

**The Octopus and the Transcendent Function: Guided Dreaming as a Structured Method of  
Active Imagination for the Twenty-First Century**

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**Conflict of Interest Statement**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. The development of "Guided Dreaming" as a method arose from the author's personal and academic research. While the author may offer workshops and training related to this method, this article is presented solely for the purpose of scholarly discourse and advancement within the field of analytical psychology.

### Abstract

This article presents Guided Dreaming, a structured approach to Active Imagination that extends the foundational principles of Carl Jung's concept of the transcendent function. This innovative method arose from the author's personal experience with hypnotic waking dreams featuring a shapeshifting octopus during a tumultuous period marked by overwhelming stress and chronic pain. It leads participants into a waking dream trance through a serene underwater narrative, facilitating a dynamic interaction between the conscious and the unconscious to enable the psyche to self-heal. Grounded in Jungian theory, the octopus functions as a potent symbol that encapsulates complex tensions, mediates conflicting opposites, and encourages the emergence of transformative insights. To illustrate the practical application of this method, the article presents three case studies of an individual, a couple, and a group, demonstrating how Guided Dreaming can effectively resolve personal dilemmas and address relational and collective challenges. The paper argues that Guided Dreaming is not only accessible and embodied but also rich in symbolism relevant for today's challenges. It makes Jung's timeless method applicable to the diverse needs and complexities of the twenty-first century, offering a pathway towards deeper awareness, resilience, and empathic collaboration. It further proposes future applications and areas for research.

*Keywords:* Guided Dreaming, Active Imagination, transcendent function, waking dreams, octopus symbol, problem-solving, Jungian psychology

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### **Introduction**

Throughout life, we navigate a spectrum of challenges, from daily personal dilemmas to formidable collective crises affecting our communities and planet, from the climate crisis and geopolitical instability to profound socio-economic divides, all exacerbated by a worsening global mental health crisis (WHO, 2025). This confluence of challenges reveals the critical limitations of a purely conscious approach: it is often reductive, linear, and incapable of processing the deep emotional conflicts and unconscious resistances that underpin persistent issues. When applied to such multi-faceted problems, these methods lead to psychological stalemates, superficial solutions, and a pervasive sense of being stuck.

This impasse underscores an urgent need for a paradigm shift in how we approach problem-solving. We must move beyond the ego's limited toolkit and develop methods that actively facilitate a dialogue between the conscious and the unconscious mind. Every problem has a psychological dimension that influences how we approach its solution. While we consciously feel emotions, their origins, underlying patterns, and full influence on our thoughts and behaviours are often unconscious. This unseen power can limit our perceptions, distort our judgment, and create the internal conflicts that lead to psychological stalemates for people, for example, who stay in abusive relationships. To break free from these limiting emotions, it is essential to intentionally engage with the unconscious, both individually and collectively. By engaging the psyche's self-regulatory capacity and its innate ability to generate symbolic solutions, we can tap into the transformative potential of the transcendent function, thereby

fostering psychological integration and novel insights that are necessary to resolve recurrent and systemic issues (Jung, 1963).

Contemporary neuroscientific research has empirically validated the foundational insights of Freud and Jung, demonstrating that dreaming—particularly during REM sleep—plays a critical role in memory consolidation and emotional regulation (Walker & van der Helm, 2009). This provides a biological substrate for the theoretical understanding of dreams as a primary window into the dynamic, self-regulating unconscious. When awake, we can deliberately access the unconscious through various traditional waking dream practices, such as dream yoga, hypnosis, and shamanic ceremonies (Lanfranco et al., 2021; Wangyal, 1998; Irwin, 1994), as well as Active Imagination—a seminal Western practice developed by Carl Jung over a century ago (Jung, 1963; Watkins, 1976). Waking dreams are dream-like mental episodes experienced while awake, encompassing visions and hallucinations (APA Dictionary of Psychology, n.d.). While Western medicine and psychiatry often view waking dream phenomena as pathological, leading to fear and stigma, indigenous cultures embrace these liminal states of consciousness for healing and transcendence (Bouso et. al., 2023).

This article explores the development of Guided Dreaming (GD), a new waking dream practice I developed for stress reduction and problem-solving based on personal experiences and grounded in Jungian psychology. If the need to engage the unconscious is the urgent problem of our age, then the legacy of Carl Jung provides a foundational solution. Jung considered his own engagement with the unconscious through visions and fantasies the “*prima materia*” of his life’s work (Jung, 1963). His concepts of Active Imagination and the transcendent function were themselves born from a personal psychological crisis, set against the backdrop of the social

upheaval of World War I (Jung, 1963). He discovered that by engaging rather than suppressing his unconscious, he could achieve profound psychological healing (Jung, 1963).

GD emerges from this very tradition, conceived in a similar crucible of personal and global crisis. I will relate it to Jung's concept of Active Imagination and provide a detailed description of the GD protocol. Additionally, I will present three case studies—one involving an individual, one involving an immigrant couple, and the third with a small group of strangers—to demonstrate how GD expands upon Active Imagination to address twenty-first-century challenges and effectively facilitates the transcendent function, both individually and collectively.

### **Guided Dreaming Development**

Carl Jung's concepts of Active Imagination and the transcendent function were born from his personal psychological crisis following his split from Freud over a century ago, amidst the social turmoil of World War I (Jung, 1963). Instead of suppressing his intense emotions, dreams, fantasies, and visions, Jung chose to engage with his unconscious, bravely trusting the psyche's self-regulatory capacity. He deliberately induced a waking dream trance through introspection to interact with the characters and settings that appeared (Jung, 1963; Jung et al., 2009). This respectful engagement formed the foundation of Active Imagination. From this practice, he identified the transcendent function, noting that psychological stalemate arises when conscious and unconscious attitudes oppose each other (Jung, 2014). According to Jung, “The shuttling to and from of arguments and affects represents the transcendent function of opposites. The confrontation of the two positions generates a tension charged with energy and creates a living, third thing … a movement out of the suspension between opposites, a living birth that leads to a new level of being, a new situation” (Jung, 2014, p. 189). By holding the tension between these

opposites, a transformative new perspective can emerge, leading to psychological integration and wholeness (Jung, 2014). For example, the conscious mind may want to leave a frustrating job, while the unconscious mind fears facing the loss of safety. This creates a psychological deadlock. To break it, one must hold the tension between these conflicting forces without choosing one side or repressing the other. This tolerance for discomfort activates the "transcendent function," which creates a new perspective that transcends the original conflict.

Like Jung, my development of GD began during personal psychological crises amid global turmoil. Balancing life as an entrepreneur, mother, and caregiver during the COVID-19 pandemic, I suffered from chronic shoulder pain caused by overwhelming stress and tension from coping with unprecedented changes and uncertainties both at home and at work. While in hypnotherapy for pain relief, I unexpectedly experienced a waking dream of *feeling exhausted, then falling asleep on a big, comfortable bed and seeing an octopus falling from my shoulder into a body of water. Deirdre Barrett* (a dream scholar and a trusted mentor of mine in real life) *appeared as a spirit guide and told me that my new soul mission is to heal the world with dreams.* The skeptic in me initially dismissed this experience, but an extremely rare, real-life encounter with a giant Pacific octopus escaping from a prawn trap weeks later changed my mind and prompted me to revisit hypnotherapy, where I had a second waking dream. This time, *I went into the deep water with the question of how I could heal the world with dreams. The octopus swam out of my shoulder and shapeshifted into a luminous healing bubble, which I entered. There in a boundless field of light, I experienced my dream body expanding and dissolving.*

Having written and published a memoir/self-help book titled "Navigate Life with Dreams" based on the parallels between personal big dreams and significant life events just a year prior, I was already knowledgeable about interpreting and working with nocturnal or

sleeping dreams (Tang & Bulkeley, 2019). Recognizing the symbolic significance of the octopus's waking dreams, I applied this knowledge to explore their meanings. The exhaustion and the act of falling asleep on a big, comfortable bed reflect a deep need for rest and surrender, compensating for the overwhelming feelings I experienced in waking life. The bed symbolizes a safe portal between the conscious and unconscious. When I see the octopus emerging from my shoulder—the very place where my chronic pain resides—it feels like the tension in my body is assigned a form and intelligence of its own. Deirdre's appearance served as a symbolic affirmation of my new life's purpose. The octopus's many arms and capacity to adapt and camouflage represent the complexity of my challenge, as well as the tangled emotions and memories stored within. As it shapeshifts into a luminous healing bubble, I sense a transformation of pain into something nurturing and protective. Entering the luminous bubble and experiencing the dream body's expansion and dissolution into light enacts a powerful psychodynamic process of release and enlightenment. My second waking dream thus transcends a mere representation of a healing wish; it embodies the very metamorphosis of pain. The somatic discomfort, first made visible and autonomous in the form of the octopus, is transformed into luminous healing energy. Dissolving within this radiance facilitated the dissolution of the egoic boundaries erected by chronic anxiety and inflexibility to change, allowing for a direct, unmediated experience of psychical wholeness and wellbeing.

In the months that followed, I revisited the underwater dreamscape numerous times through meditation and daydreaming, especially when I faced changes in my waking life that caused tension and anxiety, such as the emergence of new COVID variants and safety concerns regarding the newly developed vaccines. By visualizing the octopus shapeshifting and expanding, I could feel the tension in my body easing, leaving me feeling calmer, more relaxed,

and more open to change. Encouraged by this positive effect, I started sharing the octopus waking dream with family and friends, guiding them with my voice into a peaceful underwater dream while awake, where they could meet the octopus and relax within the healing bubble. To my surprise, they reported meeting octopuses of various colours and sizes, as well as encountering unexpected symbols like people, plants, animals, abstract shapes, and deities. Although my guidance remained the same, each person, even during group sessions, experienced a unique waking dream shaped by their individual life circumstances. Sometimes, the octopus doesn't even appear or stay in the background.

After facilitating hundreds of such sessions over the past four years, both online and in person, a consistent pattern emerged, leading to a critical realization. This observation aligns with the continuity hypothesis of dreaming, a foundational theory which posits that dream content is not a random assemblage of images but is meaningfully continuous in line with a dreamer's waking thoughts, concerns, and emotional experiences (Domhoff, 2011; Roesler, 2018). In essence, our dreams reflect the salient themes of our conscious lives. My GD sessions demonstrate that this principle extends into the realm of waking dreams. The narratives and symbols that arose for participants were not arbitrary; they directly mirrored their immediate waking-life stressors, dilemmas, and emotional states. Furthermore, consistent with research on dreams and cognition (Barrett, 2017), these waking dreams did not merely echo concerns—they actively metabolize them. The immersive, symbolic space of the waking dream provided a fertile ground for the unconscious to generate novel associations and perspectives, thereby producing creative problem-solving insights that often eluded the participants in their ordinary, conscious state.

For instance, a retiree, navigating the loss of a law enforcement professional identity yet possessing a lifelong passion for dance, experienced a poignant embodiment of this transition through her waking dream of *moving rhythmically in a mermaid's body*. This symbol seamlessly integrated her core identity as a dancer with her new, fluid existence beyond the rigid confines of a career. In a starkly different case, a transgender sex worker, whose waking life was often disrupted by the threat of violence and abuse, encountered the harrowing waking dream of "seeing" *her own dead body floating in the water*. Rather than being merely frightening, this image served as a profound somatic metaphor, forcing a conscious confrontation with the psychological toll of her circumstances. In both instances, the waking dream did not simply represent their situations intellectually; it delivered a visceral, embodied cognition of their reality, translating abstract emotional states into tangible symbolic experiences that facilitated deeper self-awareness, which may inspire actions.

Since 2022, I have presented GD workshops three times at the annual conferences of the International Association for the Study of Dreams (IASD). Under the guidance of the conference committee, I incorporated elements of psychological safety (Schiller, 2022), dream incubation (Barrett, 2017), and ethical dreamwork (IASD, 2025). into the Guided Dreaming protocol and finalized it into a 5-step process:

Step 1: Invite the participant (s) to identify a current issue, which can be personal, professional, or collective. The "How to resolve" this issue then becomes the starting point of the inquiry into the unconscious;

Step 2: Invite the participant (s) to imagine a companion for support, which can be a person, animal, or object;

Step 3: Using voice guidance to help the participant (s) visualize falling asleep in a healing place by the water, then waking up in a serene underwater dream where they first meet their chosen imaginary companion, then the octopus that shapeshifts into a luminous healing bubble, and finally dissolving in the light inside the healing bubble;

Step 4: Invite the participant (s) to journal their waking dream experience, including characters, settings, plots, and emotions;

Step 5: Invite the participant (s) to reflect on and share their waking dream experiences and potential problem-solving insights.

In 2024, for my master's thesis in health psychology, I conducted a mixed-methods phenomenological study of eleven adult volunteer participants from a population of 60. Despite their diverse ethnicities, religions, educational backgrounds, genders, relationship statuses, and familiarity with mindfulness practices, all of them experienced vivid waking dreams with unique imagery, somatic sensations, and embodied cognition (Tang, 2025). 91% reported stress reduction and attaining problem-solving insights, and on average, the participants' self-assessed mental outlook improved by 36% (Tang, 2025). I had the honour of presenting this research in October, 2024 at the IAAP/Catholic University Freiburg joint Conference – The Process of Transformation.

### **Guided Dreaming as a Modern Extension of Active Imagination**

GD represents a conscious and structured evolution of Jung's method of Active Imagination, adapting its core principles to the needs and conditions of contemporary life while retaining its fundamental aim: to facilitate a live dialogue between the conscious ego and the unconscious (Jung, 1963). While faithful to the spirit of Jung's approach, GD introduces form,

accessibility, and a resonant contemporary symbolism that makes the process more readily available to twenty-first-century individuals.

People nowadays live fast-paced, technology-driven lives, often struggling to maintain focus for deep introspection and reflection. Many face a "crisis of embodiment," remaining stuck in their heads due to overthinking and worry, which hampers access to essential somatic awareness needed for psychological growth. The decline of traditional mythological frameworks, such as spiritual and religious practices, leaves people without a shared language to interpret their inner experiences, making spontaneous archetypal imagery feel confusing. Influenced by a culture that values efficiency, there's a need for structured techniques over open-ended processes. Despite digital connectivity, feelings of social isolation persist, highlighting the need for authentic, shared experiences that validate psychological experiences.

GD is specifically suited for modern individuals. It provides the structure their distracted minds need, the embodied immersion their disembodied lives lack, the resonant contemporary symbol (the octopus) that bridges the symbolic literacy gap, the pragmatic protocol that fits their outcome-oriented mindset, and the communal context that addresses their profound need for witnessed, shared experience.

1. GD formalizes the entry into the unconscious just as Jungian Active Imagination begins with a conscious entry into a liminal state, often through focusing on a mood, image, or dream fragment (Jung, 1963). GD modifies this entry point by using a standardized protocol: breathwork and a guided visualization into a specific archetypal landscape (the underwater world). This structure provides a reliable "on-ramp" to the unconscious, reducing the initial barrier that many people face when attempting to engage in Active Imagination independently. It offers the containment

necessary for individuals living in a fast-paced, hyper-stimulated world to safely disengage from ordinary consciousness and enter a state of symbolic receptivity.

2. GD provides a specific symbolic container - Jung frequently initiated his own engagement with the unconscious by imagining a “steep descent” to meet recurring archetypal figures, such as Philemon (Jung, 1963). Similarly, GD respectfully introduces a pre-existing setting—the octopus and the underwater realm, not an imposition but an invitation, a modern temenos designed to resonate with the contemporary psyche. The octopus, as a symbol of fluidity and adaptability, is a fitting archetypal counterpart to modern challenges, such as widespread anxiety about social and environmental instabilities. This shared symbolic starting point does not limit the experience but rather catalyzes it, much like traditional cultures utilize shared mythological frameworks, such as storytelling, to scaffold individual visionary journeys.
3. GD emphasizes embodied experience - A crucial yet sometimes overlooked aspect of Active Imagination is its somatic dimension. Jung insisted that the process wasn't complete until it led to a new attitude or realization in life (Jung, 2014). GD amplifies this by constructing a multi-sensory, somatic scaffold around Jung's principle. While Jung acknowledged the necessity of a lived outcome, his method often began with a relatively spontaneous image or mood. GD, however, deliberately engineers the initial engagement with the unconscious to be a full-body experience from the outset.

GD's guided visualization into a serene underwater world is not a passive backdrop; it is a direct invitation to the soma. Participants are encouraged to feel the

weightlessness of buoyancy, the gentle pressure of the water, and its perceived temperature, immediately grounding the experience in bodily sensation. This physical anchoring is then intensified through prescribed, kinaesthetic interactions with the octopus symbol—whether through the sensation of being hugged by its many arms, dancing with its fluid form, or merging with its essence. These are not just visualizations but vivid somatic experiences that create proprioceptive and tactile feedback loops, translating psychological content into felt, bodily experience. This direct emphasis on embodied cognition ensures the process is not merely an intellectual exercise but a whole-person experience, where insights are felt in the nerves and muscles, not just understood by the mind. This facilitates a deeper, more durable integration of new attitudes, aligning the Jungian process with the established principles of contemporary somatic therapeutic practices, which posit that profound psychological change is most effective when it is anchored in the body (Hartley, 2004).

4. GD is designed for accessibility and community - Traditional Active Imagination is often a private practice, most often directed by a Jungian therapist (Tozzi, 2023). GD, by contrast, is frequently conducted in groups (online or in-person) and includes a dream-sharing component afterward. This social structure acknowledges the modern need for community and witness in psychological work (Thornicroft, 2016). Furthermore, its protocol-based nature and digital delivery make it scalable and accessible, overcoming geographic and economic barriers. This democratizes a process that was once largely confined to the analyst's office, extending the benefits of Active Imagination to a wider audience without diluting its depth.

5. GD bridges the personal and the transpersonal - At its heart, Active Imagination is about engaging the personal unconscious to connect with the transpersonal, or archetypal realm (Jung & Hull, 2023). GD efficiently facilitates this bridge. Participants begin with a personal problem (e.g., trauma, grief, creative block), and through the guided encounter with the transpersonal symbol of the octopus, they access archetypal resources (e.g., adaptability, comfort, playfulness) to address it. The octopus acts as a psychopomp, guiding the ego to a new relationship with the Self. This mirrors the goal of Active Imagination and the transcendent function: integration and individuation that emerges from the dialogue between the personal ego and the transpersonal unconscious.

### Comparative Analysis: Active Imagination vs. Guided Dreaming

To clarify the distinction between Jung's classical Active Imagination and Guided Dreaming, the following table outlines their key operational and philosophical differences:

Table 1.

Aspect	Active Imagination (AI)	Guided Dreaming (GD)
Initiation & Frame	Self-directed, internally initiated by the individual.	Facilitator-guided, structured within a defined therapeutic or creative problem-solving session.
Direction & Facilitation	Non-directive; the individual follows their own unconscious material without external guidance.	Directive; the facilitator provides prompts, themes, or instructions to guide the process.
Role of the Ego	Ego as an observer and engaged participant in an internal dialogue.	Ego as a collaborator, often following external structure to engage with unconscious content.
Primary Medium	Internal imagery, inner dialogue, and sometimes spontaneous writing or drawing.	Internal imagery, with eyes closed to focus on kinesthetic feedback.

Process & Structure	Open-ended, fluid, and unfolds according to the unconscious flow.	Consciously structured, often phase-based (e.g., setting intention, wake dreaming, reflection, integration).
Locus of Control	Lies primarily with the individual's unconscious.	Shared between the participants (who experiences and responds) and the facilitator (who holds the framework).
Therapeutic Context	Often practiced in solitude or discussed with an analyst afterward.	Typically conducted within a facilitated individual or group setting, with immediate processing.
Primary Aim	To establish a direct, unmediated dialogue with the unconscious for purposes of individuation.	To safely bridge and translate unconscious content into conscious awareness using a structured, embodied medium.

In essence, Active Imagination is a self-guided exploration of the inner world, where the individual enters a waking-dream state to converse directly with unconscious figures. GD is a facilitated, structured adaptation of this principle. It uses guided prompts to create a waking dream process that is consciously shaped and supported, making the unconscious dialogue more accessible and contained for participants in contemporary therapeutic or developmental contexts. Both methods honour the fundamental Jungian goal of connecting the conscious ego with the unconscious. However, GD introduces a scaffold—a guiding consciousness and a sensorimotor medium—that differentiates it from the traditionally solitary, open-ended practice of Active Imagination.

### Three Case Studies of Guided Dreaming

The following three case studies illustrate how GD facilitates the transcendent function for an individual, a couple, and a group. The identities of all case study participants have been disguised to protect their privacy.

### Case Study #1 – Alice

Alice is a middle-aged, white female who is recently divorced. She holds a professional degree and works for a government agency in Canada. She identifies as spiritual and frequently practices meditation. Of the many symbolic landscapes that emerge from GD, Alice's case presents a particularly vivid example of the psyche's capacity for self-reparation. A woman from a background of material affluence but emotional neglect, her problem—work deadlines and a lack of team support—buries a deeper, archetypal wound: the absence of primal, nurturing support from her parents, who were preoccupied with their own lives. She had the following waking dream from a group workshop conducted online.

*I encounter a giant mauve/purple octopus in the outdoor community swimming pool I used to frequent as a child. The octopus and I are alone together at the pool. Although the octopus is larger than the pool itself, we swim together under the water, which opens up with ample space for the octopus to swim comfortably. He gives me an enormous hug, swallowing me up in his many arms, and gently pinching me with his suckers. His hug is loving and reassuring. It turns to night and I see a strobe light with many colours dancing around. It's time to end the dream, and we say goodbye for now. I emerge feeling happy and calm.*

Set in the childhood communal swimming pool, Alice's waking dream is a powerful journey into her personal unconscious. The water, a classic symbol of unconscious emotions, becomes the stage for a profound encounter. The appearance of the giant mauve octopus is not a threat but a benevolent guardian. Its immense size, paradoxically comfortable in the confined pool, suggests a numinous presence that transcends the limitations of her waking world. This creature is a potent manifestation of the Self archetype, the organizing principle of the psyche that guides toward wholeness. It is also a clear compensatory figure: the embracing, multi-armed entity provides the somatic enveloping, reassuring hug that was absent in her early environment. The gentle pinching of its suckers signifies a tangible, almost playful connection, grounding the

experience in sensory reality. Alice's waking dream narrative offers a direct response to her feelings of abandonment. The octopus, a steady and unwavering companion, becomes an internalized symbol of support that "would never abandon me." This is the psyche's ingenious solution: if external support fails, one must discover it within. The transformation to night and the dancing strobe lights indicate a shift into a numinous, perhaps mystical state, marking the completion of the healing encounter. Her emergence feeling "happy and calm" signifies a successful integration of this unconscious content.

The waking dream does not solve Alice's problem with work deadlines and uncooperative coworkers, but changes her emotional response to them. It facilitates a process of individuation by connecting her to her childhood memory. Prior to the waking dream, Alice felt unsupported by her coworkers, much as her childhood self had been, wounded by her parents' neglect. The friendly interaction with the octopus at the childhood pool gave her the embodied realization that she will never be abandoned. The octopus, as an unwavering ally, made her childhood self feel whole and, in turn, fortified her adult self, leading to a new, more confident attitude towards relating to others. Alice's insight that she can now recall the octopus waking dream experience to boost her confidence demonstrates active engagement with her inner world. The GD process has effectively allowed her to bypass the ego's habitual anxieties and access a deeper, more resilient structure of the psyche, providing her with the internal support her waking life chronically lacked. The communal pool, once a place of lonely childhood memory, is now a sacred space of self-meeting and empowerment.

### **Case Study #2 – Jamal and Fatima**

Jamal and Fatima are a middle-aged couple who immigrated from North Africa and live in America. Jamal works in human resources, and Fatima is a homemaker. Together, they have

five children. They aimed to address stress and communication issues in their relationship through GD. During the previous months, heightened stress from work and personal commitments affected their interactions and emotional connection. They sought a method to bypass intellectual discussion and access a shared symbolic space, hoping that GD would help them understand their situation better, improve communication, and strengthen their bond by exploring their subconscious minds together. They had the following waking dreams from a couple's GD session conducted online.

***Jamal:*** *The place I chose was Dafî Beach, located on the Arabian Gulf in Abu Dhabi, a place I often went to relax during my time in the United Arab Emirates. I sat in a high place that enabled me to see the sea better. I was enjoying the movement of the blue sea waves, as if I felt harmony between myself and the movement of these waves. When you asked us to take someone or something with us, my wife immediately came to mind, but for a moment I thought about trying to take something else with me, and my understanding of that inside the dream was that my wife is a part of me, or as if she were myself, which means that if I took her with me, I would not have a new experience. Or different, but my attempt failed for myself, as she was with me, and I could not bypass her for something else, and I was convinced to take her with me. We were swimming to the bottom of the sea in harmony, and we were having a lot of fun. We reached the depths of the sea, where we saw bright, colourful fish, very beautiful, and their appearance was a source of inner peace. When the octopus appeared to us, its colour was light blue, and we felt in harmony with it. At one point, I felt that my wife and I were merging with the octopus so that we all became in one body, which is the body of the octopus, but our heads remained there, as if it were an octopus with three heads. We kept moving together in harmony on the seabed, enjoying the seaweed and some coral reefs around us. At the end of the dream, my wife and I returned to the surface of the sea, and we were swimming happily and harmoniously until I woke up.*

***Fatima:*** *I went to a quiet place near the sea and devoid of people, but I did not remember where I went. I was enjoying breathing the fresh air in this place, walking on the sand barefoot along the sea. I was with Jamal, and we were holding hands and enjoying our walk together, and sometimes we stood, and sometimes we walked slowly, and at other times we ran and had fun, not thinking much. When you asked us to think of someone to go with us, I chose Jamal directly without hesitation. We swam into the sea with fun and laughter, and we went down to the sea together, holding hands, and we also swam to the bottom until we reached a quiet place where we felt calm and comfortable. A little while later, the octopus appeared to us. Its colour was purple, and it was smiling. He*

*reached out to us and surrounded us with his arms as if he knew us and expressed to us his longing for us, his welcome, and his joy in meeting us. We spent some time hugging him, and then we moved with him on an exploratory trip at the bottom of the sea until you asked us to return, so we said goodbye to the octopus and promised him that we would not be separated from him for a long time again and that we would return to him as soon as possible.*

The shared GD experience of Jamal and Fatima offers a profound window into their psychic union, presenting a powerful narrative of the coniunctio, or sacred marriage, and a deep engagement with the Self archetype. Their parallel journeys into the unconscious reveal a dyad moving toward profound integration, both within themselves and with each other.

Jamal's waking dream begins at a beach he used to frequent, a specific, conscious choice from his personal history, representing a place of solace and known tranquillity—a symbol of his ego's safe space. His initial resistance to inviting his wife reveals a nascent egoic desire for separate individuation. His thought that she is "a part of me, or as if she were myself" is a critical insight: he intellectually recognizes their psychic fusion but fears it will prevent a "new or different" experience. The failure of this attempt is a decisive intervention by the unconscious; the Self insists that his path to wholeness is inextricably linked with hers. Their subsequent synchronized dive into the sea—the collective unconscious—marks the beginning of this mandated joint journey. Fatima's waking dream complements this perfectly. Her location is an unknown, "people-less" beach, suggesting a purer, more archetypal entry into the unconscious, unburdened by personal memory. Her immediate and unhesitating choice of Jamal signifies her intuitive acceptance of their necessary partnership in this process, a stark contrast to his momentary hesitation.

The appearance of the octopus is the quintessential symbol of the Self in this narrative. Jamal describes a light blue octopus, a colour of tranquillity and spiritual depth, with which they merge to form a single, three-headed body. This is a magnificent symbol of the mysterium

coniunctionis: the fusion of two individuals (anima and animus) with the transcendent Self (the octopus body) into a new, tripartite whole. They retain their individual consciousnesses (the heads) but are now psychically embodied by a greater, unifying intelligence. Fatima's report of a smiling, purple (a colour of royalty and spiritual transformation) octopus that expresses longing and welcome personifies the Self not as a neutral symbol, but as an active, loving, and awaiting entity within their shared psyche. It is a known and beloved guide. The promise to the octopus to "not be separated from him for a long time again" is a covenant with the Self. It represents a conscious commitment from both partners to maintain this hard-won connection to their core being and to each other, acknowledging that this unity is the source of their "calm and comfort."

For this immigrant couple, the sea may also symbolize the vast, unknown cultural unconscious of their new home. Their harmonious exploration of its depths, guided by a benevolent, multi-armed creature, suggests a burgeoning ability to navigate this new collective environment not as isolated individuals, but as a unified, strengthened psychic entity. The dream does not solve an external problem but provides an internal, archetypal blueprint for their relationship's survival and flourishing: through deep, sacred partnership, they can successfully integrate their past and present, forming a resilient whole capable of navigating any depth.

### **Case Study #3 - IASD Morning Dream Group**

A small group of attendees at the 2025 International Association for the Study of Dreams annual conference includes three members who had never met before: Jody, a woman in Western Europe; Lucy, a female artist in the Southwestern US; and Matt, a retired IT professional in the Northeast US. As an experiment in collaborative problem-solving, I proposed the issue of escalating global conflicts and wars, which affect everyone worldwide. Lucy felt the topic was

too overwhelming, and Matt expressed some skepticism about the process producing any meaningful results. Nonetheless, they participated in the experiment.

From their GD experience, Jody had a waking dream of a *purple tornado*, Lucy dreamt of an *underwater volcano and starfish*, and Matt dreamt of *turning into an electric eel*. The group spent some time after the dreaming experientials, sharing their waking dreams and discussing what the images might mean. Later that day, I created an AI image incorporating all the symbols and showed it to them the next day.

Picture 1.



This collective GD workshop demonstrates the potency of the group as a *temenos*—a sacred container—allowing individual psyches to safely engage with the overwhelming archetypal shadow of global conflicts and wars. The participants, Jody, Lucy, and Matt, embody different attitudes; yet, their waking dreams form a cohesive alchemical narrative that emerges from the collective unconscious.

Lucy's admission of being initially too scared to face the issue is paramount. It illustrates the ego's legitimate fear of being annihilated by the sheer scale of archetypal, non-personal content. The group setting provided the necessary psychic support, a collective ego-strength that enabled her and the others to descend into the depths they might have avoided alone. This courage to face the overwhelming is the first and most crucial step in the Jungian process of confronting the shadow.

The dream symbols—Joan's purple tornado, Lucy's underwater volcano and starfish, and Matt's transformation into an electric eel—were not random. They represent a coherent unconscious response. The tornado and volcano symbolize the necessary, terrifying, and destructive forces of transformation—the *nigredo* or chaotic first stage of the alchemical process (Jung, 2012). Their purple and underwater hues spiritualize this destruction, framing it not as meaningless chaos but as a primal, purgative event within the collective psyche.

The creation of an AI image (Picture 1) synthesizing these symbols acted as a concrete, visual vessel for these powerful energies. The group watched the image and felt in awe of the multifaceted meaning it holds. For Lucy, this externalized representation was pivotal. Her realization, shared in a post-workshop interview, that "destructive forces are necessary sometimes to make new worlds" is a profound articulation of the Jungian concept of *enantiodromia*—the emergence of an opposite from within a state (Jung, 1928). She understood that the volcano and tornado are not merely problems to be solved but are the very agents of the psyche's self-correction, burning away the old to make space for the new, symbolized by the regenerative starfish.

Matt's skeptical ego transforming into an electric eel completes the picture. It signifies the ego's adaptation to this new, chaotic environment, learning to generate its own light and

power within the darkness. Collectively, the group's GD process did not offer a political solution but something perhaps more vital: a myth for our time. It reframed global conflicts and wars from a problem of external politics to an internal, archetypal process of death and rebirth, granting the courage to face it not with despair, but with the awe of witnessing a painful, necessary, and ultimately creative transformation of the world soul.

### **Creative Problem-Solving Through the Transcendent Function**

Conventional problem-solving is primarily a conscious, ego-driven activity. It relies on logic, past performances, and analytical reasoning. However, this approach often fails when we face complex problems that are fraught with emotional conflict, paradoxical demands, or deep internal resistance. We become stuck in repetitive loops of thought, unable to find a way forward.

The transcendent function relies on the psyche's innate capacity to resolve such impasses by generating a symbolic third perspective that transcends the opposition between the conscious attitude and the unconscious content. Problem-solving, from this Jungian viewpoint, is not about finding a predetermined answer but about facilitating the emergence of a new attitude from the unconscious (Jung, 2014).

The process can be broken down into three stages:

#### 1. Holding the Tension of Opposites (The Stuck State)

A problem becomes intractable when it represents an internal conflict. The conscious ego holds one position, and the unconscious holds another, creating a paralyzing stalemate (Jung, 2014).

- Conscious Attitude: "I must leave this terrible job." (Driven by frustration, anger)
- Unconscious Position: "I am afraid of facing the unknown." (Driven by fear, anxiety)

- Result: Psychological paralysis, rumination, and stress. Conventional problem-solving methods (e.g., cost-benefit analysis) often fail because they cannot resolve the underlying emotional conflict.

## 2. Engaging the Unconscious (The Mediating Process)

The transcendent function is activated when the ego consciously engages the unconscious without forcing an answer. This is not an analytical process but an imaginative and symbolic one (Jung, 2014). Techniques like Active Imagination or GD are designed for this purpose. The ego steps back from its rigid position and invites the unconscious to express itself through images, emotions, and symbols. In GD, the participants, stuck in the job conflict, marital distancing, or global conflicts, don't directly think about the problem. Instead, they engage with the symbol of the octopus, a symbol of intelligence and adaptability, which holds the tension for the ego. Its presence creates a psychological container where the conflict can exist without immediate pressure to resolve it.

## 3. Emergence of the Transcendent Symbol (The Solution)

Through symbolic engagement, a new image, insight, or feeling spontaneously arises from the unconscious (Jung, 2014). This is not a compromise but a transformative third element that transcends the initial opposition. It carries fresh energy that breaks the deadlock. The case study participants didn't receive logical solutions to their problems. Instead, they experience a profound, embodied sense of being supported regardless of circumstances, gain insight into prioritising quality time with loved ones, or find the courage and wisdom to confront complex global issues. These new attitudes, born from symbolic waking dream experiences, reshape the entire problem. The conscious ego now operates from a more empowered stance, making clear and decisive choices possible.

### **How GD facilitates the Transcendent Function**

As a direct extension of Jung's theoretical framework and a vehicle for activating the transcendent function, GD:

1. forces the tension: By asking participants to bring a real, unresolved problem into the session, it ensures that a potent psychological tension is present.
2. provides the symbolic mediator: The structured GD process and the octopus symbol provide a ready-made vessel for the transcendent function. The octopus does the work of holding and mediating what the individual ego cannot do on its own.
3. facilitates emergence: The waking dream trance allows for the spontaneous emergence of transformative symbols. The solution is not pre-packaged; it is uniquely generated by the individual's own psyche to address their specific conflict.

In essence, the transcendent function is the psyche's unconscious problem-solving mechanism. GD doesn't solve problems nor teach problem-solving skills; it removes the conscious blocks to this innate psychological process, allowing it to operate effectively. The "solution" is the emergence of a new, more adaptive attitude that transforms one's relationship to the problem, often making the initial dilemma moot.

### **The Octopus as a modern symbol of the transcendent function**

Within the framework of GD, the octopus does not merely appear as a random dream image; it emerges as a potent universal symbol that embodies and facilitates the transcendent function. Octopuses live in every ocean on earth in a wide range of conditions and come in different colours and sizes, a truly ubiquitous species unbounded by geo-cultural barriers (Montgomery, 2015). Its symbolic properties make it an ideal vessel for this psychological process in several interconnected ways:

1. It embraces and holds tension - The transcendent function cannot operate without first holding the tension between opposing elements. The octopus, with its multiple, strong, yet flexible tentacles, is a perfect symbol for this capacity. It does not fight or flee from conflict; it envelopes it. In the case studies, we see this repeatedly as the octopus embraces the participants to offer support and insight.
2. It mediates between opposites - The transcendent function is a mediator. The octopus is a biological mediator par excellence; it is a master of adapting to and navigating fundamentally different environments—the solid rock of the ocean floor and the fluid, open water. It is neither fully fish nor land animal, existing in a liminal space. Psychologically, this represents the ability to mediate between
  - Conscious and unconscious: It is a creature of the deep (the unconscious) that can also be seen and interacted with (consciousness)
  - Fluidity and structure: It can be soft and malleable (emotion, intuition) yet also exert precise force and manipulate objects (logic, action).
  - Singularity and multiplicity: Its body is a unified whole (the Self), yet it operates through independent but coordinated arms (complexes, sub-personalities). This symbolizes the transcendent function's role in coordinating the psyche's disparate parts into a new, harmonious whole.
3. It generates a third, transformative perspective - The ultimate purpose of the transcendent function is to generate a new, third position that transcends the original conflict. The octopus achieves this through its renowned capacities for shapeshifting and problem-solving.

- Shapeshifting: By changing its colour, texture, and form, the octopus does not just adapt; it becomes something new to resolve the challenge before it. This is a direct symbolic parallel to the psyche's capacity to generate a novel solution that did not previously exist in the conscious ego's repertoire.
- Problem-Solving: Its intelligence is not linear but distributed and creative. It finds unorthodox solutions (e.g., opening jars, camouflaging) that bypass obvious, fixed ways of thinking. This mirrors the transcendent function's ability to produce insights that feel "out of the blue" yet are perfectly tailored to the problem.

Therefore, the octopus is far more than a helpful animal guide; it is a fitting symbol for the transcendent function in the modern era. It represents a form of sophisticated intelligence that is networked, adaptive, creative, and embodied—precisely the qualities needed to navigate the complex, often contradictory demands of contemporary life. In the GD process, it appears as a symbol generated by the unconscious itself to perform the very work that is needed: to hold, mediate, and ultimately transform psychological impasses into new possibilities. It is the living embodiment of the psyche's innate drive toward wholeness and resolution.

### **Conclusion: Societal Impact, Applications, and Future Research**

The societal challenges of the twenty-first century—characterized by intricate systems, fragmentation, and widespread mental health decline—necessitate psychological responses that are not only adaptive and symbolic but also readily accessible to diverse populations. As a structured method of Active Imagination, GD represents a potent response to this need. By providing a ritualized pathway into the unconscious and leveraging the octopus as a symbol of the transcendent function, GD offers a practical tool for facilitating the psychic integration required to navigate both personal and collective crises.

The societal impact of GD lies in its potential to democratize access to important psychological resources. By moving Active Imagination from the private analyst's office to scalable group workshops, either in person or online, GD can act as a form of community mental hygiene. In an era of worsening global mental health, GD could serve as a proactive, empowerment-based approach to fostering resilience in small as well as larger groups. For example, an in-person workshop at the 2024 IASD conference in the Netherlands with over 40 first-time participants, each focusing on an individual challenge, not only generated uniquely personalized waking dream content and actionable insights but also provided dream sharing, witnessing, peer support and interpersonal learning, demonstrating GD's potential for broader community application. As the third case study shows, GD enables groups to process shared emotions through symbolic dialogue about collective issues—such as global conflicts and wars, climate change, and intergenerational trauma—through the transcendent function, cultivating a more reflective and empathetic collective consciousness.

The applications for GD extend across multiple domains:

- Clinical: As an adjunct to therapy for individuals dealing with anxiety, depression, grief, and PTSD, helping them access inner resources and symbolic solutions beyond cognitive-behavioural techniques.
- Relationship and family counselling: To help couples and families, like Jamal and Fatima, navigate conflicts and reconnect through shared symbolic experiences, uncovering archetypal patterns and their underpinning dynamics.
- Organizational and leadership development: To foster creativity, innovation, and adaptive problem-solving in corporate and institutional settings. Leaders could use

GD's collective visioning to break through strategic impasses and develop more nuanced responses to complex challenges.

- Educational settings: To help students develop emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and creative thinking by learning to engage with their inner worlds.
- Community building and conflict resolution: As a tool for diverse groups to navigate shared challenges and foster empathetic understanding through a shared, symbolic experience.

To explore the full potential of GD, a future research agenda would be desirable:

1. Clinical Efficacy Trials: Conducting randomized controlled trials (RCTs) with clinical populations (e.g., those with anxiety disorders) to quantitatively measure GD's impact on symptom reduction compared to control groups.
2. Psychophysiological Studies: Monitor the heart and brain activities of participants during GD sessions to identify the physiological correlates of the transcendent function, observing how the body changes during the waking dreams, particularly around the octopus encounter.
3. Longitudinal Studies: Tracking participants over months or years to understand the long-term integration of insights gained from GD and their sustained impact on life choices and well-being.
4. Cross-Cultural Analysis: Investigating the manifestation of the octopus symbol across different cultures. Research could explore if the symbol's meaning, color, and interaction are consistent or vary based on cultural background, thereby testing its validity as a truly universal (or archetypal) symbol.

5. Mechanism of Action Research: Deeper qualitative research into how the intervention works, e.g., studying the role of the guide's voice, the specific elements of the underwater imagery, and the dream-sharing component in therapeutic outcomes.

In conclusion, GD is an emerging method for facilitating the process of individuation. It provides a structured protocol to consciously engage the psyche's innate capacity for self-regulation, as theorized by Jung. Through a ritualized encounter with the octopus—a symbol of the transcendent function—GD enables a modern enactment of the coniunctio oppositorum, guiding the psyche along its innate trajectory toward wholeness. The symbolic insights that emerge from this process extend beyond personal healing, suggesting implications for the collective work to build a more harmonious future, both individually and collectively and with the natural world.

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