

The House

She walked into the session looking *perfect* as always. She looked elegantly *put together*. On the surface, she embodied the ideal South Asian woman: polite, composed and pleasant.

She smiled warmly, asked how I was doing and settled into the chair across from me. She began telling stories about her family, her relationships and her world in general. The theme running through her stories was subtle but consistent: everyone around her was flawed and unkind. She, on the other hand, was thoughtful and generous - but above all, *she was good*.

This way of seeing the world, others and herself gave her a sense of safety. In a culture that rewards a woman's perfection, her ability to smooth things over, to please and serve others was convenient for people around her. She was admired for this and often envied.

There is always a cost to adapting to this way of being. In patriarchal systems, women often have two options: to succeed at embodying the ideal and be rewarded from the external world or to fail and experience shame, judgment and exclusion. What is not very well understood is that even when they *succeed* in becoming this *ideal woman* – something begins to shift internally eventually. Our inner world begins to suffer. Sooner or later, there is a breakdown or a *breakthrough*.

For this client, it came in the form of a dream.

A few months into our working together, the stories of her perfection and the imperfection of others continued to dominate our work together. Eventually, there was a dream that unsettled her. She dreamt of a house - but not just any house, it was *her house*. As she went up the stairs in this house, she found it dark, dusty and crowded. She didn't want anyone to go there. Infact, she avoided it herself.

As she narrated this dream to me, her body seemed to relax. Her face began to soften. Something in her had been stirred.

In Jungian psychology, the image of a house often symbolizes the psyche: the structure of the self. The neglected upper floor can represent parts of us we have pushed away or disowned. Jung called this the *shadow*.

Dreams like this are not just random. They are messages from the unconscious, rich with meaning. And while they might be uncomfortable, they invite us to turn inward and notice what we might not be looking at.

We began speaking about this dream. The psyche began to respond. She began having more dreams. As she began speaking about her dreams, the act of speaking, paying attention to this sacred process brought forth more dreams or more guidance from the unconscious.

She began a process of becoming curious about her inner world. As she turned inward, gently exploring the meaning of dreams rather than chasing the perfection in the outer world, something started to shift. She became more attuned to her own needs, her longings and the emotional life she had once pushed aside. Her relationship to herself began to change. She became less preoccupied with controlling how she appeared to others. Her energy shifted

inwards and she became more grounded. This inner work didn't change her life overnight but it changed her relationship to herself over time which made a huge difference in how she experienced herself, others and the world.

Many times when clients come for a session, their idea of what might happen in therapy and what ends up happening is quite different. They often expect advice or solutions but transformation often occurs in more mysterious and subtle ways. A dream, a silence, a strange discomfort we might not be able to explain.

Many of us live lives focused on the external world. Our modern world tends to encourage a more outwardly focused way of being. With less and less focus on the inner world, some of us can end up living a life disconnected from our deeper selves. Dream work is one way of reconnecting with our own self and the deeper Self.

“The house of the soul is not to be built by the rational mind but by the deep intuitive forces of the unconscious”.

- *Helen Luke*