

Culture Dreaming

An Arena for Societal Reflection

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Brian MacGregor, *Manifestation of Dreams*, 64" x 40" Oil, Acrylic, Dream collage

What ritual is this? Ten to twenty strangers gather in a room, sit in silence until a mild trance develops and images from dreams appear before the mind's eye; they report these images for perhaps a half hour. In the second phase of the rite, participants come out of trance, pull chairs closer together, and engage with the composite "big dream" just co-created, giving associations not to the personal dimension of individual dreams but to sociocultural implications and meanings of the dream images as a whole.

Is this an indigenous ritual described by an anthropologist? An experimental group exploring altered states from the '70s, or a contemporary spiritual convocation? It is none of these, though it has elements of each. It is "Culture Dreaming," an innovative new method whose premises are that individual dreams are but particles of a larger wave function that can be read as holograms; and that those participants present represent a larger whole. The wave function, known as "The Dreaming," is not a New Age fantasy but simply the fact that dreaming is going on all the time, worldwide, and

operates as a wave at the level of the collective psyche.

Culture Dreaming sessions have been offered monthly at The Dream Institute of Northern California for almost three years now, facilitated by Richard Russo and myself. I want to tell you about some of the sociocultural themes that have appeared in this amazing process, which I first learned of from a book titled, *Experiences in Social Dreaming*, an anthology of essays edited by Gordon Lawrence, a British organizational consultant who developed the Social Dreaming Matrix[®] method in the 1980s at Tavistock Institute in London. Culture Dreaming is our modification of his approach. I stayed up half the night reading accounts of Matrixes that had been conducted with teachers and schoolchildren, churches to rebuild membership, corporations faced with downsizing, and political hot spots in Russia, Africa, the Middle East—communities and organizations large and small, all over the world, except here. Countries like the United States, where individuality is overvalued, resist taking seriously the possibility that the dreaming mind regularly tracks and for-

mulates dynamics taking place at a collective level. But it was just what I had been looking for for a long time—a way to take the pulse on cultural dynamics at their source, in dreams.

Really listening

As one might expect, there are dreams that describe the process itself: about going fishing, deep-sea diving, breathing underwater—common depictions of engaging with what is below the surface. Another image captured participants' imaginations and resonated with their experience:

"I see a group of people wearing white robes, holding their hands cupped over their ears and swaying rhythmically. I realize they are really listening. They say they know when calamity is going to come as it has a different sound. People can then prepare for it. It's their job to keep listening."

Those of us who sit in the temenos of the Culture Dreaming circle often feel as if we are trying really hard to listen, as if this is our job. Of course we don't necessarily always understand what we are hearing, as this next dream shows:

"I'm talking to a stranger. She is saying things to me, but I'm not sure I understand. I see her mouth move and, though I don't understand, I'm captivated by her beautiful green eyes. I know it's something wonderful she's saying."

A third dream combines listening and not understanding into an unexpected surprise:

"I step off a tram into an Alpine meadow, where there's a chapel. Men outside in clerical robes. I hear a rustling noise in the air and wonder what it is. The wind? I listen. It's the men. They're speaking in tongues! An ecstasy grips me."

When we can let ourselves be moved by the spirit, the wind, and tell the dreams that come to us, it does feel as if we are "speaking in tongues," in that marvelous, mysterious language of dreaming.

A whale of a problem

Sessions often contain opposites—knowing and not knowing, suffering and beauty, action and reflection. At times, we have to bear witness not to calamities that are coming but to ones already present:

"There's a big gash in the earth, an open trench. It troubles me. I begin to cover it over, trying to fill it in."

We know more than we might like about injuries done to the earth—its big gashes—and it is deeply troubling. If only we could just fill them in or cover them up.

Often it is animals that are injured or confined and need help:

"I'm walking, not sure where, but there's grass beneath my feet. I come to a lion in a room, captive behind glass ..."

"At a 24-Hour Nautilus place. I come upon a seal trapped in a pool, bleached out from the chlorine. With her eyes she asks me to help. I'll get her back to wild waters no matter what it takes."

"There's a beautiful, huge parrot in a small cage, squawking ..."

Animal life is suffering rather badly today due to its contact with civilized ways; the eyes of the seal are poignant testimony to this anguish.

The animal that appears most frequently in trouble is the whale—trapped in a small pond or a pool in the backyard or atop a highrise. There is a pun in the name: it's a whale of a problem. But the situation is not without hope, as this dream shows:

"I'm driving along the Coast Highway. Below are rock formations. Above, in the sky, is a gigantic whale, turning and turning all around. From this I can tell: All will be well."

Speculating about the meanings of this dream, we wondered if it is to be taken as a sign from heaven or if it represents a human wish that things magically be made well. The next two dreams characterize a less magical process that takes place on the human level:

"I'm swimming in the ocean with my son, happy. A huge mother whale comes at us full speed. I'm scared. She swims under us and then surfaces. I realize she wants to play with us!"

"I'm standing on a beach and see a dark column like a tornado coming. I see spurts of water shooting up and call out 'Sharks!' My companion says, 'No, they're Orcas.' They are playing. One even rises up in greeting! I am filled with awe and joy."

These two dreams capture a very important dynamic that we have observed in all Culture Dreaming sessions. Calamities of various kinds do face the dreamer—those that we all can envision today and more—but often there is a steadfastness that enables the dreamer to tolerate the situation and not act hastily. The dreamer's capacity to hold still, to hold assumptions, seems to result in an opening or transformation so that what initially appeared to be a calamity or danger is no longer bleak, terrifying, or overwhelming.

Animals to our rescue

When animals approach us in dreams, we may initially be reticent about having contact with them, fearing their intentions. But we've just seen, their intentions may be playful. In the next two dreams, this theme is extended, as animals become our helpers when we are out on a limb:

"We've been biking in the mountains and come to a roaring river. There's no way to get down. Bears appear and we're frightened. But they indicate to us that they will help us, if we would get on their backs. We do, and they carry us down the river and we laugh all the way!"

"I'm with my tribe. We come to a great chasm between our land and the next and don't know how to get across. A deer lays its body over the divide, front legs on one side, hind legs on the other, so we can cross."

These dreams are reminiscent of fairy tales in which animals come to the aid of humans who are on a journey but are unable to proceed.

Homelessness comes home

One Culture Dreaming session had four short dreams about homelessness. As participants considered possible meanings, what emerged was that many of us feel homeless in that we can't afford houses; many are homeless as second or third generation immigrants not living on ancestral lands; and some feel that this country is no longer one they wish to call home. Let's look at how the dreams unfolded to enable us to arrive at these meanings. The first two depict the darker side of the social reality the actual homeless face:

"I'm sitting in a café. Through a plate-glass window I see a homeless man on the sidewalk with his belongings. A gang comes by and hassles him. The leader takes out a knife and plunges it in. The man slumps over. No one seems to notice. People just keep walking by as he falls to the sidewalk. I watch, not knowing what to do."

"I'm at a trendy shopping mall and see a homeless woman as she is slashed across the throat. She's bleeding and tries to get help, but it's as if no one sees her."

These dreams painfully illustrate the invisibility of the homeless as persons and their vulnerability to severe mistreatment, because their suffering seems not to matter. In the next dream, the problem is no

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longer located “out there”:

“I am a homeless person, though I don’t identify myself as such. I live in a metal box next to a gas station. There are two beds in it, one atop the other. To get to mine, I have to climb over the other woman living there.”

With this experience, homelessness comes home and belongs to the dreamer. The issue of who climbs over whom on the societal ladder is well portrayed in the bed scene. The fourth dream in the series eliminates the prevalent hierarchy by reversing the roles:

“I see N., the homeless woman who stays in my neighborhood. (She’s a friendly person who visits everybody. She does ask for money now and then, but she also brings presents to those of us who help her out.) In the dream, I am told that N. is my next Teacher. At first, this comes as a surprise. Then, I accept it.”

It’s easy and tempting to assume that “we” have to do something for “them.” This dream turns the situation around one-hundred-eighty degrees and suggests that the homeless woman now be the Teacher. This is a radical notion that challenges the expectation about “fixing” people and situations considered problematic. This homeless woman, known to the dreamer by her actual name, is brought back into the human circle, not because she now “fits in,” but because she has something to teach.

This is an excellent example of how those that come into Culture Dreaming introduce a wholly new view of or approach to old, unsolved societal problems. That the homeless woman exists in actuality suggests that this new approach could be actualized.

Action vs. reflection

The dominant paradigm of Western civilization is action-oriented. We want to do something for the gashes in the earth, wounded animals, and people on the streets. This inclination may be altruistically motivated, but sometimes the “doing” is merely a quick-fix enacted

impulsively to relieve our own anxieties and fears. In the dream of the trapped seal, the dreamer vowed to get it back to its habitat “no matter what it takes,” a heroic stance that is admirable, but may not allow room for reflection and contemplation of the situation so that fresh possibilities can emerge. Two very striking dreams challenge the ego-dominant attitude:

“I’m in a beautiful garden with a waterfall; I can’t believe how beautiful it is. I reach out to touch the water; but when I touch it, the garden disappears! I remove my hand, and the garden reappears. I’m fascinated by what happens—touching the water, the garden disappearing, then reappearing. I decide to leave the water alone.”

“There is a temple like a pyramid; it’s a goddess-type of worship in ancient Egypt, Greece, or the Middle East. Village people are bringing their best to offer. I want to go in the temple, but a man says, ‘If you wish it, you can’t. If you don’t wish it, you can.’ The man telling me this has a very wise look in his eyes.”

Might these dreams contain a deep-seated, half-conscious wish to go back to “the Garden,” to the cradle of civilization, and rediscover life at its fantasized unspoiled beginning? Often, when we have experiences of “the source,” like the *aqua vitae* or waters of life, we may try to possess it. This drama is being enacted in rainforests: they seem a paradisiacal place where life generates and regenerates; but they are being “saved” not on account of their intrinsic value and beauty but because they represent the newest pharmacy of medicines to cure human ills. What sort of caution do these two dreams offer in regard to the action Nature might take if we grab for its bounty?

Joining the procession

Sociologist Paul Ray’s survey of American values discovered that a new phenomenon is emerging. One-quarter of the population, which he labeled “Cultural Creatives,” express concern for community, alternative health care, ecological

sustainability, relationships, self-actualization, and religious diversity. With such a large number of people involved, Ray believes that “the potential for launching a cultural revitalization is dazzling.” This phenomenon can be difficult to observe because it has no particular person or symbol at its center. Perhaps what moves me most about the Culture Dreaming process is being able to witness this revitalization as it emerges. We don’t have to go far these days to hear bad news on a global scale. It turns out that we also don’t have far to go to hear the good news: we may be dreaming it regularly. I will close with a portion of a longer dream that came into one of the sessions:

“I see pilgrims walking up a valley pulling a tree with cords. It’s a beautiful white ash, polished like marble. As they get closer, I realize that the tree is alive. And then I realize that the tree is pulling the pilgrims! It’s to be the new Tree of Life.”

This doesn’t imply that we don’t have to make the effort to correct environmental, political, and societal imbalances; but it may give us hope that we are not carrying the healing process on our own shoulders, alone. We may be carried by something larger than ourselves.

Opening a space for the imaginal

I began with a dream about a group of people who were “really listening,” which characterizes well the way we attend to The Dreaming. This last image of people being pulled by an organic life-force also corresponds well to how Culture Dreaming operates. Participants don’t choose which dreams to tell, but let the dreams present themselves. Out of a whole lifetime each participant has had, certain ones come forward. We are recipients of The Dreaming and it leads us.

At each session, multiple themes emerge, spiraling around each other as if the dreams were conversing. It reminds me of what it’s like when a group of children sit on the floor to play. One says, “Let’s pretend . . .” and off they go into the imaginary or imaginal realm where serious play takes place. There are few

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cultural arenas where adults can engage in serious play together. There are *no* arenas where dreams are heard for their sociocultural implications. Culture Dreaming opens a play-space, similar to

what Winnicott called “potential” or “transitional space.” Dream images are the raw material with which we seriously play. It gives us the rare chance to glimpse and briefly touch the source of cultural creativity, the *aqua vitae*, that is accessible to everyone.

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