

ICONS

OF A

DREAMING HEART



THE ART AND PRACTICE
OF DREAM-CENTERED LIVING

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Foreword by Robert Sardello



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WHO IS VISITING HERE?

“Taking what you said last month about me not sharing any dreams recently,” a woman in one of the dream groups I facilitate begins, “I have either a . . .” she pauses, searching for just the right word, “well, it’s a sort of nothing . . . a kind of insignificant dream that I can share. And when I say ‘dream’—it’s really just one image. Or, I can share a recurring dream from my childhood—one that I haven’t actually dreamt in many years, though I remain quite curious about it. I mean, I’ve always thought that it’d be kind of neat to know what that dream means. So the choice is up to you.”

From this perspective—which might best be described as the “dream’s perspective”—nothing is insignificant. Even if there is “only” one image, it has the same psychic weight as, for example, those epic narratives that unfold like *Ben Hur on Ice*. All dreams and dream images, regardless of their content, have the same psychic weight; the difference lies not in their imaginal significance, but rather in how images penetrate the dreamer. In other words, the difference is in the way that we as dreamers are able to receive the images. And in the way the dream images stick around. Or not. Knowing this and wanting to display it to those gathered, I choose the one-image dream.

“Well,” the dreamer begins rather reluctantly, “there’s not much to work with. The whole dream lasted less than a minute.”

“Let’s see,” I say by way of encouragement, as everyone in the room settles in to receive the dream.



Listen. Can you hear that? It’s the sound of deep, inner listening gathering itself to receive the dream. For it’s not enough to passively listen to dreams. The endeavor is to actively—that is, receptively—listen, to hear *into* dream

images. Rather like the variety of listening that is necessary in improvisational theatre, we want to listen as though creative life entirely depends upon it.

It helps, therefore, to turn our visual attention away from the dreamer, as this tends to be distracting. Additionally, it helps to have an image of active, receptive listening. So, for example, when I settle in to tend a dream, I invariably imagine that I am mounted on the back of a rather high-strung horse—the Horse of Dreams. Together, this Horse of Dreams and I ride out into the Field of Dreams, which is a vast Plain of Possibility, wherein essentially anything and everything can happen, and does. Once there, in a heightened anticipatory state, yet as inwardly still as I can manage to be while on the back of a high-strung horse, I wait with the deep ear inside my chest—the heart’s ear—wide open and ready to receive the dream.

For in this realm of possibility, on the back of this noble, majestic creature, with my heart’s ear wide open, I am rendered “radically receptive.” That is, able to meet and greet the dream on the dream’s terms. Out there in the Field of Dreams, the dream’s images, the dreamer, and now I begin to have a shared imagination.

When we listen this way, it’s important to resist the temptation to look for meaning, to abstract away from receptive listening. Any thought as to what an image might mean invariably renders us unable to be present to the dream as it unfolds. Therefore, as mentioned, it helps to have an image of receptive listening. A human dream-catcher perhaps—a living, breathing, curious creature, loving and still wet-sinewed enough to endeavor receiving the images of another.

Or you might want to imagine one of those old-fashioned ear-trumpets, only instead of it being made of animal horn or snail shells, sheet iron or silver, imagine it rather as being “the shape of receptive listening,” inviting you to venture out from the ear with your hearing in order to meet the images of the dream.

For it is this gift of our receptive listening that actually gives “body” to the image, as though the image steps through the threshold of our active hearing into substantial being. The inner ear then *becomes* the eye and we begin to actually see the images before us. So even though dream images are never more than “subtle bodies,” in a very real sense we imaginally “enflesh” the image, giving it essential substance and imaginal matter with our receptive attention.

Soul-seeing is tactile. So as we begin to “see” images before us, as we touch them—that is, as we feel them—we feel them further into being. And what we discover by doing this, is that we too are touched by their being. In other words, it’s our perception that brings the images further into being, but their being simultaneously brings us closer to our own. From there, it is our ongoing willingness to tend the images *as living beings*, our willingness to befriend them, to host them as though guests, that maintains them and keeps the dream alive.

This then becomes a practice for actively tuning in and turning on our inner ears, listening as though our lives depend on it. For the life of the image does indeed depend on our capacity to do this. The image itself exists as an autonomous subtle body, but the *life* of the image depends entirely upon lending our receptivity to enflesh the image’s being and becoming. Without our ongoing active participation in images this way, they haven’t much life beyond the initial dream; their lives, we soon discover, are through ours.

When we lend our imaginal capacities to the images in dreams we give them somewhere else to be. For what has been said here about hearing and seeing imaginally into the dream can also be said with regard to the other senses. The senses of smell, taste, and touch—all of which have corresponding organs that are located in our bodies—come together inside the heart as an organ of perception.

Working this way, we lend our imaginal bodies to the images of dreams. As we offer them our senses and our mindful attention, we develop imaginal capacities even as we work; dreamer and dream-image each informed by the other. Thus, we lend ourselves to the task of what the poet Keats called “soul-making.” “I am certain of nothing,” he wrote in a letter, “but the holiness of the heart’s affections and the truth of imagination.”



“Okay,” the dreamer begins. “Well, I see an iceberg. And it’s, you know, just an iceberg.” She raises her hand in the air and outlines the edges of the dream iceberg, shaping it for us. “It has that classic shape that we think of when we think ‘iceberg.’ But the thing I notice about *this* iceberg,” she continues, “is that there is a small patch of green, like a forest, on one part.” She indicates a forested patch located over on the left-hand side on the imaginal iceberg. And that’s it,” she shrugs. “That’s the whole dream.”

“And where are you?” I ask.

“I’m off in space somewhere, looking at the iceberg.”

“Can you see any water?”

She closes her eyes. “Yes,” she answers then. “That’s how I know it’s an iceberg. Well, that and all the ice,” she laughs.

“Notice anything else?”

“Well,” she chuckles, “I remember thinking as I was dreaming, ‘That’s just the tip of the iceberg.’”

Everyone in the room laughs. “In other words, there’s a great big part below the surface of the water that is hidden from plain view?”

“Yes,” she replies.

“Anything else that you notice?”

“Well,” she continues, “it’s shaped exactly like Mount Hood. So it

goes like this,” she draws the outlined shape of Mount Hood in the air with her hands. “And it juts forward here, at Illumination Rock—the prominent, sharp-profiled summit on the upper slopes—and then it recesses back in here.” She shows us.

It’s happened twice now that the dreamer has outlined the shape of the iceberg with her hands; the dream, therefore, is still very much in her body.

“Like Mount Hood,” I repeat back to her. Then, “What do you know about Mount Hood?”

“Well,” she smiles expansively. “It’s where I lived for thirty years in Oregon. It’s the place that I think of whenever I think of ‘home,’ even though I haven’t lived there for fifteen years and I know I’ll never live there again.” She pauses. Then quite suddenly, “Oh, look,” she blurts out. “I’m crying! I never cry! And I’m crying!” She reaches for a tissue then laughs. “And here’s me thinking it’s a nothing dream.”

I wait, allowing the importance of what’s just been said to penetrate. “Are the tears related to the nostalgia of ‘home’?” I ask then.

“I really loved living there,” she nods.

“What did you love about it?”

“Well, I was young, for one thing,” she laughs. “And I drove a truck for the Forestry Service. I sometimes drove for days on end without seeing another human being, with only flora and fauna for company. And it was heavenly.” What is plain from the way she says this is that she mostly prefers the company of trees to that of humans.

“Why then did you stop?”

“It’s not a place you want to be when you’re old,” she explains. “It’s a very rugged lifestyle. I’d spend an entire day looking for wood. Then I’d collect the wood, chop the wood, split the wood, and stack the wood before carrying it into the cabin, where I’d burn the wood. Then I’d clean all the ashes from the woodstove. And the next morning, I’d wake up and

have to do it all over again. I'm way too old for that now," she shakes her head.

"Okay. So the iceberg in the dream is like an iceberg version of Mount Hood, of 'home'?"

"Um-hum," she nods. "Home, only you can't go home again. As if it's frozen in time."

"Because?"

"Because you can't step in the same river twice. Because there is no 'there,' there. Because even if I went back—and I do from time to time—it's not the same. Because all that's in the past and I need to let it go."

"Well, not according to the dream."

As she turns to look at me her eyebrows knit themselves into a dark, thick scarf that slouches down over her eyes.

"You may not be able to go back home again *literally*," I say then, "to a geographical spot on the side of a mountain in Oregon—one that corresponds to coordinates on a map—but so long as you are in a body you can ever return to Mount Hood as a living image carried within the heart, as home."

"Sure," she brightens, trying, somewhat unconvincingly, to agree with me. Then, "But it's not the same, is it?"

"Oh, but it's better," I insist. "Perhaps even better than having any address on any map, anywhere." Then, "Did I ever tell you the one about the Big Pink Sea Snail?" I ask, glancing around the room. Blank faces stare back at me. "From *Doctor Dolittle*?" I add, hoping to jog their memories. But several heads now are shaking from side to side. No, it doesn't register. "Well, it goes like this," I begin.