was standing on the brink of a new attitude toward vocation and commitment. To step into this meant that other potentials had to be sacrificed so I could devote time and libido to being an analyst. That sacrifice required grieving.

Lisa: These potentials needed to be consciously acknowledged and mourned. It's not that the active imagination illuminated dream in a thunderclap of revelation. That understanding came later, but the active imagination experience allowed something to move in your psyche.

Joseph: Being near the creatures in a waking state woke my feeling function. Just reflecting on the dream didn't have enough impact to shift my inner state.

Lisa: I want to share another helpful technique. When there's an element or a person in the dream that's opposing ego consciousness and has energy, I re-enter the dream imaginally and experience the dream narrative through the eyes of that dream figure. In my dream, for example, I might re-enter it as the saleswoman, stand behind the counter, see Lisa come in and fall in love with the bag. I would inhabit the saleswoman's perspective as fully as possible. Not every dream lends itself to this--it would be harder to do this with your dream, Joseph--but there are many dreams in which the dreamer feels annoyed, frightened, or drawn to a particular dream figure. That can be an invitation to see it through the other's eyes. For example a woman dreamed being in a public place and noticed movement behind her. She turned, saw a man in the shadows and was frightened. I suggested that she go back into the dream and experience it as if she were that man. She closed her eyes for a few minutes and said, "he actually wanted to help me"! This can yield a lot of information about what the dream wants to bring to us.

Deb: I'm appreciating the impact of experiencing *he actually wanted to help me* than to hear an interpretation: *perhaps the shadow figure only seems menacing—perhaps he could help you.* The interpretation might be accepted, but in only a cognitive way. It's altogether different for the person to revisit the dream and have a lived realization.

Lisa: Exactly. Here's another example: a woman dreamed that an acquaintance from high school made fun of her. I asked the woman to re-enter the dream and experience it from the other person's standpoint. She discovered *oh, she wants me to do better for myself. She's trying to goad me into being more true to myself.* What seemed like opposition was in the service of the dreamer's growth. Robert Bosnak, a Jungian analyst and author, says that dream figures have their own subjective reality, like the saleswoman

in my dream. In the *mundus imaginalis*, she's as real as I am, and I can be curious about her, as I might about any unknown person. I can try to see things through her eyes.

Deb: Jungian theory recognizes the psyche as a multiplicity, so imaginal figures *do* have their own subjective realities. People often react to this idea with skepticism because it doesn't fit our usual experience of ourselves as whole, but when you have experiences like these women did—of initially negative dream figures trying to help them—a truth sinks in.

Lisa: What we're saying again and again is to extend experience with dreams. And we keep on using that word: experience.

Deb: When you have experienced something, body, mind, or imagination, then you know that you know.

Joseph: We're coming to a close, but I'd like to add a few examples of active imagination that are not bound by a dream. Jungians and other practitioners who were curious about the inner world began to see a variety of applications. Could one simply start with a strong feeling, for example, and invite the feeling to take a form and dialogue with it? I had a simple but profound experience while walking a labyrinth. I'd read about people traveling all over Europe to walk labyrinths in historic churches and cathedrals. They hoped that by traversing a labyrinth in the right spirit, they would find a "thin place" where needed insight would come through. People often walk a labyrinth with a particular question in mind. I can't recall my exact question as I slowly walked through the labyrinth, but as I reached the center and closed my eyes, a numinous image of a prehistoric animal skull emerged. Then it began to vibrate, the jaw moved as if it was alive, and I felt a primordial connection with the spirit of animals. I felt an ancient imperative to care for each other, to be warm, to group together--all the foundational qualities of mammals were rising from my bones. It felt like a revelation of timeless connection.

Deb: I wonder if Dream School students expect that they will or should have such epiphanies. We've related some because they live in us, and because we want to illustrate the potential of active imagination, we have selected vivid experiences. I also think about a time, however, that I was holding a problem, sat with it for a while, and felt myself settling into sadness. Then a Beatles' lyric rose up: *let it go, let it go*. It didn't take long. I still needed to deal with my issue, but it no longer had *only* angst. Sometimes, these experiences can be soft and small, and if we're receptive, information from the unconscious will come to us and create a shift.

Joseph: We can also incubate such an experience over time. I'm thinking of a presentation we saw several years ago: an analyst had a dream about an ibex as she was trying to work through a chronic feeling of abandonment. She purchased a pelt and meditated under it for months. She focused on the image of the animal again and again, tracking subtle changes until she finally experienced being part of a herd. Her patience and ability to bide with the image helped her embody a new attitude of belonging over time.

Lisa: She was willing to live with the image and let it live in her.

Joseph: And then the "medicine" of the image activated in her.

Deb: Jung says that letting images come alive in us is the ultimate therapy, because the reality of the imaginal realm is healing and liberating. Ultimately, this all about what can happen between you and you, and that capacity is there, indwelling. It may take some practice and intention but it's available. I find that incredibly encouraging and empowering, as did Jung.