

Dreaming Together

Chaplaincy and the Social Dreaming Matrix

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26 July 2026

Abstract

This paper proposes social dreaming as a form of collective inquiry for chaplains. Part One asks what may become available when we bring nighttime dreams and associations into a Social Dreaming Matrix and attend to the shared anxieties, defenses, possibilities, and institutional realities of spiritual care. It describes the potential benefits of such a matrix, offers a two-phase framework, and identifies necessary boundaries. Part Two introduces social dreaming more generally, explains how a matrix works, distinguishes it from individual dream interpretation and group therapy, and traces its origins in Gordon Lawrence's work at the Tavistock Center and Charlotte Beradt's collection of dreams under National Socialism. Together, the two parts invite us to listen not only to what our profession says about itself, but also to what it may be dreaming.

Keywords: *chaplaincy, social dreaming, Social Dreaming Matrix, social unconscious, group process, institutions, professional formation, collective inquiry*

PART ONE

Chaplaincy Dreaming: Listening to Our Social Unconscious

We chaplains spend much of our professional lives attending to what has not yet found words.

We enter rooms in which fear may be disguised as anger, grief as silence, helplessness as control, and spiritual longing as a question that appears at first to be about something else. We listen not only to what is said but also to what is communicated through image, gesture, interruption, absence, contradiction, and affect. We are trained—or should be trained—to remain receptive to meanings that are present before they can be clearly named.

Yet when we gather as a profession, much of that receptivity disappears.

Our meetings tend to be organized around competencies, institutional expectations, case presentations, professional standards, staffing concerns, educational requirements, and arguments about identity and our scope of practice. All of these are necessary. But they rely primarily upon conscious, discursive thought. They ask what we know, what we believe, what we recommend, and what we intend to do.

They seldom ask what we may be dreaming.

What might become visible if we were to bring our dreams together—not to interpret one another, diagnose one another, or turn a professional gathering into group therapy, but to consider what our dreams might disclose about the shared social, institutional, and cultural world of chaplaincy?

A Social Dreaming Matrix offers one possible framework for such an inquiry.

Dreams as Social Knowledge

Social dreaming begins with the premise that dreams may contain more than private meaning. Although every dream emerges through the life and imagination of a particular person, dreams may also register aspects of the social environment that have not yet been consciously recognized or adequately expressed.

Institutions have emotional lives. Professions develop shared anxieties, defenses, hopes, myths, prohibitions, and fantasies. Historical events enter our imaginations before their full significance can be articulated. Conditions that remain officially unacknowledged may nevertheless be experienced and represented in dreams.

Social dreaming provides a disciplined method for exploring this dimension of experience.

Its central question is not: What does this dream reveal about the person who dreamed it?

It is instead: What might this dream disclose about the social world in which we are all participating?

Once a dream has been shared in a Social Dreaming Matrix, it is no longer treated primarily as the private possession of the person who reported it. It becomes available to the matrix as common material. It may evoke another dream, a memory, an image, a bodily sensation, a cultural association, or an unexpected emotional response.

One dream speaks to another. Images recur, disappear, reverse themselves, or return in altered form. A locked room in one dream may become a corridor in another. A lost child may be followed by an abandoned building, an unanswered telephone, or a crowded place in which no one can hear. No single contribution necessarily explains the others. Meaning may begin to appear in the links, contrasts, repetitions, transformations, and absences occurring across the matrix.

The dream becomes a kind of commons: brought by one of us but inhabited and explored by all of us.

Why Chaplaincy?

As chaplains, we occupy an unusual position in the life of institutions.

We cross boundaries that others often cannot cross. We move among patients, families, staff members, administrators, clinicians, religious communities, and people who identify with no religious tradition at all. We are present at moments of birth, diagnosis, rupture, conflict, dying, death, recovery, and return. We hear what people cannot say elsewhere and witness dimensions of institutional life that do not easily enter formal reports.

We are also affected by what we witness.

We absorb the anxieties of systems under pressure. We encounter conflicts between care and productivity, vocation and employment, hospitality and institutional control, professional aspiration and organizational reality. We may be asked to hold grief that an institution cannot acknowledge, moral distress that cannot be resolved, or spiritual questions that cannot be entered into the medical record without being diminished.

At the same time, we carry our own professional uncertainties.

What is our task? What authority do we possess? What distinguishes clinical chaplaincy from religious visitation, emotional support, psychotherapy, social work, or general human kindness? How do we know when a chaplain is the right resource? What do institutions actually expect of us, and what do we expect of ourselves? What is being lost as spiritual care becomes more standardized, measured, professionalized, and administratively managed? What new forms of practice may be trying to emerge?

We regularly discuss these questions at the conscious level. But conscious discussion may reach only part of our experience.

Beneath our official language may lie less easily acknowledged fears: fears of irrelevance, inadequacy, displacement, exposure, institutional abandonment, or professional disappearance. We may also carry unrecognized desires: to rescue, to be needed, to remain exceptional, to escape accountability, to become more clinically credible, or to recover a sacred identity we believe has been lost.

Alongside these anxieties and defenses may be unrealized possibilities—new images of collaboration, service, leadership, community, and care for which we have not yet found adequate language.

A chaplaincy Social Dreaming Matrix would not settle these questions. It might, however, help us encounter them differently.

Putting Our Heads Together

The familiar phrase “putting our heads together” ordinarily means combining our conscious knowledge to solve a problem. Social dreaming offers a more literal and more radical possibility: bringing together the nighttime productions of many minds and allowing them to form a shared field of inquiry.

The purpose would not be to decide which dream is most important or which interpretation is correct. It would be to notice what begins to appear when our dreams are placed in relationship with one another.

What images recur?

What emotional climates develop?

Where do our dreams locate danger, safety, authority, abandonment, care, contamination, rescue, or hope?

Who is missing from our dreams?

What cannot be reached?

Which doors are locked, which paths are blocked, and which boundaries are crossed?

What is dying?

What is being born?

Where do we possess agency, and where has agency disappeared?

What institutions, rituals, technologies, strangers, bodies, animals, landscapes, or sacred figures enter the shared dream field?

Such questions would not be imposed upon the matrix while dreams are being shared. They may become useful during the later period of reflection, when we begin to consider the patterns that have emerged.

The matrix itself must remain more open. Its discipline is to delay explanation and protect our dreams from being too quickly organized according to what we already believe.

What a Chaplaincy Social Dreaming Matrix Might Offer Us

Access to what we know but cannot yet say

We may collectively perceive changes in institutional and social life before we have adequately conceptualized them. Dreams can give form to experience that remains implicit, contradictory, or emotionally difficult to acknowledge.

A matrix may help make visible what we already sense but have not yet learned how to think.

Recognition of shared experience

Professional distress is often experienced privately. We may interpret exhaustion, frustration, confusion, or diminished confidence as individual failure. Hearing related images and emotional themes across many dreams may reveal that some apparently personal struggles are expressions of a wider institutional or professional condition.

This does not erase individual responsibility. It places individual experience within a larger field.

Such recognition can reduce our isolation without requiring artificial reassurance or premature solidarity. We do not need to agree about what the dreams mean in order to discover that we are participating in related realities.

A form of collective containment

We are frequently asked to contain experiences that others cannot bear alone. Our profession, however, has relatively few settings in which our accumulated emotional experience can be held without being converted immediately into education, advocacy, diagnosis, policy, or problem-solving.

A Social Dreaming Matrix may offer a temporary container for experiences that have not yet taken an organized form.

Containment does not mean making difficult material disappear. It means creating conditions in which anxiety, grief, conflict, and uncertainty can be experienced without overwhelming us or forcing an immediate resolution.

Freedom from the demand to perform expertise

We are accustomed to listening professionally. Many of us are also trained in psychological, theological, ethical, or organizational interpretation. These capacities are valuable, but they can become obstacles when we use them too quickly.

In the matrix, we are asked to suspend the pressure to sound insightful. An association need not be polished, persuasive, or theoretically grounded. Something apparently trivial may become meaningful when placed beside another image or dream.

Our temporary relinquishment of professional knowing can allow a different kind of intelligence to emerge.

Greater awareness of our professional defenses

Professions defend themselves against anxiety just as individuals and institutions do. We may idealize our compassion, spiritual depth, marginality, inclusiveness, or moral purpose. We may avoid conflicts involving authority, competition, money, status, competence, resentment, and power.

A matrix may reveal these defenses indirectly, through repeated dream images and patterns rather than accusation.

This indirectness can be valuable. What we cannot hear when stated propositionally may become thinkable when we encounter it symbolically.

Renewed imagination

When we feel threatened, our thinking often contracts. We direct our energy toward survival, recognition, credentialing, jurisdiction, productivity, and proof of value. These concerns may be legitimate, but anxiety can make it difficult for us to imagine alternatives.

Dreams do not obey existing organizational charts or professional categories. They combine what conscious thought keeps separate. They create unexpected relationships and represent possibilities that have not yet entered our formal discourse.

A chaplaincy matrix may therefore help restore our imaginative capacity—not as an escape from reality but as another way of encountering reality.

The generation of new questions

The most important outcome of a matrix may not be an answer. It may be a better question.

A recurring image may challenge an assumption about our professional task. A sequence of dreams may reveal a contradiction between how we describe our role and how we experience it. An absence may become more significant than anything explicitly represented.

We may leave not with consensus but with questions that are more alive, more precise, and less easily evaded.

Thought that may eventually lead to action

Social dreaming should not be reduced to an instrument for producing a strategic plan. Its value depends partly upon protecting it from immediate demands for usefulness.

Nevertheless, reflection upon the matrix may generate hypotheses with practical implications.

We may identify concerns deserving further study, forms of support that are missing, institutional patterns requiring attention, or possibilities for collaboration we had not previously imagined. The matrix may disclose where action is needed while also revealing the fantasies and anxieties that could distort that action.

The movement is not directly from dream to decision. It is from dream to association, from association to pattern, from pattern to reflection, and only then, perhaps, from reflection to responsible action.

A Proposed Framework

A chaplaincy Social Dreaming Matrix might be conducted as a stand-alone gathering or as part of a conference, professional meeting, educational program, or continuing formation event.

A basic format could include two distinct phases.

The matrix

The matrix might last approximately 35 to 40 minutes.

It would traditionally begin with the question:

“What is the first dream from our matrix?”

The wording matters. The facilitator does not ask who has a dream. Attention is directed toward the dream and the emerging matrix rather than toward the identity of the dreamer.

We may share:

- Recent or older nighttime dreams
- Dream fragments
- Images or scenes evoked by another dream
- Thoughts, emotions, or bodily sensations
- Memories and cultural associations
- Other dreams recalled while listening
- Associations that appear trivial, uncertain, or incomplete

None of us is required to remember or report a dream. Listening and contributing associations are also forms of participation.

During this phase, we refrain from questioning the dreamer, reconstructing the dreamer’s biography, applying theories of dream interpretation, or developing conclusions about what a dream means.

The emphasis remains upon dreams speaking to dreams.

Reflection and dialogue

After a brief transition, the matrix would be followed by approximately 35 to 40 minutes of reflection.

During this second phase, we may identify recurring images, emotional currents, contradictions, absences, and cross-cutting themes. We may develop tentative hypotheses about what the matrix could be revealing concerning chaplaincy, the institutions in which we work, or the wider social environment.

Our hypotheses should remain provisional. They are not authoritative interpretations and should not be used to make claims about individual dreamers.

Our purpose is to think about what the matrix has made available to us.

Necessary Boundaries

A chaplaincy Social Dreaming Matrix would require clear boundaries and capable facilitation.

It is not psychotherapy. We should not be invited to analyze one another, disclose personal histories, or treat the matrix as a substitute for individual or group treatment.

It is not case consultation. We should not mine dreams for information about particular patients, families, colleagues, or institutions. Identifying details must be avoided.

It is not a method of spiritual direction or supernatural discernment. We may understand dreams within our own religious or spiritual traditions, but no tradition should be permitted to impose an authoritative meaning upon the shared material.

It is not a diagnostic procedure. We should draw no conclusions about a participant's mental health, personality, spirituality, competence, or unconscious motivation from a dream contributed to the matrix.

Our participation must be voluntary. Confidentiality should be explicitly addressed. We should agree that identifying information about dreamers will not be circulated and that dreams will not be quoted publicly without permission.

Any written account of the event should focus primarily upon themes and learning rather than reproducing identifiable dreams.

The matrix would be capably facilitated. Our facilitators must be able to protect the matrix from both intrusive interpretation and emotional disorganization. They should understand group process, maintain the distinction between the matrix and the reflection period, and resist the temptation to provide a

master interpretation. Their task is not to explain our dreams. It is to sustain the conditions in which we can dream and think together.

An Opportunity for Us

We have many ways of speaking about ourselves. We have fewer ways of listening to ourselves.

A Social Dreaming Matrix would offer neither a comprehensive theory of our profession nor a solution to our current challenges. It would provide something more modest and perhaps more unusual: a protected space in which we could attend to the images, affects, anxieties, and possibilities arising from our shared participation in the work.

Our dreams might disclose fear, fragmentation, futility, and loss. They might reveal professional defenses we would prefer not to recognize. They might also carry images of vitality, creativity, connection, and renewal that have not yet entered our conscious plans.

We cannot know in advance what we would dream together.

That is precisely the point.

Social dreaming asks us to suspend what we already know long enough to encounter what may be trying to become thinkable. For a profession devoted to listening beneath the surface of human experience, that opportunity deserves serious exploration.

PART TWO

Social Dreaming: An Introduction to the Social Dreaming Matrix

What Is Social Dreaming?

Social dreaming is a method of thinking together through dreams. Participants share nighttime dreams and the thoughts, feelings, images, bodily sensations, memories, associations, and other dreams that arise in response to them.

Unlike conventional approaches to dreams, social dreaming does not concentrate primarily on the personality, biography, or inner conflicts of the individual dreamer. Its central question is not, “What does this dream reveal about the person who dreamed it?” Instead, it asks, “What might this dream disclose about the social world in which we are all participating?”

Social dreaming begins with the premise that dreams may contain more than private meaning. They may also register aspects of institutional, cultural, communal, and historical experience that have not yet been consciously recognized or adequately expressed. In this sense, dreams can provide access to the **social unconscious**: the largely implicit patterns of feeling, thought, relationship, anxiety, hope, and imagination shared within a group or society.

Once a dream has been offered to the group, it is no longer treated as the private possession of the person who reported it. It becomes available to the matrix as shared material. The dream may evoke associations, connect with other dreams, acquire new images, or be transformed through the group’s collective reverie. The dream becomes a kind of commons: brought by one person but inhabited and explored by everyone.

Social dreaming is therefore not simply the sharing of dreams in a group. It is a disciplined form of collective inquiry in which dreams are allowed to speak to other dreams.

What Is a Social Dreaming Matrix?

The **Social Dreaming Matrix**, often abbreviated SDM, is the setting in which social dreaming takes place.

The word *matrix* emphasizes a field or network of relationships rather than a collection of isolated individuals. Participants contribute to a shared process in which dreams and associations can circulate, connect, and generate new patterns of thought.

During the matrix, participants may offer:

- Recent or older nighttime dreams
- Fragments of dreams
- Images or scenes evoked by another dream
- Thoughts, feelings, or bodily sensations
- Memories and cultural associations
- Other dreams recalled while listening
- Apparently trivial or uncertain associations

A participant does not need to remember or share a dream in order to take part. Listening and contributing associations to the dreams of others are equally important forms of participation.

The atmosphere differs from that of a discussion group, seminar, or therapy group. Participants are invited to loosen their usual reliance on explanation and analysis and to enter a more receptive state of mind—one characterized by reverie, emotional openness, floating attention, and tolerance for uncertainty.

The purpose is not to reach an immediate conclusion. It is to allow connections and patterns to emerge before deciding what they mean.

How the Matrix Begins

A Social Dreaming Matrix traditionally begins with the question:

“What is the first dream from our matrix?”

The question is intentionally phrased this way rather than, “Who has the first dream?”

This small difference establishes an important principle. Attention is directed toward the dream and the emerging matrix, not toward the identity of the individual dreamer. From the beginning, the dream is approached as a possible expression of the collective field.

After the first dream is shared, participants respond with other dreams or with associations evoked by what they have heard. One dream may call forth another. A particular image may recur in altered form. A feeling, place, object, phrase, or bodily sensation may travel through several contributions.

The matrix develops through these links rather than through an orderly sequence of discussion.

What Participants Are Asked to Do

Participants are encouraged to listen for resonance rather than explanation.

An association does not need to be polished, intellectually persuasive, or obviously relevant. Something that appears insignificant may become meaningful when placed beside another image or dream. Participants are therefore invited to speak when an association presents itself without first requiring themselves to understand why it has arisen.

The basic movement of the matrix is:

Dream → association → another dream → image → feeling → memory → further association

Over time, clusters of images, emotional tones, conflicts, and recurring themes may begin to appear. Some connections may be readily visible; others may remain ambiguous or only partially formed.

The matrix asks participants to sustain that ambiguity long enough for new thinking to become possible.

What Participants Are Asked to Avoid

During the matrix itself, participants ordinarily refrain from interpreting the dreams intellectually or applying a particular theory of dream meaning.

They also avoid questioning the dreamer about personal circumstances, motivations, relationships, diagnoses, or biographical details. The dreamer is not placed under examination, and the dream is not treated as evidence from which conclusions about the individual should be drawn.

This discipline protects the dream from being too quickly reduced to something already known. It also prevents psychological expertise or theoretical authority from colonizing the shared imaginative space.

The matrix is not an exercise in producing the most convincing interpretation. Nor is it a competition to identify the “correct” meaning of a symbol. Participants instead remain attentive to what the dreams and associations create together.

The working assumptions are:

The dream belongs to the matrix once it has been shared.

The dream may be treated as a collective product.

Associations are more useful than explanations during the matrix.

Uncertainty is not a problem to be eliminated but a condition to be borne.

Meaning should be allowed to emerge before it is organized.

Dreams Speaking to Dreams

The phrase “**dreams speaking to dreams**” captures the distinctive method of social dreaming.

Participants listen not only to the content of an individual dream but also to the transformations occurring across the matrix. A locked room in one dream may become an open field in another. A threatening animal may reappear as a companion. Images of falling, searching, crossing boundaries, losing one’s voice, finding shelter, or encountering strangers may recur in different forms.

No single dream necessarily contains the meaning of the matrix. Meaning may reside in the links, contrasts, repetitions, and transformations among many contributions.

The matrix therefore depends upon a willingness to think associatively rather than linearly. Participants allow themselves to enter a state resembling daydreaming or reverie while remaining attentive to the group and to their own emotional responses.

Even resistance, boredom, confusion, irritation, silence, or difficulty remembering dreams may become part of what the matrix is communicating.

Reflection and Dialogue

The Social Dreaming Matrix is often followed by a separate period of reflection and dialogue.

The distinction between these two phases is important.

During the matrix, participants share dreams and associations while resisting premature interpretation. During the reflection phase, the group becomes more consciously analytical. Participants may begin to identify recurring images, emotional currents, contradictions, and cross-cutting themes.

The group can then develop tentative hypotheses about what the matrix may be revealing concerning its shared institutional, cultural, or social context.

These hypotheses remain provisional. They are not definitive interpretations of individual dreams. Their purpose is to help the group recognize what may previously have been implicit, unformulated, or difficult to think.

A matrix of approximately 35 to 40 minutes may therefore be followed by a comparable period of reflection. The precise timing can vary, but adequate time should be protected for both the dreaming and the subsequent effort to think about what has emerged.

The Origins of Social Dreaming

Social dreaming was pioneered by Gordon Lawrence, who began working with the Social Dreaming Matrix in 1982 at the Tavistock Center for Human Relations in London.

Lawrence had observed that dreams were frequently present in the life of groups but were rarely shared or considered. Dreams were generally regarded as private material belonging within individual psychotherapy or psychoanalysis. This assumption prevented dreams—and the images, feelings, and sensations associated with them—from circulating within groups as sources of social knowledge.

An important influence on Lawrence was the work of journalist Charlotte Beradt. Between 1933 and 1939, Beradt collected the dreams of ordinary people living in Germany under National Socialism. The dreams reflected shared experiences of surveillance, dread, helplessness, conformity, humiliation, and approaching catastrophe.

Beradt's work demonstrated that dreams can register political and cultural realities even when those realities are not yet fully understood or openly discussed. The dreams were personal experiences, but they also bore witness to a common social world.

Later writings concerning dreams under conditions of war, displacement, concentration-camp imprisonment, and political oppression further demonstrated the capacity of dreams to preserve symbolization and interior life under circumstances that threaten to destroy them. Dreaming may provide evidence that the capacity to imagine, represent experience, and remain psychically alive has survived.

Dreams can therefore carry not only the imprint of collective trauma but also unrealized possibilities—images of futures that have not yet been consciously conceived.

The Continuing Purpose of Social Dreaming

Since its beginnings at the Tavistock Center, social dreaming has been used in groups, organizations, institutions, professional communities, and cultural settings throughout the world.

Its continuing purpose is to make more explicit what remains socially and culturally implicit or unconscious.

A Social Dreaming Matrix does not guarantee consensus, clarity, or immediate practical solutions. Its contribution is more fundamental. It creates a setting in which participants can notice what ordinary forms of discussion may overlook: unspoken anxieties, emerging possibilities, shared conflicts, hidden assumptions, and images of change.

By socializing dreams, the matrix can help a group generate new thoughts, new questions, and new perspectives. It provides a disciplined way of attending to what a community may already know at some level but has not yet found a way to think or say.

Selected Readings

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Suggested Citation

Roth, D. (2026). *Dreaming together: Chaplaincy and the social dreaming matrix*. Clinical Chaplaincy Papers, No. 4. ClinicalChaplaincy.org.