

**Gale Houston**

## **JUST A DREAM**

The hobbledy man smiles and beckons as he gyrates away down the middle of the empty road. Discs and commas pelt across the screen, expanding as they fall. Mike Westwood's music throbs and warms from within, like a micro-wave oven: For Everything That lives is Holy, sings the company.

Just a dream.

If you are reading this article, you are probably interested enough in your dreams to look for meaning in them, via your own hunches, breakfast conversations, or one of a dozen bought or do-it-yourself methods. My way of using one of those methods, Gestalt, I have explained in some detail in the first of two special issues of this journal on that subject. (Vol VIII No.4) I do not have a religious devotion to that, or any one other method of working with dreams. As a culture we have kept ourselves dissociated from our dreams, and in my view work with them far less sophisticatedly, and with far less wisdom, than the one or two tribal civilisations I have read about, which daily integrated their members' dreams into their planning of the tribe's work and other activities.

Before going on to speculate about the substance and intention of dreams, and to expand on what I see as useful ways of working on them, I shall say a little more about the tribal method I have just mentioned.

At least one Iroquois Indian tribe used to start each day with a full meeting, at which anyone who felt moved to share their dream had the right, even the duty, to do so. Just as dreamers in this culture often adapt their dreams to their audience, dreaming Jungian dreams for a Jungian therapist, (if they like him, I daresay), or fine dichotomous conflicts for a Gestalt worker, so, as far as I can judge, tribal dreamers let themselves dream in a mode and code accessible to their own tribe.

Florid revenge dreams about another tribe member, for example, were very allowable. The dream thrashing or killing was understood as some kind of reproof to the named victim. And, curiously, the dreamer telling such a dream would then be required by the elders to give some token gift to his victim.

Compare the elegance of this with the laborious acting out in, say, factory grievance procedures now. The tribal method subtly pays tribute to the inner reality of the dreamer, by asking from him a penance-present, a tangible gift, for the ill-wish he dreamed and told. And if his victim is dissatisfied, then presumably he will drag that dreamer's name in the mud by himself having a revenge dream.

Another striking discovery, when dreams are told within a contained community, is the overlap between many of them. I have lived in a group for some weeks, in which a Californian Indian instituted daily dream meetings. The overlap of focus in our dreams was exciting, even if unsurprising. What was more uncanny was the likeness of imagery in these nocturnal poems. And a consequence of the sharing was, for me, a shift in consciousness, as I let myself be aware that the unconscious mind of many other, apparently disparate people, was probably composing my dreams as well as their own.

Sacking a staff member, going for an excursion into the hills, and changing all our time-tables, were three of the decisions which emerged from overlapped dreams, and were acted on, besides many apparently dream-prompted events affecting sub-groups and individuals. I, and I think many there, found it easier to respect and trust dream-messages than the apparent rationality of ordinary talk.

The often mysterious nature of dreams made everyone give attention to each one. Its meanings, when agreed, were to some extent internalised by everyone present. So a subtle and thorough spiritual housekeeping was for ever in progress in these dream-meetings, seemingly through the intuitive faculties of everyone present. We came to know each other's shifting needs, moods, fears and hopes through the imagery of our dreams, which, like a certain brand of beer, reached those parts of us that everyday talk could not.

I hope that that very brief description and reminiscence helps you see why I give special value to working on your dreams within the group where you live or work generally. For many people this is not at all practical. So much of what follows will contain the assumption that you will work in a pair or a near-stranger group, and in my view

much of what I might call the inter-active value of your dreams will be diminished, in consequence.

From all I have said so far I hope you will have gathered that I consider dreams to be more than just day-residues, drifting past some misty window of night-consciousness, as they settle into some compost heap in the mind. I see them as somewhat amazing poems, containing or suggesting as much meaning as you choose to attribute to them.

Like poems, they seem to vary in intensity. Like poems, they defy the categories of rationality. Like poems, they each have a form which may first be intuited, but could probably also be described in a more linear and intellectual way. For example, some appear to have stanzas, where one theme is re-worked in what at first hearing seem quite unconnected images and happenings. All seem to have an all-roads-lead-to-Rome quality, in that you can leap or trudge from any of them down Freud's highway to the unconscious, or Perls' highway to integration, by way of the dreamer's major conflicts. Most use what in poetry would be called a convention, in the case of dreams this being the obscuring of meaning, whether by reversal, paradox or omission, or even an extreme form of punning, so that a bank of sweet smelling flowers in a dream, when described aloud by the dreamer, is suddenly seen to represent not the Great violets she first mentioned, but Great Violence, with a different kind of smell altogether.

Which neatly brings me to what I most want to stress in this article.

I am often asked if it is a good idea to work on dreams alone. People learn a free-association method, or Anne Faraday Dream Diary method, Gestalt, or some other way which they perfectly well comprehend and know how to apply. What would you reply to them? Whatever I say, what I think is this. Mulling over your dreams may help you illuminate them and yourself considerably. But by and large I think it is very seldom enough for anyone to do, if they want to explore far.

If you have told your dreams to an attentive listener, you will probably have been quite startled at times to find the switches or shifts in value that happen as you do so. What in a dream was a sad and troublesome happening, like seeing some near relation get their foot stuck down a well full of mud, may turn out as you externalise the dream by telling it to make you break into laughter of a gleeful kind you in no way experienced within the dream. Ho ho.

A paradox about a dream is that in some ways it is not real at all. Yet if you remember it, you are likely to be awed at the sense of vivid reality within it. And I allege that your natural response is to want to tell about it. That telling is to my mind the next proper stage of the dreaming process. You have got yourself a monitor by finding an audience. You have more or less assured their attention both through your own enthusiasm, and very probably the intriguing material of the dream. The open telling serves to show your hearer something of your internal process, which she needs to know to live alongside you responsively, indeed safely. And the same telling serves to give you some attention, another need satisfied, and to let you find the difference between what you experienced as you remembered the dream, and what you experience as you turn that totally secret reality into a shared recounting. Together you look into the new territory the dream has revealed, and may come to some conclusion: Yes, I am still angry that they gave my toy drum away; Yes, being unemployed is like being lame for me.

That conclusion or reflection I see as the next stage of dreaming, but certainly not the last, though I often see it treated as an endpoint. I have more respect for my unconscious than to suppose it merely chucks me insights, as you might chuck bones to the dog, for it to chew at for a time and then bury.

The last stage of dreaming is action. In that sense I say that all dreams are about the future. I see them all having the intention of changing what you do in the world, in an apparently small or apparently large way. Unless that happens, you frustrate yourself. You ran your own TV show inside your head and then you snapped it off. And you can go on doing that till the day you die.

Your dreams are more than TV shows, if you let them into your life. They are a distillation of your experience, and perhaps more, and your wisdom, and perhaps more. Like healthy talk, they are a means of moving from one experience through to new experience, new action.

Yet we live in a culture full of talk which seems not to end in action. We have TV sets which are like store-bought dream-machines, filling our imaginations with sounds and pictures, and leaving our bodies in a sitting posture. In this sense we live in a dream-world, and forget action, which is life. How much of what you do is mere maintenance activity? Earn the money, wash the clothes, cook the food, make habit visits.

I respect maintenance work. But I also respect our capacity for creating, changing, innovating. And I notice the forces of inertia. This is one of the several ways in which I see it as most functional to share dreams within the group where you work or live. Then you surround yourself with monitors, in a way that does not happen if you visit a counsellor or therapist, or have two hours a week in a therapy group whose members only meet at that time. But even there it is possible to draw dream-work through to the questions, What am I going to do now? What's different now? What do I want to change? How?

**Further reading:**

H.E. Driver. Indians of N.America. University of Chicago Press,1969

R.K. Denton. A non-violent people of Malaya, the Senoi. Rinehart and Winston, 1968

Corriere and Hart. The Dream-makers. Bantam. 1978

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