

Embodied Imagination Year 2 Training Australia

Case presentation – ‘Lily’ Dec 2022

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This presentation describes my work with the dreams of a client, who I shall call Lily, as part of her ongoing therapy, combining Embodied Imagination with other therapeutic techniques.

Lily came to me late in 2019, referred by her GP for counselling for depression. She was then 66, and on the age pension. Her score on the K10 Depression and Anxiety scale (administered by the GP) was 27/50, indicating a moderate disorder.

Lily was born in Scandinavia in 1953, the youngest of four girls. Her mother had major depression after Lily's birth, and was hospitalised several times for long periods. Lily was largely raised by her older sisters. The family migrated to Australia when Lily was four. She struggled to learn English at school, and felt very shy and fearful of doing wrong.

Lily presents as kind, gentle and cautious. At our first session she said that after her husband died fifteen years ago, she lost her motivation and interest in life. She has two sons, and has good relationships with them. She had a career as a nurse, and was close with her husband.

Lily was an obedient, anxious child who felt unimportant and afraid of causing trouble. She has suffered from depression on and off through her life. It worsened after her husband died when she was 50. Lily found creative expression through art, being talented at painting, drawing and mosaics. She also felt a strong spiritual connection all her life, reading widely and sensing the spirit world through vivid imagery.

I found out later that Lily's mother made three suicide attempts after Lily's birth, received shock treatment, and eventually had a leucotomy (a lobotomy to the temple) when Lily was four. Lily was most attached her oldest sister, who was twelve when Lily was born. She said all her sisters loved her but were not equipped for the job of caring for her, and the eldest was sometimes bossy and resentful.

Lily remembers her father as kind and loving, but wanting quiet in the house. Her mother became happier after the move to Australia; she developed friendships and sang in a choir.

Lily's Therapy

Lily has attended therapy fortnightly for three years. During the first year, her depression worsened. She was taking an antidepressant but this had little effect. We explored many aspects of her life, past and current, using experiential processing and supportive counselling. Lily often connected to positive energies in herself and the universe, but the positive states generally faded away and her depression returned.

Early in 2021, I wondered if Lily may have bipolar disorder. She had stated that her low mood would “sweep in and out like the tide,” and she had no control over it. At those times “all the colour would be gone from the world.” The usual strategies I teach people to regulate depression did not find any momentum for Lily. So I wrote to Lily’s GP, outlining her recurrent cycles of depression, followed by brightness and creativity, as well as her family history, and suggested a psychiatric assessment.

Lily saw a psychiatrist that I recommended. After increasing her antidepressant with no improvement, he prescribed a mood stabiliser (lamotrigine) and Lily began to feel a little brighter. In this period, we worked on recognising and accepting her diagnosis of bipolar disorder and reducing her self-blame. In July 2021, she came in with a quote from *A Course in Miracles* about a child who longs to go home, to their final home where they belong. She was inspired by this passage and had begun making mosaics again.

Dreams

From August 2021, just after my first EI training intensive, Lily brought me a series of vivid dreams.

Dream (1) came soon after the family cat died. Lily felt the cat was linked to her husband, as it had walked into their house as a kitten the day after he died. In the dream, she and her husband are in a plane and can see slopes covered with emerald green plants. Then they see slopes of pure white snow. All is beautiful. She transitioned easily into the green plants and reported a sense of freedom, growth, happy being what they are, swaying in the breeze.

Working this dream with Lily, I got the sense that embodied imagination was a useful modality for her. Embodying the dream images brought up good feelings about a happy time in the past, and a sense of reconnecting to life again.

Dream (2) The following session Lily brought a recurrent dream: she meets a person with a baby in a pusher. The baby speaks wisely, like an adult, and Lily is completely amazed. It breaks her perception of ordinary life. Transitioning into the baby she feels deep knowledge, self-possession, great potential, and loneliness at not being seen.

This dream may depict Lily’s sense that an important part of her was not seen during childhood. There are qualities of wisdom, spirituality and wholeness in the image of the baby, all of which I validated for Lily. She reported feeling very peaceful after working this dream.

Dream (3) The next session Lily brought a new dream: *The music is loud, I try to turn down the volume, the knob comes off in my hand. I see a live wire, poking out of the machine. On touching the knob, I receive an electric shock. I become frozen, sitting cross-legged on the floor. I call out for my husband and son for help, but no one comes. I think "I need to get out of this."*

Transiting into the live wire: a blue indigo light, very powerful, a sense of expansion, energy flowing outwards, a kindly loving face, a sense of electricity in the forehead.

Transiting into the frozen self, sitting cross-legged: Feeling overwhelmed, frozen. "I can't be that open; I'm not good enough." Feeling blocked in the belly, and a sense of shame.

The following session we revisited the images from the dream, as I felt more integration might be helpful. We reconnected to the blue pulsing light with a kindly loving face, and the shame and unworthiness in the frozen body. This led to memories of Lily's early childhood, with her mother in hospital for long periods, being cared for by her sisters, feeling unworthy and a nuisance. I wondered if the electric wire had any relation to her mother receiving shock treatment, but did not raise this with Lily.

A memory came of a time when one sister left Lily alone and crying in her cot. I proposed an experiential process in which she sees and dialogues with the child self. She saw the image, felt it in her body and spoke to it. She was able to offer the child love and support, and felt it was received.

For the rest of 2021, Lily's mood was mostly good, though still flat at times. She felt trust in the psychiatrist and hopeful about herself. She also had increasing bouts of nausea and vomiting, and had a colonoscopy in December, in which some polyps were removed. She had vivid dreams during this time but no recall of them.

In early 2022 Lily's Depression and Anxiety score was 18/50, which is deemed "likely well". During 2022 she brought a series of vivid dreams which I will present in summary form.

Dream (4) January

At a showground, a fishing line is lifting me up in the air. There are streamers around me, I see the audience below, and other groups doing dance pieces. I don't know what I'm meant to do. I wave the streamers in the air. I feel inadequate. An overbearing woman brings in a big candelabra, presents it to another woman. I feel left out. I say "humility is fine but I don't want humiliation."

Transiting into Lily on the fishing line: flying, floating, a beautiful feeling all over the body, exhilarating.

Transiting into the fishing line: silvery, transparent, strong, rising upward, pulsing, lifting people to a higher plane.

Transiting into the critical woman: A rigid, disapproving face, I must set things right, fear of sloppiness, feeling brittle in the throat.

What emerged for Lily after the composite was a peaceful feeling, pity for the bossy woman, and an image of two large bird's wings settling over the whole scene.

This dream seems to represent Lily's sense, from childhood, of being able to fly to imaginative and spiritual heights, but then being disapproved of, possibly by her older sisters. In the dream she protests about being humiliated; I saw this as growth in her sense of worth. The emergent image of two birds' wings covering the scene implies protectiveness from above, which will become a recurrent theme in Lily's dreams.

Dream (5) (One year ago, never forgotten)

I'm looking at a wall of rocks, dark stones cemented together. It's a big high dominating wall. I think "I want to get rid of it; bring in Whelan the Wrecker." Then I see the wall crashing down, and a big mess of rocks all over the ground. I think "this is just as bad as the wall." I ask the cleaning lady to clean it up. She says "no way, we're fed up with cleaning."

I hear a sound, a girl's voice, very high, clear as a bell. It is close by; I start to feel lighter. It's one long pure note, like the sound of a Tibetan bowl. I see the wall is gone. I think "Ah, that's what was needed – the right note."

When the wall is gone, it reveals a purple and mauve sky with new galaxies forming. Next a butterfly enters, white, made of paper, cut in an intricate pattern. Its wings open over the whole scene. I wonder "is it aware?" I think "someone made this, it's a beautiful work of art."

Transiting into Lily at the wall: feeling helpless, alone, empty, crushed in the chest, hard to breathe.

Transiting into the voice: lightness, energy, a sense of knowing the right note, otherworldly, feeling peaceful through the whole body.

Transiting into the paper butterfly: the wings are light, very large, open. A sense of wisdom, knowing the subtle laws of life, fine and delicate.

What emerged for Lily was an image of the large butterfly wings spread over ordinary reality, a feeling of peace, and of understanding the subtle realms of life.

This dream represents breaking through some kind of barrier and finding new dimensions of beauty and peace, behind ordinary life. It seemed to me that Lily's spiritual understanding was appearing in her dreams and kindling a new sense of hope and possibility, after surviving some long, dark years.

In the next few sessions Lily came in feeling flat, guilty, and self-critical. I looked for ways to build her inner resources: once, I called on her husband's spirit to speak to her and offer support; another time, we worked experientially with her sad, alone little self. Lily spoke to her, then got an image of a guardian angel coming to her child self with reassurance and love.

In another session, we did a calm place visualisation: she saw a sea cove, and sat feeling the elements soothing and nourishing her. These experiential exercises felt useful to strengthen the side of Lily that believes suffering can be accepted if placed within a broader spiritual perspective, and that life is fundamentally good.

Dream (6) May

I am at home. It is night time. A car pulls up, with a family inside. The car is full of kids, they are noisy. I hear car doors slam, they run through the house. They say the rooms are fine. The kids run everywhere, one is missing, then reappears. It is chaos. Then I'm looking at a river. The water is rising, it's a flood. The water is green and murky. I am picked up by the current, carried along, I see a massive drop coming. I feel pure terror as I'm pulled towards the cliff.

Transiting into Lily at home: a sense of belonging, comfortable, at home in the stomach.

Transiting into the visitors: a whirlwind, feeling restless, insecure, exhausted, empty in the gut and bowel.

Transiting into the flood water: green, murky, destructive, a powerful force, I don't care about anything or anyone, feeling angry, in the throat. [Lily went in and out of this transit, sometimes feeling her own terror and then back to the flood water.]

Lily's response after the composite: "I feel sorry for the family, so insecure and lost. Home feels like the essence of belonging, a lovely feeling. The flood seems like the fear of death. It doesn't care about humans." Lily remembered it was the anniversary of her husband's death. She left the session feeling disturbed by the intensity of the dream.

In this dream, images evoking chaos, terror and death appear. These could be seen as personal to Lily's history, or simply existential issues common to us all. I saw their appearance as an opportunity for Lily to process the fears she carries, but also as a potential risk to her emotional stability. My hope was that by sharing the dream with me, and experiencing its frightening elements in a supportive context, she could learn to know and tolerate feelings that were overwhelming to her younger self.

For the next two months, Lily felt flat and had sad dreams about her husband and mother, with little recall. Her nausea and vomiting continued intermittently. In sessions, we processed her feelings and did guided visualisations to continue building her inner resources.

Dream (7) August

I can see a forest with very tall trees. It is night time, there is a campfire, shadows all around. People are sitting in a circle. A baby is crawling around the outside of the group, in the shadows; the people don't notice it. The baby is unsure whether to join the circle. As the baby crawls along, it's foot falls off the leg and is left behind. Then a green phosphorescent light comes out of the baby's knee, moves to the foot and drags it up to rejoin the leg. As each knee moves, the glowing green light reaches down and pulls the foot along.

Transiting into Lily above the scene: floating, observing, I am drawn to the treetops.

Transiting into the treetops: tall, straight, removed from the people. Feeling the life in the trees, the leaves growing, in the prime of life.

Transiting into the baby: no clothes, crawling slowly, hesitant, wonders "will I go inside the circle?" Attracted to the warmth and camaraderie, feeling lost and alone, but I need my freedom.

Transiting into the green light: a long greenish tube of light, magnetic, glowing. I am part of the body, just doing my job, pulling the foot forward, keeping things together.

Afterwards, Lily felt okay but puzzled. Commenting on the dream, she said "I feel I am keeping things together, but only in a detached way."

I wonder if the baby in this dream represents Lily as a child, feeling like an outsider in the family due to a poor attachment with her depressed mother. Such early feelings may have predisposed Lily to depression later in life, particularly after losing her husband in middle age. The green light that rejoins the baby's foot to its body might represent the spiritual force that holds her together in the face of a loss of wholeness or purpose in life.

Next session Lily reflected on the dream and said "sometimes I feel a part of me is very distant, just dragging myself along. At other times I feel the opposite; today I feel great." Lily recently told the GP "I am on a journey with Gena. I can see life more objectively now when I'm down."

Dream (8) September

I am in my teens, with a group of girls. We have queued up to see a famous man. He is great, he gives you a kiss and you feel wonderful. I step up to him and find he is a robot with cardboard limbs and a mouth like a rubber plunger. He kisses me on the mouth, it is nice and warm, but then the plunger grows bigger and covers my whole face. I am stuck inside it, panicking, trying to break free and not be suffocated.

Transiting into Lily at the start: I feel youthful, impressed by my friends in their floral dresses. I will try getting the kiss too. I feel happy, excited, in the solar plexus.

Transiting into the robot: stiff, like a puppet, cardboard arms and legs, leaning forward, I am giving kisses to people, I feel innocent and good.

Transiting into Lily receiving the kiss: it feels nice and warm, but then it grows over my face, sucks tightly, like an anaconda trying to swallow me. I feel shocked, confused, horrified, and guilty because it did not give me nice treatment like the others. My hands try to pull it off my face.

Transiting into the rubber plunger: feeling rejected, insulted. I only want to hold her, wrap myself around her.

After the composite Lily said: "I got a flash that this being wanted me to join him and meet his family. I said NO! - total rejection." Lily reflected that she feels guilty when she says no to something repulsive. This is a familiar guilt she feels at rejecting people and things, for fear of hurting them.

The following session we revisited the dream and explored the theme of saying no to what's repulsive. Lily shared an image that came to her recently, of golden wings coming over her shoulders, light and protective. She said "I can step away from being strangled." We visualised and reinforced the protective wings.

In subsequent sessions Lily reported feeling good, and that she is making ceramics again "just because I feel like it."

Lily recently said she has been more assertive with her oldest sister, and joked that "big sisters are the crabgrass in the lawn of life." We continue to work with dreams when they arise, as well as processing memories and dialoguing with her inner child.

Reflections

Lily was quite able to enter the dream environment and transit into the images within the dream. Considering Lily's history of depression and her psychiatric medication, I felt it was important to do integrative work with the traumatic images that arose. I wanted to strengthen Lily's inner resources, and was able to do so using her own positive imagery. My aim was to build her ability to connect with good feelings and call on positive self-talk.

Themes of spiritual guidance, wisdom and protection appear frequently in Lily's dreams. Various threatening images also occur, and may relate to existential themes for her: the critical woman (her older sister?); the terrifying flood waters (times of fear and overwhelm, such as starting school in Australia?)

One might speculate whether certain dream elements relate to particular parts of Lily's history. For example, the electric wire in Dream (3) is reminiscent of her mother's shock treatment. Similarly, the babies in dreams (2) and (7) might reflect Lily's time as an infant with her depressed mother: feeling profoundly separate and alone, with no way to communicate. These babies may also be seen as presences arising from Lily's lifelong sense of spiritual wisdom.

Several frightening images arose in Lily's dreams, particularly in dream (6), the green flood water and dream (8), the suffocating rubber plunger. Lily worked the dream composites in the usual way, but I chose to revisit the images and process them consciously. We followed her associations, and in the case of the rubber plunger, talked further about her struggles to say 'no' to things she doesn't want. Gradual growth has occurred in this area.

Lily's dreams frequently express a deep sense of peace and understanding, a sense of 'home', or an expansive spiritual perspective, such as we saw in the wise baby in dream (2) or the single pure note and the intricate paper butterfly in dream (5). These are valuable resources from Lily's spiritual life that we have elaborated and built upon.

In conclusion, I believe that by sharing and embodying the images from her dreams in a safe, supportive relationship, Lily has been able to process some important aspects of her rich inner life. Some dreams were many years old, but still vividly remembered. Incorporating these significant dreams into her therapy has enabled Lily to share the deep spiritual meaning she derives from her artwork and her understanding of life.

I hope that this collaborative process, along with her psychiatric treatment, is helping Lily build a more resilient, integrated sense of self.

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