

Incubated Dreaming

A NATURAL SPIRITUAL INSTINCT

Meredith Sabini

Dream incubation is probably familiar to most IASD members, so I thought I'd offer a perspective on it that may be novel. Instead of focusing on the elements that comprise incubation—the seeker's intent, a deity or Spirit to whom petition is made, and a venue in which the sleeping/dreaming are ceremonialized—we might consider that there is a core or nucleus of the practice that arises from an innate and universal human instinct. Dream incubation, thus, is a *natural* spiritual practice, akin to our instinct to pray or observe omens. We may not think of instincts as being “spiritual,” but C. G. Jung provided the framework for this when he said, “The spiritual appears in the psyche also as an instinct, indeed as a real passion.” Archetypes, as Jung defined them, are ancient, evolved instincts that manifest in universal culture behavior patterns, such as dream incubation.

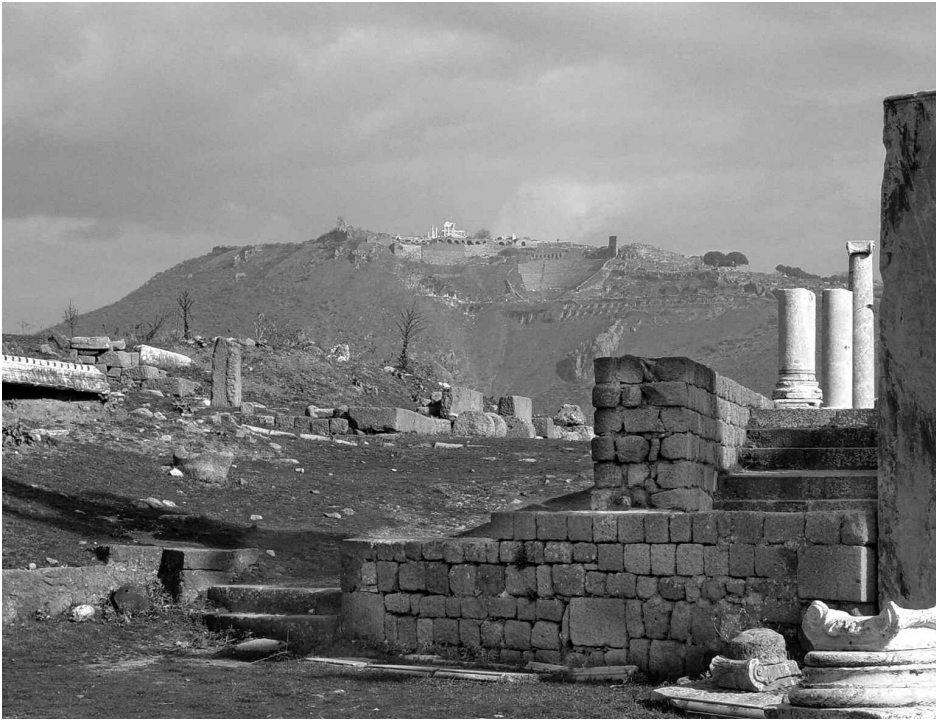
Today, we have no dream deities, no incubation shrines; our own bedrooms or lodging at a retreat center have to suffice. I have often lamented this lack,

part of the pervasive spiritual/religious dearth of our modern era. With friends, I spent six years renovating a dilapidated mineral springs in hopes of restoring the Asklepian tradition. In 2000, the place was burned to the ground in a regional wildfire. Afterward, a dream came to a family member in which my four grandparents, seated in a sacred fire circle, said to tell me that this had been done with a purpose. (More on this later.) Looking back, I realize this itself was an incubated dream, coming to a member of my kinship group at a time I was too distraught to dream for myself. The lengthy dream showed much about the land, the nature spirits on it, and its destiny, in answer to my felt but unspoken question, “Why did this happen?”

After gathering together my ideas for this article, I was awakened one night and “told” that the absence of any visible, outer form for incubation rituals actually enables us to experience the incubation instinct at its most elementary, free of any cultural constraints. This revision was most welcome: the cup I

saw as half-empty rotated to a new position in which it became half-full. In fact, my own experience, perhaps like yours, was of coming upon dream incubation spontaneously. Though I was quite familiar with many cultural versions of the practice through my 1972 doctoral dissertation on the place of dreams in non-Western cultures, this gave me only scholarly knowledge. It was when I was ill and in need of healing, like pilgrims to Epidaurus, that I spontaneously discovered incubation.

For several years in the late seventies, I got quite sick at the holidays, and wanted to know why as much as to be well. At my analyst's suggestion, I traded the extroverted activity of Christmas-to-New Year's week for one of silence and solitude at a remote mountain cabin, my dream journal for company. Reading an entire year's dreams during the week, I noticed recurring themes and figures; and I began to incubate dreams on asked and not-quite-asked questions. Dreams offered insight into my present and other psychosomatic illnesses—how they



View looking east from the entrance to the Asklepeion at the acropolis of Pergamum (Image courtesy of www.HolyLandPhotos.org)

started and what their dynamics were; difficulties in certain relationships were shown in a new light.

It was not that I asked a question on any given night and in the morning, a dream was there. Questions were not always formulated clearly or consciously; rather, they existed in the twilight of the unconscious. Sometimes immediate issues have been followed by relevant dreams; but dreams about broader ponderings about my personal destiny and about the culture we live in have come intermittently over a long span of time. A recent dream seemed to depict this natural incubation process: candelabra on “this side” was lighted up; then, another on “that side” lighted spontaneously in resonance. Both were trident-shaped, suggesting the Greek word “psi” for psyche or soul.

I believe that freeing incubation from time-bound expectations and consciously-formulated intent still retains the essence of the practice, that is, the archetypal core instinct. This is also in keeping with ancient dream quest traditions in which the seeker would not know

when or if a dream would come, and might have to remain at the cave or temple for days or weeks, or return again. To me, the interior domain from which dreams come is a vast wilderness with many layers and dimensions; I visit it and it visits me. The first hour upon waking, I lie quietly, receptive to what might arrive. This is my hour of meditation, my spiritual practice, and incubating is an integral part of it. I try not to replicate the culture’s dominating, colonizing attitude by treating the dream world as a third world country I can strip-mine for its riches.

I am also intrigued by incubating dreams about our culture. I see culture as a “third thing” between us, like a patient whom we all share and is surely ailing. In 1997–98, I had a series of dreams verifying my impression that the present extinction process affecting plant and animal life and indigenous peoples could potentially affect *Homo sapiens* as a whole. These dreams were most certainly an incubated response to the painful issues I had been reflecting on for several years. But rather than leave me

feeling hopeless about our plight, the dream information indicated that it was our speedy tempo of life, out of synch with nature’s laws, that was putting us at risk; and this could be changed.

In November, my new business, The Dream Institute of Northern California (which I finally opened at the behest of insistent dreams and visions), hosted a Social Dreaming Matrix with Gordon Lawrence, author of *Experiences in Social Dreaming*. We listened to all dreams for societal referents. It was thrilling to watch dreams expand from their personal meanings into holograms for the culture.

Over the door of his Bollingen retreat, Jung carved the inscription, “*Vocatus adque non vocatus, deus aderit*,” meaning “Called or not, the god(s) will be present.” This captures the essence of the perspective on incubation I have tried to convey here. The inherent wisdom function of the dreaming mind *spontaneously* responds to questions we have about our vocation, relationships, illness, destiny, whether we know we have asked them or not.

So why did that Asklepiion-to-be burn down? It’s a long story. The short version is that all of us involved had no dreams about the endeavor and we mistook this lack of response for a green light. My destiny was to come back to the city, into the midst of the hectic modern world, and help the dream live here.

During our panel on incubation at JFK University in October, one presenter made a slip: instead of saying that people “journeyed to Asklepius,” she said “journalled.” Perhaps a Spirit spoke through her to us all. Our journeys do not have to be geographical. We can journal and journey interiorly, to that place of Mystery where the gods of sleep and dreaming, by whatever name we know them, are alive and well.

An onierophile for over thirty years, **Dr. Meredith Sabini** is an artist, writer, and licensed psychologist who specializes in dream interpretation and training. She designed the Dream Assessment Protocol for clinical and research use and directs The Dream Institute of Northern California, in Berkeley, which offers programs for the public as well as dream training.