Deep Dreaming

A different approach to group dreamwork moves away from dreams as a resource for personal guidance. This approach focuses on dreams as a reflection of our collective joys and sorrows, and looks for guidance, not just for individuals but for our culture as a whole.

Psychologist Meredith Sabini and longtime dreamworker Richard Russo of The Dream Institute of Northern California have developed a novel process called Deep Dreaming. In this approach to group dreamwork, participants link their individual dreams to form a new sequence of dream images. This sequence is like a larger, composite dream that the group explores to understand the themes and issues of the culture at large.

Each Deep Dreaming session has three separate phases. During the first part, “The Dreaming,” participants sit together in a meditative state that connects them to the creativity and mystery of the unconscious. In this phase, participants are invited to share dreams from any time in their lives. As the dream imagery of others washes through participants, their own dreams arise in response. Dreams evoke other dreams and a new sequence of images emerges.

During “The Dreaming,” individual dreams are shared in the present tense without any kind of commentary or association. The imagery of many dreams stands side by side, undiluted by interpretation.

In the second part, “Discussion and Exploration,” participants return from the meditative state to discuss the images and dreams in the new dream sequence. Just as we associate to images in our individual dreamwork, so in Deep Dreaming participants associate to the imagery of the co-created dream sequence. However, the focus is on understanding cultural issues, rather than the personal meanings of the imagery. For instance, the image of a homeless person might lead to a
discussion of homelessness or lack of roots in the cultural at large, rather than in an individual’s life.

During “Dream Re-entry,” the third and final part of Deep Dreaming, the focus shifts from the cultural perspective to the personal. Participants return to a meditative state to explore a personally meaningful scene in the composite dream sequence. As an example, a participant might chose an image of homelessness that reflects how she feels unrooted or without a home base in her own life. At the conclusion of this phase, participants share the images they have chosen.

Since the beginning of this work in 2004, Sabini and Russo have offered Deep Dreaming to various organizations and to graduate students interested in using this approach. They also have a core group that has met for over ten years. Themes that have emerged include global warming and environmental degradation, homelessness, the suffering of animals, gender issues, and intercultural relations. Strong feminine figures and wisdom from indigenous cultures have appeared as resources in many dreams.

Participants are frequently moved by the compelling imagery that arises in Deep Dreaming sessions. They also report being equally touched by their experience of interconnectedness. As Russo wrote in a recent article:

"During more than a decade of exploring and refining the method, participants repeatedly reported that simply the experience of coming together to dream, and the resultant feelings of interconnectedness, were as important and rewarding as the content of the dreams of any particular session. Typical comments are that it is comforting to know that other people are having dreams similar to their own; that the dreams all seem to be “coming from the same place,” and thus they feel close and connected to the other dreamers; and that the burden of disturbing dreams seems lessened through understanding that the dreams are not only about personal issues. (51)"

My own experience resonates with Russo’s comments. Some years ago, I participated in several Deep Dreaming sessions. I particularly remember one that featured many animal dreams. Images of joyfully cavorting with whales and images of a frightening encounter with a bear have stayed with me. I also remember a sad dream about a wounded elephant. Our co-created dream
sequence presented many different aspects of our collective relationship to animals. It revealed our shared love of animals as well as our deep grief at how we humans have hurt these wild and beautiful creatures. I came away from this session feeling more connected to animals personally, but also with a more deeply felt understanding of our culture’s relationship to animals.

Although the vivid content of this dream sequence has remained with me, I was equally touched, as Russo has suggested, by the intimacy of this process. I was moved by sharing the creativity and mystery of the unconscious with other participants. I was touched by the opportunity to link my unconscious to the unconscious of others and to weave my dream images with theirs. This was a powerful and intimate experience that I’ve never forgotten.