

DREAMS DREAMING

We all dream. We may not remember, or remember bits and pieces, but most of us dream several times each sleep period. Dogs and cats too seem to dream; it looks that way certainly! Maybe roosters dream: I sometimes hear a single rooster crowing in the middle of the night. Because we remember such tantalizing tidbits only, humans have always paid attention to dreams. One thing that makes dreams memorable is that they always seem so 'real' when we are in the dream. Then, in the morning, we wonder. That is perhaps why in many cultures there is a folklore about dreams. Dreaming about a crow means a message, or a death. Something red in a dream means 'blood' in some cultures, but 'fire' in another. In some societies the dreams of pregnant women are particularly important because they either predict, or even determine what the child will be like.

Generalizations that claim universal (or cultural) meanings—that dreaming about lightning means this or that, that a certain image or action has a fixed meaning—are not very useful. The *meaning* of dreams is personal, and depends on the state of mind of the dreamer, the circumstances of her/his life. Dreams are conditioned by such things as age, religion, education. Certainly dreams often reflect something we are worried about, or things that have happened recently. Nightmares bring back fears we have not been able to forget, or absorb. I have found that for me a dream often leaves me questioning, and that the questioning, thinking about a dream, is what is important. The story, if there even is one, is less important than what we think of it, and what the story brings to mind.

I think it may not be the content that is meaningful but the questioning afterward. What is important is the process of thinking about a dream— most often dream fragments—and the associations that come up.

I learned about paying attention to dreams from a small group of very ancient aboriginal (original) people in Southeast Asia. When I knew them, the first thing they did each morning was share, with those who had slept in the same hut, what each remembered of their dreams. They lived in small bands, rarely more than a dozen people. They were semi-nomadic, moving every other year or so. At a new location they would make little houses from the bamboo that was plentiful in the jungle. Nobody 'owned' these huts on stilts, they were built together and lived in together. Where they spent a night seemed to me a random act, but perhaps they chose who they felt like being close to. In the morning they shared what fragments and images they remembered from their dreams. Sometimes—not

always—someone would try to put these different pieces together to make a story. But even if a story did not emerge, the tone of the shared dream fragments (happy, restless, wondering) set the tone of that day. Usually, if there was a story, it was fragmentary, simple and not very demanding. The story might say that today would be a good day to watch birds. Or the story might say that today would be a day of singing and not doing much of anything. Perhaps a suggestion that this would be a good day to go hunting, and then (usually, I think) the story would also tell what the prey would be.

After the time when I met these simple people, I read what travelers have written about other aboriginal peoples in other parts of the world. It seems all aboriginal people value dreams. The Dreamtime of Australian Aborigines anchors, holds our world in place. Other aboriginal peoples had similar ideas.

I think that the world we visit in our dreams can guide our steps even through the modern landscape. As far as I know, no aboriginal people thought of dreams as expressions of the subconscious, as we do.

At first I did not understand much of their language, although that never was a problem. I spoke the country language, and usually at least one person was fluent enough in Malay to interpret my words, and interpret their words to me. And it is astonishing how

we can communicate without words if we have to. The first thing I learned about dream sharing was that what was important was the process of sharing, not the meaning of the content, or the images of a dream. Occasionally a dream may have an obvious and important message for the dreamer and even for others. But in general the content of someone's dream was less important than what it might trigger in the sharing. They did not think that a bird, say, stood for, or meant a message. Someone would ask, what kind of bird was it, where was it going, was it flying or sitting, did it make a sound, what was its color? It was the process that was important. Once or twice one of my dream fragments were part of this process, and I was astonished how meaningful the story that emerged turned out to be. The process was sometimes guided, but rarely. I do not wear a watch, but I imagine this early-in-the-morning ritual of sharing rarely lasted more than five or ten minutes. Gradually, I understood that, most often, the story did not come from the dream fragments, but rather from talking about them. The sharing had somehow triggered a 'knowing'.

We, westerners, see through our own point of view.

We would probably see aborigines as poor, simple, dirty, obviously uneducated people, not fitting in a civilized world. So doing, we would miss other important qualities, for instance their joyfulness: they sang little songs all day. I have noticed this *joie de vivre*, the *joy of being alive*, also among indigenous people far removed from civilization. The farther away from the delights of money and 'things'—from our point of view the poorest, perhaps dirtiest—there was this same, open joy in just being.

The people I got to know smiled, were kind and considerate with each other and to me, a total stranger. They have been described as 'truly peaceful, non-violent people'. They loved children unconditionally, I never heard a raised voice, let alone saw a raised hand against a child. They knew their environment (in this case a thick jungle) so intimately that they never had much difficulty finding food. They loved telling stories, and they also were happy just sitting near, touching each other, without words. And they always knew when I was coming, although there was no way for me to let them know beforehand what day, or what time I would reach them. They 'knew' other things as well that they could not possibly know. There are writers who have written about them, anthropologists who have studied them. Aborigines (in Africa called pygmies) are often referred to as Stone Age people. That is not so, of course; they use metal and a few other objects made by us. Yet, it is generally accepted that they are an ancient people, their cultures go back thousands of years. All of them dream.

Not long ago I read *The Tree Where Man Was Born*, by Peter Matthiessen (© 1972). Toward the end of the book he describes a meeting with a small group of aborigines in Central Africa. I quote one and a half sentence: "The encounter in the sunny wood is much too simple, too beautiful to be real, yet it is more real than anything I have known in a long time. I feel a warm flood of relief, as if I had been away all my life and had come home again..." That is how I felt as well. As if I *recognized* something in them that reverberated with something very deep inside me.

I have thought about that for years; it is much in my mind and heart. We, humans, have come a long way. We have become very different from those simple people. We live in a civilization that has made it possible for us to live lives emperors could not dream of, even a few hundred years ago. And yet, and yet...

We have lost the joyfulness I found among those simple people. And we have lost the knowing that has nothing to do with our Information Age that threatens to drown us in meaningless 'facts'. And, perhaps most important, we have lost our sustainable habits, and so our habitat. Instead, we are fouling our nest with our many and various pollutions, and are destroying the very earth we live on, and from. Perhaps we lost ourselves.

When we, humans, homo sapiens, were wild, as bison were wild, or tigers, or insects,

we lived within our means. We did not hunt more than we could eat (or preserve), took more from a plant than it could survive. There were no leaders, no laws other than the laws of nature. Our culture was simple perhaps, but assured that we lived together harmoniously with others, and with our environment. We did not strive to change, we did not think ourselves better than, or even different from all Life around us. I do not know what made someone decide—perhaps ten thousand years ago—that he (certainly a male) wanted to change what had been the natural (our nature's) way of being. But someone did. One day that someone decided that he was special, he felt different, better than all others, human as well as non-human. With that new feeling of being different he looked around him, feeling that he had power over the land, the plants and animals. The beginning of a concept we now call *owning*. He imagined that he could own the land he stood on, and then the land he and his tribe occupied. He began to see his wife and children and some neighbors, as less than he. So he owned a wife, perhaps several, and he owned his children. Communities now had a leader. And when the community was large enough, the boss had pals, secondary bosses. Hierarchies formed, until we achieved what we call *civilization*.

We have come far from our wild ancestors. We no longer feel part of the earth and its many life forms. Perhaps that is why it is now easy for us to consider changing the earth, using it, abusing it. It means nothing to us to cut 2000-year old trees to make paper, to dam rivers that change the very face of the earth—even apart from endlessly building structures and cutting roads. Now we know that our frantic doings are changing the climate of the earth. We also know, and have known for half a century, that we are eradicating thousands, perhaps millions of species.

From my perspective the man who invented owning, and the idea that things could be *mine*, started something that changed us. We think—of course, how could we think otherwise—that the way we are today is the best, the most advanced. It is difficult to remember what 'wild' was, yet it is still part of us, I am certain. Let me assure you that wild, as I use the word, does not mean uncontrollable, irresponsible, crazy, or even primitive. No, wild to me means in tune with the earth, with all Life around us. As Native Americans said, All My Relations. It must seem that we have put that wild behind us. And it all began as just a simple change in how we saw ourselves: not as part of this planet, but its masters, some say managers. We have managed badly, indeed we have squandered our heritage. What if something wild is still inside us? Perhaps that is what dreams help us remember. The importance of dreams is not in their content, but in the thinking about a dream that allows us to get in touch with the wild deep inside.

Of course I asked the aborigines about the difference between the dream world and the one we call reality (I'm a question-asker). Usually they did not understand my question, or did not know how to answer perhaps. But once, when I was with four young men—I cannot now remember what we were doing, or talking about, but I asked the question: What is the difference between the dream world and (looking down as I stamped my foot, then looking left and right to suggest the manifest world) the world of things. They shuffled their feet nervously, until one young man (unusually tall I remember) said one word, *Naung*, also stomping on the earth. At the time I interpreted that to mean that the world we stood on is the shadow world, and the dream world is more real.

It was only very recently that suddenly I realized that he may have meant something else: *our world, the world we call reality, has shadows; dreams are without shadows*. I was looking at the trees I see from the little porch of the house I live in. A dark green forest. A fierce sun making some of the shiny leaves of the guava trees blink silver. When I looked between the trees, I realized that the darkness was the dark green of the leaves rather than the density of trunks and vines. After all it is only a little bit of forest, with thin trees, reaching no more than 20 feet high. It is the shadows that make it dark. I looked to the left and right:

everything has a shadow! I saw clearly that shadow is what gives a thing its separateness, its three-dimensional reality.

And suddenly the word *naung* came back into my awareness. *Naung* is a Malay word for shadow, or shade. Ah, that is what that young man meant! In our western world we are conditioned to see differences. Shadow is one of the things that make an object stand apart. Our way of seeing reality is to see differences, different things, each with its own name and its shadow. Science trains us to see differences, separateness. We have become so good at noticing differences that we can no longer see the whole. Dreams, where there are no shadows, no divisions, no separateness, are a way to see the whole again. In the world of dreams it is obvious that everything is related to everything else; images and action jump from one scene to another seemingly at random, because it is all one.

In our western world we have forgotten that *everything is related to everything else*; we do not see that any more. Our conditioning has cost us seeing the earth as it is: a complex ecology, with a dynamic, always changing balance. A multi-dimensional spider's web if we could only see.

The aborigines I knew still could see the relatedness of everything, in which they fitted, seamlessly. They knew that their environment supported them well. It did not occur to them to disturb the totality, the balance, because they were part of it.

We, westerners are completely ignoring those basic givens of living. MORE has become the motto of our civilization. More of everything: more things, more money, more power. More than we can eat, more than we need. Obviously, inevitably, that means we must steal from others, human and non-human. By destroying the balance, we destroy the planet. Probably that is why we distrust the dream world and call it something bubbling up from our sub-conscious, or imagination, not real. When in fact, dreams are what can get us in touch again with the whole, that multi-dimensional spider's web that I call All That Is, where everything is related to everything else.

Dreams are a door, the last door perhaps, to our most inner being, where we are still part of All That Is. Dreams give access to our wild selves. Dreams are very private, individual expressions of that ancient part of us, accessible only when we let go our civilized consciousness. Perhaps—probably, I think—that also means that if we can learn to *let go* our trained, educated (brainwashed) consciousness, we might access that ancient self with awareness, and find other treasures as well.

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I have heard people say, Oh, I never dream. That is not true. Scientists who studied dreaming say that all of us have several periods of dreaming during every night. When people say they never dream, they probably mean they do not remember their dreams. The easiest and most successful way to remember dreams is probably to spend a few moments, as soon as one wakes up *remembering*. It is important to remember immediately, as soon as one is awake. Not ready to open eyes yet, or get out of bed, but in that half state between dream and awake at least the last image can be recalled. We can give ourselves instructions: *as soon as there is some awake awareness, bring back what was going on, what happened, what image, word, sentence comes to mind?* After doing that for a while it becomes a habit.

It helps to share what one remembers with another, or several others, as the aborigines did, but even when we wake up alone it is important to remember in our minds what remains of what the dream meant to us, what was the tone, the mood of what I wake up with? I have done this remembering for half my life. It has become a habit. For me it is important to remember the feeling tone of the dream. How did it feel? Was it happy, strange, familiar, a warning, something to look forward to?

The ideas of Sigmund Freud, C. G. Jung and the many flavors of psychology after them, have become part of popular culture. Freud thought that dreams are expressions of repressed sexuality. Jung added the concept of 'archetypes', images that all humans share in what he called the Collective Subconscious. Others say that dream images have a fixed meaning: flying means sex, seeing or hearing an owl means a warning, and so on. That does not work for me.

Occasionally I dream of people I have known. But most of the time I dream of people I have never met, never seen, and yet they seem astonishingly real. I am firmly convinced that dreams are uniquely our own. The same dream, or kind of dream, for two different people would have two different messages, or, no message at all. Dreams are important to me. In my experience, not infrequently the answer to a sticky question comes in a dream. Not in words, a sentence, but a dream or dream fragment triggers a knowing within me. I know that dreams have warned me. I have learned to listen to my dreams, as I have learned to listen to what some call intuition. Dreams have proved true for me much too often to think that they are just messages from my subconscious. My dreams have given me information I did not have, and often could not have known!

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We sit around the edge of the floor in a small hut rubbing sleep out of our eyes. Whoever has something to say, says it, no one is in charge, of course. A few words from my neighbor on the left. A small boy laughs softly. Somebody yawns and stretches luxuriously. A girl fusses as if she has to relieve herself.

She saw a bird going very fast! "what kind of bird was it?" "what color was it?" "where was it going?"

"Well... it was a yellow bird, and it was flying very fast to get away..." "What was it trying to get away from?" "... I don't know..."

A young man speaks up, gruffly at first: "I am in a storm, a bad storm, we all had to flee into the jungle." "Yes," the girl who had seen the bird says, "that is what the little bird was flying away from, a storm!" An old woman speaks up (I think of her as 'old', although she probably was no more than forty), "this storm is coming from over there", and she motions with her chin to the west, in the direction of the Capital city.

Silence. We try to imagine a big storm. From what I can see, the weather is calm, perfect, although it is so early in the morning that it is hard to tell what the day might bring. I can feel the heat of the sun beginning to drive away the moisture that has condensed overnight.

The young boy—I found it hard to tell the age of children, and nobody knows their age—speaks slowly and very seriously, "This big storm is not rain, or wind," he says. "It is something else."

We all look at him. Nobody says anything.

After a while the boy continues even more softly, we have to strain to hear his words, "A people storm."

Later someone told me that what the boy had said, (translated in Malay because I did not understand much of their language yet) was *ribut orang*. Ribut is storm, or it can be a big noise, even a big commotion; Orang means human. Ribut orang could be "a disaster brought about by people", or "a disaster that strikes people."

The five people sitting around the little hut now are very still. I can sense people thinking what a 'people storm' might be. They seem to accept, to agree: Yes, there could be a disaster, a human disaster rather than rain or high wind, even thunder and lightning, which is about the only thing they greatly fear. Slowly, without words, it seems that there is a drift to thinking that this must be a man-made disaster.

It is quiet for a long time. Nobody says anything. I think the dream session is over, but as we get up and out to begin the day, our silent thoughtfulness spreads among the people who had slept in the other two huts. I hear the words that mean *ribut orang* being passed from person to person. And I saw at least two people point to the west, the storm comes from that direction...

I had to leave that morning, and as I say goodbye to a subdued group of people I see that a few of the women were packing their belongings, as if they were getting ready to leave. A fleeting thought comes to me: they are fleeing further into the jungle. It seems strange to me that they might want to move because of a vague dream. Almost I turn around to ask where they are going, but... No, I am not sure I understood right. The day before, when I first arrived, this little group of people, only a little more than a dozen people of all ages, had seemed happy, unconcerned. They were singing, people were chatting, and everyone had a smile. In the evening we had sat around a little fire, talking. They had giggled when I could not decide which hut to choose to sleep in.

Now, in the morning, their smiles are apologetic. Nobody is singing.

The rest of that day, far from the little settlement, I felt uneasy, as if waiting for something. Several times I caught myself thinking, what is a *people storm*? I got home in the early afternoon, did some work. The next day I decided to find information about rumors that Government people were measuring something in the area where these people lived. I was not sure what they were measuring, but it sounded like some kind of land survey. It took me a few days to find out more. Yes, a survey of some kind, an ongoing project. They had already surveyed north of the area where the aborigines lived and were slowly moving south. I heard someone who had just come back from a recent survey say that they had come to a little clearing with three huts, but to their surprise nobody was there, although all signs pointed to very recent occupation.

"They must have run away when they heard us coming," the man laughed.

No, I wanted to say, they ran away several days before, when they dreamed a *people storm* was coming.

But, of course, I didn't say anything. Some months after that I heard that a few of the people I had visited were now living with another group, because almost half of the group I had met had become very sick with the 'foreign sickness' (tuberculosis). The sick ones had been evacuated to the TB hospital a British doctor had set up on the outskirts of the capital city. The few healthy members of the group had joined a group elsewhere.

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Now, many years later, my memories of the People are deeply engraved in my soul. I learned not only that my dreams, as well as my intuition, are worth listening to, but that integrating them in my daily life *works*. Each day becomes the expression of the dream(s) I had in the night. Sometimes the dream tells me to go somewhere, sometimes that I should stay home. Occasionally a dream tells me to expect something unexpected that day. Often my dreams make no sense at first and I wish that there were a few people around with whom I could talk softly about our dreams. Perhaps what someone else had dreamed would have made my dream clearer. I know that it works that way! I experienced it, every time I dreamed with them. But I live alone—a very unnatural way of being, but in our civilization not all that unusual. Since I do not wake up with other people around me who have shared the space where we slept, I sometimes imagine other people. Occasionally that works. When writing these stories I imagined you, the reader, sitting across from me, on the split bamboo floor in a little hut, very early in the morning, as we are sharing what fragments we recall of our dreaming.