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WHEN A DREAM ENTERS THE ROOM

What Jung, Black Elk and the Symbolic Life of Childhood Might Teach Early-Years Practice

Oliver Riddett | The Archetype Approach

When a dream carries strong emotion into waking life, the task is not to decode it, but to help the child give it form.

A child arrives in the morning and says, "The wolves came back last night."

The adult might smile, offer reassurance and say, "It was only a dream."

Fair enough. Most dreams pass. The child moves on, breakfast happens, somebody cannot find their other shoe, and the day carries everybody forward.

But this child does not quite move on.

They draw wolves at the mark-making table. They build a cave from blocks. They chase other children through the garden, then hide beneath a table and insist the wolves are outside. At story time, every path somehow leads back to the forest.

The dream has ended in one sense. The child is awake.

In another sense, it has entered the room.

This is not an argument for analysing children, diagnosing them from dream images or reaching for a dictionary that tells us what a wolf is supposed to mean. It is a simpler proposal: dreams sometimes continue into waking life through play, movement, emotion, bodily reactions, recurring images and stories.

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Perhaps the task is not to tell the child what the wolf means. Perhaps it is to help them find a way to meet the wolf.

JUNG WAS NOT GUESSING

Carl Jung is sometimes presented as though he sat alone in a grand study, gazed into the fog and invented symbolic meanings because they sounded profound.

Whatever else we make of Jung, that picture is not fair.

Dreams sat at the centre of his clinical work for decades. He paid attention not only to striking individual dreams, but to sequences: the way one dream could correct, deepen or challenge the understanding formed from another. For Jung, a dream was not a coded message with one fixed answer. It was a spontaneous presentation of the psyche's situation, often showing something the conscious personality had missed, avoided or held too narrowly.

In *Man and His Symbols*, Jung is reported to have estimated that he had interpreted at least 80,000 dreams. The exact trail behind that number is difficult to establish firmly, so it should be repeated with care. What is beyond dispute is the scale of the material behind his thinking: patients' dreams, his own dreams and visions, children's dreams, and recurring images studied beside myth, folklore, religion, art and alchemy.

Jung was looking across time and culture for patterns, but he also insisted that the image had to be returned to the actual dreamer. A symbol could not be solved by looking it up. The dreamer's associations, emotional life and wider circumstances mattered.

That point is especially important with children.

A wolf might be frightening, beloved, funny, protective, lonely or simply the animal from yesterday's story. The adult who arrives carrying a ready-made meaning has stopped listening before the child has begun.

Jung's work was shaped by his period and by a European gaze that sometimes spoke too freely about cultures that were not his own. That requires honesty and care. Yet one part of his insight remains useful: the image is alive within a relationship. It cannot be separated from the person who dreamed it and treated like a label.

BLACK ELK AND THE UNFINISHED VISION

One account that shows what can happen when an inner image is brought into shared life belongs to Black Elk, the Oglala Lakota holy man whose story was recorded through John G. Neihardt in *Black Elk Speaks*.

This is not a Jungian case study, and Black Elk should not be recruited as though he were evidence for a European psychological theory. His vision belonged to a particular people, history, spiritual world and responsibility. The account must be approached on those terms first.

Black Elk experienced his Great Vision as a child. It held horses, thunder beings, sacred directions, songs and a calling connected with the life of his people. Yet for years much of it remained unspoken and unfinished.

As he grew older, the vision did not simply fade into childhood memory. It pressed upon him. Thunderstorms became terrifying because they seemed to carry the demand he had not yet understood how to fulfil. He withdrew, felt increasingly troubled and feared that he might be losing his mind.

Eventually he told the medicine man Black Road what he had seen. Black Road did not reduce the vision to a neat explanation. He recognised that it needed to be brought outward and performed before the people through the Horse Dance.

The community helped give the vision earthly form. Images were painted. Horses and riders represented the four directions. Songs from the vision were sung. Drums, rhythm, movement, colour and shared participation gathered around what had previously been carried alone.

Black Elk later described the performance as an earthly shadow of the greater vision. Afterwards, he said that the fear which had stayed with him for so long was gone. The thunderclouds that had terrified him now felt like relatives coming to visit.

We should not claim that a ceremony "cured" him in the modern clinical sense. We can say only that the Horse Dance brought the relief Black Elk himself described and changed his relationship with the thunder.

Nor is this sacred Lakota ceremony ours to borrow, reproduce or turn into a classroom activity with a laminated instruction card. That would miss the point rather spectacularly.

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But we can respectfully notice the movement within the account: something overwhelming and private was spoken, witnessed, embodied and held by a community.

The thunder was not defeated. It became related to.

THE IMAGE WAS NOT EXPLAINED - IT WAS EMBODIED

Black Elk was not merely told, "The horses are your anxiety."

The images were spoken. Painted. Sung. Moved. Placed within a circle. Shared by other bodies.

The relationship changed because the vision was no longer trapped inside one frightened person.

This offers a careful possibility for early childhood. A child may remain pursued by an image while it lives only within them. Once it can be drawn, built, enacted, altered, contained or shared, the child is no longer only the one being chased. They may become the maker of the path, the builder of the shelter, the voice of the creature or the person who decides where the story pauses.

The image does not need to disappear for the child to gain agency. The wolf may remain a wolf. The storm may still thunder. But the child may begin to stand somewhere different in relation to it.

WHAT EARLY-YEARS PRACTICE CURRENTLY MISSES

Early-years practitioners are trained to notice a great deal.

We observe speech, attachment, sensory responses, schemas, movement, drawing, social patterns and imaginative play. We understand that a child may communicate through more than direct explanation.

Dreams, strangely, tend to fall through the net.

They are treated as charming anecdotes, meaningless night-time muddle, private family material or fears requiring quick reassurance. Sometimes that is all they are. Not every dinosaur needs a working group.

But when a child repeatedly carries a dream image into the day, it may deserve the same open attention we already give to recurring play.

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That does not mean creating a new assessment category called "Dream Development" or deciding that every monster proves anxiety, trauma or an unbalanced archetype.

A child who dreams of wolves is not therefore a Rebel. A child who dreams of a flood is not automatically dysregulated. A child who dreams of flying has not handed us a spiritual profile.

The setting can simply make room for the image without claiming to own its meaning.

THE ARCHETYPE APPROACH: REFLECTION, NOT DECODING

The Archetype Approach is not a dream-decoding system.

It offers a language of relationship, movement and balance. Its six axes can help adults think about the kinds of waking experiences that might support the play, while leaving the dream itself with the child.

Those axes are movement and stillness; care and playful disruption; truth and harmony; imagination and order; intensity and intellect; exploration and construction.

A single dream may move across several of them.

Imagine a child who repeatedly dreams of being chased through endless rooms by a creature they cannot see.

We might notice movement without rest. Exploration without somewhere secure to return. Intense imagery seeking form. Imagination without enough influence over the ending.

These are reflections, not conclusions.

The practitioner does not write, "The monster represents unbalanced Energy."

They ask a better question: "What waking experiences would allow this child to move, stop, construct safety and choose how the story ends?"

Perhaps the child needs a chase game with a clear stopping signal. Perhaps they want to build a den that nobody enters without permission. Perhaps they want to become the creature. Perhaps they are finished with the whole thing by lunchtime.

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The wider Archetype Approach environment should offer space for all six axes: places for movement and quiet, wild invention and careful order, intensity and reflection, wandering and making.

At its symbolic centre could sit a flexible provision I call the Night Garden.

This is not a sleep-themed corner with stars stuck to navy paper. It is a place where inner images are allowed to become outward forms.

It might hold clay, charcoal, paper, blocks, loose parts, fabric, masks, puppets, animals, figures, miniature doors, bridges, caves, simple instruments, maps and a shared book for stories that want to return.

The Night Garden could receive dreams, repeating stories, imaginary companions, fears, memories, losses, transformations and the strange questions children ask when ordinary language is too small.

Its purpose is not interpretation.

Its purpose is symbolic hospitality.

It gives the inner life somewhere to land.

FROM DREAM TO WAKING INVITATION

The invitation should follow the child's interest rather than being prescribed from the symbol. We are not building a new box of techniques. We are watching for where the image wants to continue.

THE CHASING ANIMAL

A child may draw the animal, become it, build it a home, decide how fast it can run or invent a signal that makes everybody freeze.

The waking provision might include controllable chase games, strong physical boundaries, movement with clear endings and den-building. The adult may wonder whether the child needs both the freedom to run and the power to stop.

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The point is not to tame the animal on the adult's terms. It is to see whether the child wants a different position within the story.

THE ENDLESS STORM

A child may return to thunder, floods, wind or darkness.

They might explore drums, water, weather paintings, loud and quiet rhythms, shelters or a story in which the storm finally passes over the hill.

The waking support could hold intensity beside containment: sound the child can begin and stop, strong movement followed by predictable rhythm, water that can be poured and gathered, a shelter that remains standing.

BEING LOST

A child who keeps dreaming of being lost might make a map, leave landmarks, build a village, invent a guide or create a homecoming song.

The waking invitation could bring exploration together with construction and return. The child wanders, but there is a path back. The child leaves, but they can mark the way home.

None of these activities is prescribed because a particular symbol has appeared. They arise only if the child chooses to continue the image.

SAFEGUARDS: DESCRIBE, DO NOT DECODE

The symbolic life of childhood is powerful precisely because it is not fully owned by adult explanation. That mystery needs protection.

A responsible approach must rule out fixed dream dictionaries, leading questions, diagnosis from imagery, assigning an archetype from a dream, imposing adult symbolism, repeatedly returning to a dream after the child has moved on, presenting classroom activity as therapy, borrowing Indigenous ceremony or treating dream content as factual evidence.

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

If a child makes a waking-life disclosure, ordinary safeguarding procedures apply. The adult records what was said, avoids investigative questioning and follows the setting's safeguarding policy. The presence of dream material neither confirms nor cancels the disclosure.

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The practical rule is simple: describe, do not decode.

A practitioner may record: "The child repeatedly drew a large horse and said they felt excited when it came closer."

They should not write: "The horse represents the child's need for freedom."

The first statement stays close to the child. The second quietly replaces the child with the adult's theory.

Describe, do not decode.

A HYPOTHESIS WORTH EXPLORING

This is a proposal, not a finished body of evidence.

The Archetype Approach hypothesis is that when adults listen carefully to children's dreams and allow recurring images to emerge through child-led play, art, movement, construction and simple shared acts of completion, children may develop greater agency and a less fearful relationship with experiences that previously felt overwhelming.

That possibility should be explored carefully rather than announced as fact.

Do recurring dream images change after symbolic play? Does the child gain more choice within the story? Do frightening figures become helpers, companions or manageable opponents? Does the dream disappear once its emotional movement has found another form? Can practitioners respond without labelling or over-interpreting? Can the six axes guide richer provision while protecting the mystery of the dream?

These are real questions. They deserve observation, case studies, dialogue with families and, eventually, proper research.

Jung taught us to take dreams seriously without reducing every image to a simple code. Black Elk's account shows the transforming power of bringing a private vision into relationship, movement and community. The Archetype Approach can now ask what becomes possible when children are offered a gentler, developmentally appropriate invitation.

Not an adult explanation.

Not a diagnosis.

Not a borrowed sacred ceremony.

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A place to draw, build, move, tell, change, pause and return.

A place where the wolf can come out of the dark without taking over the whole room.

Perhaps some dreams do not need to be solved. Perhaps they need to be welcomed out of the dark, given a place beside us, and allowed to find a new ending.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

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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.