



Robert Bosnak

Embodiment

Creative Imagination in Medicine, Art and Travel

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Embodiment: Creative Imagination in Medicine, Art and Travel sets out Robert Bosnak's practice of embodied imagination and demonstrates how he actually works with dreams and memories in groups. The book discusses various approaches to dreams, body and imagination, and combines this with a Jungian, neurobiological, relational, and cultural analysis. The author's fascination with dreams, the most absolute form of embodied imagination, has caused him to travel all over the world. From his research he concludes that while dreaming everyone everywhere experiences dreams as embodied events in time and space while the dreamer is convinced of being awake; it is after waking into our specific cultural stories about dreaming that the widely differing attitudes towards dreams arise. By taking dreaming reality, not our waking interpretation of it, as the model for imagination, this book creates a paradigm shock and produces methods which can be applied in a wide variety of cultural settings.

Through detailed case studies, professionals and students will find thorough discussions of:

- ways to flashback into dreams and memories while in a hypnagogic state of consciousness
- the practice of embodied imagination and its profound physical effects
- psyche as a self-organizing multiplicity of selves
- the nature of subjectivity
- the body as a theater of sense memories
- the limitation of reason
- the process of dissociation
- the treatment of trauma

This book discusses a variety of techniques which may be applied by health professionals to their work with patients and clients. It will also be of particular interest to Jungian and relational psychoanalysts, psychotherapists and clinical psychologists, as well as to artists, actors, directors, writers and other individuals who wish to explore the creative imagination.



Robert Bosnak is a Dutch Jungian psychoanalyst who, after having been in private psychotherapy practice in Cambridge, Massachusetts, for 25 years, currently lives and works in Sydney, Australia.

A radical work that demands nothing less than the end of Descartes' view of the self as singular and fixed, of the self as solely a mental entity. Rather, Robert Bosnak argues, the human "self" is a constantly changing theatre of multiple, embodied or quasi-embodied beings. Intelligent and autonomous, operating in any state of consciousness but especially manifest in dreaming or vision, they are ignored at the cost of our own health. Aboriginal traditions may call them Ancestors; Jungian psychology "projections"; Bosnak directs us to a different metaphysics. Drawing on Henry Corbin's Imaginal Realm, as well as on medieval alchemy, scientific complexity theory, East Asian philosophy, postcolonial critique, and above all on three decades intensive work with dreams, *Embodiment* reveals how humans can relate to the multiple beings alive in each of us. By intensively encountering their essences and relationships to one another, we can, like the alchemists, extract subtle medicine to "enhance cohesion throughout" our multiplex selves. We can be healed. Original and fascinating.

Kimberley C. Patton, Professor of the Comparative and Historical Study of Religion, Harvard Divinity School.

Late at night, when everyone is quiet, sit alone with Robert Bosnak's astonishing book, *Embodiment*, and allow him to accompany you on an exciting journey that is at once physical, spiritual, psychological, and astonishingly compatible with current data from neuroscience and cognitive science. Bosnak challenges our time-honored assumption that what we call the real world and the dream world exist in two discrete domains, and demonstrates in vivid clinical detail that the living presence of dissociated selves that animate our dreams can be summoned into our waking life, can coexist with our waking selves, and can enter into creative discourse with them.

"Dreaming," Bosnak's paradigm for embodied imagination, represents a simultaneous multiplicity of emotional embodied states. He argues that the creative use of embodied imagination in waking life—including in therapy—must correspond as closely as possible to the dreaming condition in order to permit the coexistence of various states of being. Optimally, this requires the presence of a state of consciousness between sleeping and waking—a state that is naturally experienced while falling asleep. In Bosnak's words, the goal is to present "a total world, so real that you are convinced you are awake. You don't just think so, you know it in the same way you now know you are awake reading this book." As a working psychoanalyst, I have found this to be so accurate that I can never again say "It's only a dream." I highly recommend that you make room on your bookshelf for *Embodiment*.

Philip M. Bromberg, Ph.D. Training and Supervising Analyst, William Alanson White Institute; Clinical Professor of Psychology, New York University Postdoctoral Program in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis. Author of *Standing in the Spaces: Essays on Clinical Process, Trauma, and Dissociation* (1998), and *Awakening the Dreamer: Clinical Journeys* (2006)

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In memory of Henry Corbin

Dedicated to my teachers and students

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Sydney, May 2006

Prelude

The strange world you are about to enter, filled with alien perspectives and ancient recurrences, is also the most common world of all. It is a world of many selves in constant states of interaction. Some selves are physical, such as the population of our waking worlds; other selves, like the figures we meet in dreams, appear physical, but are fundamentally unknown. The latter exist in a world where imagination takes on body. Theirs is the realm we shall address in this book: the embodied imagination. These appearances present themselves as “other,” as having a subjective existence different from our own. Some cultural settings tell us that these dreamed beings are sub-personalities and are therefore integral parts of us, others say that they are ancestors, or spirits from a metaphysical realm, while yet others understand them to be garbled memories randomly downloaded by a delirious brain. None of these statements – psychological, spiritual, or positivistic scientific – have anything to do with the phenomena they purport to describe, but only repeat their own culturally established self-understanding. While meeting figures in embodied imagination, as in, for example, a dream, they present themselves as real. We viscerally know we are meeting *other* selves. Any notion beyond this meeting with otherness is a culture-specific afterthought, not stemming from the encountered phenomena.

What we perceive while dreaming is that we are in a place which is not of our making. We didn't invent it. It is a spontaneous presentation, an independently alive manifestation. Apparently physical worlds come to life in a flash and disappear without a trace.

We stand at the dawn of creation.

Into the cave

Deep inside the prehistoric caves the world looks different. From nowhere it seems, suddenly, 13,000-year-old mammoths look down upon us with relative disinterest. They stare at the stalactites dripping down like stone icicles beyond us. One stands thoughtful and woolly, his tusks uncomfortably long as they never stop growing, wearing down his old age. They call him the Patriarch. He is beautifully represented, carved into the stone in different layers of depth, which makes his woolly fur stand out in fuzzy precision. He is carved over scratches made by fingers into stone, scratches similar to ones the cave bears have left behind in the walls to sharpen their claws. The bears had long gone by the time our ancestors came to enter this cave in Rouffignac, in the Perigord region of what now is France, 13,000 years ago.

I envision our ancestor entering, seeing the carvings left by bear. This must be the way the wall is met, he thinks. So first he makes similar scratches with his fingers, to imitate the ancestor, the bear, who has made his winter beds here for tens of thousands of years. This is the way the ancestor did it, so this is how we begin, honoring our forebears as a background to our own impressions. The Patriarch stands looking back at the entry of the cave, kilometers ago, carved over a grid of scratches. Four fingers, like a bear's claw, is the matrix. Farther to the right we see two herds of mammoth meeting, looking at each other. The frieze follows the contours of the wall. These are the powers in all their gigantic nature. They meet, face off, maybe peaceably: two tribes of great spirits. This is the largest consistent drawing. It is the cave of mammoth spirit facing itself – encounter, reflection.

Along the wall I see, shimmying on his belly along the cave barely two feet high, our ancestor on his way to be initiated into the world of the great spirits, the massive mammoth. He crawls on to the great hall, half a meter high, where, lying on his back, he draws the great spirits among whom he lives, the alien beings, greater, swifter and stronger than he on the ceiling in order to capture and venerate their spirit and become initiate to their powers. Unable to take distance he draws the ceiling animals life size, in perfect

proportion, as if by entering their body he can feel along their contours as he draws. Lit by a tiny grease lamp, spooking the cave around him, I see him in a face-off with dark fears, and his awe of the Great Ones. Encounter, meeting, face-off, opposing directions, the Great Ones show the way.

We leave the primordial corridor, seated comfortably on a toy train riding us back over kilometers of dug-out cave to suit our quick contemporary taste for instant experience, to the entry where we buy postcards.

In imagination we meet mammoths carved in the bedrock of being. They predate us, dwarf us and are possibly indifferent to our existence. Imagination is our way of knowing them.

The trip is an experiment, never tried before. We shall go with a small band of 17 people to live in a rocky shelter along the muddy Vezere river, inhabited for over half a million years by humans and proto humans alike, put up camp and dream together, in order to get knowledge by way of imagination. In caves which sometimes are like great cathedrals with stalactite columns of glistening beauty, pipe organs of gigantic proportion shaped by excretions from walls, and in the flickering light of the fire, animal spirits coming at you from the heart of the rock, you know there exists a *spirit of place*. Imaginings in these surroundings are different from those in Times Square. We instinctively recognize the difference. The deep recesses of earth incubate different musings than does the screaming neon light of New York's entertaining heart. Each excites us differently. After a while our heart beats with the spirit of a place, unless we are able to hide away in a walkman-world of insulation.

Our camp is at La Madeleine at an unexcavated site below to the one where such a treasure trove of prehistory was found, that scores of museums were supplied and a whole era got its name (from the Latinized version of Madeleine): the Magdalenian period, 13–30,000 years ago. The owners of the site have given us permission and we did not ask the *gendarmérie*, the ultimate authorities in prehistoric sites. We camp outside the law, outside of time, outside of national boundaries, with participants of six countries from four continents. We eat the same food the prehistorics would have eaten – except for one inexplicable lapse of pasta – while we sleep on the sand under the rock canopy which sheltered *Homo erectus*, the proto human who roamed this earth long before we, *Homo sapiens*, did. I dream here that a band of tall *Homo erectus* folk, replete with marching drums and tubas like a prehistoric scene from *Music Man*, come walking up from the far end of the rocky shelter to welcome us, Cro-Magnon man (inhabitant of the Magdalenian period and our genetically identical ancestors), the new kids on the block.

For a week now we have been dreaming of our personal heartbreak, and the pains and joys of being this specific individual in our personal day and age. But the dreaming is beginning to shift . . .

Around our fire, Asuka from Japan sits downwind (the wind has turned since we started this two-hour session of dreamwork), oblivious to the smoke blowing in her face, as she sojourns in deepest concentration inside her world of dreaming. She feels isolated from the group. Her English is good, but somehow when it comes to dreams she cannot follow what is spoken. It reminds me of my own difficulties in understanding English when it is sung. Around the campfire with its low flames, she reports her dream of sitting around the campfire with flames reaching up very high. Another woman from the group reaches through her isolation, touching her gently, asking her how she is doing. Then, beyond the fire, Asuka senses the presence of a stone. She tells us that in her native Japan there are some stones house spirits, called *kami*. Such is the stone she senses. Helped by the concentrated effort of the group, Asuka is now in a flashback of the original dream experience. Once again she sits by the towering campfire feeling great sadness and isolation. At first her sadness is dry, she tells us, but then it turns moist in a flow of tears. I cry as well, having often felt that particular Japanese version of the pain of being excluded from the group as from the source of being. The more she senses the rising flames of the common campfire, the more outside and sad she feels. Her skin is like an eggshell, she tells us, encasing an inside of emptiness. When the member of the group, called Shelley, touches her, Asuka feels as though the shell cracks and a tiny opening is made. She points to her right cheek, between the bridge of the nose and her eye. Her hand motions are exquisite as she gestures the tiny-ness of the opening through which now the pressure equalizes, making her no longer feel empty inside, cut off from the fullness outside. Reality becomes alive again. Then she senses the stone behind the flames. As she focuses on it, suddenly, she is pulled feet first into it. The stone is as a Harry-Potter-portal opening to an otherworldly depth. Asuka feels she could travel down forever, never reaching to the core. Surprisingly enough, her torso does not go down, however, it is just her feet that reach for this endless depth. Her feet have become intelligent, sensing toward the core, sensitive and determined. At the same time she notices the upward-thrust of the gigantic campfire flames, which pull her towards the sky. Asuka is stretched painfully, like a string, between the heavens and the underworld. Yet in this pain she feels no longer isolated from the group.

This stretch between the worlds, the various states of being, has been called “soul” by western alchemists. For soul, they say, is stretched between mortality and eternity. They named it *anima media natura*, soul stretched between our opposing states, the meeting of a single lifetime and Forever. It is quiet in our rocky shelter where half a million human years surround our brief contemporality.

Una is as Irish as they come. Her last name is virtually unpronounceable to the non-Celtic tongue, which twists and stumbles, to her slight amusement, over the strange vowels and unexpected consonants. Her blue eyes