

The Field of Dreams

"If this were a culture dream..."



Meredith Sabini

I believe we are on the brink of a new era in dreamwork. We have achieved a sophisticated understanding of dreams and dreaming at the individual level, with an excellent variety of dreamwork methods developed over the past fifty years. Needed now is an equivalent understanding of dreams that concern the societal bodies to which we belong, locally and globally. The dreaming mind does produce material related to these realms and needs to be apprehended from the standpoint of societal dynamics.

A well-known example of this is the Biblical account of the Pharaoh's dream about seven fat cows and seven lean cows, which Joseph correctly interpreted as prophesizing seven years of plenty followed by seven lean years. Based on this information, the Pharaoh made sure ample food was stored during the years of abundance so that when the drought came, the people had enough to draw upon. This dream does not pertain to the personal life of the ruler nor was he able to interpret it himself; it took someone with a broader viewpoint to intuitively perceive the breadth of meaning implied.

Dreams like this are for the culture and belong to the culture. There are many other examples of such dreams throughout history. Beginning at age nine, Oglala Sioux medicine man Black Elk had visionary dreams about the impending annihilation of native peoples; though the dreams showed the role Black Elk was to play in this unfoldment, they were not about his personal psychology. Similarly, in the spring and early summer of 1914, C. G. Jung had a thrice-repeated dream that "an Arctic cold descended, and froze the land (western Europe) to ice." (MDR, 175ff) Jung was initially worried the dreams did pertain to him personally, but as the political tensions in Europe mounted, he realized the dream was a collective one foreshadowing the coming war.

Known as culture dreams in anthropology, such dreams do not always come to those in positions of leadership nor do they necessarily contain prophetic information. Among dreaming cultures, a tribal council is usually

available to hear a culture dream from anyone who has received it. When Jung lived among the Somali during his safari in Africa in 1925, he noted with interest the dream of an old chief, which was simply that a cow had calved at a particular clearing by the river; a runner was sent, and the cow and calf were found at the place indicated. Jung remarked, "These people are extraordinarily close to nature." (CW 18, par 1290)

I have been collecting culture dreams for some time and they have certain distinguishing characteristics. The first and perhaps most important is that the dreamer has few if any associations to the dream content, and ordinary dreamwork methods do not open the dream for exploration in the usual way. The dreamer is usually just an observer. Also, there is little if any emotion on the part of the dreamer, another feature that distinguishes them from personal dreams. Culture dreams tend to be rather plain and factual rather than symbolized in elaborate, imagistic, or fantastical ways. They are "just so" in the sense that there is little narrative storyline or dramatization.

We often have dreams that include public figures, public places, and public events; these are not necessarily culture dreams, but personal ones that include these referents for their personal meaning to us. Culture dreams are a category of their own; the dreaming mind does not tend to blend the two in any given dream, but presents the cultural information separately, so it can be identified as such and then worked with. In answer to the question of why one person might receive a culture dream and not another, my impression is that some individuals are simply more attuned to the dynamics of the cultural unconscious. It is the process of having a culture dream that may have meaning for the person and not the dream's content, which pertains outwardly to the culture itself.

When I was in analytic training, I had dreams that described the goings on behind the scenes at the particular institute. At a point when sexual misconduct was taking place and financial difficulties existed, I dreamed: "I am on a large, ocean-going vessel, which is

passing through some bad air; I am told to hit the deck and lie low." I had no way of knowing what the dream alluded to; only later, when both sets of problems became publically known, did it make sense that the ship referred to the institute passing through a dark time. It in no way involved me; the dreams were simply trying to help me orient to hidden realities that were affecting the training program.

Dreams such as these are like weather reports on the psyche of a culture or social body. If we envision culture as a "third thing," a living entity that we belong to but also have to care for, and which may itself be in trouble and need treatment, then it makes sense that the dreaming mind would attempt to inform members of a "culture" about its ongoing condition—whether the culture is our local neighborhood, an organization to which we belong, the geographical area or nation where we live.

There is ample anthropological evidence that indigenous societies recognized culture dreams, discussed them, and relied on them for making decisions. Iroquois dream practices, documented in the French Jesuit records and recounted by Robert Moss in his book, *Dreamways of the Iroquois*, paid heed to culture dreams and involved well-thought-out ways of integrating their information into the life of the tribes. The present-day Achuar in Equador, whose dreaming practices were recently documented and studied by San Francisco psychoanalyst Charles Fisher, have daily dream-sharing within family groups and an elders' council for dreams of larger relevance. Montague Ullman frequently referred to the societal dimension of dreaming; in 1986, he went as far as to say "I don't think that dreaming has primarily to do with the individual; I think it is the manifestation of phylogenetic adaptive mechanisms that have to do with the survival of the species."

If we use this lens to examine the examples presented so far, we see that they all concern, on a modest or broader scale, the survival of a tribe or group. Since our species may be joining others on the endangered list, it behooves us to attend to the wisdom and guidance available via the survival function of dreaming. To read a fascinating account of how the ancient, evolved dreaming mind could come to our aid in this way, I highly recommend Anthony Stevens's *The Two-Million-Year-Old Self* (Texas A&M, 1993).

This column is based on my presentation at the recent IASD conference, which stirred enthusiasm for this new

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era in dreamwork. We have been saddled with an overly narrow, even narcissistic, view of dreams, which holds that we only dream about ourselves and that all parts of a dream pertain to the dreamer. Though the majority of our dreams may, indeed, be for and about ourselves, there

are other types of dreams, some pertaining to our family, our kinship group, our work life, and occasionally to the wider world around. To make use of these culture dreams, we can modify the popular dictum and ask a revised version: "If this were the culture's dream . . ." what meanings might it hold? I will be offering programs on collective and culture dreams, drawing on Jung's important contributions and on the research data I've collected, so that dreamworkers and therapists will be able to identify and effectively work with this exciting and valuable dream material that may have relevance for many.

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