

Dream to Live not Live to Dream.

by Michael O'Shea PhD



Introduction

The general thrust of this discussion lies with the concept of 'dream'. The 'dream' referred to incorporates a positive vision of self together with an optimistic image of what is possible for the future. The effects of absence of 'dream,' which may culminate from a negative self-image will be explored. The significance of 'dream' as a conduit for positive life change will also be discussed. Reference will be made to the absence of 'dream', which, in the view of this writer, results in a fatalistic, helpless vision of self and life. Life then becomes a tragedy; a combination of loss of self and missed opportunities.

The Concept of 'Dream'

August 28th 1963, standing on the steps of the Lincoln memorial in Washington DC, Martin Luther King delivered his 'I have a dream' speech to over two hundred and fifty thousand civil rights activists. Whilst this speech epitomised the quest for equality for the African-American population, it also provided listeners with a vision for the future. The 'dream' that King spoke of was one which was free of the racist bigoted society which was ingrained in much of American culture at that time. King's 'dream' prophesied an alternative life standard within which equality and mutual respect for all would become embedded in a new social order. Who then would have considered the possibility of an African-American President in the White

House which is located only a short distance away from where King stood that August day to deliver his iconic speech. The 'dream', as visualised by King, became a foundation stone which underpinned a more inclusive and equal social structure. What resulted was the uplifting of black people to some positions of power and authority even extending to the highest office in the county, that of President of the United States. The 'dream' can come true and has come true for some.

Like King, Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire noted that social transformation begins with the 'dream' of something more than that which the predominant social structures currently offer (Freire, 1999, pg126). During the 1950s' and 1960s; Freire held the post of Director of the Department of Education and Culture of the Social Service in the State of Pernambuco, Brazil. He was very touched by the suffering of the poor with whom he came into contact. His subsequent educational programmes aimed at reaching out to and communicating with the more socially deprived. Freire was of the view that personal transition can be considered a vision or 'dream' of what is possible beyond one's present life circumstance. However, the 'dream' should not be simply interpreted as a form of escapism. Instead, 'dream' becomes an initial phase in the struggle to re-create one's personal world. It has been suggested that such a dream is impossible without some form of hope (Freire, 1999, pg91). For Freire, the hope of something better to come provided the oppressed with the necessary determination to persevere in the cause for personal transformation (1998b, pg35). As a result, he rejected any form of fatalism. According to Freire (1998b), one common feature

that germinates among people in desperate situations is the lack of hope. In fact, he described such fatalistic tendencies as an 'existential weariness' (Freire, 1998b). Individuals harbouring fatalistic attitudes believe that their future has already been predetermined. Freire observed that, in every desperate situation, there dwells the possibility of hope even if the possibility of advancement, escape or achievement is obscured by current life circumstances (Freire 1998b, pg41). In fact, he was of the view that hope exists as a natural requirement for human beings (Freire 1998b, pg44).

form of personal reflection opens the door to a new outlook in life and thus, occupies much of the client's process within the therapeutic forum (1986, pg17). To remove the psychological and emotional obstructions which impede the living of 'dream' may be one goal of therapy insofar as 'dream' is constructive to the client's self-concept. Furthermore, the essence of 'dream' is only purposeful insofar as the quest pertains to concrete life situations (Freire, 1999, pg126). Otherwise, 'dream' remains a hypothesis or fantasy.

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'*conscientisation*' is considered more than just the identification of dehumanising structures existing within one's world. It also involves a radical denunciation of dehumanising structures accompanied by the proclamation of a more positive life structure (Freire, 1985, pg85). Furthermore, positive transformation cannot be handed to an individual on a silver platter. The individual is required to partake in the re-shaping of his/her own world. Only then is he/she free to be autonomous. Take the case, for example, of a client who is in an abusive relationship. A client conscientised has attained a new level of awareness and will not only begin to see the relationship as not-normal but will actively begin to refute the abuse as part of normal living. Through a process of therapy, the client will gradually begin to mould a new life and possibly live the 'dream' never thought likely. The therapist is not a rescuer in this process.

Ironically, Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky observed that an enlightened society is a society enslaved (1972, pg53). Within such a society, traditional cultural values and supports are replaced by radicalism, a reduced sense of community, an emphasis on industrialisation and increased productivity targets, together with a heavy reliance on scientific discovery to explain the essence of being. In such a world, the masses succumb to the 'dream' of the entrepreneur and the individual searches for self-worth and purpose (Dostoyevsky 1972, pg86). To be a slave is to give up one's free will, whereby some people over-indulge in order to escape from unhappy lifestyles (Dostoyevsky 1972, pg90). This observation could be construed so as to imply that increased drug use and other addictive activities constitute a means of escape

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Nevertheless, the notion of hope does not imply that change has already taken place. Instead, hope offers the possibility for change in the future. Rather than focus one's attention on one's desperate situation, it has been suggested that one should adopt a position of 'critical optimism' (Freire 1998b, pg58). 'Critical optimism' can be described as a rational appraisal of one's current life circumstance together with a realistic vision for future positive change (Freire 1998b). To uphold a positive outlook in life implies that one is prepared to engage in the process of personal transition. A realistic vision of what may be possible separates 'dream' from fantasy. Freire theorised that such questioning and examining the variety of possible answers provides more avenues towards further curiosity-generated exploration (Freire 1998b, pg31). Throughout this procedure, the individual gradually begins to reflect upon his/her 'cultural reality' (Freire 1998b). In fact, Freire observed that this

discussion, is the 'dream' of something other than one's current life situation. This 'dream' requires that one remain wide awake to one's present life circumstance and to one's own self-concept. In other words, a level of self-awareness and honesty with oneself is necessary if one is to vision some positive transformation for the future. For Freire, '*conscientisation*' involved the deepening of one's awareness to the reality of the situation within which one exists. The gradual process of '*conscientisation*' involves a progressive movement from maintaining a naïve consciousness to a more critical awareness (Freire 1986, pg81). A person '*conscientised*' will obtain the ability to distinguish myth and fallacy from social reality (Freire 1998b, pg48). '*Conscientisation*' evolves, therefore, through addressing real issues that offer an alternative to the blind acceptance of psychological manipulations or ideological propaganda (Freire, 1974, pg48). The process of

from a purposeless existence. Within such a culture, a person is not given the freedom to pursue dreams and act upon intuitions. Instead, a person without will or desire becomes just a small part in a bigger machine (Dostoyevsky 1972, pg34). Self-worth comes from what others think of you or by your income. Society is very unforgiving and never allows an individual to bury his/her past (Dostoyevsky 1972, pg99). The concern which remains is whether significant purpose in life is to be brought to awareness or do we simply exist as slaves to life circumstances (Dostoyevsky 1972, pg90). In other words, to be human is to choose who we are and how we respond to life circumstances.

Implicit to this debate lies the distinction between 'dream' and fantasy. Critical to the concept of 'dream' are visions and goals which are both tangible and obtainable (Freire, 1999, pg126). 'Dream' becomes fantasy when expectations and ambitions are non-realistic or irrational. In short, fantasy could be described as a form of escapism whereby, the individual chooses to live in a world removed from reality. Freire observed that a person with a 'dream' is ready to take action to achieve the dream (1999). In contrast, a person who experiences fantasy is not ready to undertake such proactive measures and, as a result, displays a resignation to his/her current life situation. Indeed, fantasy could be considered a form of escapism and, subsequently, a removal of the self from reality. Instead, 'dream' provides one with a vision of an alternative life situation which is both obtainable and tangible in the real world. In short, 'dream' provides a blueprint for personal achievement, motivation and direction (Freire, 1986, pg20). In addition, the pursuit of a life 'dream' may also

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provide the essential ingredient for finding meaning in life. For instance, one's purpose in life may be focussed on family or on one's chosen vocational path suggesting that the 'dream' becomes the foundation stone for discovering one's life plan and purpose. It may be argued, therefore, that 'dream' and individual purpose are closely intertwined. It is for this reason that 'dream', that is, the quest for purpose, is essential to life and marks a point of demarcation between living and existing.

The absence of hope thus resulting in the non-existence of 'dream' therefore, is considered the antithesis to the quest for personal achievement. Dostoyevsky (1972, pg74) once observed that lack of achievement was closely associated with lack of self-confidence. Describing life as a 'tragedy', Dostoyevsky suggested that a person without a 'dream' sits by and watches the world pass by while those actively participating in worldly affairs progress. As transition takes place, a person without 'dream' remains stagnant and in a condition of stalemate. The world stops for the person with no 'dream'. Such a person feels worthless and of no consequence (Dostoyevsky 1972, pg43). A life without 'dream' is a life resigned to the impossibility of hope. In short, the absence of 'dream' may constitute a fatalistic view of life and of oneself. Dostoyevsky highlighted the plight of one individual who is so critical of his surrounding social constructs he removes himself from society. To live in 'the underground' suggests that one can create one's

own world and remain there alone. One may remain lord and master in one's own world (Dostoyevsky 1972). The opening lines 'I am a sick man, I am an angry man, I am an unattractive man' sets the tone for the whole story (Dostoyevsky 1972, pg17). The subject remains pessimistic in that he is what he is and he cannot be changed. Despair, he stated, is 'to be conscious of the hopelessness of one's situation.' As a result, one remains powerless to escape from one's preconceived or predetermined life situation (Dostoyevsky 1972, pg22).

In contrast, existentialist Viktor Frankl spoke of 'learned meaninglessness' that can only be described as a learned nihilistic view of one's own self-worth (1984, pg177). Frankl, a Jewish psychiatrist, witnessed the effects of purposeless life on those incarcerated in Auschwitz (1984). He was of the view that, despite his/her life situation, each individual can find a purpose to live. The potential for danger arises when an individual places his/her life's meaning within oneself only to discover that "oneself" has been devalued in some way (Frankl 1984, pg17). Frankl was of the view that it is critical to dedicate one's efforts in life to a greater cause than oneself during those difficult moments in life. He advocated a policy whereby, the client in therapy could find potential meaning within the existential realities of his/her own personal existence. In contrast to a meaningful life, there exists despair, a state of existential distress, in other words a sense of self-worthlessness

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(Frankl 1984, pg25). Frankl invoked the term 'existential vacuum' to describe life that is meaningless (1984, pg28-29). Vacuum suggests emptiness whereby, the individual may resort to other superficial modes of escape such as drugs or alcohol. One classic example of such meaninglessness is when an individual lacks the free will to choose for oneself and spends his/her life conforming to what others want. In this case, the individual experiences inner emptiness that results in a 'will to money', 'a will to power' or sheer boredom (Frankl 1984). The search for meaning in life is a journey of self-discovery as meaning can only be discovered, it cannot be invented (Frankl 2000, pg113). Given the fact that the search for meaning in life involves some soul-searching on the part of the individual, no one person can freely hand out meaning to another. Each individual is responsible for finding his/her own meaning for life's journey (Frankl 1984, pg119). The search for meaning allows the individual move from 'what is' to 'what can be'. One must hold out some possibility of hope for the future rather than submit to what otherwise would become a hopeless situation. Meaning in life must be realistic. Meaning in life built upon false hopes is inadvisable for it can result in total despair (Frankl, 1986, pg99).

Frankl's interest lay very much in our freedom to choose our response to the situations we find ourselves in. Given the fact that we may find ourselves plunged into life and death or life-changing situations, the therapeutic process often helps individuals to recognise that

they are not always mere victims of circumstance (Corey 2001, pg143). To some extent, we are whom we choose to be in any given circumstance. Rather than submit to external forces and thereby, remain passive victims of circumstance, the aim of therapy is to empower clients to direct the course of their lives (Corey 2001, pg145).

Individual 'Dream' and the Therapist:

'Hold fast to dreams, for if dreams die, life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly'.

Langston Hughes

Consider this hypothetical case; a client presents himself/herself despairing over what he/she feels is a life lacking purpose and fulfilment. Two possible scenarios arise. Firstly, the client is experiencing the absence of 'dream', the possibility of something more and is thus caught in a fatalistic view of life. The expression 'This is my lot in life' offers no hope of improvement which often results in a grave sense of despair and resignation. Freire noted that the apparent absence of hope becomes more noticeable in times of social struggle (1998b, pg42). Deborah Condon (2011) suggested that the psychological impact of recession is 'severe'. Those who are unemployed are two to three times more likely to die by suicide. Unemployment increases the risk of depression insofar as an individual measures his/her self-worth in terms of vocational and financial security (Condon 2011). As a result of recession, the inevitable rise in suicide rates become

evident as experienced during the recent economic downturn. Another possible scenario is that the 'dream' is unachievable in the eyes of the subject. A number of issues have already been discussed concerning the necessity of 'dream' in life and the importance of 'dream' being both obtainable and tangible. To achieve 'dream' is significant to the therapeutic process so long as 'dream' is rational and achievable.

The second possibility is that the client is aware of 'dream' but lacks confidence or visualisation to pursue 'dream'. Frankl observed that human freedom is not necessarily 'freedom from' but 'freedom to' (1986, pg52). Freedom is freedom to be something else, we need not be totally conditioned by background, origins or circumstances (Frankl 1986, 79). In other words, life need not be totally conditioned by past experience but can remain open to the possibility of new experience brought to awareness by 'dream'. One noteworthy objective of therapy, therefore, is to empower the client to transform 'dream' into living meaningful reality. Frankl was of the view that 'Tragic Optimism' is the ability to 'Say yes to life despite everything' (1984, pg161). Through the therapeutic process, the individual may become more enabled to act freely and responsibly. Freedom, in this context, is liberation from the shackles of past negative conditioning agents towards self-emancipation. In short, Corey is of the view that therapy attempts to help the client escape from a 'Restricted Existence:' to develop new values, habits and insights for a more fulfilled existence (2001, pg143). While much emphasis is placed on past or childhood experiences in order to understand the present, to fully understand the present helps the individual to reshape his/her future.

For Frankl, humanity is not only 'Is' but principally what the person decides 'What/Who he/she is' may be unclear (1986, pg21). In any situation, the last freedom one has is the freedom to choose one's attitudes and human life has the potential to hold meaning in any situation. Frankl's vision of therapy is very much future orientated and looks at what life can hold for the future (2000, pg114). While the human condition is essentially involuntarily fashioned by past experience, therapy, with its emphasis on future, also tries to deconstruct the anomalies and possible misjudgements of the past. Responsibility subsequently remains with the individual to re-shape, re-invent or re-construct his/her self-concept and life experience. Frankl was of the view that neurosis is often the product of 'existential frustration' which itself is caused by absence of meaning (1984, pg123). While 'dream' and meaning in life are closely associated, absence of meaning, thus, absence of 'dream' may fabricate certain neuroses such as fatalism, fanaticism, fear of responsibility or collective thinking as opposed to self-responsibility (Boeree, 2006). Frankl was of the view that lying to the soul by the sheer search for pleasure or superficial meaning often results in a neurosis or illness of the soul (Frankl 2000). It stands to reason, therefore, that a healthy soul constitutes a more positive self-concept together with a more constructive vision of one's place and purpose in the world.

Conclusion:

King's 'dream' of a more integrated society is not necessarily actualised in all aspects of life in the USA. Nevertheless, the speech in itself draws attention to the fact that individual transformation often begins with a 'dream'. When

contextualised in this manner, 'dream' becomes a starting-point for something new and something more from life. Therapists are continually engaging with clients whose lives appear to them to be aimless, without purpose or direction. Those seeking therapy may harbour some form of 'dream' of something more for the future. Pragmatic, psychological or emotional obstructions may hinder the client in his/her quest for a new life. Others may be accepting their current life situations with a fatalistic or despairing mind-set. Therapy, as a healing process, can endeavour to enable the client to discover his/her intrinsic meaning in life and pursue that 'dream' which is integral to meaning. In short, the soul, the essence of being, often scarred by life experiences, thus becomes the focal point for self-healing and personal transformation. The soul, the spring from which 'dream', comes to life, 'dream' the keystone to meaning, meaning or life-purpose root of life-fulfilment. The challenge for the therapist, nevertheless, is to work with that client who says 'Dear Therapist, I have no dream' to develop some level of self-empowerment in order to effect change and live the 'dream'. ☺

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