

**Reflections on Dreamwork with Central Alberta Cree:  
An Essay on an Unlikely Social Action Vehicle**

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RUNNING HEAD: Cree Dreams

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## Reflections on Dreamwork with Central Alberta Cree: An Essay on an Unlikely Social Action Vehicle

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For almost 15 years I worked primarily at a midwestern universities department of psychology. When I was put up for full professor the colleague who was nominating me said that although I deserved to become a full professor he "wished I hadn't done the research I had done." That is dream research. Would that this was an unfamiliar theme in my professional life, but exempting my colleagues, who also thought this was a scientifically valid if not important subject to investigate, most of those I came into contact with both professionally and personally thought dreams were "interesting" but not to be taken seriously. Thus when I moved with my family to Canada it was with eager anticipation that I took a job teaching two psychology classes at a nearby Native college. I knew little about Natives but I had heard about the deep reverence with which they held dreams.

In the ensuing years I have become increasingly involved with Canadian Aboriginal people. Dreams play a central role in all of my relationships with these people.

Over the last three years I have taught primarily Cree, but also Ojibway and Blackfoot, at two all Native Colleges, Yellowhead Tribal Council and Blue Quills Native College, and in mixed Native/white classes at two community college settings some distance north of where I live in Edmonton, Alberta. To teach Natives you have to go to them as few travel to the major universities for education.

There are two other areas where I have become involved with Natives in Alberta, as a dreamworker and personally. As a dreamworker I conduct workshops on dreams with a Cree woman both for whites and for Natives. I have also conducted some research with my students on the relationship of dreams to waking autobiographical incidents and am currently working on a book about the death of a Cree woman.

Personally I have become deeply involved with the extended family of the Cree woman with whom I do workshops. This involvement is primarily as a sort of surrogate grandmother to two of her greatnephews but also as a close personal friend to her niece (their mother). Finally, on a deeply personal level my own dreams have shown a marked increase in animal, Native and elder imagery. Although I was right in general in my

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this chapter was presented at the 10th annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Dreams in Santa Fe, New Mexico, June 1993.

assumption about Native attitudes towards dreams it has been a long haul to this validation. Simply put, being around Natives is not being with Natives.

The one million Aboriginal people in Canada make up almost 1/20th of the population, a much larger percentage than in the United States. A Native woman from the US visiting Alberta commented to me how good it felt to see on a daily bases references to Native issues in the media. The Canadian Native has been compared to the blacks in the US in terms of their higher incidence in prisons, on social assistance, and using medical services. Yet the rights of Aboriginal peoples is at least 20 years behind those achieved by their counterparts in the US. Furthermore, it has been argued that the attitude of the Canadian government is more restrictive towards Natives than is the case in the US.

In many ways the Native community in Canada is like that of other poor peoples but there are differences. Due to the vastness of the land mass many Canadian Natives are physically isolated so their access to mainstream resources is difficult. This is exasperated by strong family and community ties as well as wide spread dysfunctional family of origin problems resulting in even less likelihood of changing their situation.

This was driven home to me when I realized how quickly I had come to almost "expect" personal horror stories from my Native students. For instance, during a workshop I was facilitating on dreams in a nearby community, there was only one Native woman in the group. After each nonnative participant had processed a dream using Ullman's group technique (Ullman & Zimmerman, 1979) the Native woman who had largely been quiet told us her dream and her story. It was filled with violence, incest, drink, and the other ingredients of Native childhood I had come to "expect". I did not realize what my mind set had become until I looked at the faces of the other women in the group (all mental health workers) which showed their horror at this Native woman's story. Only then did I realize how deeply immersed I had become in the stories of pain among my Native students and friends. Although I try to not become insensitive to these tales I realized also that to react too strongly to such a tale is to cut off the teller. A certain nonjudgmental acceptance of the brutality is expected if self-disclosure is to proceed.

Although attempts are being made to move more services to the reserves (e.g., most have schools to grade 9) they are as yet inadequate (e.g., Natives often quit school rather than leave the reserve). Another problem is in the nature of the two cultures. For instance, communication styles differ. Natives use nonlinear styles which allow and indeed expect uncertainty and are accompanied by nonverbal cues, like avoidance of eye contact with an authority figures, which make it confusing when they move into the dominant culture.

In sum, the situation of Natives in Canada today is similar to that of Blacks in the US in the 1950's with repression and prejudice very alive. It is based in part on the belief that they are creating their own problems as evidenced by their failure to succeed at most white enterprises (e.g., huge failure rates in college programs). In the period since I started working with Natives I have realized that the naive idealism of spiritual seekers towards Natives is as one sided and prejudice as the "dirty drunk" stereotypes which are quite alive in Canada. Thus it is important to strive for a middle ground integrating their peaks and pains. Another aspect of this middle ground is to demystify whites as either great or evil in Natives eyes.

In this chapter I will discuss the possibility of using dreams as a vehicle for generating and nurturing cross-cultural dialogue. This dream based dialogue can be expressed in various forms: from Native to Whites, from Whites to Natives, between Whites and Natives, within Whites and within Natives.

### **Dream Dialogues: From Natives to Whites**

I have been facilitating dream workshops for natives and nonnatives with Ravenwoman, a Cree woman in her 50's. Born on a band north of Edmonton, Ravenwoman's father is Cree and her mother is Mohawk. Her grandmother on her mothers side of the family was a medicine woman who was very proficient with dreams, using them as spiritual guidance. Ravenwoman's greatgrandfather was the founder of the band while her grandfather was the chief for 33 years. He was the most important influence on her during Ravenwoman's formative years. She would take dreams to him and he would teach her the way of the dream including the ceremony that was used in greeting the dream. When she was about three years old she told her grandfather about a dream of a white wolf. This told him that Ravenwoman was dreaming for the people and he began her training in earnest.

Ravenwoman has been my primary teacher/friend in my relationship with Natives and dreams. Speaking in some detail about her dream life gives the nonNative some sense of its importance and place in Aboriginal cultures (Gackenbach, 1992).

"For a lot of people dreams are teachings. My grandfather believed that if you listen to your dreams you could learn things my ancestors knew how to do," Ravenwoman recalls. When she was quite young she took on the responsibility of the younger children, which is a common practice among Native families. Ravenwoman relates how her teaching dreams of that period used to help her take care of the younger children. For instance, her mom and dad had gone grocery shopping which usually took an overnight trip. She was left with her siblings and a baby-sitter with not much food in the house. Ravenwoman dreamt of someone "showing me how to pick some herbs and some onions." When Ravenwoman awoke she told her brother that



she "dreamt where we can find some things we can make a soup out of." They went and picked the things and the sitter helped them cook it. "It was good!"

Ravenwoman recalls another incident which happened during her preschool years when her brother lost money their mother had given him for milk. He came home and knew he was in trouble. He told Ravenwoman to find it in a dream. As he expected her to be able to do this it is likely she had been doing it before. She says she recalls that incident cause they were in trouble if it was not found. In her dream she asked a lady to find it. They retraced his steps and found it in the dream between the slates of a wooden sidewalk. Then she awoke and they went and got it.

Her mother had 11 children in 16 years so there were several at home when she was sent to residential school at 6 1/2 years. Her older brothers also went. She says "I made the mistake of telling the nun about my dreams and I was told it was the devil. . . I learned then not to talk to other people about it . . . [and to] pretend I wasn't different."

After she left the convent school she would dream often of the devil although she never knew what he looked like. He was always trying to get her and she would wake up crying and screaming. Ravenwoman's fear of the devil was there because of her mothers strict Catholicism. However, these dreams were as fearful as what she learned about the devil at school. In a typical dream of this period she would be in a one-room house with her brother and sister who were smaller than her. The devil was trying to get in first by the door, which she blocked, then by the windows, which she also blocked. Then he came down the pipe of the pot bellied stove and tried to get the lid off. Ravenwoman struggled with him over the lid and screaming she would wake. Unfortunately, yet also "statistically normal," Ravenwoman's childhood was marked by her own illness, rape, violence and alcohol abuse.

During the time she was having the devil dreams she noticed that the learning/teaching, freedom and future dreams all shut down. But as she moved into adulthood these precious dreams returned. She now dreams for the family. For instance, she was told in one such dream some years ago to call all her brothers and sisters together and warn them that one of their children was in deep trouble. They needed to be especially alert and protective for two weeks. Only one sibling, her sister Delcy, did not come to the meeting. Two weeks later Delcy's daughter committed suicide. Even Ravenwoman's oldest brother who says he does not "believe" in dreams will come and do a ceremony if Ravenwoman says he should because of a dream she's had.

Ravenwoman spoke of an experience which she had twice as an illustration of the difference a lifetime makes. The experience was early in her life and reappeared a second time after menopause. Ravenwoman saw a

big ball of light, pulsating energy with a voice which filled the room at 8 or 9 years of age she writes:

This was a spiritual dream of God appearing to me. In this dream I began by being afraid of something unknown to me and I wanted to hide, then I decided to pray, for in my dream I knew he would help me. Then this big ball of pulsating light appeared and I could hear the words this ball of energy was saying as an echo in the room. It said, "I am the goodness that you must follow and if you believe in me and trust me I will always be there to help you. If you wake up now you will see me." I woke up and saw this light beside my bed and I was no longer afraid. I ran to tell my parents and they said it was only a dream it had not really happened.

The most recent one occurred after she had been up awhile praying and using her pipe. It appeared in the midst of this ritual. It explained about God and that God could help her and her people. "When we pray to God we are looking to the goodness within ourselves." While with that ball of energy she said, "I had no room to be anything else but me - the real me." She said "what I felt was a total trust . . . I felt humble." "If you can feel kindness and love coming from energy, that's what it was." When I asked her what was happening in her life as an adult about the time of the experience it turned out to be a period of considerable stress. At the school she was working for as a play therapist six of the children were suicidal, her son had just broken his back, and they had just unexpectedly adopted another son who had fetal alcohol syndrome.

She explains that the same experience separated by almost 50 years takes on a different quality. "It's like when you go to a movie when you [are] a child. You see this movie and you think how fantastic and so on. Then you go again and see it as an adult but as an adult you pick up the real characters; you pick up the depth; you pick up what's really happening." These experiences she explains when they occur around menopause have meaning, richness and depth. The message to her is "this is what I've been trying to tell you all your life."

As can be seen by this brief biography throughout her life dreams have played a central role for Ravenwoman. Also relevant to our work is her other training. She completed a Bachelors of General Studies in Arts and Sciences with an emphasis in psychology and Native History. Ravenwoman is currently a school counselor at her bands school. She also has received intensive training in a wide variety of mental health issues.

Out of our histories and trainings we have dialogued at length about all aspects of our cultures but especially about dreams. What has been refreshing is the similarities between her understanding of the dream in her culture and the scientific understanding I bring to our dialogue. For instance, she always speaks of dreams as teachings about what we need to know in

order to proceed clearly into our own futures. Certainly a perspective consistent with the information processing perspective of REM sleep dreams, which are easiest to recall (Belicki, 1987). If we all paid attention to the cutting edge of our own mental capacities, REM sleep dreams, would we not be better prepared for our own future choices? The view of dreams as teachings seems to me to also echo the classic psychoanalytic perspective of dreams reflecting deep psychic issues. Although Ravenwoman would agree with this she looks to the dream for specific and concrete direction regarding the issue at hand. Again an approach in contemporary dreamwork which values the problem solving capacity of these night experiences but perhaps not as concretely as Ravenwoman.

But there are also differences in our styles of working with a dream. Ravenwoman tends to be more sensitive to specific items of content as having meaning while I tend to focus more on the process of the dream. To illustrate I recently had a dream of two white tigers lying on a stage. I walked up to them and was unharmed despite my hesitation. Ravenwoman said in her "read" of my dream that white animals represent the spiritual and are a positive signal while I read it as what am I afraid to approach. One is an object emphasis based on cultural teachings while the other is process oriented focusing more on relationship between dream items.

#### **Dream Dialogues: Within Whites**

Initially Ravenwoman's object based interpretations made me uncomfortable as they tend to be at once specific and vague. But then my dreams began to evidence more and more animals and Natives and most recently elders. Clearly my work with Natives was bleeding into my deep unconscious so it made increasing sense for me to use cultural interpretations.

One very strong dream identified my "totem" animal<sup>2</sup> and was best understood using a Native cultural perspective. I dreamt:

I was at an event of some kind largely outside. There was a hole in the ground that was an entrance to a big underground cavern. It was partially blocked by a concrete square but I saw in it a saber that I knew children who were coming to the event would try to get and possibly would fall in. I thought of going down to get it as I sat on the edge of the opening but saw that it was very gravelly and that I'd slip into the deep cavern. Then a big turtle came into the cavern from below and I asked her to get the sword. She did and came out of the cavern and gave it to me.

When I woke I assumed the turtle was of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle variety as my 8 year old son used to play with them. This may have been

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<sup>2</sup> A totem animal is a spirit helper which often comes to a person in a dream (Harner, 1980).

mixed with a turtle character in a book I had read him the night before, an association consistent with the helping children theme of the dream. But it lacked a depth that I also felt came from the dream. Then I found the cultural interpretation that turtle is the "oldest symbol for planet Earth and is the personification of goddess energy, and the eternal Mother from which our lives evolve (Sams & Carson, 1988; p. 77)." This interpretation spoke strongly to me in that the turtle in my dreams was clearly female and came from deep within the earth to help me in my work. It wasn't until a month later that it was suggested to me that the turtle might be my totem. These interpretations do not work at odds to each other rather they fill each other out. One taking the waking precursors and associating them to my current concerns while the other moving the dream experience to relevant cultural contexts.

### **Dream Dialogues: Within Natives**

Although I have learned from Natives and Ravenwoman about dreams and especially my own it is also clear to me that within Natives there is a wide range of attitudes towards dreams. These range from confusion and ambivalence to an almost sacred acceptance.

Although I started with a largely professional relationship with my Native students and coworkers, it has evolved in some cases into deeply personal relationships. Although these personal relationships have gradually grown a series of events coincided about a year ago which significantly deepened my relationship with Ravenwoman's family. Coincidentally, during Ravenwoman's sisters (Crowwoman) last weeks my 16 year marriage broke up in no small way due to my various levels of involvement with Crowwoman's family. Thus I found myself with children only half the week (as we had agreed to literal joint custody) and felt a void. Crowwoman had been raising her daughters sons and although her daughter took over their care during Crowwoman's last months she was/is ill prepared for the task thus I have become a sort of surrogate mother/grandmother to them.

I suppose this all sounds very commendable on the surface and certainly the liberal "do-gooder" in me was attracted to this new role. But the reality of being deeply involved with Native children who come from a multigenerational highly dysfunctional family has only hit home more recently. I have struggled with transference issues with both Crowwoman's daughter and her grandson. We are all clearer that I am not Crowwoman, I am their friend. These are the primary relationships I have with this family as well as continuing a close personal friendship with Ravenwoman. I am also quite close to another cousin and am in a relationship with a Cree man from another reserve. With many of the rest of this family I have a positive relationship but we are not as close.

One of the marker experiences of my acceptance into this family was when Ravenwoman's youngest sister called me one day with a dream about



Crowwoman. Gena said, that Ravenwoman wasn't at home when she'd called to ask her about the dream so she thought she would call me.

So how do dreams figure into this complex web of family relationships? As in other Native families with whom I have come into contact, dreams also play an important role in this one. From the dreams/visions of Crowwoman during her illness to dreams of her by the various family members since her death to dreams about other aspects of their lives.

From the beginning of Crowwoman's illness she generally turned her life over to an 82-year old shaman, The Old Man. She refused the radiation, chemotherapy, and surgery the western doctors had suggested saying that she didn't want to poison, burn or cut her body. She wanted to heal or die the traditional way.

Her healing regime with the The Old Man included a flour, pepper and mustard poultice. It was put over the cancer area, left on overnight, and taken off in the morning. There would be sweat underneath which was thought to be a cleaning force. The Old Man and Crowwoman had a dream experience with the poultice which seems to signify her confusion about the role of dreams in her own culture.

She was staying with The Old Man and his family for about six weeks. He'd given her this poultice to put above her groin area on her right leg over the cancer. She had been using the poultice fairly regularly. One night she had a dream that the poultice was pulling out a yellow bile from her. A few days later The Old Man stopped by her room in the morning and commented to her that he had had a dream about her poultice and that it was doing the same thing, pulling out yellow bile. Immediately after these concurrent dreams, Crowwoman stopped using the poultice. She told her sister, Ravenwoman, that it was uncomfortable as it was always tugging.

When she told me the dream and the following week came back and told me The Old Man's dream and that she'd stopped the poultice, my obvious question was, "Crowwoman, are you sabotaging your treatment? Do you need to die? Do you want to die? Is that maybe what's going on here?" She was not offended by my blunt questions rather she clearly responded, "Yeah, I've thought of that and I don't know." She wasn't sure, but it was something that she had thought of. I told her that I felt that the concurrence of both dreams so close in time was an indication that it might work. At the least it would be helpful. She agreed but did not continue with the poultice.

When I asked The Old Man about the poultice dreams after her death, I explained the mutuality of them but not the dreams themselves as he said they should not be told. They both spoke to the fact that Crowwoman could be helped if she did something which she chose to not do. The Old Man chuckled when I told him this and commented good naturedly, "Well, I



should quit smoking but I don't quit smoking. I guess there's a need yet for me to continue to smoke." We don't always do what it is we need to do.

Since Crowwoman's death many family members and friends have had dreams of Crowwoman. Geoff, The Old Man's son and a shaman in his own right, kept having dreams of Crowwoman and called for a Ghost Dance to contact her. Ravenwoman dreamt shortly after her death that she saw Crowwoman dancing in radiant joy with pearl bracelets around her ankles. Her grandson, Ret, dreamt that she was in a body bag in his mom's closet and that there was a way for her to come alive. I too have had a powerful dream of her since her death where she encouraged me to dance and not work so much. The dreams and visions vary but what all seem to hold constant (white and Native) is the "reality" of these dreams as visitations by Crowwoman with specific messages.

I am also part of the day to day dialogue in the family involving dreams. So for instance, a family member to whom I am close dreamt of being with a very attractive man. We talked about her concerns about physical beauty in processing the dream. What's become clear to me is that dreams are as much a part of daily conversation in all aspects of the family system as is cooking dinner. Although I knew intellectually how deeply they were regarded and had some feel for it with my students, the pervasiveness of this it has been driven home by my personal involvement with this family system.

### **Dream Dialogues: Between Whites and Natives**

As well as the dialogues Ravenwoman and I have conducted about dreams I have been doing research on the relationship between dreams and waking autobiographical incidents in Central Alberta Cree versus whites in the area. It further delineates the impressions of cultural differences regarding the dream which I have been getting as a teacher, writer, and friend. The dreams which were collected as part of an in-class activity were factor analyzed separately for Native and nonnative students from two classes on developmental psychology (Gackenbach & Prince, 1992).

Natives in this sample conceived of dreams along several distinct and meaningful dimensions (i.e., transpersonal or spiritual as separate from personal conflicts) whereas nonnatives were more likely to cluster these concepts of dreams into a single dimension. These findings reflect the Native idea that dreams are messages to be understood from other worlds and the opposite belief in nonnatives that all dream elements are parts of the individual psyche.

Supporting this empirical work is my experience of dreamwork with Natives; I have tried to promote the idea that even dreams of spirit were personal. I met resistance. Overtime I have come to more fully appreciate the different dream forms of which they speak. To illustrate, this dream/experience is clearly transpersonal and seen as concrete in that the

dreamer was certain this was a visit/message from her dead mother. Yet as the story unfolded it became clear there were powerful emotions involved. These manifested in a very real transpersonal connection. DS told me of a recurrent dream she had as a child a few days before the class did a dream incubation technique. She wrote:

The dream I had that always made me wonder is a circle of trees and a little opening where a road comes in and my mother walking on that road towards me inside that circle with a rock in the centre, a bag I put my sweet grass in after I had picked it and braided it. The part I can't understand is she disappears just before she reaches me to hold my hand and I wake up. Some day I would like to touch her hand in my dream to see what happens.

DS's mother died three hours after birthing her. DS was raised by her grandparents and physically abused by her grandmother who blamed DS for the death of her mother. DS hated her grandmother and was glad when she died yet the interference of the grandmother into the connection between DS and her mother continued in DS's eyes even after her death. She told me of a time after the death of her grandmother when she tried to contact her mother in a sweat lodge ceremony designed specifically for that purpose. DS explained that her grandmother came in spirit to the sweat and blocked DS yet again from connecting with her mother.

DS told me after class that when she told her grandfather about her dream as a child, he said that if her mother touched her she'd die. The dream in his view represented her mother watching over DS. So because of her death and the grandmothers influence DS was never able to truly connect with or "touch" her own mother.

A few days later we did a dream incubation technique for solving problems. DS wrote:

Last night I had been thinking and worrying about my daughter who is in an abusive situation and her boyfriend took her to Saskatoon. He is abusing her out there.

I fell asleep and I dreamt about my daughter sitting in that circle I use to sit in my own dream and I was the mother who was reaching for her hand. And when I touched her hand and she smiled, my phone woke me up and it was my daughter and she was at a police station and said she ran away from [him] and the police were going to take her to a WIN house and bring her home to me in the morning.

With my white cultural hat it seems that the recurrent dream of childhood certainly echoed her distance from her mother, due primarily to the mothers death and the rejection of her grandmother. The second dream with her own daughter showed what she had achieved in her own family that which was denied to her in her family of origin, connection with her

daughter. In DS's mind the dream experiences had their own reality, their own firmness that plainly said it all. And the "proof" of the spiritual/transpersonal nature of the experiences was that she touched her daughter's hand at the moment the phone rang. There was certainly no doubt in DS's mind about the transpersonal nature of these dreams prior to the last one with her own daughter. It was more for my benefit that she told the last dream to me. DS knew the surrounding psychological aspects of the dreams but did NOT interpret the dreams in that way. She stayed very firm in her belief in the other worldliness of the source and meaning of the dreams.

### **Dream Dialogue: From Whites to Natives**

The primary way which I have worked with dreams with Natives has been as a teacher. In every class I have taught to Natives I have included a discussion of dreams in at least one of three ways: lecture, self disclosure, and/or assignments. Inclusion in lecture ranges from asides which might highlight the course material (i.e., telling about the relationship of men to women in the dreams of women as a function of time of menstrual cycle during a lecture in social psychology on interpersonal attraction) to a formal inclusion on the course syllabus. Regarding the latter I have included dreams in Introductory Psychology classes as a separate topic, in Developmental Psychology as an aspect of the development of thinking and feelings, in Personality as part of certain classic theorists, and in a special topics class on Altered and Higher States of Consciousness. I have found that not only are they appreciative of any information on dreams but frequently ask me for more information including asking me about a specific dream they have had.

I should point out that my approach to teaching these same psychology courses to nonnatives is basically the same with less of an emphasis on dreams. I find that although they are also quite interested, it is not with the intensity and focus of the Natives. This cultural attitude is also evident when nonnatives approach me with a specific dream. They follow the white cultures "etiquette" of asking about a dream, minimizing it by laughing at the very idea that such things could be taken seriously. This sort of apologetic laughter is almost, but not entirely, unheard of with Natives in their approach to me about dreams.

The most fruitful way that I have worked with dreams with Natives in the classroom is via written assignments. In conjunction with a section on dreams I might ask the class members to write out a dream and hand it in to me. They are always given the opportunity to not have me read it. But usually they are eager for me to read the dream and comment on it. They are extremely unlikely to share a dream in an open classroom setting whereas high self disclosure was forthcoming within the privacy of the homework assignment.

I have found that Natives are equally willing to share dream and/or autobiographical information with me and at times both are at a fairly deep

level of self-disclosure. At this point I have probably read about 500 dreams/autobiographical assignments with 1/2 to 2/3 dreams. For instance, from a victim of sexual abuse:

The lecture on sexual abuse as well as John Bradshaw's film were both very disturbing for me because as a child I was sexually abused for a period of 9 years from the time I was eight until I was 17 years old. I am currently in counseling and I just found the film very 'enlightening' because it showed me or made me think about all the other people who have been abused and I didn't feel quite so alone.

Such tales of horror and fear also come out in their dreams. A Native woman writes of a memorable dream:

I got separated from my two girls and my husband. The people were gathered in a dome-like room and everybody was scared and I kept thinking about my girls and my husband. There was no electricity and no one was allowed to go outside of the dome. There were many people injured and many that were dead. Many of the people were burnt up and looked horrible. I didn't get the chance to find my girls because I would wake up.

Interestingly Natives are not nearly as interested in my feedback on their autobiographical stories as they are in my feedback about their dreams. In fact, my impression is that it seems to be an infringement on their privacy to say much about their life stories but a betrayal of trust to NOT say anything about their dreams.

When I am teaching a longer section on dreams I try dreamwork techniques both in and out of class. I would say in general that they are either lost about how to do the technique or at best resistant. For instance, in one guided imagery technique where they worked individually after the first few steps the level of classroom buzz elevated making it apparent that this was not something with which they were comfortable. I closed the technique early and when reading the dreams and what they had written about them I found that they quite understood how to do the technique but that the sensitive personal issues were much closer to the surface than I had ever experienced before with this technique.

In another class I was able to get further with the same technique. The dream of LM illustrates the potential effectiveness of this technique for helping the dreamer bridge cultural beliefs to an interpretation of the problem. LM writes of her dream and immediate reaction to it:

A couple of months ago I had a dream that the mushum's [Cree for grandfathers] were telling me that they were going to take my son, Conrad, away from me. I asked them why, but they would not answer and the dream ended. I keep praying to them to tell me why they were are going to or let me know what they mean. But nothing has happened. Now I worry constantly about my sons.



As part of the technique she rewrote the dream from the point of view of the grandfathers:

I am a grandfather, in the spirit world. I watch over people that need guidance. I am worried about Conrad, because he's really feeling left out or neglected and I have to let his mother know. I shall warn her in her dream. If I say taking away her son, she then might pay attention to his feelings of neglect. It will help guide her through this phase of his life.

It turned out that she had recently had a second son and was concerned that her first son, who was 16 when the baby was born, was feeling neglected.

She wrote to me about this in a later assignment:

Then in class when I wrote about it. [I] had another dream that night. This time telling me that I've done everything to make my son happy. I have not neglected him and I think in a way, that since having a new family and a baby, he felt left out.

It is important to note that she had found the solution in the dream work technique, however, it seemed to me that her acceptance of the solution was contingent on getting a verifying message from the grandfathers in a subsequent dream.

In general when Natives give me a dream to "read" they want an interpretation of the message it is conveying. Thus they defer to my authority on dreams as they would to an elder or another dream "reader". They also ask many people what they think of the dream and do not reject each interpretation rather they seem to take them all in and mull them over. Never really coming to a firm conclusion about any one dream. In contrast the newest thinking on dreams in our culture is that the dreamer is the owner and final authority on their own dreams (Ullman & Zimmerman, 1979).

I try to bridge these two belief systems by offering some interpretation in the form of questions which seem generated from the dream imagery. In this way the answers remain with the dreamer and I have served as a gentle guide who nudges them to consider it from another perspective. This on occasion leads to a dialogue especially when the dream has had a very powerful impact on the dreamer. In any interpretations/discussion I never shy away from transpersonal interpretations. So if I am told a dream of a deceased relative, which almost universally is seen as a visit, I honor it and go to what message does he/she have for the student.

It quickly became apparent to me that some belief systems, views of "reality", are best left in place. I in no way accept that my ontological position is the "truth" and am quite adamant with my students about the arbitrariness of white cultures view of reality as bounded, separate and linear. In fact, my own private ontology is very consonant with Natives so



the shift to a view that dreams of the dead are always visits with messages rather than unprocessed deep unconscious material bounded in the individual psychic was quite easy for me to make.

I do not want to characterize my dream work as not without the influence of my own culture. I do emphasize that it's the message that is most important and don't engage in arguments of ultimate reality of its source.

### Conclusion

I have sketched in this chapter the pattern of relationships I have developed with aboriginal people in central Alberta. These relationships range from personal to professional. Through them all I have tried to support who they are in their full range as complex, fully functioning members of Canadian society as well as the inheritors of a rich spiritual tradition for whom dreams are central. It is from this connecting in dreams that a multifaceted cross-cultural dialogue has emerged.

I am aware that I am in a position to reenergize the value of the dream and indeed the value of many of the traditional teachings around spirituality for the Natives I come into contact with. In my role as teacher, with a doctorate in psychology they listen to me about the science of dreams and states of consciousness which I integrate with standard psychological concepts. In some way my teaching serves as a stamp of approval from the white society encouraging them to appreciate some of the truly beautiful traditional teachings. I do not presume to tell them anything about the specifics of their traditions rather I speak simply of the science and clinical work with these states of being and emphasize my belief that my culture was and is simply wrong in dismissing or minimizing them.

This role was especially brought home recently when I was asked by students at Yellowhead Tribal Council to teach a class on these extraordinary states of consciousness including dreams. We had daily in-class activities to personalize the material. These ranged from dreamwork to testing their ESP using Rhine's Zener cards. Although this was my first attempt to directly bridge the western scientific understanding of these states of being with people of a culture who traditionally deeply regard them, I am hopeful that I will be able to offer it again at Native colleges.

There were many moments of confirmation for the value of the class from the students but perhaps one of the strongest was from a mid-30's Cree man with tattoos all over his arms. I knew his father was a medicine man and he had repeatedly made mysterious asides to me about the spirit world including warning me that I should be afraid of it. His gruff exterior could be daunting. At one point he told me a dream and was quite eager to hear what I would say about it. In our conversation about the dream he clearly experienced the "aha" which manifested as a startle response in him. I had approached the dream in a Native manner looking for the direct guidance it

offered and he was shocked that I would suggest a direction for guidance that he had not thought of or that no one else to that point had suggested to him. I knew at that moment that I had gotten through to him in a way that all the lecturing in the world had not. He had told me in the past of his own ambivalence about going into the "family business" (medicine man). I believe that my western scientific support of the states of consciousness dealt with in his fathers work had a influence on him. This is but one example of what I believe is the potential impact of the proper introduction of this material to peoples who fundamentally hold a belief in these states of being but for whom white cultural influence has caused serious doubt. I accomplished in this course with more depth then ever before my goal of supporting Natives looking back to their own culture for spiritual guidance.

A second social action agenda I strive for in my work comes out of an curious phenomena Ravenwoman and I have repeatedly experienced during workshops, classes and personally. It is the naivete that both cultures hold for each other. That is, the almost reverent awe that each culture can hold for the others "authority". This is not only in terms of dreams but many areas of the transpersonal/personal domains. Let me illustrate.

I had Ravenwoman come to a dream class I was holding through the faculty of extension at the University of Alberta. The students sat in a circle around her in a hushed silence quite literally hanging on her every word as she spoke simply about her experiences with dreams and the spirit. Afterward as we walked through the parking garage to our cars, Ravenwoman turned to me and asked "What's wrong with those people?" We both shared a good giggle over her puzzlement and agreed that the classes attitude towards her was silly. But what we found equally silly was virtually the same reverence paid to me when speaking on psychology and even on dreams to Natives. The white "doctor" is seen with a deep respect that seems over done in its apparent depth as was the respect that was paid Ravenwoman.

The other side of the reverence attitude is the anger of the Native and the nonnative towards each other. This is nicely spoken to by a student's poem which came to her while falling asleep. She was taking a Native Studies class where she was learning about the atrocities which occurred to her people around the time of colonization. Not normally a poet, the first two lines of the following poem came to her in this sleep transition state. She got up and spontaneously wrote out the entire poem.

#### **Purging**

At last I have found a voice from which to speak  
To the Queen of England, from her subject so meek.  
How can you sleep at night, mind peaceful, body limp  
You enjoy life to the fullest with nary a hint  
Of how your old money came into your hands . . .

On the backs of others in a faraway land.

Your monarchy grew by leaps and by bounds  
Not once did you question how your fortune was found.  
Do you let your mind wander to the days of old  
How your ancestors reached out and went for the gold.

In their greed they staked claim with a flag and some rules  
Saying "nobody's here, just savage fools".  
You said you discovered the land, therefore, you own  
All riches and resources the Indians call "home".  
We thought you spoke truth with your treaties so grand  
We lost our lifestyle and you took the land.

Some tears, some bitterness and plenty of hurt  
A people worn down by your laws and your dirt.  
Exploitation, Assimilation, words . . . not easy to say  
From a people who survived and won't go away.

Like the Phoenix we're rising, from bended knee  
From alcohol, poverty and racism, we'll soon be free.  
We'll learn your language, your laws and your game  
While we nurture our own and be rid of the shame  
Of being an Indian, scorned by the whites  
We'll keep our pride and get on with the fight.

Should your sleep be disturbed with dreams of fright  
Reach to the Creator for visions of light.  
Undo the wrongs done to people of old  
With harmony restored the truth will unfold.

Linda Anderson  
Spring, 1993

It seems that there is little middle ground in relations between our cultures in Canada. Thus this is a second agenda I have in all of my work with Natives and about Natives. Too many of my "New Age" contemporaries refuse to see that Nintendo is as popular with Native children as it is with our own; that although violence and abuse is frequent and exists alongside an incredible sensitivity to what we have come to call the transpersonal or the spiritual as well as an emotional openness; that hockey is the way "out" for Native teens just as basketball is for inner city blacks in the U.S.; and that young adult Natives feel the same pressures to go into the "family business" as whites do - in other words to honor the families heritage/teachings.

I have been attempting to achieve this middle ground or place for cross-cultural dialogue through dream-based work at many different levels. This vehicle for understanding each other seems to facilitate living with and not just around Natives.

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