

Culture Dreaming

by Richard Russo

For the past year,* I have been participating in an ongoing experiment in cultural dreaming inspired by the work of W. Gordon Lawrence. Each month, dreamers gather together at the Dream Institute in Berkeley to share dreams. I almost said “to share *their* dreams,” but that would have been inappropriate, because personal ownership of the dream is precisely what we aim to move beyond. The idea behind “Culture Dreaming” is very simple, but very radical: What if we were to listen to dreams not for what they say about the dreamer, but for what they might be saying to us all?

I have long been interested in cultural aspects of dreaming, and especially fascinated by tribal cultures in which dreaming is an ongoing part of group life and decision-making. In one common model, individual dreamers bring their dreams to a council of elders, or to a shaman. The dream is understood to be for everyone, not just for the dreamer, and its meaning is carefully explored to help determine the group’s course of action. What might our culture be like if *we* listened to our dreams? The growing interest in shamanism and the ongoing appeal of the myths surrounding the Senoi indicate that I’m not the only one who feels this way.

I was trying to imagine ways of bringing dreaming into the mainstream of our culture when Meredith Sabini, Director of the Dream Institute in Berkeley, California, told me about the work of Gordon Lawrence. Lawrence, coming out of the psychoanalytic tradition and operating pretty much independently from the modern dreamwork movement, has developed a form called “Social Dreaming,” for separating the dream from the dreamer and exploring it in its deeper context. Lawrence came to Berkeley held a three-day intensive Social Dreaming Matrix, which allowed us to experience the process after reading about it in his

books. Sabini obtained permission to continue working with the Social Dreaming method, and since then we have held monthly “Culture Dreaming” sessions at The Dream Institute, as well as one at the 2005 IASD conference in Berkeley last June. (We call it “Culture Dreaming” because the word “social” has the unfortunate connotation in the U.S. of casual, recreational activity). Lawrence has developed his ideas in great depth over many years of experience, and has explored social dreaming in many different settings. Our own experiment in Culture Dreaming has unfolded in its own way, which I will describe briefly.

Following Lawrence, we arrange our chairs in a snowflake pattern. When the Dreaming begins, someone starts by sharing the first dream. Once the dream has entered the room, it becomes everyone’s dream; no longer referred to as (e.g.) “Sally’s dream,” but as “the dream about the green snake.” We know that the dream has deep personal meaning for the dreamer, but that is not what we are here to explore. Thus we depart from the conventional dreamwork model by not addressing the dreamer, the circumstances surrounding the dream, or the dream’s meaning for the individual who dreamed it. Once the Dreaming has begun, the dreams themselves call forth further dreams. Participants may find themselves suddenly recalling a dream they hadn’t planned to share. Themes emerge, different threads of imagery unfold and entwine in complex patterns. In one session, we were visited by many different dream animals, including snakes and sea mammals; in another, we dreamed about different ways of receiving spiritual messages; in another, the homeless and the downtrodden appeared. Thus we depart from the shamanic model, for we do not work with a particular dream and use our familiar methods of dream ampli-

fication and interpretation to explore its cultural rather than personal meaning; instead, we refrain from attempting to “understand” or “interpret” anything and follow the succession of dreams wherever it might lead. Each Culture Dreaming session brings into being a beautiful and complex dream that we experience together as it unfolds.

This last aspect strikes me as the most revolutionary aspect of Culture Dreaming. When we started, I had fantasies of finding answers to our societal problems through culture dreaming. Although each Dreaming session is followed by a discussion of the themes that emerged, the most powerful part of the experience for me has been coming together with others to dream. The way themes emerge and develop, and one dream is echoed or amplified or given counterpoint by another, is often astonishing, and leads to a deep feeling of interconnectedness among the dreamers that is profoundly meaningful in its own right, and reason enough for the experiment. As we continue to explore Culture Dreaming, I have come to feel that each session is itself part of a larger pattern that we move through and that moves through us—a great Dreaming that manifests small facets of itself in our nightly dreaming, and that enters the room when we come together for Culture Dreaming, and moves through us as we move through it, embraces and holds us as we embrace and hold it.

Culture Dreaming is still very much an ongoing experiment. We want to bring Culture Dreaming into specific social settings, such as schools and businesses (as Lawrence has done with Social Dreaming). We will also continue to explore how Culture Dreaming relates to shamanic dreaming and other approaches to dreamwork that many of us are pursuing.

The experiment has only just begun.

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