

## Meredith Sabini

### WHAT DOES THE SOUL WANT?



This question was the centerpiece of a dream I had this summer, the night before giving a training seminar at a therapy clinic. On waking I immediately knew that the question and the antagonism it provoked reflected a core conflict present not only within this particular clinic and in the mental health profession, but also in our society at large. It's unusual when a dream contains a philosophical or psychological koan. Since this one is so fundamental, I would like to share with you the dream and the reflections it precipitated.

*There are two of us, myself and a woman about half my age, whom I knew in the dream. She resembles a graduate student from several years earlier, a person who claimed to have a spiritual orientation; it turns out she hasn't been telling me the whole story.*

*The dream opens in the middle of our dialogue. Apparently I have been giving her some guidance and instruction. She had told me her son's birthday was coming up and that she planned to get him a puppy. It was in response to this that I posed the question, "Is that what the soul wants?" As the dream opens, she gets up and starts to walk away, saying to me, "That's just weird," or "You're just weird." The implication was that a birthday was an*

*ordinary event and one need not consider anything as seemingly deep and difficult to ascertain as What the Soul Wants. She implies that I am making too big a deal out of this.*

Before turning to the dream itself, let me tell you more about the context. My presentation for the clinic was on the value of initial dreams in providing diagnostic and prognostic information, and it was to be in two parts. In the first part, a month earlier, I had taught the staff how to collect initial dreams during intake, what to look for in them, and how to correlate the imagery with clients' presenting symptoms and life histories. At the second session, coming up the day my dream occurred, the therapists were to bring in client dreams for discussion. This is the format I regularly use for training therapists, and I am often nervous about whether anyone will obtain dream material and whether we will be able to make anything of it during the short time allotted. I was greatly relieved that the dreaming mind came up with this image of the underlying dilemma facing therapists. I felt I could tell the dream as part of the program, especially since I'd told them that they themselves might have the initial dream for a client; I could now model

this possibility using my own dream about their dilemma as an example.

My practice when exploring a dream is to lie quietly in bed for perhaps half an hour or more and let the associations drift in. With this dream, I knew right away that it captured the chronic split between the pragmatic approach to problem-solving favored by our culture and a spiritual approach that would consider what the soul, or psyche, might want and need. I knew that therapists at this agency, as in most short-term service organizations, felt under pressure to work in a focused, practical manner to turn out quick results. I also knew that although many of them privately had a meditation practice or spiritual perspective, this was not something they felt encouraged to integrate into their clinic work.

The student and I represent the two sides of this dilemma, and the dream casts these in rather sharp contrast: the pragmatic Western voice that treats birthdays and similar events as "ordinary" and the voice, often imported from another tradition, that advocates for the soul. The young child in the dream is akin to patients who come to a clinic in need of help. The institutional stance is that they merely are depressed,

confused, anxious, or ill, and need merely a soft shoulder to cry on, a sturdy hand to guide them, or a pill to take, none of which involve asking that seemingly overblown question about the soul.

This polarity was not new to me; I have heard therapists at many clinics over the years complain about being forced to do superficial work when they knew more was called for. So what was the dream offering that was new? I felt that by showing the two sides in such stark relief, it highlighted the limits of each position as well as the falseness of the polarity itself. One of the assumptions people have is that "it takes a lot of time" to find out what the soul wants or needs, as if they have to go away on a meditation retreat for ten days of silence in order to find out. The point of my presentation on initial dreams is that, by carefully unpacking each element in them, a therapist can know immediately not only what ails the psyche or soul but also what it needs for healing. The essence of a patient's lifetime may be condensed into a single initial dream, the psyche's effort to convey this overall picture to the healer, something that the conscious self often cannot do when it's distressed.

There is falseness on both sides of this polarity: that the

soul is somehow separate from the ordinary and that the ordinary is somehow separate from the soul. Though this has been true in our modern world, it is not a given human condition but an artifact, part of our Judeo-Christian heritage that the Kingdom of God, the domain of the divine, or sacred space, is located elsewhere.

Of the twenty or so therapists and interns who came to the second session, four did bring clients' dreams. The wonderful creativity and insights of the group came for-

ward as they engaged with each element, figure, and action sequence as I had instructed, thus readily discovering the links between dream motifs and issues in clients' lives. The intense suffering of soul that had led their clients to seek help was uncovered, and the room filled with caring and compassion. We had more than enough material to discuss, and not enough time for my dream, but it was very much present as a background, providing a standpoint from which I could

empathize with the underlying conflict between practicality and spirituality.

It was not until I wrote up this account that I remembered the etymology of the word spoken in the dream: "weird." It is a Teutonic word, *myrd*, meaning fate, spelled *Wurd* in Old High German, *Wyrd* in Anglo-Saxon, and *Weird* in English. This mythic tradition refers to three sisters, the Weird, or Wyrd Sisters, akin to the Moirai, the triple goddess in ancient Greek tradition, and Celtic Morrigan. Predating

patriarchy, these central mythic figures variously lived in a cave at the source of the Fountain of Life or in the cosmic womb under the Tree of Life. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare called the three witches the Weird Sisters. By this time, the significance of the triple goddess had begun to degenerate, and "weird" became synonymous with uncanny, frightening, preternatural. The graduate student's statement in the dream could thus be rephrased, "You want me to consider my son's fate? That's wyrd." Yes, it is.