

"California Dreaming" by Rue Harrison

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On a busy street in Berkeley, a curving path leads to a storybook brick cottage. Opening the rustic redwood gate to the Dream Institute of Northern California is truly like entering a dream. The Dream Institute was founded in 2003 by Meredith Sabini, psychologist and editor of *The Earth Has a Soul: Jung on Nature, Technology, and Modern Life*. Sabini views dreams as an underutilized means, by which we can perceive both the visible exterior and nonvisible interior of the world.

The idea to found the Dream Institute came to Sabini in a dream. She listens carefully to her own and the dreams of others in order to understand the Institute's ever-evolving purpose, described in their newsletter as "a participatory cultural center whose mission is to encourage interest in dreaming as a natural human resource, democratically available to all that can inform and inspire our cultural and personal lives."

For the past four years the Dream Institute has been the venue for a unique process that exemplifies this mission: Culture DreamingSM. Sabini and the Institute's associate director, Richard Russo, past president of the International Association for the Study of Dreams, facilitate this innovative method of exploring dreams for their societal and cultural implications on a monthly basis. Similar to the Social Dreaming MatrixSM developed by Gordon Lawrence at the Tavistock Institute in London in the 1980s, Culture Dreaming offers a suprapersonal approach to dreams. Having taken part on a number of occasions, I have come away with a completely new impression of dreams as a shared energy that streams through all of us. This has helped me see the self-absorbed quality inherent in the popular view of dreams as revealers of *my* psyche, where I can hope to have my big dream, the one that will lead me to the right path for *my* life.

A much more expansive and unifying conception of dreams is held by other cultures, and Sabini describes her own discovery of this: "As a young graduate student studying psychology and anthropology, I was stunned to discover that American society was unique for *not* having venues where dreams could inform our sociopolitical life. I learned about the sophisticated dream practices of the Lenape, Iroquois, and the Achuar, and about the ancient Greek Asklepiion tradition from which Western healing professions developed. There were Asklepieion shrines or temples throughout the Mediterranean basin where anyone with a question or problem could go to have a healing dream. Freud is not the beginning and wish fulfillment not the end of dream theory."

On a recent Saturday, I once again opened the Dream Institute's gate for a session of Culture Dreaming. In its role as a cultural center, the Dream Institute always has a dream-related art exhibit on display, so I enjoyed the art and socialized with people as they arrived, finally taking a seat in one of the chairs that were intentionally arranged in an out-of-kilter snowflake pattern to promote a tendency to go inward. Culture Dreaming sessions are not dependent on the creation of group cohesion; therefore almost every time there will be a person or two who has never participated before. The guidelines are to tell a dream in the first person and in present tense, with no commentary. The dream may be from anywhere in one's entire lifetime of dreaming. Participants sit silently and wait for a dream to appear in the mind's eye, as a response to the dream of the others. The importance of really listening to each other creates a unique relationship among the participants, who are called to a new sensitivity by a ritual that demands one speak one's dream at just the right time. After a short trance induction, we began.

On this day the dreams come haltingly, with lots of space in between. I took note of my inner process—wanting to find the best time to speak with a fitting dream, nervous that

no dreams would appear, or that there would be no place to fit in the one dream that I consciously came with. A woman across the room spoke: *"I'm in an open meadow divided into two parts. I live on one side with people. On the other side is a hermit who has separated himself from the world. He is going to allow access to this area. It's a bit of a journey to get over there."* The setting of the dream and the mention of a group invited me to tell a half-remembered relatively recent dream: *"I'm at a remote lodge in the country with a group of people. We are playing a game: we pretend to stalk and 'kill' each other. We're wearing scary masks. I get 'murdered' a couple of times. Then it's over and we're all out on a balcony overlooking the ocean, having cocktails. There are long steep stone stairs down to the beach. I decide to go down. I have vertigo as I try. When I get down to the beach it's as though I see from the air a map and a prediction that this area is going to be covered with water. I say to myself, 'I won't buy it.'" Silence followed, then more dreams. Just when it felt that we couldn't sustain the sense of being joined together any longer, Sabini rang a bell ending the first part of the ritual.*

After a break we returned to the chairs now arranged in a standard circle to invite exchange. Sabini and Russo reiterated that we had created together one long dream, that we can each take ownership of all of the dreams spoken. Sabini once wrote: "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."

We identified some themes of our dream. One was the presence of old, wise men, sometimes weakened or forced into retreat from the world. The dream of the hermit in the forest enabled us to verbalize that we as a society have been living in only half of the world, the more visible side. The dream suggested that now we are being called to explore the hermit side, the interior world. We also needed to look again at current cultural values, as exemplified in the killing game dream, that have encouraged predatory practices in our relations with one another in business. The image of a landscape submerged underwater evoked the climate crisis, a concern Sabini and Russo affirmed has appeared over and over in Culture Dreaming sessions.

We discussed the many examples of opposites that emerged in our collective dream, as well as images of the individual taking the risk to move away from the collective. There was a general feeling of being on the brink of something and not knowing which way things will go. Another dream from this session seemed to touch on all these themes: *"I'm walking around in a vast and confusing city. I come to a dilapidated tenement building. I go up several flights and pound on a closed door. I say, 'Obama, I'm ready to go on my mission.'"*

More than anything else, Culture Dreaming is a ritual, enacted in a space that is delicately constructed to convey that what happens within it matters. This space can be created by complete strangers or for any group or organization. In earlier sessions, I expected more from the discussion itself, as if a concrete interpretation of a dream could be found. This last time, however, I discovered that my expectations had changed. Instead of wanting the dream to become useful for my everyday consciousness, I took a few more steps towards what we sophisticated modern people have lost—access to dreamtime. That is, it was evident that the discussion allowed the group to be together a little longer, to savor the appearance of the larger dream in a space midway between dreamtime and the busy world outside, which was always within earshot. All that was required to leave that busy world was a slight shift of attention. We could not have done it without the containment of the ritual.

In my last session at Culture Dreaming, I heard descriptions of archetypal scenes, conflicts, fears, and images of haunting beauty that live in all of us and find expression in

our dreams. I also experienced something subtle, something more than aesthetic appreciation, wonder, or the warmth of an awakened feeling of kinship with the individuals participating. Jung has described it thus: "To concern ourselves with dreams is a way of reflecting on ourselves. But it is not our ego-consciousness reflecting on itself; rather, it turns its attention to the objective actuality of the dream as a communication or message from the unconscious, unitary soul of humanity. It reflects not on the ego but on the Self; it recollects the strange self, alien to the ego, which was ours from the beginning, the trunk from which the ego grew." For the briefest of moments I contacted a sense of my membership in organic life.