



Illustration by William Rotsaert

# Culture DREAMS

*A vision of dark passages emerges while the ego sleeps.*

By Meredith Sabini

Were we native people living in a viable folk culture during a time of crisis, most likely we would be hearing and discussing dreams that pertained to our situation. They might be the dreams of a medicine man or woman, or those of an individual who came forth with a dream-vision, knowing it could benefit the tribe. Today, it would be very unusual to claim dreams have cultural relevance, this practice being so completely alien. And yet, isn't this precisely part of the problem—that guidance from our nightly source of wisdom is no longer valued? Four dreams about our culture's transition are shared here. If you will gather round the fire, we will venture together into the dark tunnel of transition and emerge with light at the end. But first, let the words of a wise elder set the stage.

In his essay, "The Meaning of Analytical Psychology for Modern Man," Swiss psychiatrist C.G. Jung imagines that a prototypical "modern man" comes to him for consultation. For those offended by Jung's dated gender usage, I can mention that he considered the overly developed, vertical, linear, and "masculine" form of consciousness present in men and women to be a fundamental problem. Modern man is the characterization of this, and according to Jung, he "suffers most of all from the disease of knowing everything better; there is nothing that he cannot classify and put in the correct pigeonhole." Jung gives this diagnosis: "You are suffering from overstrain as a result of your numerous activities and boundless extraversion." This figure is part of the make-up of any and all of us living in contemporary civilization and needs to be acknowledged so we can help it transform.

What remedy did Jung prescribe? "We must guide him, by devious ways at first, to a dark, ridiculously insignificant, quite unimportant corner of his psyche. . . . That corner of the psyche is the dream." But Jung knew that modern man would object to this prescription, claiming that "realities must be countered with other equally palpable realities, and not with dreams," which are "utterly subjective and nugatory." Modern man, Jung parodied in *Letters*, vol. II, would say that "you cannot build a house with dreams, or pay taxes, or win battles, or overcome the world crisis." This attitude typifies the outer-directed bias of Western civilization. In 1960, before chaos theory or the concept of the implicate order had become well known, Jung told the Earl of Sandwich: "It is quite possible that we look at the world from the wrong side and that we might find the right answer by changing our point of view and looking at it from the other side, i.e., not from the outside, but from the inside."

With this in mind, we can understand Jung's recommendation in *Civilization in Transition* regarding dreams: "Dreams are impartial, spontaneous products of the unconscious psyche, outside the control of the will. They are pure nature; they show us the unvarnished natural truth, and are therefore fitted, as nothing else, to give us back an attitude that accords with our basic human nature when our consciousness has strayed too far from its foundation and run into an impasse." We are at an impasse in evolution; indeed, we may be witnessing the death and regeneration of our whole civilized way of life.

Just as dreams can come to our aid when we are at an impasse in our own lives, so they may help guide the body politic. In the first century B.C., a Roman senator's daughter dreamed that the goddess Minerva appeared to her and complained that the Roman people were neglecting her temple; the dream was reported to the Senate and funds for restoration of the temple were approved. We are far from having this serious a respect for the wisdom of the dream, and it would be naïve to expect it, but it is nevertheless important to hear stories like this as a reminder of historical periods that did.

Our conscious mind monitors matters concerning friends, family, and the world around us, and the unconscious does likewise. During the three decades that I have

kept track of dreams, I have noted that certain ones refer to our culture's suffering. Here, I recount four dreams that directly concern the death of the old paradigm and the emergence of a new one. They give a graphic portrayal of the dismal situation we have gotten ourselves in and show the emotional reactions of despair and outrage; they depict the stages of mourning and eventual acceptance. One dream hints at how long the transformative process may take, and the series closes with an inspiring glimpse of a new way of being.

Two dreams are short and straightforward, two are lengthy and complex; the first is dark and painful, the last is bright and hopeful. They did not initiate my "conversion" to the new paradigm, a process much like a religious conversion, but certainly took it to a deeper, more profound level. The first took place in 1990, on a holiday weekend. I awakened from it in shock:

I am in a line of traffic about to enter a tunnel, like the Caldicott Tunnel. It looks crowded and no one can see very far ahead. But cars crowd in, pushy, the way commuter traffic gets. I want to slow down and leave room between cars. Trucks barge in from the right side, cutting into the space I try to leave. But as they enter the tunnel, they crash. There are accidents, though I can't exactly see what. Both trucks fall over onto their right sides as if the tires blew out. One is a big rig and one is a regular delivery truck. Gasoline has spilled all over the tunnel entrance, and I won't go any nearer. Cars from behind push me, but I won't go. I'm in the old Volvo. I just wait.

Then I see a passing police car, and I honk wildly until it stops. Soon police come and see the mess. They go into the tunnel and two policemen pull the truck drivers out and try to give them mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, but it is too late; they are dead. Then the police direct traffic back, backward. My decision was correct; if anything, I hadn't stayed far enough away. My choice to go slow in spite of the collective pressure is redeemed.

There followed a second part to the dream, concerning my personal reaction to the cultural situation. In it, I realized that I would never be comfortable in this culture, because my need to move slowly was inherently at odds with the tempo of the culture, which is out of order and in conflict with basic human instincts. The phrase "never be comfortable" repeated in a litany of recognition and despair, and I woke up sobbing.

In the liminal state between dream and waking, I intuitively came to understand that the hurried pace was a cultural symptom of denial of the death threat from the global environmental disasters hanging over us, including the threat of our own extinction. The so-called pressure to keep busy is thus a defense or protection against the enormous, if not intolerable, pain of that death threat. If people keep busy enough, they don't have to experience that pain. The phrase "the culture is in manic denial" echoed in my mind for weeks.



When we come face to face with the abominable conditions in today's environment, of course we want a quick fix, if only to reduce our own personal anxiety.

The dream had a shattering effect. It left me in shock and deeply distressed for a long time. Eventually, its message seemed to settle in as a grim truth. The wisdom of the psyche had held up an X-ray for me to look at, allowing me to see why I had not felt in sync with the culture. The insight the dream offers into the cultural symptomatology seems extremely important; it has major implications for how current problems are approached. The presence of "manic denial" explains why there is such resistance to making changes in lifestyle even when they would be beneficial. For example, in order to stop using so much paper or wood from virgin forests, we have to accept the actuality of deforestation at an emotional level, not merely a superficial factual one. We have to look death in the face, whether it is the death of tree, plant, and animal species or our own.

Jung made an almost identical interpretation regarding the function served by noise. This passage is from a letter written in 1957 to law professor Oftinger at the University of Zurich, who was concerned about the disturbing effect of noise. Jung said (*Letters*, vol. II):

The alarming pollution of our water supplies, the steady increase of radioactivity, and the somber threat of overpopulation with its genocidal tendencies have already led to a widespread though not generally conscious fear which loves noise because it stops the fear from being heard. Noise is welcome because it drowns out the inner instinctive warning. . . . Noise protects us from painful reflection, it scatters our anxious dreams, it assures us that we are all in the same boat. . . . Noise is so insistent, so overwhelmingly real, that everything else becomes a pale phantom. It relieves us of the effort to say or do anything, for the very air reverberates with the invincible power of our modernity.

Jung was not hopeful that noise pollution could be eliminated because it serves the purpose of preventing our feeling, our instinctive fears about the degenerative symptoms of urban civilization.

At the time of the dream, I had just read *If You Love the Planet*, Helen Caldicott's newest book, in which she shifts attention from the prospect of nuclear winter to that of an environmental winter. As a futurist, Caldicott has tried to foresee where we are headed and alert us to the dangers. There is also an actual tunnel with this name near where I live. The Caldicott Tunnel is poorly maintained and in bad repair, and I have always felt reluctant to drive through it. *Tunnel* is thus a compound metaphor for actual dangers that exist and the potential dark passage that lies ahead, to which the culture seems recklessly headed.

This image of traffic getting pushy perhaps represents the collective tide sweeping us along, making it almost impossible to live our lives at a reasonable pace. What sort of madness has us in its grip? The irony is that by unconsciously barging ahead, we end up headed right for a dark tunnel. Were we to see where we are going, would we be so eager to get there? We tend to think that it is reality that everything is going fast these days, but Jung's observation suggests that this accelerated rate is a defense against a fuller experience of a more objective reality.

The dream shows how hard it can be to withstand this collective pressure, as people honk at me to keep going. The car in the dream was the classic 1966 Volvo 122 that I used to have, one of the sturdiest vehicles ever made; a Swedish car known as "the little tank," it had a tractor engine, was tremendously reliable, and often lasted for as many as 300,000 miles. I have some knowledge of languages and at first thought that the word *volvo* meant "I go," but when I looked it up, I found the verb in Spanish means "turn back," or "return" and in Latin, "ponder," "consider," or "turn." I felt that the dream was implying it would take a sturdy commitment on my part to stand my ground and not be forced to go along with the collective tide to go faster. In the 1980s, I had already made the difficult decision not to get a computer, which certainly had left me behind.

In 1990, I had several dreams in which my maternal grandmother and her father came to me and told me about our Amish heritage; this paved the way for me to ponder and consider how to turn back to the classic, yet still viable, lifestyle they represented. Often ridiculed as being old fashioned, the Amish have managed to maintain healthy farmlands, artistic cottage industries, and a religious feeling for life on this earth. A common saying today is "We can't go back!" But just as a hiker who is unsure of a trail goes back to the last fork or the trailhead to read the signs, we, too, can return to what Jung called the tried and tested ways of the past and progress via retrogression. This dream has been a touchstone, giving me the courage to stand my ground as I return to these more sustainable practices of the past, knowing that this stance may be ridiculed, but, in the long run, redeemed.

In the dream, I try to maintain a modicum of space, but a big rig and delivery van go around, passing me on the

right, a maneuver that is both dangerous and illegal. I wonder if this refers to the inclination in the commercial sector to keep on with business-as-usual despite the consequences. To "go around" suggests a psychopathic tendency to ignore societal and natural laws because we supposedly have a right to do whatever we please with our private business and private property. What sense does it make, for instance, for car manufacturers to churn out hundreds of thousands of new vehicles every year, or for Stanislaus County in the central valley of California to have looked the other way as millions of car tires were dumped at a local ranch, eventually resulting in a toxic blaze of enormous magnitude? What sense does it make for the Napa Valley to encourage the planting of more vineyards by issuing timber-harvest permits that allow the removal of beautiful conifer forests, also a valuable asset? This clear cutting is often hidden from public view, just as it was in the state of Washington. Perhaps, if Jung's interpretation is correct, most of us don't really want to hear, see, or feel the destruction that is going on right in front of us.

The turning point in the dream comes when the trucks enter the tunnel. Something happens, and they crash. The tires deflate, leaving the trucks lame. In dreams of individuals, the loss of pressure in bicycle or car tires often appears at times of depression, when resilience and buoyancy are gone and one feels "flat." Depression is a natural result of confronting the dark reality of our times. But if we try to circumvent, deny, or push past it and won't go willingly into it, then the dark reality may force itself upon us via accident or illness. I have often wondered if it will take more accidents such as Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, and the Valdez oil spill in order to break through the barrier of denial that exists.

The drama of the dream comes to a close as law enforcement, symbolizing the principle of social order, arrives. I honk wildly at the passing car to come to our aid, and it does. The policemen try to resuscitate the truck drivers, but it is too late—they are dead. Law enforcement directs the traffic away from the tunnel, away from the risk of a dark, environmental winter. Might this mean there is some hope that as health hazards increase, those in positions to enforce the laws will take more responsibility for reducing liability, and intervene? Sweden was one of the first countries to recognize the potential health risks of electromagnetic fields; on the basis of a comprehensive epidemiological study, the government took the initiative to move people away from high-voltage power lines, preventing schools and homes from being located as closely to them as they previously were. Our country insists on excessive research and undue scientific debate before even modest steps can be taken toward prudent prevention. Natural human instincts are not allowed to enter into political debate but are denigrated as emotionalism and hysteria. But it was by honking wildly that I got the attention of law enforcement officers so that they intervened.

This dream, with its dark scenario, removed the vestiges of my own naiveté about the course our culture was on and left me overwhelmed, depressed, and in despair. It was in this context that the following dream took place in 1992:

I say to someone, "Let it all fall apart—as quickly as possible," meaning "let the culture fall apart." Somehow, I then realize that won't happen, because it takes just as much time for a culture to come apart as it did for it to build up.

The wish for immediate repair and resolution is understandable, arising out of a need to reduce our internal anguish and helplessness. If only we could "just say no" to cutting down forests, to chemicals sprayed on food, to toxic waste buried in soil. When we come face to face with the abominable conditions in today's environment, of course we want a quick fix, if only to reduce our own personal anxiety.

During this phase, my own ecological commitment became intense—I stopped driving a gas-powered car and bought an electric one; I refused to purchase anything packaged in plastic; I declined restaurant food that contained pesticides. In the long term, none of these turned out to be very realistic. Other changes, such as switching from paper made from wood to one made from Kenaf fiber, did. It is important to recognize that this phase is motivated by a frantic and frightened impulsiveness, not a solid place from which to make lasting choices.

Initially, I was very disappointed in the message this dream contained because it eliminated the prospect of immediate relief from the agony I was in. I had to continue the mourning process and accept the fact that significant improvements in environmental conditions and a change in the tempo of our culture were not likely to occur in my lifetime. The problems are of such magnitude and complexity, woven into every aspect of life, that they cannot merely be taken out of context and repaired, as if the culture were an old car whose transmission needs rebuilding.

The third dream helped to resolve a dilemma that those going through paradigm conversion face: the tendency to polarize old versus new, nature versus urban life. It came at a time when I was experiencing a strong pull to revert to simpler ways of life, including living in a rural area and going "off grid." My conscious answer to the dilemma was, as James Hillman has pointed out, projected onto the countryside, as if that were the only place where nature existed. The following dream suggested another possibility:

I should invest in Luz Electric because it combines the old with the new.

Luz was a company I had read about with interest—a private company that took the initiative to install solar collectors in the southern California desert to supply power to the Los Angeles basin. Solar-energy usage is ancient; photovoltaic storage is a contemporary development. Together they represent a combining of old and new into something that might be viable for large areas. The dream corrects my simplistic wish to return to a supposedly uncomplicated past and holds together the opposites, so they are no longer at odds. This is in line with Hillman's observation that by "idealizing wilderness and placing it in Idaho . . . [we] cast a



shadow on our daily world, trashing it yet further. Beauty is elsewhere, so what is here becomes desolate . . . the city is scapegoated." He asks why we could not have sidewalks that meander like rivers and buildings that have curves instead of anorexic lines. Nature exists everywhere; it is as much subjective and spiritual as objective and physical. The dream invites me to invest in that new attitude, not with actual dollars but with an energetic commitment to holding the opposites together, rather than splitting.

The fourth and final dream, in 1994, was as positive and hopeful as the first was negative and frightening. It takes us fully into the paradigm shift, showing the limitations of the former *Zeitgeist* and the advantages of the one now emerging:

**I see a mountainside, curvaceous in its outline, and realize that it is the body of the Great Mother. It is an enormous female body in a reclining position, something like the form seen atop Mt. Tamalpais. On the hillsides, people are engaged in plantings. Everything that had previously been planted, according to the former principle of linear order and rationality, has died. That principle was incorrect, and that is why the plantings died. I see row after row in orderly fashion, like a vineyard or orchard, mathematical in its precision and spacing.**

**A new planting is beginning, based on the correct, natural principle of "clusters according to meaning." Scattered over the hillside are, in fact, clusters of people doing plantings.**

**There is a question of whether it is necessary to remove the former planting—dead trees. At the end of one row, a man takes the initiative to experiment; he walks along the row and pulls out the trees simply by grasping the thin trunks. The trees come out with very little effort. He ambles down the row, removing the dead plants.**

**Then I take a break from the work—of planting in clusters—and go indoors, where I look at my mail and answer a knock at the door from a visitor.**

I awoke from this in a state of awe, feeling that I had been granted a glimpse of something elemental and profound. Here, the deep psyche portrays the current shift away from a paradigm excessively ruled by reason and order toward a new one based on clusters of meaning. Reason and order are necessary and valuable principles but have been applied in ways that damage living things. Not everything flourishes when placed in logical, linear sequences. As the new chaos theory in physics is showing, order as a fundamental principle does exist, and it does not take the form only of straight lines but of spirals and arcs, curves and clusters.

Clustering according to *meaning* is similar to what Jung termed *synchronicity*, well-recognized and respected in India and the Orient, not in contradiction to the principle of linear causation but complementary to it. The two are of equal value and equal use, but because our culture has been dominated by the linear form of consciousness, it distrusts non-

linearity as if it were irrational and magical. Actually, it is a natural phenomenon.

In the dream, there is a question as to whether the old plants should be removed and how hard a task that would be. Someone gives it a try and finds they come out easily; in contrast to my conscious impression, the psyche seems to think that removal of old ways is relatively easy. New plantings in accord with the natural principle of clustering were already under way, demonstrating that the death of the old paradigm and birth of new can go on concurrently.

The central image in the dream, of course, is the Great Mother as the mountain on whose body we are mere dots on the landscape. The size differential between our species and this transcendent being reminds us that although we could (and do) kill off plenty of life on the surface, the life force itself, which some call Gaia, is more powerful than we know.

This dream series concerns not only the ecological crisis but also the larger shift in paradigm, or *Zeitgeist*, in which it is occurring. As a result of the final dream, the intense feelings of angst that had gripped me for some years began to subside, replaced by hope that a new way of being is emerging. Signs of it are already visible, accompanied by predictable signs of resistance. To quote the famous line from Hölderlin's poem "Patmos": "Danger itself fosters the rescuing power."

Jung observed that dreams with a collective character "force people instinctively to tell them." He felt that this was appropriate because "such dreams do not belong to the individual; they have a collective meaning." Having sat with these dreams for a number of years, exploring them in my own analysis and with consultants, I now want to share them, for they do not belong to me alone. I hope that whatever truth they contain will be inspiring to others, as together we attempt to transit with integrity this enormously difficult time. ☉

*Meredith Sabini, Ph.D., is a licensed psychologist, teacher, and author. She runs depth psychology programs in Berkeley, California.*

By Robert Buckingham

# A good Death

**A**s we enter the twenty-first century, modern medicine has brought cures and medicines for nearly every scourge that afflicts mankind—from the common cold to eradicating smallpox to powerful cancer-fighting drugs. However, amidst all these medical breakthroughs, one important point is still being missed—that we all will die, no matter what concoction we may come up with to fight off death.

The emphasis of modern medicine is in the use of medical intervention, hospitalization, and drugs to either cure or control disease. However, we often seem to forget that death is the normal end to birth—indeed, we start dying the minute we are born. With all this new medicine that surrounds us, we should be able to accept death as a graceful exit, an end to the dance of life, and we should all be given the opportunity to die as we wish. Needless to say, sometimes we do not have a choice in our demise—accidents or other unforeseen deaths take many lives. But for those of us who live long, fruitful lives, it would be comforting to know that we will have a say in how our life ends.

Often the elderly sick are kept alive at the end of their life solely by sophisticated machines that pump their blood, inflate their lungs, and nourish their frail bodies. Many times these people are simply alive in the physical sense. As far as the elderly are concerned, their lives are often prolonged simply because our society doesn't allow them to die. Indeed, physicians are taught that death is

not an acceptable option. A traditional approach in Western medicine involves aggressive, expensive, high-tech medicine that often does not lengthen lives physically. In this type of treatment, death occurs when a cure is possible or when we are fighting to save the life of a young person who cannot have a lot of life left to live if the disease can be staved off. However, some people just cannot—and should not—be saved.

What, then, is the answer? Should we take the fight in our own hands? Or should we accept our fate and die as gracefully as possible? Over the last couple of years, more and more grassroots groups have organized with the intent of impressing upon the public that modern medicine's way of dying may not be the only option. One such group is the Hemlock Society, which is a strong advocate of physician-assisted suicide. Demands upon our health-care system that simply cannot be met through standard methods are probably indirectly responsible for the increasing popularity of alternative, patient-enabling health care such as hospice care, which focuses on allowing a terminally ill patient to die in a manner as dignified and pain free as possible. On the flip side of hospice care is physician-assisted suicide, or euthanasia. Dr. Jack Kevorkian, the best-known example of one providing this type of care, is highly criticized for his blatant challenge to traditional medicine.

On a personal basis, I admire Kevorkian for his understanding that the way we treat our dying is often inhumane and results in needless suffering. Critics accuse him of lacking compassion and of using human subjects to further his ideals of medicine. Since he is a retired pathologist, many say he has no idea how to deal with live, struggling patients—that his practice is with the dead. However, he does enable patients to consummate their wishes. He does not actively seek out his clients, as some assume, but demands

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MARCH / APRIL 2000  
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