

# Dreaming for Our Survival

By Meredith Sabini



Were we living in a viable traditional culture during a time of upheaval such as our own, we would be gathering regularly to hear and discuss dreams. They might be those of a medicine person or anyone who had received a dream for the tribe. In the 1920s, for example, when his tribe was starving because no seals were caught that year, an Inuit shaman saw a new hunting ground in a dream and led his people to it across the frozen sea of Baffin Bay. In the first century B.C., a Roman senator's daughter dreamed that Minerva complained about her temple being in disrepair; the dream was reported to the Senate and funds to restore it were approved.

Swiss psychiatrist C. G. Jung recognized that such dreams are not private property: "Collective dreams have a character which forces people instinctively to tell them . . . such dreams do not belong to the individual; they have a collective meaning . . . they are true for people in certain circumstances." (CW 10; par 323) Some years ago, I had a dream in words that if this were a tribal culture, my job would be that of "dreamer." In what follows, I will tell several of my own collective dreams as well as others told at a council gathering; all pertain to the present ecopsychological crisis.

It may seem highly unusual to consider dreams as relevant to societal or environmental matters. Yet this is precisely the problem: information from this universally available source of guidance is neither expected nor understood. The ecology and environmental movements are mainly outer-directed and action-oriented, and there is little if any interest in the seemingly private activity of dreaming. But dreaming itself is a natural resource, abundant and self-renewing. And dreaming is not a narcissistic event, but a 140-million-year-old survival function in all mammals. Anthony Stevens, in *The Two-Million-Year-Old Self* recommends that we should "regard dreams as an endangered species (for) they represent our primordial habitat, our last

wilderness, and we must protect them with as much fervor as the rainforests, the ozone layer, the elephant, and the whale." (p. 121)

The late Montague Ullman (1986), founder of the country's first sleep lab and advocate of the societal value of dreams, did not believe dreaming had to do primarily with the individual, but saw it as the "manifestation of phylogenetic adaptive mechanisms that have to do with the survival of the species" (p. 383). Jung claimed that our civilizing potential had "led us down the wrong road," and, in an imaginal consultation given in 1933, "The Meaning of Psychology for Modern Man," advised us to "turn back to the most subjective part of yourself, to the source of your being...where you are making world history without being

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aware of it." (CW 10; par 316) What source did Jung have in mind? Dreaming. "Dreams...are pure nature; they show us the unvarnished natural truth, and are therefore fitted, as nothing else is, to give us back an attitude that accords with our basic human nature when consciousness has strayed too far from its foundation and run into an impasse." (CW 10; par 317) We have strayed from our phylogenetic foundation and run into an impasse, because we have been using only our limited conscious mind to deal with survival matters. The dreaming mind opens into a broader bandwidth.

The dreamworld opened for me in my late twenties and became the path I've followed ever since. While doing graduate research in 1972 on the place of dreams in non-Western healing practices, I came to see that our society is unique in not attending to dreams for cultural purposes. Dreams have been central to my

own "ecological conversion" process. After a drought shook me out of my complacency about nature's resources, dreams guided me through Joanna Macy's stages of despair, hopelessness, angry withdrawal, and intense activism, to an eventual acceptance of what I, as only one person, could accomplish. The following two dreams took place in the winter of 1997-98, when I had just begun teaching Evolutionary Psychology, offering programs that emphasized the conflict between our modern self, which tries to keep up the fast pace, and our primordial self. Here is the first dream:

*I am giving my talk at the L.A. Jung Institute. Men remark/complain how busy they are. I say, Yes, this is the cultural symptom I am referring to—busyness is a symptom of being in the grip of a cultural neurosis, which is actually putting us in danger of extinction. I emphasize that those of us who are healers have to model how to come to terms with this symptom so others can too; if we can't, no one can.*

A sequel three months later emphasized how busyness impacts our decision-making:

*I am giving a talk about how decisions people make when they are rushed or tired, which people often are these days, won't be good, solid decisions. I talk about the need for rest and renewal. A woman demonstrates how energy just carries her from one activity to another. I say, "Yes, defenses have energy!" This surprises people, so I explain that keeping busy is a defense against feeling the anguish of where we are today: at risk of extinction.*

These dreams voice the dark question, then less openly discussed, of whether our species itself might be at risk. Species can go extinct by being over-adapted or under-adapted. We are both:

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over-adapted to superficial societal demands of no survival consequence and under-adapted to our inherent two-million-year-old human nature. We in the developed world violate our own nature by regularly overriding our need for rest and renewal, by underestimating the value of social relations, by failing to create meaningful rituals. Based on the epidemic levels of sleep deprivation alone, we ought to place *Homo sapiens* on the endangered list.

But the dream also provides an important ecopsychological diagnosis: it says that “busyness” is a symptom of a cultural neurosis, which has us in its grip. The dream challenges those of us who are healers to free ourselves of this cultural neurosis. I took this advice seriously and within several years was able to exit the fast lane and reposition myself to live closer to nature’s timing. The pressures to keep up the “busy-ness as usual” pace are enormous, and I find that resisting them is a daily challenge.

The next dream, positive and hopeful, describes this shift from the former paradigm based on abstract principles to a new paradigm based on nature’s laws:

*I am on a mountainside, curvaceous in shape. I realize it’s the body of the Great Mother, an enormous female body in a reclining posture. People all around the hillsides are engaged in planting. Everything previously planted according to the principle of linear order has died. Row after row of vineyard and orchard in mathematically precise spacing are now dead. There is a question of whether it’s necessary to remove the dead trees. A man walks along and experiments by grasping the thin trunks and pulling; they come out with little effort. Throughout the hillside, others are engaged in planting based on the natural principle of “clusters according to meaning.” Then I take a break from this work and go indoors, where I look at my mail and greet a visitor.*

I awoke from this dream in a state of awe, feeling I had glimpsed a Nature god: Mother Earth on whose body we are mere dots. The size differential is a reminder that although we can, and do,

kill off plenty of life on the earth’s surface, the life force extends beyond our species’ reach.

Order and linearity are necessary and valuable, but have been excessively applied; not everything flourishes when placed in straight lines with equal spacing. From modern chaos theory, we know that natural systems take the form of arcs and spirals, curves and clusters.

“Meaning” is a non-material or spiritual dimension. If our new “plantings,” cultural as well as agri-cultural, arise naturally from clusters of meaning, this would bring spirit back into relationship with matter.

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The dream ends with my leaving this magnificent setting and returning to my own house, with its mail and visitors. What does this finale suggest? Perhaps that it’s crucial to keep our personal lives in balance with the supra-personal work we undertake. We have to set limits on the latter and be sure we tend our own daily life and community.

I want to introduce dreams into our dialogue about ecology on the assumption that we dream about the earth more often than we realize. The opening dreams of Inuits finding a new hunting ground and Romans rebuilding a temple, like all “big dreams,” arose out of a cultural context and were understandable within that context; the dreams were accepted as meaningful in those particular cultures. To suggest bringing dreams into our socio-cultural arena today means introducing a new element, and there is bound to be skepticism and reticence as well as curiosity and interest.

In 2003, I founded The Dream Institute of Northern California. Since 2004, we have hosted Culture Dreaming<sup>SM</sup>, an innovative program in which dreams are explored for their larger socio-cultural implications rather than

for their personal meaning to the dreamer. Culture Dreaming is similar to the Social Dreaming Matrix™ method developed in the 1980s at the Tavistock Institute by Gordon Lawrence; his anthologies, *Experiences in Social Dreaming* and *Social Dreaming @ Work*, have chapters on how this method has been successfully used in schools, churches, and organizations in Europe, the Middle East, Russia, and South America. At our monthly gatherings, which are open to the public, we sit in council and invite “The Dreaming,” a larger-than-personal process, to express itself. Individual dreams are blended into a new co-created narrative, whose themes are then linked to issues in the world at large. Culture Dreaming even shifts our perspective beyond our own species.

For Earth Day 2009, I took from our monthly transcripts the many dreams that referred directly to the earth, and arranged them in a narrative sequence. This was made into a dramatic performance piece. It was stunning to see Nature’s story told entirely through dreams. The drama was presented at several venues for Earth Day 2010. The performance concludes with this remarkable dream:

*There is a gathering where something sacred is taking place. A woman is on her knees tenderly raking red oxide soil with her hands, so it comes to life. In another room, people are learning how to build a stupa with rocks and branches, so it too is alive. The woman says, “I think it’s about ready.” She kneels down and touches the soil. It’s alive and beautiful, like a dear, precious friend, found again. Others join her around the stupa and push soil into it, from bottom to top. The whole thing begins to hum as the soil imbues the stupa with life. The humming and vibrating begin with the soil, then the stupa, and then those around it.*

A stupa is a traditional Buddhist monument, perhaps originally a burial mound, with a center pole that represents the tree of life or *axis mundi*. Masses of earth are raised on a platform and then faced with stones; the structure is often surrounded by a processional

path. In the term "stupa" I hear a play on words: that only by "stooping" down low and bringing to our faces to the ground in devotion can we correct our hubristic stance of domination over Nature. The dream demonstrates that matter can be enlivened with spirit.

Throughout 2012, we held a special series of Culture Dreaming sessions devoted to the theme of the Great Turning, and selected dreams were likewise made into performance pieces. I will close with one of these dreams, which offers hope that we are not alone and that transpersonal forces are available:

*I have taken the elevator to the top floor of a very high building. As the door opens, I see a huge, dusty warehouse filled with what look like thousands of retired gods and goddesses—statues. But when I move closer, I can see that they are moving very slowly, each to their own*

*rhythm, as if in a sort of suspended animation. I have the overwhelming sense that they have a deep desire and intention to be reanimated by humans and to be of service once again to those on earth.*

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