

THE NIGHT GARDEN



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THE DREAMING CHILD AND THE ANXIOUS ADULT

When the Child's Image Wakes Something Unfinished in Us

Oliver Riddett | The Archetype Approach

The dream belongs first to the child. Before we explain it, we must notice what it has stirred in us.

A child wakes and says, "Mummy died in my dream."

The room changes.

The adult feels it before they think it.

A drop in the stomach. A flash of fear. A private picture of accident, illness, abandonment or loss.

The child, meanwhile, asks for toast.

Ten minutes later they are building a tower and arguing about the red block.

The adult is still standing in the dream.

This is one of the strange things about children's symbolic life.

The image may belong to the child, but it does not remain neatly inside them.

It enters the adult.

It touches memory, fear, belief, guilt, grief and every old story we thought we had packed away somewhere sensible.

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Then the adult begins to respond not only to the child's dream, but to what the dream has woken in them.

This can happen in families and settings alike.

A child says a wolf ate Daddy. The adult consults Google, a dream dictionary and three generations of family trauma before breakfast.

Steady on.

The dream may be important.

So is the adult's reaction.

But they are not the same thing.

WHEN THE DREAM FRIGHTENS THE ADULT

Adults often imagine that anxiety begins after we have interpreted something as dangerous.

Quite often, the body gets there first.

A child describes falling, death, fire, monsters, a parent disappearing, somebody entering the house or a baby being left behind.

The adult tightens.

Attention narrows.

Questions arrive quickly.

"Why did you dream that?"

"Did somebody say something to you?"

"Are you worried Mummy will die?"

"Did the man touch you?"

The adult may believe they are gently gathering meaning.

The child may experience an atmosphere that suddenly tells them the image is dangerous.

The dream becomes heavier because the adult has become afraid of it.

This does not mean adults should become blank, casual or emotionally unavailable.

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A child needs to know that their inner life can affect us.

But they also need to know it will not knock us over.

There is a difference between being moved and becoming flooded.

When the adult floods, the child may begin caring for the adult, withdrawing the dream, exaggerating it to hold attention or learning that certain images are too dangerous to bring into relationship.

Sometimes the child says, "It was only pretend," not because the image meant nothing, but because the adult made meaning feel too expensive.

A child needs to know their inner life can move us without becoming responsible for holding us together.

TWO STORIES ENTER THE ROOM

Whenever a child brings a powerful dream, two stories may enter the room.

There is the child's story.

And there is the story the adult begins telling themselves about it.

The child says, "You left me in the forest."

The child's story may be a dark wood, a path, a sudden absence and a fox that leads them home.

The adult's story may be: "My child feels abandoned because I work too much."

Or: "This proves the separation has damaged them."

Or: "They are blaming me."

Or, in the opposite direction: "It is nonsense. Dreams mean nothing."

Both panic and dismissal can protect the adult from uncertainty.

One fills the dream with meaning too quickly.

The other empties it before it has had a chance to breathe.

The adult's story may be understandable.

Perhaps they really do carry guilt about work, separation, illness or a family change.

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Perhaps the dream touches their own childhood fear of being left.

Perhaps death, forests or missing children belong to a private history the child knows nothing about.

The problem begins when the adult's story quietly takes ownership of the child's image.

The conversation stops being: "What was it like for you?"

It becomes: "What does this say about me?"

The child's dream is then recruited into the adult's trial, defence, confession or rescue mission.

That is too much work for one small wolf.

PROJECTION RARELY ANNOUNCES ITSELF

Projection does not usually walk into the room wearing a badge.

It feels like obvious truth.

The adult does not think, "I am placing my unfinished fear into this image."

They think, "I can see exactly what this means."

A parent who fears losing closeness may hear a dream about another family as rejection.

A practitioner with a history of chaos may hear storms, burglars or broken houses as signs that something must be wrong at home.

An adult who was never protected may become intensely alert to every violent image.

An adult who was mocked for sensitivity may laugh the dream away before it can touch them.

A spiritually inclined adult may rush to call the dream a message, visitation or past-life memory.

A highly rational adult may close the opposite door and insist that it is random brain-noise.

Different conclusions. Same hurry.

The image has not been allowed to remain uncertain.

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Jung understood projection as a process in which something belonging partly to our own inner life is experienced as though it exists wholly in the other person or object.

For early-years practice, the useful point is simple.

A child can carry an image that awakens material in the adult.

If the adult does not notice this, they may respond to their own material while believing they are responding purely to the child.

The answer is not to become free of all projection before speaking to children.

Good luck with that.

The answer is to become interruptible.

To notice the heat.

To recognise that certainty has arrived suspiciously fast.

To create enough room for the child to remain the owner of the image.

THE NEED TO KNOW

Powerful dreams offend the adult desire for a tidy world.

We want to know whether the dream is normal.

Whether it predicts something.

Whether it means trauma.

Whether it came from a film, a sibling, a memory, a spiritual experience, a fever or the cheese sandwich at tea.

Sometimes those questions are reasonable.

But the need to know can become more urgent than the need to listen.

Dream dictionaries are attractive because they end uncertainty.

Wolf equals threat.

Water equals emotion.

House equals self.

Teeth equal anxiety.

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Lovely. Job done. Everybody home.

Except the child's wolf might be a friend, the water might be joyful, the house might belong to a witch and the teeth might simply have been enormous and brilliant.

Fixed interpretation comforts the interpreter.

It does not necessarily meet the dream.

The same is true of rapid professional categorisation.

The dream becomes evidence of anxiety, attachment difficulty, sensory overwhelm, grief, trauma, neurodivergence or an archetypal imbalance before the child has shown us what they are actually doing with it.

These possibilities may sometimes matter.

But possibility is not conclusion.

The adult who can tolerate not knowing offers the child something precious.

An image that does not have to defend itself against instant explanation.

The adult does not need to know what the dream means in order to help the child remain in relationship with it.

CALM IS NOT DISMISSAL

There is a soft form of avoidance that sounds like reassurance.

"Do not worry. It was only a dream."

The sentence is often kind.

It is trying to return the child to safety.

But it can close the door too soon.

The child already knows the dream happened during sleep.

What they may not know is what to do with the feeling still living in their body.

A better response does not need to become solemn or dramatic.

"That sounds like a strong dream."

"You looked frightened when you told me."

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"Do you want to tell me what happened next?"

"Would you like to draw it, or leave it for now?"

"You are here with me now."

These responses do two things at once.

They recognise the image.

And they recognise waking reality.

This is containment without cancellation.

The adult does not climb into the nightmare and scream beside the child.

Nor do they stand outside shouting that none of it is real.

They hold the doorway.

THE ADULT AS CONTAINER, NOT OWNER

The word containment is sometimes misunderstood as control.

In relational work, it is closer to the capacity to receive an experience without immediately throwing it back in a more frightening form.

The child brings fear.

The adult does not return panic.

The child brings confusion.

The adult does not return a rigid explanation.

The child brings a strange image.

The adult does not seize it, decorate it and put their own name underneath.

The experience is received, steadied and made more thinkable.

This is close to what Winnicott described through the holding environment and what Bion explored through containment: the child gradually develops the capacity to bear and think about experience through relationship with an adult who can bear it first.

In the Night Garden, symbolic containment may also be physical.

The dream can be placed on paper.

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The monster can be made from clay.

The storm can have a drumbeat that begins and ends.

The lost child can build a path home.

The adult offers edges without insisting on an answer.

A page.

A basket.

A den.

A story with a pause.

A calm body nearby.

The adult is not neutral.

They are present, protective and available.

But they are not the owner of the dream.

WHICH ADULT ARCHETYPE HAS TAKEN THE WHEEL?

The Archetype Approach gives us a useful way to notice our own response.

A child brings a dream and one of the adult's familiar powers may leap forward.

The Helper wants to soothe, rescue and make the bad feeling disappear.

The Thinker wants to understand it immediately.

The Planner wants a cause, a category and an action plan by lunch.

The Friend worries that the dream reveals a rupture in the relationship.

The Rebel may challenge the family, the setting or the whole rotten system before the child has finished the sentence.

The Imagineer may expand the image into a vast spiritual or symbolic event.

The Joker may make a joke because the atmosphere has become uncomfortable.

Energy may intensify the moment simply by caring very loudly.

The Watcher may pull back so far that observation becomes emotional absence.

None of these powers is wrong.

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Each carries a genuine gift.

Care matters.

Thought matters.

Order, truth, humour, imagination, intensity and observation all matter.

Difficulty begins when one power takes over before the child has shown us what the moment needs.

The adult's task is balance.

Movement and Stillness: can I resist rushing and remain present?

Care and Playful Disruption: can I take the child seriously without making the atmosphere unbearably heavy?

Truth and Harmony: can I hear something uncomfortable without forcing reassurance or conflict?

Imagination and Order: can I welcome symbolic possibility without fixing it into a system?

Intensity and Intellect: can I feel the power of the image and still think clearly?

Exploration and Construction: can I remain curious while offering a safe form, boundary or next step?

The question is not, "Which archetype does the dream reveal in the child?"

It may first be, "Which archetype has been activated in me?"

WHAT TO SAY WHEN YOU DO NOT KNOW WHAT TO SAY

Adults sometimes overcomplicate these moments because we believe the perfect response must be profound.

It usually does not.

A few simple sentences can keep the image open without leaving the child alone with it.

NOTICE

"That dream has stayed with you this morning."

"You keep coming back to the wolf."

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"Your body went very still when you told me."

CLARIFY WITHOUT INTERROGATING

"Was that part of the dream, or did something like that happen when you were awake?"

"Do you remember any more, or is that all for now?"

"How did you feel when it came near?"

RETURN TO SAFETY

"You are awake now, and I am here."

"We can leave the light on while you settle."

"You do not have to tell me any more."

OFFER FORM

"Would you like to draw it, build it or let it stay in the dream?"

"Shall we make somewhere for the creature to go?"

"Do you want to choose how the story ends, or keep the ending as it was?"

FOLLOW THE CHILD

If the child changes the subject, that is information.

If they return tomorrow, that is information too.

Listening does not mean repeatedly hauling the dream back into daylight after the child has moved on.

The adult keeps the door available.

They do not stand in it waving a clipboard.

WHEN THE DREAM TOUCHES REAL LOSS

Some dreams arrive in a family already living with grief, illness, separation, adoption, conflict, migration or uncertainty.

A child dreams of the person who died.

They hear their voice, eat with them, lose them again or wake angry because the person left.

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The adult may be grieving too.

This makes the moment both more tender and more difficult.

The adult may want to declare the dream a visitation.

Or deny that possibility because it feels frightening, irrational or culturally unfamiliar.

The child may not need either certainty.

"You saw Grandad in your dream."

"What was he doing?"

"How did it feel when you woke up?"

"Would you like to draw the place you met him?"

We can honour the dream without deciding its metaphysical status for the child.

Different families hold different beliefs about dreams, ancestors, death and the continuing presence of loved ones.

Those beliefs deserve respect.

They should not become a script the child must perform.

The child may say it was Grandad.

They may say it was a dream-Grandad.

They may change their mind next week.

Mystery can remain open without becoming careless.

The adult can hold grief and waking reality together.

WHEN THE WHOLE SETTING BECOMES ANXIOUS

Professional settings have their own nervous systems.

One child shares a disturbing dream and adult anxiety can spread quickly.

The story is repeated in the staff room.

Several people add interpretations.

The observation becomes longer every time it is retold.

A meeting is called.

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A form appears.

Professional anxiety loves a form.

Sometimes careful recording and discussion are exactly right.

Sometimes the adults are collectively making the image larger because nobody wants to be the person who failed to notice something important.

The answer is not to become less safeguarding-minded.

It is to become more precise.

What did the child actually say?

Was it clearly described as a dream?

Did the child refer to a waking event?

What emotion and behaviour were observed?

Has the image returned?

What has changed, if anything, in sleep, play, relationship or daily functioning?

What did adults ask after the initial statement?

Could our questions have shaped later language?

Precision protects children better than panic.

It also protects the dignity of families and staff.

DREAM, DISCLOSURE AND SAFEGUARDING

A dream must never be used either to prove or dismiss a safeguarding concern.

That sentence needs to sit right in the middle of this work.

Dream content is not factual evidence that an event occurred.

Equally, the word dream does not magically make every statement irrelevant.

A child might say, "A man came into my room in the dream."

A calm, neutral clarification may be necessary.

"Was that only in the dream, or did something happen when you were awake?"

If the child makes a waking-life disclosure, ordinary safeguarding procedures apply.

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The adult should not conduct an investigation, ask leading questions or decide the truth alone.

Record the child's words accurately.

Follow the setting's safeguarding process.

Seek the appropriate advice.

The same care applies when dreams are accompanied by persistent distress, major changes in sleep or behaviour, or difficulties affecting the child's daily life.

The Night Garden is not therapy, diagnosis or a substitute for clinical or safeguarding support.

Symbolic hospitality and professional responsibility belong together.

Not every monster is a safeguarding referral.

No safeguarding concern should be dismissed as "just a dream."

Both sentences matter.

Precision protects the child from both panic and neglect.

A PRACTICE OF ADULT SELF-OBSERVATION

The most useful work may happen after the child has left the room.

Not because the child is a puzzle to be solved in their absence.

Because the adult needs somewhere responsible to place what the image stirred.

Supervision, reflective conversation and private writing can help separate the child's material from our own.

A practitioner might ask:

What did I feel in my body when the child spoke?

Which part of the dream stayed with me?

What meaning did I assign first?

What in my own history makes that meaning feel convincing?

Did I become more frightened than the child appeared to be?

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Did I rush to soothe, decode, joke, report, spiritualise or dismiss?

What did the child actually ask from me?

What remains unknown?

What boundary, provision or follow-up is genuinely needed?

This is not an invitation for practitioners to confess their entire childhood in the staff room.

Containment applies to adults too.

The purpose is to notice enough of our own material that it does not quietly become the child's assessment.

A mature adult is not an adult with no reaction.

It is an adult whose reaction can become information rather than command.

WHAT CHANGES WHEN THE ADULT STAYS STEADY

When the adult can remain warm, curious and grounded, the child gains more freedom inside the image.

They can tell more or stop.

They can laugh without the adult deciding the dream was meaningless.

They can cry without the adult deciding catastrophe has been confirmed.

They can become the monster, draw the dead person, rebuild the house or leave the whole thing alone.

The dream does not have to become a performance of distress for adults to take it seriously.

Nor does the child have to minimise it to protect everybody else.

The adult's steadiness lends the child a wider range of possible relationships with the image.

Fear can become curiosity.

Curiosity can become play.

Play can become form.

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Form can create choice.

Choice can allow the child to return to ordinary life without having to destroy the dream or be swallowed by it.

This does not guarantee the nightmare will stop.

It does not prove that symbolic play has resolved a hidden conflict.

It simply creates better conditions for the child's relationship with their own experience.

A NIGHT GARDEN HYPOTHESIS

The Night Garden proposes a careful hypothesis.

When a child shares a powerful dream, the quality of the adult's self-awareness may shape what becomes possible next.

If the adult responds from unexamined fear, guilt, certainty or fascination, the child's image may become heavier, narrower or less safe to share.

If the adult can notice their own activation, remain grounded in waking reality and offer symbolic hospitality without fixed interpretation, the child may gain more agency around the image.

This needs exploring rather than declaring.

Do children return more freely to dream images when adults respond without alarm?

Does neutral language reduce the pressure to confirm an adult interpretation?

Can supervision help practitioners distinguish safeguarding precision from collective anxiety?

Do children show more choice in story, movement and ending when the adult remains emotionally available but does not seize the image?

Can the six axes help adults recognise imbalance in their own response before applying them to the child?

What happens when the adult becomes the first garden that must be tended?

A child says, "Mummy died in my dream."

The adult feels the old fear move.

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They breathe.

They notice the child in front of them.

"That sounds like a strong dream," they say.

"Do you want to tell me any more?"

The child thinks.

"No," they say. "Can I have jam?"

And perhaps, for now, that is enough.

Before we ask what the dream means for the child, we may need to ask what the dream has awakened in us.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Oliver Riddett is the founder of the Archetype Approach, a developmental and relational model of childhood built around twelve universal archetypes. Developed through practice at Children of Towan in Porthtowan, Cornwall, the approach helps parents and practitioners look beneath behaviour and respond through balance rather than correction.