



Article and Illustrations
by
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GETTING HELP FROM DREAMS

Can we get any help from our dreams? Are dreams really more than a rehash of the day's experiences? Could dreams actually inspire us, provide guidance, even healing? If so, how can we ever know how to correctly interpret them?

Science claims that dreaming is somehow necessary to our biological survival. Yet if remembering dreams, not to mention correctly interpreting them, were critical to our survival, the human species would long ago have become extinct. Few of our dreams are remembered, and fewer still are understood. The critical value of dreams must lie elsewhere.

I believe that the essence of the dream is the *story* we experience while asleep—the dream experience itself changes us. The guidance that dreams provide, the help they give, is produced by the effect of the dream experience, remembered or not, upon our being. That's what I've come to understand from my own experience.



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I was first introduced to the value of dreams by an artist friend whom I held in special esteem. In sharing with me how his dreams were enriching his life, he told me, for example, how he had first seen his inexpensive, but beautiful, oceanside studio in a dream, and then located it in town after some searching.

It was 1968 and I was preparing for my Ph.D. research examinations at U.C.L.A. Reading about dream psychology at that time I learned that our oft-forgotten dreams were regarded as a natural, necessary and regular part of the sleep cycle, but the specific value of dreams remained undetermined. A few psychologists claimed they could deduce insights into a person's deep personality structure from dreams, as if dreams were meaningful symptoms. One psychiatrist, Carl Jung, claimed to have found something more than mere symptomatic meaning in dreams. He wrote that dreams have symbolic value, that more than simply reflecting the personality, dreams point beyond the individual to a system of guidance within life itself. But Jung, too, gave the impression that interpreting dreams was a magician's art.

While I had been studying dreams as a clinical phenomenon of ambiguous repute, my artist friend was actively engaging his dreams as an extension of his creativity. He introduced me to the work of Edgar Cayce, who suggested that if you or I were to make an active attempt to become involved with our dreams, we would become the best interpreters of our own dreams and would be led to know how to receive the dream's help. What a different perspective!

My friend's stories of his dreams were exciting and gave me a sense of great new possibilities. While I had been

studying the psychology of alterations in consciousness—amnesia, multiple personalities, trances and dreams—I realized that I was amnesic for my own dreams. Being able to use dreams as an instrument of guidance, as if having an internal compass to point the way, had an irresistible appeal.

It was on such a note of inspiration that I finally determined to seek my dreams. I wanted to overcome my amnesia for them. I made a New Year's resolution, bound together a sheaf of papers into a hand-made journal covered with some attractive material and wrote a dedication prayer in the journal, asking that through dreams I might be able to see through the fog of my life. I wanted to connect with any meaningful life plan that might be within me. New Year's Day, 1969, was to be the first day of my new life.

I awakened that next morning without recalling any dreams. I tried the day after, but with no luck. I kept my journal by my bedside every night, night after night, but still with no success. It was disheartening but I persisted. Beyond my abstract, intellectual curiosity about dreams, I had good reason to persist. I was in personal need. I was a troubled person, searching for something that would allow me to feel good about myself, something to give me a sense of direction and a new lease on life. I was 25 years old at the time, in the seventh year of my career as an alcoholic. I had taken my first drink on my 18th birthday and immediately became addicted. I drank something every day thereafter, and by the time I was in graduate school, I was drinking myself to sleep every night. I didn't know it at the time, but the effects of the alcohol were making it very difficult for me to



remember my dreams.

It wasn't until March, over three months after I began, that I finally remembered a dream. Even that one almost eluded me. I was already out of bed, groping in my closet for a shirt, when I remembered something about a flying goat. Aware that it wasn't an ordinary memory, but perhaps something of a dream, I sat down on the bed and it gradually came back to me. It was a dream that would change my life. Here it is:

I am camping in a tent on the wooded land of an Old Wise Man. It is his special sanctuary and I feel very grateful to be here. I am standing in the barnyard face to face with the Old Man. He fixes my gaze—I feel his presence quite strongly. Behind him a goat magically flies back and forth, a few feet off the ground, around the barnyard, then flies into the barn. To my left in a haystack lies an

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empty wine bottle. I suspect that someone has been there sneaking a drink. I say to the Old Man, "Hey, look at that!—there's a drunk on this property, sneaking around to drink. We've got to find him and get rid of him, kick him out. He doesn't belong in such a special place as this."

The Old Man looks at me patiently, his deep eyes penetrating my innermost self, and replies, "Henry, that man is my guest. He was invited here long before you arrived. I put that wine there myself, to lure him in so that I can feed him."

I look back at the haystack and see an empty mayonnaise jar and an empty bag of potato chips. Potato chips and mayonnaise? I wonder what kind of food is that. I guess my image of a wise man would have him serving health food. But my presuppositions are brushed aside, for in the presence of the Old Man's generous acceptance of the drunkard, as mysterious as it may seem to me, my self-righteousness sticks out in shameful contrast. I feel exposed and embarrassed and I can't look the Old Man in the eye anymore. I wander off into the forest to return to my little



round tent.

From that moment of recall, the dream played upon my waking mind. I wondered whether the goat was a symbol of my astrological sign, Capricorn. Could the drunk in the dream relate to my own drinking? As I asked myself questions I couldn't answer, I discovered just what it is like to puzzle over the meaning of the dream images. I couldn't make much sense of my dream, but one thing stood out: the face of that Old Man and my feelings while talking with him. While his intentions for the drunkard puzzled me, clearly my own attitude was inappropriate—my feeling of shame over being so righteous was a vivid experience. The idea that the Old Man purposely left wine for the drunkard as bait suggested to me that perhaps there was some *purpose* to my problem drinking, even if I couldn't see it. Yet the food being left for the drunkard—potato chips and mayonnaise—seemed peculiar and made no sense at the time. But I no longer felt quite comfortable being so judgmental about my drinking.

This reaction was my first clue about getting help from dreams. A meaningful interpretation of the dream was not available. Instead, it was the natural, emotional effect of the dream upon me that proved important. I tried to be accepting of my drinking while continuing my quest for dreams. The former was much easier than the latter. I still found dreams hard to recall. I wasn't able to record another dream until July, and after a whole year, I was only on page three of my dream journal. I graduated from U.C.L.A., accepted a faculty position at Princeton University, and continued to recall only an occasional dream. The following summer I devoted my vacation exclusively to working on my dreams. I would sleep late and then spend at least an hour after waking trying to recall as much of my dreams as possible. It was not that easy to catch on to how to recall them.

I gradually improved my dream recall by lying in bed and meditating on the vague images until they flowered into more complete recollections. It would take me several hours each day to write out my dreams fully from my morning notes. From my work that summer, I discovered some interesting subtleties about memory for dreams and summarized them in an essay, "The Art of Remembering Dreams."* I found that we can get some help from dreams simply by remembering them. I reasoned that if the dream experience was meant to affect us, then by remembering the dream experience over and over again during the day, the impact of the dream would be strengthened.

That fall I decided to do a more formal study. In an experimental course, students and I developed a way of measuring the results of our efforts trying to remember our dreams. Using this measuring scale we were able to prove that remembering dreams was a skill that could be learned by anyone. In a published report of our work, "Learning to Remember Dreams," I noted another finding: having learned *how* to remember dreams, we don't necessarily remember them unless we make the effort.

While I continued to record my dreams, my drinking began to create problems for me that I couldn't ignore. It finally reached a point where even the otherwise compatible Princeton environment found it objectionable. Worse for me, my girlfriend was losing her

*Copies of Dr. Reed's essay are available upon request from the author at 503 Lake Drive, Virginia Beach, VA 23451.

patience. My first wife had divorced me when I graduated from U.C.L.A., and although I could look at it as a traditional "dissertation divorce," I knew that a large factor had been my drinking. My new girlfriend, however, had been very accepting of my drinking problem. Her loving acceptance was very dear to me. That I could exhaust even her patience, then, was very demoralizing.

I suppose my story as an alcoholic is typical: repeated confrontations with the problems brought on by my drinking were met with repeated vows to quit drinking. These vows would then be quickly forgotten as my compulsion got the better of me, until finally that moment came of "bottoming out."

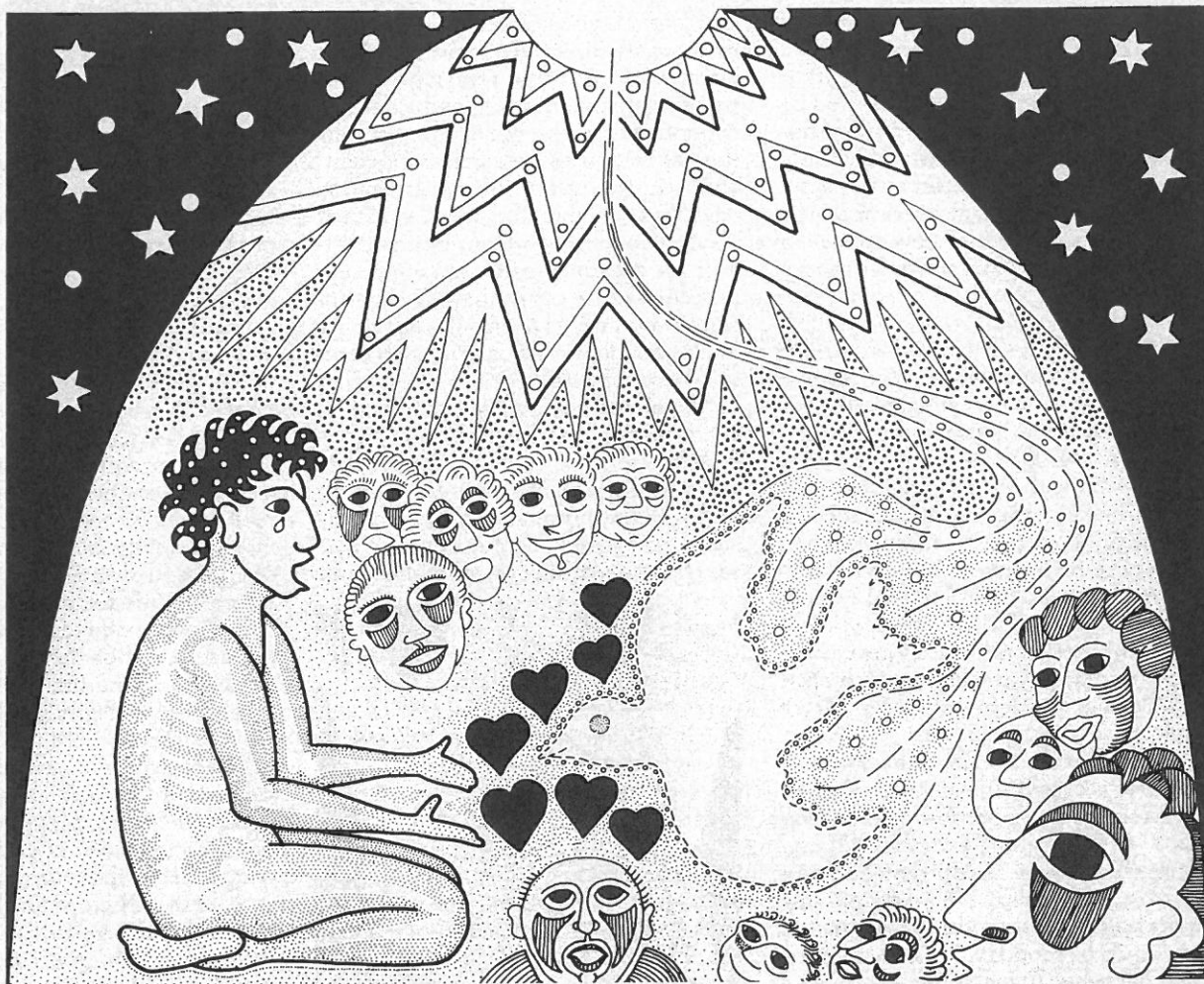
The bottom came for me one morning after an important party. I had been admonished in advance and vowed to be on my good behavior. I never did remember much of that party. What I remember instead is waking up the next morning with a tremendous hangover and being confronted with an account of my antics. My disgust with myself propelled me to vow with all my might, "I will never drink again!" As I lay there, my declaration echoing in my mind, I realized that those words were all too familiar. The falsity of the declaration taunted me as I sank into the despair of the truth: I knew that I would never voluntarily quit drinking—I loved it too much! I felt totally helpless and sullenly contemplated my future as an unredeemable, drunken bum.

One night, feeling very lonely and sorry for myself, I drank myself to sleep, only to find myself awake a few hours later, lost in uncontrollable sobbing. My crying was the carryover of this dream:

I am in a crowd of people looking up into the sky. It is night and yet the sun is up and acting strangely. Rays of light shoot out in all directions across the sky. An eerie tension unites the crowd and the sky. Out from the sun flies a glowing object. As it descends from the sky it appears to be a dove. The dove flies overhead, then zooms right down to me and nestles in my chest. I cry aloud, releasing tears of joy and relief, "Somebody loves me!"

The crying was still with me when I awakened. Afterwards I felt calmer inside, as if there might still be hope. Again, it was the emotional impact of the dream, not any interpretation, that proved helpful.

Feeling that I might be worth saving, I decided to seek psychotherapy from a



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Jungian therapist whom I had once heard lecture. I had questioned her about my dream of potato chips and mayonnaise, and her reply, "The wine is the spirit," intrigued me.

When I called for an appointment, I learned that her schedule was full, and it would be over a month before we could meet. Meantime, I began attending meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous.

I was in for a surprise at these A.A. gatherings. While among friends and peers, who were confounded by my drinking, I felt the loneliness of a stranger in a strange land, and I made no sense to myself. But at the A.A. meetings, people spoke a language that I

immediately recognized and understood, and I felt myself in their stories. By my third meeting, I accepted the fact that I was an alcoholic. Even though I didn't know how I would ever stop drinking, I was nevertheless strangely relieved. I realized that all the guilt trips and other torments I had suffered were not an expression of my individual personality, but instead were an expression of the syndrome of alcoholism. I likened it to a person *unknowingly* caught in a whirlpool, who feels scared and guilty for helplessly spinning around in circles. But when the source of the predicament is realized, the feelings of foolishness and guilt are relieved, because when you're caught in a whirlpool, you're bound to spin helplessly—it's not your fault!—until you are released.

One day soon thereafter, on my way home, I stopped by the liquor store to pick up my evening's ration. But when I grabbed for a bottle, something inside me hesitated. I couldn't do it. I didn't understand what was happening, but finally I left the store emptyhanded, thinking I would return later. But I

didn't return. That evening, a mood of sadness descended on me, because I realized I couldn't drink anymore. I was surprised and somewhat put out. I hadn't yet decided to quit drinking—what was going on? I tried to make sense to myself about how I was feeling. I remember explaining to someone that I felt as if I were standing on the edge of a cliff, wanting very much to jump off, but realizing that there were plants back home that needed watering—who would water them if I jumped? Longing to jump into the bliss of release, but reluctantly accepting the responsibility of being needed at home, I sadly returned. My drinking career had ended.

But how? By whom? I hadn't decided to quit. I never would have done that! I didn't want to quit, ever. So what had happened? I didn't know. All I knew was that drinking was no longer an option for me and I felt sad about it. By then I had begun psychotherapy, and when I told the therapist what had happened, she did not seem at all surprised. She encouraged me to continue going to

A.A. meetings. She surmised that I had been able to let go of drinking because I knew, at an unconscious level, that what I was seeking in booze would be found through our work in psychoanalysis. Maybe she was right. Only years later would I better understand what she meant. But at the time, at the beginning of my strange new career as a non-drinking alcoholic, I was a mystery to myself.

Much later I was to discover a dream I had recorded in my journal just before my drinking stopped. In this dream, I am at my grandmother's house. It is late at night, and spooky, as if spirits were roaming the house. I am searching about looking for the source of the mystery. At one point, I am startled by a black cat jumping in front of me. Crawling on my hands and knees, I explore the kitchen and find bottles of whiskey in the kitchen cupboard. I knock them over, saying to myself that such stuff should not be left in the reach of children.

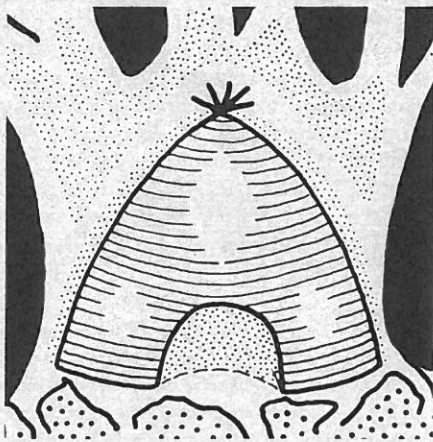
Perhaps this dream, which I only vaguely recalled, represented an inner decision. It is the closest I have ever come to finding any act of "will," anything resembling a "decision" to quit drinking. Actually, I experienced my quitting not as something I did myself and could be proud of, but as something that happened to me, something I found out about after the fact. Whatever role this dream played in what happened, it certainly was without benefit of my conscious assistance.

Meanwhile, I became more interested in Jungian theory, and discovered a book by a Swiss psychiatrist, Carl Meier, "Ancient Incubation and Modern Psychotherapy," about the cult surrounding the Greek god, Asklepios, who performed healings during the dream state. Sleep sanctuaries were created in his name, such as at Epidaurus. People with illnesses would sleep in these temples and have dreams that healed their afflictions. These dreams did not need interpretation, for the dream experience itself was the curative factor.

Dream incubation appealed to me as it confirmed my own feeling that the dream must be sufficient itself to accomplish its purpose. I made arrangements to spend my sabbatical leave from Princeton at Dr. Meier's laboratory, the C. G. Jung Sleep and Dream Laboratory, in Zurich, Switzerland. There we explored many different types of experimental designs for studying problem solving in dreams. Returning to Princeton, I supervised student projects in my

laboratory trying to implement some of these ideas. Inwardly, however, I felt dissatisfied with this research. Then I received an invitation to conduct dream experiments at the youth camp run by the Association for Research and Enlightenment, the non-profit organization developed around the work of Edgar Cayce. Contemplating an outdoor setting for dream research among people predisposed to value their dreams inspired me and gave me the necessary impetus to design an experimental ritual of dream incubation.

I developed a plan to gather the campers together, tell them stories of the wonders of Asklepios, and speculate about the possibility of dream healing today. Since in the ancient days, a person could not sleep in one of the sanctuaries without a prior dream of



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invitation from Asklepios, I would tell the campers to watch their dreams for signs that they were to undergo dream incubation. Only those who had such a dream should consider going any farther.

For a sanctuary I bought an aesthetically pleasing dome-shaped tent. It would become the "dream tent." The intent of the incubation procedure, briefly, was to engage the participant in a series of activities that would place that person in roughly the same frame of mind as that of the ancient Greek pilgrim who sought a healing in one of the sanctuaries of Asklepios. The incubant was to imagine someone who was held in tremendous respect as a healer or wise person, and to imagine the tent as a sanctuary in a location thought to be full of healing vibrations. I would then engage the participant in a day of

role-playing activities, having dialogues with the imaginary healing figure concerning the problem for which help was sought. That night, the person would sleep in the tent in quest of a helpful dream. That was the plan.

I arrived at the camp and erected the tent, but when the time came to come out of the tent and approach the campers with my plan, I got cold feet. I felt guilty and inadequate. Who was I to propose such an experiment? Things such as incubations were essentially initiation mysteries, processes that were handed down from master to initiate. I had not been initiated by anyone. I felt as if I had made all this stuff up. I decided that the best thing to do was either to take down the tent, or, if I left it up, to indicate simply that it was a fun place to sleep if you wanted to get away from the crowd and focus on your dreams.

I felt disappointed and depressed over my decision. But then, out of the blue, while still in the tent, I remembered a joke I used to tell when I was a kid. It went like this:

There was a man with a terrible illness. He had scabs all over his body that were filled with pus. Every few days the man would peel off his scabs and put them into a jar. Then he would store both of these in his closet. One day a friend came to visit, wandered into that closet, and got locked in. Three days later when the man happened to open up the closet door, his friend stumbled out, saying, "Thank God! I would have starved if it had not been for those blessed potato chips and mayonnaise!"

Yuk! Potato chips and mayonnaise! So *that* was the meaning of that perplexing image in my first dream! I was dumbfounded to have this long-buried memory suddenly pop into my mind at such a critical time. It had been over three years since I had had that dream, never understanding the reference to the strange food the Old Man provided the drunk. Now for some strange reason I had recalled this childhood joke, which obviously was the source of that dream image. I could then recognize, from my studies of symbolism, its significance: it was a reference to the mystery of the homeopathic principle declared by the Oracle of Apollo, "the wounder heals." It is the notion that an illness itself brings its own cure, that there is something in an illness that heals, if you will but incorporate it into your life.

This paradoxical principle derives its truth from what is referred to today

as "Goddess Reality," or the "archetypal feminine" side of existence. In contrast to the archetypal "masculine" reality, where we perceive how we can change things by exerting control and manipulating events, the feminine side of reality sees the possibility of transforming situations by yielding to them. For example, it is a well-worn, if often ignored, axiom that "accepting yourself just as you are is the beginning of change." The martial arts of the East, as another example, are based on a similar principle, advocating yielding to the thrusts of the opponent as a means of disarming him. We have a similar principle from the Bible "resist not evil." In homeopathic healing, illness is not seen as an evil to be combatted, but instead as nature's way of correcting an imbalance in the system. In my dream, the Old Man used booze as a lure to teach me the secret of the healing power of woundedness.

I could see, from what booze had taught me, how his trick had worked. The spirits of alcohol had come to rescue me, against my will, from a one-sided existence. I realized that my life had been dominated by the intellectual pursuit of power as a means to deny my basic dependency upon factors in life beyond my personal control. In reflecting upon my "reasons" for drinking, I recalled that I always had felt that life was too "concrete," and that I was always "scraping my knee" against its hard realities. Just as I had rejected the necessity of such suffering, and had tried to avoid it, so had I questioned the value of the Old Man's "food" when I first had that dream. I did, however, yield to the seduction of alcohol. Drinking at first served as a protective lubricant. But in time, it brought me face to face with my wounded knees, made me acknowledge that my dependency was inescapable, and made me give proper recognition to the importance of its spiritual basis. I had to surrender my attempts to conquer life through power. Instead, after quitting drinking, I was like the wilful captain of a powerful motor boat who had gradually learned to feel more comfortable as skipper of a sailboat, utterly dependent upon the spirit of the winds and the moods of mother nature. I had become grateful for my alcoholism as an affliction of the "gods" that only they could relieve. Alcoholism thus had offered me an initiation into the way of the spirit and the power of surrender.

All these ruminations brought me full circle back to my plans to pursue research on dream incubation. I realized

that the method for dream incubation that I had so laboriously constructed was prefigured in my own first dream. The sacred place of the sanctuary, the revered benefactor of the Old Man, even the *tent* that I was now using—all these components had appeared in my dream! I remembered, too, that the god of dream incubation, Asklepios, was regarded as the archetypal "wounded healer," because his power of healing originated from a wound.

I had been profoundly mistaken in assuming that it was my cleverness that designed this experimental ritual. I saw that I was unwittingly *acting out a dream*. What an irony, a humbling one at that, because while I had been stumbling around trying to figure out how to use dreams for creative problem solving, my dream had been solving my problem without my knowing it. My dream provided me with a new life pattern based on an ancient source of wisdom.

These surprising discoveries cleared away my inhibitions, and I went ahead with my plan. I announced the availability of the dream tent and began a program of research that was quite successful in demonstrating the continued operation of the miracle of dream incubation. In my published report of that research, "Dream Incubation: The Reconstruction of a Ritual in Contemporary Form," I concluded that symbolic ritual might be a helpful method for assimilating the transformative power of dreams.

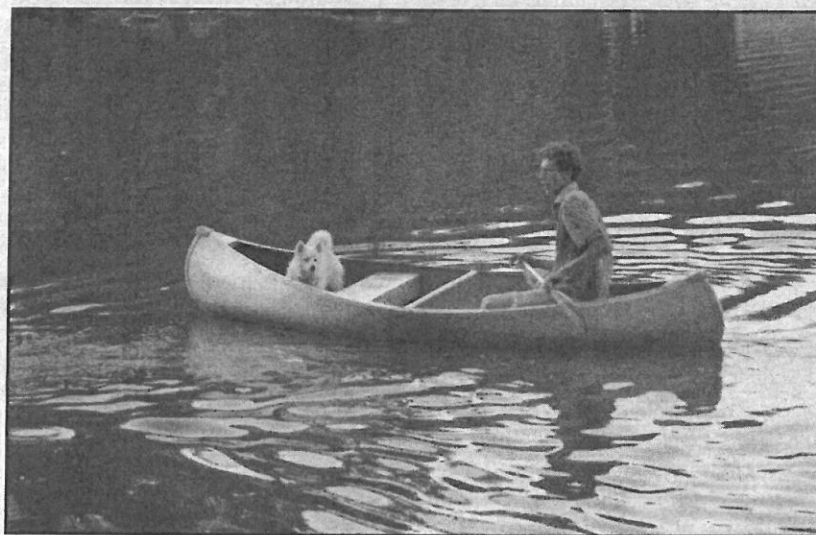
Looking back, I am amazed at my dream's access to long-forgotten memories, and that it could select just the right image from my personal experiences to communicate a profound

understanding that would then take me several years to appreciate. I see that the synchronistic timing of my recall of the childhood joke, giving meaning to that critical image in the dream, coincided with the moment that the dream and my original petition that led to the dream were about to be fulfilled. I will always remember that crucial moment in the dream tent, an experience I now call "Dream Realization."

I now believe that trying to interpret the message in a dream is a natural and useful exercise, but will always be an imperfect approximation to recapturing the total understanding that accompanies the original dream experience. By allowing the healing influence of a dream to take effect the dreamer changes as a result of the dream. The meaning of the dream is thus *realized* in life, and the dream no longer needs interpretation. The dream story itself is then experienced as the most perfect revelation of its truth. At its best, then, dream interpretation is practice in fully remembering the dream.

Getting help from dreams can be as simple, and as profoundly mysterious, as falling asleep only to awaken a changed person. Even if we don't realize it for some time, it happens, naturally, night after night.

A new research project, "Obtaining Guidance from Dreams," designed by Dr. Reed is available in home-study format. It involves a 28-day exploration of your dreams directed by exercises in a 210-page workbook. Those wishing to participate in this research may write to A.R.E. Dream Research Project, Box 595, Virginia Beach, VA 23451, enclosing a check for \$15 to cover the cost of materials and requesting product code 480010.



On the lake behind his Virginia Beach home, Henry Reed takes Charlie on a canoe ride.