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TRIBAL DREAMSTORY CIRCLES: A New Look at Ancient Wisdom

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Abstract

This discussion traces a relationship between Jungian psychology and more ancient methods of dream tending and storytelling. Utilizing the modality of Algonkin Traditional dreamstorytelling as a medium for constellating, activating, and sharing the tribal dream, Jungian approaches to group dreams and group dream work are explored, using sociological and narrative lenses. The conceptual frameworks of the communal or relational unconscious, kinship libido, and the 'tribal unconscious' are introduced, amplified, and integrated with Traditional teachings. This brief overview articulates a call for individuating group models and healing community building.

Keywords

Dreaming, story telling, community building, group work, Jungian analytical psychology, tribal unconscious

Introduction

Many of our dreams are objective in nature, compensating for waking reality or simply presenting information about such things as relationships, health, and life choices. A few dreams carry messages for an audience larger than the individual dreamer – the family, the community, the tribe.

So says American Jungian Analyst and dream circle pioneer, Tess Castleman. In her seminal work, *Threads, Knots, Tapestries*, Castleman explores this oft ignored layer of the unconscious. What C. G. Jung called the communal unconscious or kinship libido, Castleman calls the 'tribal unconscious'. Sourced by extensive anthropological research and personal relationship with the Lakota people, Castleman uncovers the wisdom that has guided individuals, tribes and nations on Turtle Island (North America) long before Freud or Jung peeled back the layer of consciousness to open us to the wisdom within. With true Heyoka wit (sacred clown who challenges collective attitudes and acts as a change agent, similar to court jester) -, Castleman challenges the Jungian interiority of the last century and affectionately calls herself a Jungian Sociologist. She invites a new generation of Jungians to take our dream work knowledge and expertise out of the closed consulting room and into the streets. Tribal dreamstory circles are one way this call can be answered.

Tribal dreamstory circles endeavor to view dreams from both the subjective perspective of the dreamer and the objective perspective of the tribe/group. The subjective is honoured but de-

emphasized in the dreamstory sharing. Dreamers are taught to share their dream as a dreamstory, eliminating biographical details in favor of broader narrative perspectives. What emerges in the dreamstory telling is the essence of the dream, objective and universal truths, and the skeleton of the archetypal energy that has been constellated. Participants are invited into the dreamstory to find their own resonate truths. This tribal lens deepens the individual's understanding of his or her dream while at the same time it strengthens the tribal alliance. The dreamstory allows participants to enter, challenge, clarify, refute, or embrace the teachings without fear of violating the personal biography of the dreamer. What emerges is a tribal group of support and relatedness as opposed to a therapy group of interpretation or confrontation.

The experience of witnessing the evolution of dream to dreamstory is quite startling. The shift from a subjective reading of the dream to an objective reading of the dreamstory opens the images and the energy of the dream. The tribal sharing and amplification of the dreamstory images and symbolism constellates the 'tribal unconscious' of the dream group. A field is made manifest. This tribal field allows the individual to find him or herself in the group/tribe and make new space for the group/tribe in him or herself.

Through these experiences, the tribal alliance strengthens and, very soon, archetypal or collective dreams are constellated. These 'tribal dreams' announce themselves with synchronicities – those meaningful coincidences between the inner and outer world. In the tribal dreamstory circle, these synchronicities serve as pathmarkers and guide the tribe/group toward individuation. As the 'tribal dreams' are shared and the collective energy integrated, sociological responsibilities are articulated and embraced. This is a powerful tool in light of our current social chaos and misattunement.

As a former student of Tess Castleman, I have been participant and apprentice to her tribal dreaming wisdom. This is wisdom of experiential recovery and uncovering rather than a theory of empirical discovery. This is feminine-based, earth-based, Eros-based wisdom. Well researched and tested in the laboratory of over twenty years of dream group work, Castleman fosters a deep appreciation for this relational layer of the psyche.

Tribal dreamstory recovery

Stirred up by my own indigenous heritage (Algonkin, Metis, Celtic) and intuitive knowing, whilst pursuing Jungian studies on the foreign soils of Zurich, Switzerland with the C.G. Jung Institute and the International School of Analytical Psychology, I was instantly fascinated by Castleman's work. While I am drawn to and deeply nourished by the work of C. G. Jung enough to have embarked upon this rigorous training, it was not until I attended a lecture and seminar by Castleman in the summer of 2003 that I felt my indigenous knowing could reside alongside the psychological theories I was painstakingly studying. An integration of my privileged European education with my intuitive - native knowing suddenly seemed possible. Two years later, when I began to practice as a Jungian Analyst in Canada and noticed 'tribal unconscious' phenomenology in my own work, I contacted Castleman for supervision. She was generous with her knowledge, experience and wisdom. I often times was assertively corrected by her acerbic wit and truth telling, and was guided under her tutelage to explore and recover my own unique understandings. In my work, in my post-graduate Jungian research, and in the tribal dreamstory circles that support and spur this examination, a Jungian sociological reality and my tribal ancestral knowing find integration. The following discussion adds my experiential and theoretical threads to the unfurling tapestries. The following exploration attempts to make explicate some of the connections in the implicate matrix of our dreaming, our storytelling, our relationships, and our communities.

Tribal dreamstory uncovery

My personal professional experience of leading tribal dreamstory circles beyond the Castleman model

had been tested in informal group gatherings and more intentional, structured groupings for three years. Previous to this Jungian sociological focus on the 'tribal unconscious' as a manifestation of the group psyche, I had well over two decades of experience in community building initiatives with troubled youth, disenfranchised women, and new Canadians. In community based psychiatric treatment homes and centers, urban high schools, and landed immigrant settlement programs, I learned, taught, and struggled with the collective and personal knots that tangle us up and the silken threads that connect us to one another.

*"Nin-din-away-mah-john-ee-dog" – "*We are all related," say my indigenous elders. This honoring phrase, spoken to human or beast or tree or rock means that the Creator wants us to see everything as it is meant to be, without the illusion of separateness. My elders teach that we are to see our relationship to everything, how everything is connected, how everything outside of us is also a part of us. There is a burning passion in me to experience healing community, a call in me from the depths of Nin-din-away-mah-john-ee-dog. Perhaps this is born from my tribal bloodline (Algonkin, Métis, Celtic); perhaps it is the failure of community I have suffered in conventional religion and patriarchal educational institutions, perhaps it is the emerging Wetlanschauung. This is an innate yearning to know myself in the group and to know the group in me. As a Jungian analyst, deeply invested in fostering individuation in my self and in my analysands, the dichotomy of this yearning challenge me to the core. My emerging experience, my education, and my ancient knowing, remind me that true healing community resolves the contradictions and polarities between Me and You, Us and Them. True healing community gives the individual and the group a forum of support to help each participant to explore deeply who he or she is and who each is not; who we are and who we are not. True healing community holds the tension and opens to the grace that can transform the contradictions into paradox. When this type of healing community can be constellated, the social isolation characteristic of the initial stages of the individuation process can be creatively mediated.

It is a hero's journey to embark upon the path of individuation. Collective attitudes and values must be sacrificed to allow for the emergence of personal destiny. This is always a wounding initiation. Tribal dreamstory circles support the individual in this initiatory process and assist as he or she works to manifest their personal destiny in the larger group. The archetypal or universal heroic journey never ends with the discovery of the sought-after treasure. As the fairytales, myths, and legends remind us, the most dangerous part of the journey is the return. Can the hero bring the treasure back to his community? Can the individuating personality return to the collective she rejected? Will the hermit descend from the heights of enlightenment and walk again in the lowly village? As in tribal lore, the individual is stolen from or breaks from the comfort of the community and 'cries for a vision.' All the while he or she is alone in the forest, crying for a vision, the tribe dances and prays. When the individual returns there is great cause for celebration. The tribe both receives the vision and supports the individual in manifesting it. Tribal dreamstory circles foster this ancient community building dynamic.

Tribal dreamstory discovery

Individuating group is what my tribal dreamstory circles seek to facilitate. Individuating group is an example of a true healing community. This is not to be confused with group experiences which override or swallow the individual. Nor is this to be equated with group experiences that shelter the individual from the heroic tasks and moral imperatives of personal destiny. Few would argue that something more powerful than individual libido is constellated in groups. Some have called it the group 'oversoul,' or in my traditions, 'a gathering of ancestors.' The shadow side of this is all too prevalent in cult activities or guru over-identification. Projection and recollection is a tender and tense tightrope walk in all relationships. Yet, the introverted experience of Eros, the archetypal principle of relatedness, at some point seeks to be extroverted; first to the other, then to the tribe, and finally, in concentric circles, outward to the nation, the continent and the world.

I theorize that the archetype of the tribe, the universal energy that draws us toward one another in groups, -is seeking manifestation in the world at large. Even in the modern world? Particularly in the

modern world! All too often, the shadow side of this archetypal thrust, on the one side makes glaring headlines in the daily media in aggression such as - gang warfare and hostile corporate takeovers, or on the other side can be trivialized in label loyalty or team pep rallies. Whatever consciousness one has gained in the interiority of one's own individuation process is challenged and refined in relationship with the other. Both our personal and our transpersonal relationships serve to define and refine who we are what our unique task is on this earthwalk. As the developmental theorists claim, there is no I without a you. The heroic struggle of individuation requires we endeavor to bring the treasure, the vision, the dream back to the greater community. The tribal dreamstory circle can facilitate this return.

As a storyteller trained in the Algonkin tradition, the backbone of my model for the tribal dreamstory circle includes Traditional storytelling. Storytelling is an ancient and well tested modality for cultural teaching and transmission. In my lifelong experience as story listener and story teller, there is something about a story that is softer than advice, gentler than a reprimand, more enduring and endearing than a theoretical construct. Isn't the dreammaker, that marvelously creative choreographer of our emergent awareness, the ultimate storyteller? Stories and dreams, according to my Elders are tomahawks. They cut both ways. You think they are saying one thing and then they surprise you by saying another. Coyote and his trickster cousins, Spider and Raven, are the storytelling totems in my tribal Traditions.

The trickster tales abound. In trickster tales, the teaching is delivered by the character that breaks the rules, violates the societal taboos, or lives out the shadow energies latent in the community. Coyote marries his daughter and shows us the chaos created when endogamy libido that needs exogamy renewal is denied and subverted. Heyoka wears a t-shirt advertising alcohol to a funeral for teens killed in a drinking and driving accident on the reservation. Raven steals the light and acts as a change agent. Spiderwoman weaves her stories and catches us with her truths. My indigenous elders knew all about the subversive quality of story long before the psychologists or sociologists theorized the mercurial nature of these transformative interventions (Spence, 1982; Schafer, 1992; Stern, 1990). Narrative approaches to healing, community building, and cultural transmission use it, live it, and create out of it. Taking this Traditional teaching modality into the arena of the tribal dreamstory circle is my current model for community building.

Tribal Dreamstory Telling

This dreamstory may be true, this dreamstory may be false. This dreamstory tells a lie to tell a truth. It is the time of Corn Planting Moon. Barren fields and swollen rivers are waiting for the sowing of Creator seeds. The seeds gathered before the snowfalls and stored in the sacred Hogan all winter are now ripe. They are stirring. They are humming. Old Man Coyote and Grandmother Nokomis, call the tribe together at the threshold of the sacred Hogan. The season of long, dark nights that invite secret dreamstory telling is coming to a close. The days are getting longer. The birds are singing in the high branches. The game is calling from the distant hills. Yet, sadly, even amidst all this budding creation time, the smoke from many fires taints the spring breeze. The tribe is strong again, but the nation is at war. Destruction is at hand. Mother Earth's tears are many. Father Sky hangs his head in sorrow.

Throughout the long cold of many winters, dreamstories have nourished the tribe from within. Nestled in secret under the hides and furs of brother and sister beasts, the ancestral dreamstories have woven threads of hope. This tapestry of hope has been wrestled back from loss, and now quivers, ready to unfurl into a new age. The seven generations on each side of the tapestry are dressed in journey clothes. In the sacred Hogan, the dreamstories have strengthened the tribe and prepared them to be leaders to the Nation. Old Man Coyote and Nokomis announce it is time to share the strength and richness of these dreamstories. The bellies of the children are full with the nourishing goodness of dreamstory. The spines of the old ones are strong with the sturdy goodness of dreamstory. The hearts of the lovers are aflame with the passionate goodness of dreamstory. It is time to bring the secret dreamstories back into the war-weary world. It is time for the Tribe to rebuild the Nation with its dreamstories. This dreamstory may be true, may be false. I tell it to you as it was told to me, so now you can tell it to others with me or without me.

Tribal dreamstory circle

Working in tribal dreamstory circles is a challenging undertaking, both for the analyst-facilitator and for the dreamstory participants. The first task for the would-be group must be containment and alliance frame-building. To foster this alliance as a shared responsibility, I designed a ritual to set the circle and move the focus from the facilitator to the wider group or dreamstory circle. I utilize my native symbols to establish an objective focal point. My native hand drum is placed on the dream wheel table in the centre of the room. The dream wheel table is an ancestral heirloom made from two 18th century wagon wheels. It represents what Ojibway writer Richard Wagamese describes in his inspiring novel, *Dream Wheels*.

Wherever they went, the stories went with them. Even when the time of firekeepers had passed there was always a keeper of the dream wheel. There was always someone or something that held the stories, protected them, kept them safe, held them for sharing on nights like this, around another fire in a new time, in a new place, a new world. (p. 321)

My dream wheel table at the center of the room holds my native hand drum. As the participants gather around my dream wheel table, the hand drum displays a chaotic tangle of colorful ribbons. Inspired by the aboriginal ribbon shirt dancers, the drum of ribbons seemingly vibrates with the beauty of healing community breathing beneath the chaotic tangle. This image of silent drum and chaotic tangle of ribbons held by the concentric circles of the dream wheel table attempts to conjure up some of the implicate or unconscious connections latent in the newly forming group. It becomes a tangible touchstone as the group forms, grows, and deepens in tribal connectedness.

After a brief Traditional teaching about the sacred herbs and sacred smoke that open the Creator to our intention to foster healing community, participants are invited to smudge themselves with cleansing sage. As the leader, I light a beeswax candle. While I never relinquish authority for the circle, I invite the group to experience and grow in consciousness about what I already know through my own experience about the tribal field. As facilitator, I keep one foot in the constellating field and one foot in my role as analyst-guide. Containment keeper more than active participant is the role I adopt, particularly in these initial sessions.

After the outer frame is set by the circle, the tangible symbols and the initial rituals, each participant is asked to extract a ribbon from the tangle. Holding one end of the chosen ribbon, each participant is invited to offer her or his name to the drum and make a verbal commitment of respect, courtesy, and confidentiality to each member and to the group. I insist that the group initially agree to contain the energy within the group and limit talk about the group outside the gatherings. This is important when the group is forming so that the energy constellating between us does not get siphoned off in shadow groupings or 'parking lot meetings.' Once the 'tribal unconscious' has been constellated, this sealed vessel requirement can become more flexible.

Once the commitment to the group has been articulated, each participant ties the other end of their selected ribbon to the drum. Each is then encouraged to share personal understandings of subjective and objective dreaming. I am constantly amazed at how open and aware participants are to the underlying premise that some dreams are meant for a wider audience than the dreamer. Dreamers' experiences with the objective quality of some dreams, in my experience, is easily accepted and widely shared.

When the gathered group is cohesive in experience, psychological maturity, and familiarity with Jungian dream praxis; namely, exploring the subjective message in the dream through amplification, interpretation and active imagination, - this initial ritual and sharing allows the analyst-facilitator to

receive information and make necessary adjustments to the pacing of the more theoretical aspects of the presentation. More experienced dreamers will be ready to test out tribal dreamstory strategies sooner than less experienced dreamers. This initial setting of the frame also affords the analyst-facilitator the chance to point out the advantages of multiple perspectives in dreamwork. I remind more experienced dream group participants that while indigenous ancestral knowing supports and amplifies the Jungian theories, there is a wisdom and genius in the dream that transcends current psychological or sociological theories. I invite the more experienced group dreamers to consider more primitive ways of knowing in this initial gathering.

If the group is not cohesive, this initial sharing allows each participant to experience and express himself or herself amidst the diversity of the group. For a non-cohesive grouping, meaning a group with a diversity of maturity and experience, this is an excellent opportunity to reinforce the tolerance needed and the tension inherent in building healing community. This is also the place to introduce dreamstory circle protocol; namely, the concepts of dream tending inspired in part by the work of Robert Moss, (2005), and experienced in my work with Tess Castleman. Supporting this collegial mentoring, my own indigenous elders have gifted me with an understanding of the dream (and the dreamers' personal, social and spiritual responsibility to the dream) that guides much of my dreamstory work.

As a visual representation of what my tribal dreamstory circle endeavors to constellate, this initial drum and ribbon ritual is poignant. The ritual serves to manifest our first explicate or conscious example of the implicate or unconscious connections emerging between us. As the chaotic pile of ribbons is untangled, one strand at a time, as each member commits to the group, the individual is encouraged to find and hold his or her strand in the group and notice the strands from the group touching him or her.

When each participant has extracted and tied his or her chosen ribbon to the drum, after the dreamstory protocol has been set, I tell the birthstory of my native hand drum. It is a story that moderates the curiosity of new revelation with the prudence of incubation and gestation. It is a story of a synchronistic creation born of a dream that in time birthed my dreamstory ideas.

Many years ago I had a dream that my maternal grandmother birthed and mourned the death of a premature child. In the dream, the too-soon born, too-soon mourned child is called Snowdrop. The dream child shows herself as an insistent sprout of spring and melts away just about as quickly.

This dream inspired a series of stories written in a six week reverie that I called 'The Ancient Ones.' From these stories, these dream inspired narratives, a master's thesis, a post-graduate dissertation, and my tribal dreamstory circle ideas were crafted. Now, many years and many tellings later, I use my native hand drum as a tangible symbol of rebirth. I tell my tribal dreamstory participants the original dream, the synchronistic creation story of my hand drum, and the introductory dreamstory I now call Snowdrop Dreaming.

Snowdrop Dreaming

It was the time of the Snow Blinding Moon. Seeds were waking beneath the sleeping soil. The time of storytelling was waning. A new song was needed. Drum Maker took up the task of crafting a heartbeat drum from the longings of the tribe. As is our tradition, the newly crafted drum was hung in the cedars to await morning. It was the longest night. The skies were dark and clear. The moon was full. Drum Maker slept soundly with the knowledge that she would cut the drum from the cedars and welcome the new day with her birth song. Just before dawn, an unexpected storm rose from the cold, cold North.

In the snow-laden dawn, the drenched drum was cut down from the sodden tree. Her skin was sadly warped and loose. She was silent. She had no song. With mourning, Drum Maker took the dead drum back to her bed. The tribe watched. Drum Maker laid the silent drum upon her grief-heavy stomach. She fell asleep. A deep sleep. Drum Maker entered the dreaming lodge. The tribe wept with and for the silent drum and the songless Drum Maker. Creator heard the cries. Creator felt the premature silence. Creator sent heat to the birthless belly. While Drum Maker slept, while Drum Maker dreamed, Creator's belly heat dried the drum. The belly heat tightened the skin around the frame. When Drum Maker awoke, the drum sang. She sang a new song. She sang a song wrestled from the longest night. She sang Snowdrop Dreaming

The intention of this initial dreamstory is to encourage dreamstory listening and dreamstory telling attitudes. Permission to become an oral dreamstory listener and some of the skills in oral dreamstory telling are emphasized and modeled at this time. Once the story of my drum 'Snowdrop Dreaming' has been shared, the spokes of the colorful ribbons connected to the drum are displayed in all their grandeur. At this point I play the heartbeat sound on the hand drum. Each participant is invited to hold a hand over their own heart and feel the complementary beat. This ritual reminds us that we are all connected through the living earth to one another. The phrase, *Nin-din-away-mah-john-ee-dog*, is spoken and the Traditional teaching of tribal interconnectedness is shared. The group is encouraged to accept that it is our individual and shared heartbeat that unites us beyond the illusions of gender, race, or creed that separate us.

This ribboned drum, the resonating heart beat, the first dreamstory telling, and the Traditional teachings of *Nin-din-away-mah-john-ee-dog* become the means to reinforce that in my tribal dreamstory circles, participants are encourage to speak, share, dream, and story into the center. The ancestral center is always the focal point. I believe this centering keeps the energy or kinship libido from getting stuck in the 'goo' of personal projections or from constellating archetypal guru transference to the facilitator. In the countertransference, I feel a deep relaxing and opening in my own heart when this center has been established.

Throughout my tribal dreamstory circle series, the dream wheel supports the drum and the drum resonates with and to the colorful connections we foster with one another in the group. This initial ritual is inspired by the tribal Traditional teaching known as 'speaking into the fire.' It is my understanding and praxis that this careful attention to centering the energy of the group fosters a healthy depersonalization of ideas and emotions and allows for personal and collective reflection, shared silence, and deep consideration of self and other, Self and Other. This centering is essential if the group is to deepen beyond shadow projections and recollections, and effectively and safely open the deeper tribal layers of animus and anima sponsored ancestral and archetypal energies.

Finally, the specific model and case experiences of my tribal dreamstory circles are best experienced rather than articulated in a journal article. Like the vibrancy of an oral story, at this point, the unique and sacred experience of my tribal dreamstory circles cannot be adequately contained within the constraints of academic logos that require empirical data or qualitative and quantitive evidence . Perhaps it is because the tribal ribbons are still vibrating to a shared heartbeat. Perhaps it is because some of these implicate connections are still emerging. Perhaps it is because the post-partum period of what has been newly born must be tended in privacy. Perhaps it is because these native and 'primitive' truths have too often been colonized by masculine logos when they long to be held by feminine Eros. There is a mystery that seeks to be honored before it is fully shared. Whatever the reasons, my story ends here. I tell what is ready to be told, keep silent what is meant to be contained, and invite the reader into new considerations and explorations of tribal dreamstory and 'tribal unconscious' phenomenology.

Conclusions

Charting the personality and theoretical differences between Freud and Jung, to the modern theories about mutual transference and countertransference, one cannot deny that psyche seeks relationship. Relationship 'goo', as Castleman calls it, is what strengthens the bonds between us, whether these bonds are antagonistic or affirming. We have had over one hundred years of knowing this 'goo' through the healing dyad of depth psychology and the analytical relationship. Some trailblazers have

ventured beyond the containment of the consulting room and some have been shattered or swallowed up by the challenging experience of group process. The psychological and sociological fallout of some encounter groups of the sixties, or some currently popular intensives of cathartic corporate weekends suggest that more contained and intention-focused group experiences are easier to integrate. Much is to be gained by empirical study of this kinship phenomenology as it is manifest in group and group dreaming. My humble suggestions and emergent experience with tribal dreamstory circles echo Castleman's call: the time is ripe to take this learning to the streets. To the schools, the prisons, the hospices, the drop-in centers, the board rooms, the staff rooms, and yes, even our own living rooms and lodge fires. The dream wheel is ready to roll. *'Waneeshee' – 'May the way be beautiful for you'. -*

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To all my Tribal Dreamstory Circle participants, thank you for your willingness to participate in my Tribal Dreamstory Circles. All I am learning and teaching strengthens the dream wheel and moves us forward toward the healing community we seek.

To my indigenous elders, guides, teachers, and tribal brothers and sisters, the time has come at last. *Waneeshee*.

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