Deep Dreaming (aka Culture Dreaming))

Deep Dreaming is a new approach to group dream sharing developed by Richard Russo and Meredith Sabini at the Dream Institute of Northern California to explore the cultural dimension of dreaming. Originally called "Culture Dreaming," the name of the process was changed to Deep Dreaming in 2014 in recognition of a new dual emphasis on not only the cultural aspects of dreaming, but also the experience of dreaming together.

Background

When Sabini and Russo began working together in the 1990s, they shared a common interest in dreams rooted in both Jungian thought and the social awareness of the burgeoning dreamwork movement. The work of Gordon Lawrence at the Tavistock Institute in London provided the inspiration for Culture Dreaming. Lawrence sought to bring dreams into his practice as an organizational consultant. His method, which he called "Social Dreaming," moved away from focus on the individual dreamer and used a new form of group dreamwork to illuminate and explore what was happening in the group, beneath the surface. During a typical Social Dreaming Matrix, participants would share dreams, stories, memories, associations, and possible interpretations, with the goal of stimulating new perspectives and creative thought.

After meeting Lawrence and studying his method, Russo and Sabini took Social Dreaming in a new direction, which they called "Culture Dreaming." Whereas Social Dreaming matrices generally are held for businesses and organizations to address issues facing the group, Culture Dreaming casts the dream net wider: ordinary people from all walks of life come together to share dreams and listen for what they might be saying about the culture of which they are all a part. If Social Dreaming seeks to uncover currents of thought in the unconscious life of the group, Culture Dreaming seeks to uncover the unconscious life of the culture itself.

Bogzaran & Deslauriers (2012), in their discussion of Culture Dreaming, wrote:
> "If each person holds a piece of the hologram, could it be that bringing our dreams together leads to some form of social-perceptual depth? To that effect, Meredith Sabini and Richard Russo have adapted a social dreaming process devised by Lawrence (2005) to inquire about group response to social and ecological themes…. Dreams are viewed as a shared social resource."

Culture Dreaming: The Process

Culture Dreaming sessions initially consisted of two parts: Part I, the Dreaming, during which participants tell dreams following a simple set of ground rules, followed by Part II, a joint exploration and discussion of what the group has witnessed and experienced.

Part I: The Dreaming

The first part of the process, the dream sharing session, uses a special seating configuration developed by Lawrence, but otherwise departs from his Social Dreaming method in significant ways. One crucial difference is that no associations, amplifications, or other comments are allowed, only dreams. The aim of Lawrence's Social Dreaming matrix was to stimulate creative thinking; his method used a mixture of dreams, thoughts and associations to facilitate the development of working hypotheses concerning the issues facing the group. Culture Dreaming has also been used in consulting work with groups and organizations, by Sabini & Russo as well as others (e.g., Trevino, 2008), but the main goal of the process is to explore the dreaming of the culture. Sabini and Russo found that the intrusion of thoughts and associations during the Dreaming pulled participants out of the dream state. Staying only with dreams allows the group to settle into a deeper, relaxed but alert meditative state, in which one dream calls forth the next. Instead of participants making conscious associations to each dream, the dreams make associations to each other, leading to chains of meaning that could not have been foreseen. The result is a new, long dream whose many scenes are comprised of the individual dreams of the participants – as if each individual dreamer had a piece of a puzzle whose totality could not be seen until the group came together and the Dreaming was allowed to unfold. The resulting "big" dream may be startling in its thematic complexity and often quite beautiful in its intricate structure.

A typical "Dreaming" (Part I) lasts twenty to thirty minutes, during which ten to fifteen individual dreams are heard. The process is intense. Most people are used to listening to one dream at a time; staying in dream space for twenty or thirty minutes requires great concentration. Occasionally a participant may nod off during the process – often to "return" with a fresh dream!

Part II: Discussion and Exploration

In Part II, after a brief break, the chairs are moved into a circle and the group reconvenes to discuss the dreams that were heard in Part I. In a significant and crucial departure from Lawrence and almost all other approaches to group dream sharing, the dreams that emerged during the dream sharing process are viewed as one big dream, consisting of many scenes. The opening and closing scenes are given special attention, and the overall arc of the Dreaming examined. No discussion of the personal meaning of any particular dream or image for an individual dreamer is allowed. Instead, associations and amplifications are made, themes and connections amongst the individual dream scenes explored, and relevance to collective issues considered.

Themes that have emerged in Culture Dreaming/Deep Dreaming sessions include environmental catastrophes, homelessness, the suffering of animals, gender conflict, racism, global warming, violence, alienation, and war.

Part III: Dream Re-entry

After using the method for several years, Sabini and Russo discerned a need for greater closure to the process, and added a third part: dream re-entry. In Part III, each participant chooses an image or scene that is particularly meaningful to them from that day's Dreaming. The group goes back into a light trance and each person reenters the dream scene they've chosen, allowing it to unfold further. Afterwards, they report back to the group what they've experienced or

discovered. This allows each dreamer to make a personal connection to the group's Dreaming, while providing the group with further insight into the meaning of the big dream they have co-created.

Deep Dreaming

The addition of the dream re-entry component to the process marked the beginning of a shift away from emphasis on the cultural content of the Dreaming, though that is still present and always discussed, to a focus on the experience of dreaming together. 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 feeling of interconnectedness, were as important and rewarding as the content of the dreams in 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.

In recognition of the importance of these insights, Sabini and Russo changed the name of the process to "Deep Dreaming," and now lead advanced groups in which dreamers commit to a series of sessions. After each session, participants receive a narrative summary of the dreams that were heard, and are asked to make or find a small object that represents some image or theme from the Dreaming, to be placed on an altar at the start of the next session. In this way, continuity between sessions is emphasized; each session picks up where the previous one left off, allowing participants to go more deeply into the Dreaming.

Relation to Shamanism

Although Sabini and Russo were inspired by their familiarity with shamanic dream cultures, Deep Dreaming differs from shamanic models of dream sharing in significant ways. Most shamanic dream cultures distinguish between personal dreams that are for the dreamer and "big" dreams that are for the whole community. A dreamer who has had a big dream brings it to the shaman, or to a council of elders, for interpretation. Information and insights gleaned from the dream are then used in making decisions affecting the life of the community.

Deep Dreaming also recognizes that some dreams have significant meaning for the community, but differs from shamanic models in several important ways. Rather than focusing on big dreams, Deep Dreaming works with ordinary night dreams. The theory behind this is that many, if not most, dreams have a cultural dimension that often goes unnoticed, but can be illuminated when viewed in the context of other, similar dreams. There are practical reasons for working with ordinary dreams as well. A "big" dream told by one person may be so powerful that it overwhelms the other participants and prevents the group Dreaming from unfolding. Furthermore, a Deep Dreaming session can be held at any time, without having to wait for someone to have a big dream. In effect, the process invites the emergence of a *new* big dream, built in unexpected and unforeseeable ways from the individual night dreams of the participants. In that sense, Culture Dreaming/Deep Dreaming can be viewed as a new form of group shamanic practice.

Deep Dreaming replaces hierarchal models with an egalitarian one. The Dreaming is open to everyone. Rather than consulting a dream "expert," whether shaman, psychotherapist, or dream worker, ordinary people come together to create a big dream, and work together to understand what it is saying.

Relation to Jungian Thought

The idea of the "cultural complex" has been introduced in Jungian literature by Thomas Singer & Samuel Kimbles (2004). In this view, not all "complexes" are personal (in the classic Freudian/Jungian sense); some are cultural. In other words, individuals within a given culture or sub-culture may carry complexes that do not originate in their personal experience, but are held in common by members of the culture and may be passed on. For example, an individual's attitude toward homeless people, the poor, or immigrants may stem from attitudes embedded in the culture, rather than any direct, personal experience, which may be absent. To the extent that these cultural complexes remain unconscious and therefore unexamined, they unknowingly affect behavior the same way that personal complexes do.

Deep Dreaming can be a way to work with these complexes, by bringing them to light within the safe container of the group session and examining the ways in which they might be shaping our behavior. With the addition of the dream re-entry component, which often brings creative resolution to issues raised during the Dreaming, Deep Dreaming is a new form of healing work that addresses the cultural, rather than the personal, level of a problem.

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