

Tending the Dream Is Tending the World

by
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To develop a respectful and sustaining relationship with our dreams, we must return to a more “indigenous” sensibility, one that is informed by the psyche of nature—an awareness that our own essential psychological spontaneities are rooted most deeply in the psyche of the natural world. We are born out of the rhythms of nature, and to ignore these rhythms is, ultimately, to deny our psychic inheritance

Introduction

“DreamTending” is an ecological approach to dreams which awakens a dormant way of knowing, a way of imagining that remembers the world, too, is alive and always dreaming. In this essay, I present five ecopsychological principles central to the craft of DreamTending. In addition, I describe how the practice of DreamTending is implemented and how tending a dream from an ecopsychological perspective extends dreamwork to include the voices of the other creatures and things with whom we share the world.

DreamTending is initiated by one species, human beings, in recognition of and response to the call of the world’s other inhabitants, animate and inanimate, who have need of us—as we do of them. In a world alive with the psychic presence of all being, we humans are viewed as one species of dreamers among the many, particular members of an indivisible, interdependent psychic ecosystem—merely one of the constituents of a world alive with psychic vibrancy. As the question of how to listen to the world’s other voices reverberates in the psyche, we discover that a more inclusive orientation to dreamwork is needed—an approach that is open to hearing the dreams of the non-human inhabitants as well as the dreams of persons.

Unlike most methods of dreamwork which focus primarily on the human psyche, DreamTending sees into dream images from “nature’s point of view.” While most dreamworkers explore the historical associations which link the dream images to the personal developmental background of the

dreamer and most analysts delve into the realm of the collective human experience as they amplify archetypal patterns which resonate with the dream narrative, the DreamTender goes beyond these person-centered approaches to the dream. DreamTending sees the images in dreams as inextricably wedded to the psyche of nature, a psychic process that underpins the human psyche. Dreams are experienced as nature revealing herself in image and expressing herself in the dreams of persons. Traditional anthropocentric orientations to dreamwork are viewed as limited and give way to a broader approach which realizes the generative impulse of nature that fuses each dream image. DreamTending adds to traditional dreamwork methods those skills that are responsive to nature's dream.

The practice of DreamTending is grounded in five ecopsychological principles, each implicating dream life with the psyche in the world.

DreamTending: Five Ecopsychological Considerations

I. The Psyche of Nature Animates the World

DreamTending starts with the idea that psyche is nature. The life force that permeates all being, that gives shape and texture to all creation is psychic. This psychic process which enlivens the phenomena of the world is not limited to an interior feeling state of the human experience. The human species does not project psyche to the world, rather, it is the psyche of nature that ensouls human being. DreamTending views the human psyche as a latter elaboration, grown out of the organicity of nature. As a community of being, humans must develop new intimacies with what has been previously dismissed as soulless and dead. Through the portal of dream, access is opened to nature's animating display, a matrix that, in turn, mirrors the human soul.

DreamTending begins with this recognition—that the things and the creatures of the world exist with psychic presence, a psychic depth. Each of the world's entities is experienced as an essential presence, containing a particular soul spark, a seminal image—all aspects of the anima mundi, a world alive, animated, and sourced by the psyche of nature. In tending a dream, images are experienced, most essentially, as expressions of nature's intent.

II. In An Animated World, Everything Dreams

DreamTending contends that dream figures and images may not, necessarily, originate within the personal psyche of the dreamer. In an animated world, everything dreams. We, as humans, are experienced as living within an extended field of dreams. In this broader ecology of dream life the earth's other beings express themselves, on behalf of themselves. Native peoples have long experienced the actuality of "the spirit that lives in the tree" or "the voice of the totem animal." These animating spirits are heard by native peoples through the images of dreams, valued as teachings, warnings, predictors of the future, experienced as the dreams of the world.

To the DreamTender, a dream image of a tree is heard both as a reflection of the human psyche (representing the personal/archetypal body of the dreamer) and of the world psyche (representing the actual body of a particular tree in the world). For example, imagine an old oak tree, one that literally has lived on the dreamer's property for well over 70 years. Imagine further that this old oak tree unexpectedly gets uprooted in a strong windstorm. That night, oak tree appears as a dream image of the dreamer.

DreamTending first considers, as most dream methodologies do, the emotional response of the dreamer to this image and, accordingly, associates to the surprise, grief, and horror of the day's discovery. DreamTending goes further, however, in that it acknowledges the voice of the actual tree—its grief, its decay, its sense of its own life and death and legacy. In tending a dream we would ask: "What is this tree expressing about itself through the dream image? What is the 'spirit' in the tree asking on behalf of itself?" These questions expand our relationship with the dream to include the voice of the particular oak felled in the windstorm, recognizing the tree as a living psychic phenomenon. Further, death of the oak does not occur overnight. The natural process of decomposition takes place over time, life gradually leaving the leaves, limbs, trunk, and roots. Dream images which reflect this process of dying may continue to present themselves to the dreamer as the felled oak in the world continues to dream.

On a larger scale, DreamTending views the planet as an entire ecosystem in various stages of transformation, speaking on behalf of itself through the dreams of humans. As the world expresses itself through dreams, the

DreamTender becomes aware of many, up to now, repressed images as they become more manifest. The repressed, the rejected or neglected, are the symptoms of the world condition. These dream images are the expressions of a world alive and always dreaming.

III. Dreams Images are Alive and Embodied

DreamTending asserts that the images themselves are alive and embodied. “Living images” have enormous influence over that which is seen, imagined, experienced in the interior workings of the human psyche. In human beings, first, there is image; then, behavior. The animating image is a priori and a deepened relationship with the world begins with an awareness of the primacy of the living image.

Living images are “tended” in a manner that honors their reality as imaginal beings. They are experienced as having body, presence, and pulse. It takes time to allow the dream figures to come back into their own lives, to walk about on their own legs. As embodied images, dream figures find immediate sympathy with the embodied dreamer. No longer is the dreamer only “in his/her head.” The dreamer gains access to the living image through the sensory awareness of his or her own body—touching, smelling, even tasting the embodied dream image. Through the body it becomes possible to feel into the other, to attune to the other, to breathe with the other, to be known by the other—to meet body-to-body. As images present themselves in their embodied autonomy, a relationship develops between the dreamer and the living dream image and a new sense of “working the image” becomes possible.

In DreamTending, interpreting the meaning of images yields to noticing how images have an affecting presence, how a particular image touches/moves or impresses a particular dreamer. In this way, it is not so much we who “work the image” as it is the images who work on us. The traditional psychological practice of reducing the image to a fixed explanation of meaning changes when tending the embodied image. Instead of the dreamworker taking the image to the place of a fixed explanation, it is the dreamer who follows the actual living image to where it would take him or her. To acknowledge the autonomy of the embodied image is to invite the generative intention of the image to be realized, the organicity of the image to emerge and develop. In this regard it is the images themselves that

individuate. A world alive with living images is an evolving dreamscape—an animated topography that individuates through its images.

IV. Mutual Regard Exists Between Embodied Images

When the images of dreams are accepted as autonomous living figures with breath and pulse, a respectful, co-respondent relationship between the embodied dreamer and the image-body occurs. Dreamer and image are present to each other in the immediacy of the interaction, similar to the felt experience of an I-thou relationship. A kind of loving often occurs, an elemental recognition that we are all living constituents of a dreaming psyche, a realm of existence that underpins the very nature of being itself.

For the DreamTender, psyche extends beyond the personal and collective domains of the human being to a broader realm which enfolds the world. The “world unconscious,” referred to by some as an “ecological unconscious,” is perceived as the dimension where all the earth’s phenomena, not only human beings, are interrelated in a field of psychic mutuality. When dreams are tended from this perspective of a universal psyche, there is an inherent sense of psychic reciprocity—a felt sense of mutual regard. People experience themselves as parts of the whole, caring for the world as they care for themselves. As the world expresses itself in myriad ways in the dreams of all dreamers, DreamTending provides the medium for intimate relationship between person and world.

V. The City, Too, Is Dreaming

DreamTending recognizes that the things of nature and the “human-made” things of the street are joined, most essentially, in the creative life-death forces of the psychic process. Nature is to be found not only in the wilderness landscape, but also in the psyche of the city, in the human-made. Contemporary society’s tendency to place human-made and nature-made in opposition splits urban life from the natural world, in a way “orphaning” the city—tearing it from the life of Planet Earth. Too often, we leave the city to encounter “nature,” imagining it only exists away from civilization, among the grasses and trees of the countryside. The city, too, is dreaming, and the pulse of nature beats strongly through its images.

DreamTending gives value to the process of nature rather than focusing only on the literal products of “wilderness places” found in natural landscapes. In

tending dreams, one listens into the images of the city and the human-made to discover nature's harmonic at work. When the image of a building presents itself in a dream, the image is attended to as an imaginal structure of the city rather than simply labeled as a representation of the dreamer's personality structure. As a building of the cityscape, the "dream-image-as-building" has presence, purpose, soul. It belongs to the psyche of the city, and is experienced as one part of the unfolding rhythms of that place. The building is listened to for what it knows (or needs), valued for its perspective, and regarded for its place in the living body of the city. Through DreamTending, the wisdom of nature is heard in the creative process that is inherent to the crafted steel and formed concrete that constitute the walls and the streets of the city. The dream of the city can be heard through its images.

The Practice of DreamTending

When I am DreamTending, in the psychotherapeutic consulting room or the dream group session, I literally shift my chair from the familiar face-to-face configuration with a dreamer to a more open, almost side-by-side arrangement. This change in physical position allows physical space for the figures, the dream images—as independent, alive entities—to join and interact with us. As the dream re-animates in the present moment, the dreamer and I focus on the details of the images and the immediacy of the dreamer's experience.

Essential to the process of DreamTending is attention to location. Perhaps most unique to my way of working is an emphasis on the specificity of landscape. Tending the dreamscape means first examining the landscape. The dreamer spends considerable time looking around in the dreamscape. I ask her/him to notice the color of the ground, the texture of the dirt, the temperature of the air, the taste of the ocean—specific details. In this process, the dreamer becomes increasingly attuned to the landscape. The dreamscape comes to life. The dreamer experiences the living presence of the psychic ground underneath. As the dreamer realizes where he or she is located, the spirit of place reveals itself and becomes present. Just as an awareness of the persons within our lineage connects us to our ancestral inheritance, so too does the revelation of location return us to the patternings and rhythmic energies of our geographic heritage, our sense of place. To know where we are located is to know who we are.

When I think about tending a living image, these words come to mind: curiosity, patience, compassion, and sensing (with one's physical senses). DreamTending involves attending to my curiosity about the figures of the dreamtime in a mindful way. I wonder about their movements. I observe their activities. I listen to their (and my) experiences.

Tending a dream also involves patience—the capacity first to “walk-about” in the immediacy of the dream, as if I am a part of the dream (which I am). With patience, I am not in a hurry to so quickly interpret images regressively back to past, personal life circumstance or analyze forward to personal or collective processes of individuation. In an attitude of patience and curiosity, I expect the unexpected. No longer am I reliant on my well-tested explanatory maps. Rather, I wait for the actuality of the dream image to reveal itself in the immediacy it's activity and intentionality. This requires taking the time to be present. The living nature of the dream image will often come out and surprise me.

Compassion is a feeling of the heart. To tend a dream is to bring a heartfelt empathy to it. The images in dreams are not static entities to be analytically dissected. They are living beings with inner natures. To have compassion for an image in a dream is to feel into that image's inner nature, to see how it expresses itself. To tend dream life is to be in empathic relationship with the essential vitality animating it. When I am sitting with a dream, I am in the presence of life revealing itself. I am working from the heart, and I am touching and being touched by the essentials of the dreaming. At times, I experience a sense of loving and being loved by the very musings of life.

Sensing an image in the immediacy of its presentation is very important in tending the dream. The senses of sight, hearing, touch, smell, and even taste give access to the “body” of the image, thereby creating a body-to-body resonance with the images of the dream. The dreamer uses bodily senses to relate to the imaginal body of the dream image. For example, tending the image of an ocean wave, the dreamer might, in imaginal play, dip a toe into the water to discover if it comes from the warm tropics or the cold Arctic. Smelling the ocean also provides vivid connection. To smell a dream figure or setting is to be in the living presence of that image, engaged directly in embodied interaction. Using our senses keeps us in the dream's reality rather than in the interpretive constructs of the therapist or dreamer. To see, hear, touch, taste, and smell situates the dreamer and the dream tender inside the dream as participants of the dream.

In tending living images, perhaps what is most important is the capacity to listen. When DreamTending, the way I listen to the dreamscape is to listen so deeply, so intently, so attentively, and with such care and concern that the figures know they will be heard—that when they speak on their own behalf, their voices will be listened to. To cultivate this way of listening, a receptive, open way of attending, allows for the songs of those who are different than we are to be heard.

Conclusion

In DreamTending the purpose is not to fix images in static explanations nor to identify with them as aspects of ourselves. Instead, to tend a dream is to attend to the images by giving them time and place to present themselves on their own behalf. These visitations by the images, through their presence in the room, affect the dreamer and the dream therapist. It is the impact that they make on our experience which is noticed first—rather than the demands for meaning that we would impose on these images.

Dream images are not only representations of the neurotic complexes of the past, nor are they located only in our personal or collective human experience. Rather, these visitors of the night are the beautiful and the horrific beings of the world dreaming. To be in relationship with them offers each of us access to the life-affirming rhythm of the world psyche—a cadence rooted, most essentially, in the psyche of nature.

So many of us have split ourselves off from the timeless mosaic of nature's ecology. This harmonic is no longer active in our lives, and this creates illness. DreamTending reconnects us to the universal pulse of life, uniting us with a broader ecology and, potentially, restoring health.

DreamTending is an ecopsychological approach to the dream, offering something valuable to each of us. In DreamTending, we too, are imaginal beings hosting the very images that, in turn, imagine us. In this ecological view of psychological life, DreamTending offers an approach to the dream that attends mindfully to the particularity of each image—discovering its nature, wondering about its activities, and listening to its experiences.

In an increasingly ego-centric, human-centered world, the well-being of the planet may depend on our ability to hear and respond to the many voices of nature's other beings. In tending the dream, we are tending the world.

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