



Source: Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, 'The fight reflex', *Guardian Unlimited*, 19/08/06.

Tags: [Iraq](#), [dreams](#), [mother/father](#), [war](#), [violence](#)
Writer/s: [Helen Townsend](#)

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

At the dream workshop, we sat in a circle. They called it the 'Dream Forum', one of those places where everybody holds hands and you tell the person next to you about yourself, so they can introduce you to the group.

When it came to my turn, the woman next to me, who had a face of composed gentleness, said 'Hi everyone, this is Jason, and he's had some very troubling experiences for a young man.' Her name was Margie and she had one of those practised new age voices with an American accent, not from being American or even living in America, but from listening to tapes. Some of those people I don't like, but Margie, I sort of warmed to her. Maybe because she held my hand a little too long and reminded me of my Grandmother.

Anyway, I'm at the Dream Forum because—because —because—I have bad dreams. And I don't know where else to go. I went to a psychologist and she told me that dreams were the rubbish of the unconscious and not to worry. If I wrote down, 'THIS IS JUST A DREAM', and had it on my bedroom wall for when I woke up, then the dreams would go.

They didn't. I still woke screaming every night.

Anyway, I went to the Dream Forum with a half open mind. I liked the guy who was running it. He was called Chris. I thought he seemed like a good guy. I'd met him at the markets, where I go sometimes to buy tee-shirts, flirt with a girl and look at the peace and love shit. Chris was handing out flyers. I didn't think he'd be the one running the thing, but I didn't mind. He had a good vibe about him.

I'm not really a peace and love person. I was in the army, pensioned off after Iraq. 'Psychologically unsound' was the reason for my discharge. That's the sort of present the army gives out when they let you go, a little tag line to get you started back on civvie street.

When Margie said I'd had some troubling experiences for a young man, she didn't know the half of it. I told her about being in Timor and the terrible payback deaths I'd seen. Well, just what remained of the body. But the really horrible stuff was in my own head.

Lots of the women in the forum had dreams about Princess Di. Princess Di!? I couldn't believe it, but evidently she's a very powerful female symbol of desire and envy. She represents the need to be admired —courage in the face of adversity. She's the Queen of hearts. I thought she was just a tarty princess, better looking than most of them.

In the afternoon, it got a bit meatier. There were some rape fantasies. A bloke who had gay dreams broke down and cried. He said he thought he was gay, which he

obviously was. Chris was really good with him, very straight, really sympathetic. I liked Chris a lot, but when he asked for the next person to volunteer their dream experiences, I couldn't do it.

We did get onto violent dreams. I thought—'this is my stuff'—but it wasn't. These people were the victims of violence—husbands, snake and monster dreams, even war dreams. The general scenario was that they had a tiff with mother, husband, sister, brother, boss, and then the next thing, here was this person in snake costume or army fatigues monsterring them.

Some of them, I felt sympathetic towards. But some of them, it was almost like they'd twisted it. They didn't want to be privy to their own violence. They wanted it, but they wouldn't be responsible for it.

Margie told us her dream. 'My Dad had been in World War II and he was really proud of it. It was his whole life, or the most important part at least. And I have this dream about him shooting me. And he shoots and shoots and shoots, and I die and die and die, but every time, he's back and so am I, and I don't know why he's doing this.' And she started to cry.

I didn't say anything, but I thought about it a lot. Because I'm her Dad. Or I know who he was. I understand him. I know where he was coming from, shooting her like that night after night after night.

The average person's head is full of violence. What's the statistic about TV? Something along the lines that by the time a kid is 14 they will have seen about 21,000 graphic deaths portrayed on TV. We all want to know about violent death. We want to know about killing and being killed. People act it out, like some compulsive masturbatory fantasy. They make TV shows, films, write best sellers. They show it to others, they paint it, they write it up on walls.

But there's only a few of us that ever do it, that is, actually kill someone. And some of us, quite a few, we get away with it. It happens in a way that it doesn't go deep, or perhaps the person doesn't have a deep part of them. Those people aren't psychologically unsound. They get a better tag to start back on civvie street.

But then there's the ones like me, who don't get away with it. It sits there. It's the bad dream come true. I'm the perpetrator, not the victim. I've done it. I'm done. Finished. Can't wrap it up at a workshop, can't change it, can't edit it. The great fantasy of humankind—it's mine, it's me.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Helen Townsend.