

Dreams in Traumatic Reality

The author provides a select group of illustrations of the internalized terror of some victims who managed to access professional mental health services.

by Petar Opalic

Petar Opalic, MD, PhD.,
Professor, Belgrade University,
Neuropsychiatrist and Psycho-
therapist, Institute for Mental
Health, Belgrade

All in all, the population of Serbia and Montenegro has been living in chronic stress for nine years. The stress was made somewhat bearable by its emerging and developing gradually over a long period of time. In contrast to the majority of the Yugoslav population, a minor part (not more than 10%) was directly affected by the war in terms of a family members going to the front, taking refugees, famine, or immigration to some other country.

In such an atmosphere, and in such times, I continued my own research, which included research on the dreams of our research subjects, that is patients. Needless to say, these dreams were affected by the war, as were my own dreams. These dreams expressed in a particular way the intensity and the nature of stress-inducing living conditions. The presentation of the dreams in a narrative form, with basic biographical data of the person involved, follows. At the end of this phenomenological presentation of subjects' dreams, I shall present my own dreams related to traumatic experiences that most of the people of former Yugoslavia more or less directly experienced.

The material on dreams was obtained in the following way: The subjects included in a re-

search of psychopathological response to trauma were randomly chosen for this research. The subjects were given two blank pages of paper with given instructions on the top: Describe a dream or dreams you remember from any period of your life. Note the period." The time given for the description was not limited. All dreams are presented in their original form supplied by the subject. I have presented only the dreams that were most obviously affected by the war. As a researcher, I would sit and read these dreams. Presented are also a dream heard from a subject, who is a patient of mine, as well as my own dreams.

The Dreams of Randomly Chosen Subjects

The dream of a 23-year old student, living with his mother and grandmother in a small town near Belgrade:

A catastrophe has happened. I found out that the Moon has fallen on the planet Earth. I can smell sulphur and smoke. I am surrounded by a lot of people, all stunned. There are a lot of dead people. All the time I am running the streets and watching these horrible scenes, until I wake up, very upset.

A 33-year old mechanical engineer, employed, living in

Belgrade with his wife and two daughters:

There are a lot of soldiers. It is the First World War. A lot of dead in pits. The pits are covered with planks, and the soldiers who have survived are crossing the pits and walking between them. They are in Serb army uniforms. Interesting thing is that there are no wounded. Everything is covered with smoke, fog and soot. It is cold. Not a sound is heard. Everything is so silent. Then I wake up.

Below follows a dream of a 34-year-old kindergarten teacher, mother of two children:

I am dreaming of my nephew who was a little boy then. I am taking his arm I have found in a park, torn off. I was very attached to him and I still am. Maybe because he was the first boy to be born in our family after a longer period of time. I usually do not remember my dreams, but that picture with his arm torn off appears very often in my dreams.

Below follows the dream of a 49-year-old clerk, originating from the part of Croatia mainly populated by Serbs until 1995, the part mostly struck by war. He has been living in Belgrade with his wife and two children for the last 20 years. My colleague, who had conducted the poll, told me that the man had consented to describing his dreams reluctantly, and left obviously more dejected following the description he had supplied.

Lately, I've been dreaming relatively often of my birth-place, which is now practically deserted.

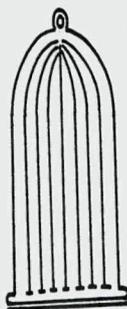
All Serb population has been expelled. While the war lasted, I very often dreamt that I was with them there. Later, when the conflicts ended, I dreamt that I am going to my birthplace, I can see all the details, the scenery, even colours, but I feel very unpleasant, and I wake up with these discomforting feelings.

A 22-year-old woman, single, clerk, living in Belgrade, dreamed that her teeth were falling out.

It is a common belief in our folklore that losing teeth announces the death of a close family member (Stojanovic, 199):

I have dreamed several times that I am losing my teeth. I am standing in front of a mirror and I cannot believe that they are falling out, one by one. My hand is full of my teeth. I am thinking how I would go out like that, toothless. And in the middle of that chaos, nervousness, sorrow and discomposure I wake up.

A 35-year-old woman, shop assistant, living with her husband, daughter, and son, following



the operation of her ankle she had injured at her working place. Her parents have left the war region in Croatia and are

living in a refugee camp near Belgrade:

Couple of days before I injured my ankle, I was dreaming that I am with my parents, in a refugee camp in Despotovac. People are dancing, the music is playing. I want to dance with them, but my mother would not let me and pushes me off. The dancers, the musicians, look like the devils themselves, black haired, horned. When she pushed me off, my mother, together with my sister-in-law, who died 5 years ago, goes to some cellar, and I follow them. When we got there, I see that it is full of children and people. Somehow, I manage to get out, but my mother and my-sister-in-law remain inside the cellar.

Below follows a dream which followed a series of conversations with refugees and their relatives, typical of refugees. It was dreamt by a 34-year-old soldier from Bosnia, with an infected wound in his thigh. According to my colleague, the poll-taker, the subject, in contrast to other subjects, replied to the question in a very detailed manner, adding oral explanations he had not supplied in writing. Other subjects, did not comment while writing about their dreams, inquiring only about the technical aspects of the poll:

I am walking along the streets of a familiar town. It used to be a lively town, full of brightness and beauty. However, today it is utterly different. The streets are deserted, not a living soul can be seen. The war is raging. The enemy is attacking from all sides, but the people are resisting their

attacks. Far off, I can hear the roar of cannon fire. The air I am breathing is full of gunpowder and some kind of danger I can feel. The buildings are tall, and they look so ghastly, in that silence. I stop for a while, and look at myself. I am in my war uniform, little shabby and smeared with blood here and there. In my hand I hold an automatic rifle, with cartridge belt reaching the ground. Then I look in front of me and stop. I can see a fire blazing up, consuming everything on its way. It is blazing up and approaching me. The whole town is consumed in flames, simply disappearing in front of my eyes. I am disappearing too, standing there and watching into the distance.

A 40-year-old worker, father of two children, and a soldier in the Bosnia war, describes and comments on his dreams:

1. *dream:*

When I was wounded, I had many unpleasant, ugly dreams. In one of them I dreamt myself being at the front near Gradacac. We were fighting for a village in the vicinity. There were a lot of dead, wounded and massacred. It disturbed me to such an extent, that I roused from my sleep, almost falling off the bed. I was frightened, but at the same time happy to see it was just a dream.

2. *dream:*

I remember a dream I had in the hospital in Brcko, immediately following the wounding. I dreamed that I had been killed. I dreamed all sorts of horrible things, like in my previous dream. I got frightened and roused from my sleep. For a moment, I was

happy it was not a reality, but, following these nightmares, I could not sleep.

It is interesting to note that many subjects dreamed about WW II, a time when Belgrade was bombed twice—in 1941 by Germans, and in 1944 by the Allies. A 60 year old woman, randomly chosen, wrote:

I remember my childhood, very unpleasant dreams of war, bombing, trenches, tanks, which I used to dream very often. Thinking of my dreams as an adult person, I remember only the dreams of flying. My body seems to be flying, and it makes me feel very pleasant.

As a kind of message of this paper, we shall present a dream and the comment of a man who had lost both his legs at the Bosnian front, experienced clinical death, and is a bedridden invalid now. I asked him to describe his dreams. He wrote the following:

This is a dream related to my previous life. I dream that I have both legs, that I work and live decently, that I would never have to go to war and fight for ideas of some other people. I dream that I had a family and children, that I and their mother are playing with them. And now, I cannot do any of these things.

Below are presented the dreams of a man wounded in the Bosnia and Herzegovina war, who was, following several injuries, like the previous subject, hospitalized. This man I visited upon the request of his relative, a friend of

mine. Since he was at the same time the subject included in the research, our contact was a very close one, different and emotionally charged, which probably resulted in his elaborate explanation of his dreams and his commenting on them:

Twenty days following my injury, I was dreaming of my birth-place, Mrkonjic Grad, the town where I also lived. The town was occupied by Croatian Army forces, which upset me more than the wounding itself. Thinking of the things that happened there pushed into the background my wounds and my thinking of myself. The Dayton Agreement stipulates the return of Mrkonjic Grad to Serbs, but Croats are burning it systematically, so that it should be completely destroyed.

That night in December, I was dreaming that I was watching my street. It was all bright with sunshine. I could clearly see my house and my granny's house. They were safe and sound, not a little bit shattered. I felt as if something was telling me: "It is good, you are still lucky." With this pleasant feeling, I woke up and the whole following day was very nice. Even the news that our houses had not been destroyed reached us. The news came from our friends, Croats, who had remained in the town.

Recently, I've again dreamed that I am in front of our house, in front of the entrance door. Of course, I immediately wish to enter, but I do not want to enter through the front door. Something told me to use the back entrance, through a

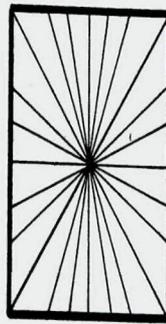
room I had turned into my workshop, to see, on the way, if my tools had been taken. The door is closed and it all seems to have been left untouched. When I push them, I feel an explosion and I start, but it does not wake me up. A thought crosses my mind: The door was mined, but I am not injured, even the door is not demolished". When I enter the room, it is all burned and empty. I wake up with this ugly feeling that everything I had was taken away and destroyed. Are my hidden fears justified? Will I ever be able to return anywhere?

As soon as I finished my conversation with the patient, I realised how similar were his dreams to the dreams I was dreaming then. It was then that I made a decision to include my dreams related to the matter later in this paper.

Below follows a dream of a current patient of mine, a woman of 32 years of age, civil servant, single, without any sexual experiences whatsoever, living with her mother and brother in a small rented flat. She is a Serbian refugee, expelled from Kosovo at the beginning of NATO strikes on FR Yugoslavia. Immediately following the expulsion, after two weeks, her father died, which marked the onset of her psychotic behavior. Talking to me as her psychiatrist, the person she expects help and support from, speaking without any emotional modulations, she told me the following:

I expect you to understand me. Whoever I tell this, I get the same answer: "You have to be treated. You are crazy." Ever since we have

been expelled from Kosovo, I feel that people are manipulating me. I feel that they want to control me when we communicate, that they want me to be some other person. Now I have become three different persons at the same time. More than the others, my former elementary school teacher and her husband are doing it.



During our third session, she told me a dream she had dreamed immediately before her psychotic decompensation:

I dream that I am getting up from a grave. I am naked, all black and blue and wrapped in cobwebs. Somebody must have beaten up on me. Suddenly, I wake up, but I wake up in my dream. Then I dream I am in my room, dressed up. My neighbor, a teacher, sits next to me. She looks like my former elementary school teacher who has been chasing after me, but it's not her. My neighbor is holding a child which I have, in my dream, adopted. The child is a baby of a Serb woman, raped in a concentration camp by a Croat. I felt sorry for the child. I

ask her what the child's name is. She replies: A fiend." I take him to be something evil, like a devil himself. Then I wake up. Tomorrow, I think about the dream. This cobweb is some kind of net, it seems I've been entrapped. Before that dream, I read a newspaper article about "Marija 1993," a Serb woman in a concentration camp raped by Moslems. It must have all interweaved somehow in my head.

From the very beginning of her dream-story, I was appalled by its contents. As soon as she told her story, I thought: Only the horror of psychotic dreams contents can make us realize all the reality of dreadful war insanity.

The Dreams of the Author:

My dreams are related to the objective inability to go to the place where I spent 15 years of my life, from 10 to 26 years of age. The inability results from quite bad relations between Serbia and Croatia burdened with a series of unsolved problems:

My father, Dane, then a 71-year-old pensioner, threatened with the loss of his life, was expelled from Djakovo, Croatia, at the beginning of July 1991. Djakovo is the town where I completed my elementary and secondary school education. I left it for Zagreb, where I began my studies of medicine and philosophy. Following a night of mental torture by two Croatian policemen (who threatened to kill him, searched the house without a warrant, deprived him of his personal belongings, etc.), my father left the house in utmost secrecy

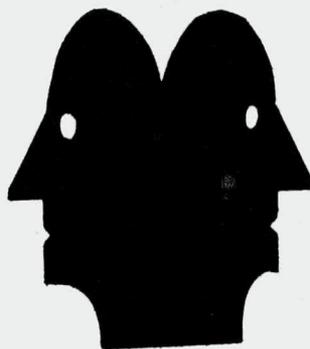
early in the morning, never to return. That he saved his life was confirmed when a couple of weeks later, explosive devices were thrown into his bedroom twice, completely destroying the interior.

The following dream that has been repeated around 20 times for the last 8 years:

I returned to Djakovo, into the suburb we called Chicago, a part of the town across the railway where I had lived. I am standing in front of our house, at the corner of two streets. The house had been built by my father and my late mother, Djuja, with the support of my sister, my brother and me. Something tells me that I must not enter the house. Some other people moved in, or if I try to enter, something terrible would happen. I will be arrested, or taken away, or simply disappear. On the other hand, I crave to enter the house. Sometimes the house is half demolished, sometimes completely changed, with strange, unfamiliar arrangement of its rooms, sometimes all overgrown with vegetation etc. In some of my dreams, I fear to even approach it, and I sneak, from the distance of 7-8 neighboring houses, along the edge of the suburb, and I usually pass by a field we had owned. In others, the houses in the neighborhood are also changed, but I am certain that they are the neighboring ones. I usually do not see any of my neighbors, people I have known from my childhood and youth. There are usually no people, and even if there are, they somehow are avoiding me. The

atmosphere is unpleasant, disagreeable, full of tension and expectations, and, at the same time, yearning for the place of my childhood and youth. I usually wake up in similar disposition.

Below follows the dream I had at the beginning of January 2000. In those days I talked on the phone to my cousin living in Djakovo, the person who had spent some time with my family as a young girl, and the person I have been contacting since the beginning of the Balkan wars. She remained with her family in Djakovo.



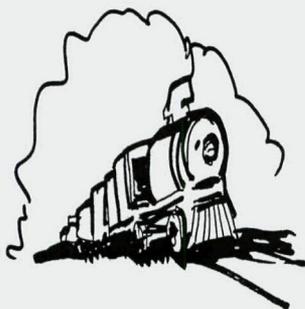
During our conversation, we exchanged information and many emotions related to our relatives and common friends.

The dream:

I am coming to our house in Djakovo. I am walking along V. Lisinski Street, leading to our house. I am high-spirited. The atmosphere in the street is rather lively. I am passing by a childhood

friend who had lived in the neighborhood. It seemed to me that he smiled. I am approaching him to greet him, but he is somehow cold, refusing to shake hands. We are greeting rather coldly. I keep on, and meet another childhood friend. I thought for a moment that we would embrace and greet each other, but he rather disinterestedly passes by me, murmuring something. I become ill disposed, I begin to feel awkward, and give up the idea of greeting. I am standing at around 50 meters distance from the spot where our house is supposed to be, but it is not there. It is tumbled down, like a couple of houses neighboring it and a huge building site has emerged. I am approaching to ask a worker: "What are you building here?" He replies: "We are building a brick plant from Satnica." (My father used to work in the brick plant in Djakovo, while two Croatian policemen, who had tortured my father the night before he escaped, were from Satnica). Then I notice that a part of our house still stands. I finally dare to enter the house. Full of happiness, I recognise pieces of furniture in the living room and a thought crosses my mind: "Oh, they are still here, we could transport them to Belgrade." I am deeply touched that I have finally found the house, and I for a moment think: "I would like to have a good cry now." Then a woman shows up, allegedly temporarily living in our house, and she invites me for a cup of coffee. But, she leads me out of the house and we are passing by some tables arranged in such a manner resembling an inn. (I then thought: private business initiative has be-

gun.") But she does not let me sit at the table, she offers me to sit on the bare ground. I accept it, but when I decide to sit and finally drink my coffee relaxed, I can see that everything around me is muddy. I wake up, with mixed



feelings of distress and relief.

Instead of a conclusion

Walking slowly along a railroad track, I am jumping on every second sleeper. Suddenly, a train is approaching at a great speed, but I am not afraid. I am carrying a cage with a bird in my hand. The bird is a very little one, yellow and frightened. I am telling it that everything is all right, that we are not endangered. But the bird does not understand me, which makes me very sad.

Instead of interpretation of the dreams presented in this paper, the dreams whose contents and basic emotion is related to trauma, I have presented a dream of a 28-year-old man, carpenter, father of a child, living in Belgrade, a randomly chosen subject, whose dream in a very

picturesque way presents the very essence of what I wanted to say in relation to the topic of dreams in traumatic reality, that is, the topic of the heart of human existence in general. The question every man should answer is the topic raised by the dialogue of the bird from the dream and the man dreaming the bird.

The "bird," if we may interpret it, is a spark of freedom and reason we all feel in our inner self and constantly talk to, thinking if we should let it free from the cage (getting rid of various inner inhibitions and inertness of ours); or keep on watching it frightened (giving in to the outward chaos—the train in the dream—threatening us). Every man is always given a free and rational choice, especially in extraordinary circumstances that the wars and other social cataclysmic events, like those of the nineties in the Balkans, abound in. □

References

Stojanovic J., Snovi B. (1999) od simbola i mitova do istorije ljudske civilizacije; u: Ilankovic N., (ur.), Svest, spavanje, snovi, Institut za Psihijatriju, KCS, Beograd, 1999, 161-175

Copyright of Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping is the property of Cleveland State University and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.