

Henry Reed

From Alcoholic to Dreamer



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I am camping in a tent on the land of an Old Wise Man. This land 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. His deep eyes fix my gaze and I feel his presence quite strongly. I then notice behind him a flying goat! Yes, indeed, this place is special, and magical. The goat flies back and forth, a few feet off the ground, around the barnyard, then flies off into the barn, not to be seen again. Then to my left I see a haystack, and lying there an empty bottle of wine. I realize 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 here. But the Old Man looks at me patiently with his deep eyes, and replies, "Henry, that man is a guest of mine, and 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 jar of mayonnaise 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 own self-righteousness sticks out in embarrassing and shameful contrast. I feel exposed and can't look the Old Man in the eye anymore. I wander off back into the forest to return to my tent.

* * *

This was the dream of a lost and drowning man, someone whose intellectual orientation was no longer sufficient to protect him from the mysteries of life. I was 25 years old when I had this dream, in my third

year of graduate school and the seventh year of my career as an alcoholic. The dream proved incredibly important to both endeavors. Let me tell you my story.

In preparation for my doctoral examinations at the University of California at Los Angeles, I had been studying the psychology of alterations in consciousness: amnesias, multiple personalities, trances, and dreams. In the midst of that study, it occurred to me that I was amnesic for my dreams. What if I could break that amnesia? How were my otherwise forgotten dreams coloring my subsequent waking life? Behind that abstract, intellectual curiosity, I was also 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. It was then that a good friend of mine, an artist whom I held in special esteem, shared with me how his dreams had enriched his life. While I had been studying dreams as a clinical phenomenon, my friend was actively engaging his dreams as an extension of his creativity. What a different perspective! My friend's stories of his dreams gave me a sense of new possibilities. Being able to use dreams as an instrument of guidance, as if having an internal compass to point the way, had an irresistible appeal for me.

It was on such a note of inspiration that I finally dedicated myself to seek my dreams. It was as a New Year's resolution that I actually began. I bound together a sheaf of papers into a handmade journal and covered it with some attractive material. I wrote a dedication prayer in the journal, asking that through dreams I might be able to see through the fog of my life and to make the connection 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 wasn't until sometime in March, over 3 months after I started, that I finally remembered a dream—it was that dream about potato chips and mayonnaise. I almost didn't remember it. 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 back down on the bed and it gradually came back to me. Something like a loving fate must have surmounted the alcoholic obstacle to my dream recall. I shudder to think what my life might be like today had I not been given a second chance to remember that dream.

What a dream! It was to play upon my waking mind. Was the goat a symbol of my astrological sign, Capricorn? I wondered. There was a drunk in the dream—could that relate to my own drinking? Here I was,

interacting with my first dream, discovering just what it is like to puzzle over the meaning of the images. I couldn't make much sense of it, but one thing stood out: the face of that Old Man and my feelings while interacting with him. His intentions for the drunkard seemed very puzzling to me, but clearly my own attitude was inappropriate—my sense of shame over being so righteous and uppity was a vivid memory from the dream. The idea that the Old Man purposefully left wine for the drunkard as bait suggested to me that perhaps there was some *purpose* or *meaning* to my problem drinking that I just couldn't see. Yet the food being left for the drunkard—potato chips and mayonnaise—seemed so peculiar that I had a hard time accepting that it might make any sense. The question of meaning was left unresolved. But I no longer felt quite comfortable being judgmental about my drinking. I tried to be accepting of my drinking and to continue my quest for dreams. The former was much easier than the latter.

I continued to find 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, accepted a faculty position at Princeton University, and continued to recall only an occasional dream. At the end of that first year of teaching (when, for the first time since junior high school, I had a summer off), I devoted myself exclusively to my efforts at remembering my dreams. I would sleep late and then spend at least an hour when I awakened to recall as much of my dreams as possible. I improved my dream recall to the point that 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 (Reed, 1976a). That fall I decided to do a more formal study. In an experimental course, students and I developed a dream recall scale based on the phenomenology of trying to remember a dream. We used this scale to record our progress at improving our dream recall and were able to prove that it was indeed possible to learn to remember dreams. The nature of our research method allowed us to make a number of observations about dream recall not previously noted, and I published a report of our work (Reed, 1973).

I also continued to drink, whether I accepted it or not, but it finally reached a point where even the otherwise compatible Princeton environment found it objectionable. Worse for me, my girl friend was losing her 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 girl friend, however, had been very acceptant of my drinking problem. Her loving acceptance was very dear to me. That I could exhaust even her patience, then, was

very demoralizing. When I look back on it, I see that the critical turning point, that special moment of “bottoming out,” 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 sunk 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. My girl friend’s tone of response to me, not strident, but strangely calm, indicated that she, too, had accepted the horrible truth.

I was now alone and on my own. I went one night to a faculty party, but felt strangely out of place as everyone asked after my girl friend. I left the party, stopped by a liquor store, and went to my laboratory to drink. I drank myself to sleep. I found myself awake a few hours later, lost in uncontrollable sobbing. My crying was the carryover of a dream. I remembered the dream:

I am wandering around a strange city when I come upon a crowd of people. We are looking up into the sky. The sun is up to something. 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 in the sky it appears to be a dove. The dove flies overhead, then zooms right down to me and nestles in my chest! “Somebody loves me!” I cry aloud, releasing tears of joy and relief.

The crying was still with me when I awakened from the dream. Afterwards I felt calmer inside, and felt as if there might still be hope for me. I decided to seek psychotherapy. I called a Jungian therapist whom I had heard lecture once before. I remembered what she had told me at her lecture, when I questioned her about my dream of potato chips and mayonnaise: “The wine is the spirit.” When I called her for an appointment, I learned that her schedule was full, and it would be over a month before she could see me. I was impatient, but felt she was worth the wait. In the meantime, I began to attend some meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous.

I was in for a surprise at these AA gatherings. While among my 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.

At the AA meetings, however, people spoke a language that I immediately recognized and understood, and I felt myself reflected in their

stories. By my third meeting, I accepted the fact that I was 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 personality, but instead were an expression of the personality of alcoholism. I remember comparing it to a person who is caught in a whirlpool, but doesn't know it, and so feels guilty for always spinning around in circles. When the person finally realizes the predicament, the feelings of foolishness and guilt are relieved: when you're caught in a whirlpool, you're going to spin around helplessly—no blame!—until you are released.

One day soon thereafter, on my way home from school, 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 empty-handed, 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 made my way back to the liquor store, but then found myself turning around to come home, again empty-handed. 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 that 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 AA 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 analysis. Maybe she was right. Only years later would I better understand what she meant. But at the time, at the beginning of psychotherapy, at the beginning of my strange new career as a nondrinking alcoholic, I was a mystery to myself.

Meanwhile, my research on dreams continued. I had learned from that first experimental class that it was hard for the students to maintain their interest in dreams without being able to interpret them or otherwise find some meaningful way to interact with them. Interpreting dreams was still very difficult for me so I searched for some alternatives. I had become

more interested in Jungian theory, and came upon a book by a Swiss analyst, Carl Meier (1967), about the ancient cult surrounding the Greek god, Asklepios, who performed healings during the dream state. Sleep sanctuaries were created in his name. People with illnesses would sleep in these temples and have visions that healed their afflictions. The dream did not need interpretation, for the dream experience itself was the curative factor. Dream incubation appealed to me and 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. Once there, Dr. Meier shied away from working on dream incubation, but we brainstormed many different types of experimental designs for studying creative problem solving in dreams. Returning to Princeton, I supervised student thesis 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 nonprofit organization developed around the work of Edgar Cayce. Contemplating an outdoor setting for dream research 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 and tell them stories of the wonders of Asklepios, and to speculate about the possibility of dream healing. Inasmuch as in the ancient days a person could not sleep in one of the sanctuaries without a prior dream of 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 a tent, an aesthetically pleasing, dome-shaped tent that would become the "dream tent." The design for the incubation procedure, basically, was to engage the participant, the incubant, in a series of activities that would place that person in roughly the same frame of mind that must have existed in the ancient Greek pilgrim who was seeking a healing in one of the sanctuaries of Asklepios. The incubant was to imagine someone for whom they had much respect as a healer or wise person, and to imagine the tent as a sanctuary at some location that the person thought would be very healing for them. I would then engage the person in a day of role-playing activities, in which the person would dialogue with their healing figure concerning the problem for which they sought help. That night, the person would sleep in the tent to have a helpful dream. That was the plan.

When I arrived at camp, however, and had the tent erected and the time came to approach the campers with my plan, I got cold feet. I felt guilty and inadequate. Who was I to experiment with such a sacred mystery? I remembered what Dr. Meier had said when I had discussed the possibility of trying to resurrect dream incubation: "I don't want to

play God!" I thought to myself how things such as incubations were essentially initiation mysteries, processes that are handed down from master to initiate. I had not been initiated by anyone. 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 one wanted to get away from the crowd and focus on one's dreams. I felt a little disappointed and depressed over my decision. But then, out of the blue, I remembered a joke I used to tell when I was a kid:

There was this man with a terrible illness. He had scabs all over his body and these scabs were filled with puss. The man would peel off his scabs and put them into a bag. And he would drain off the puss into a jar. He then stored both of these up in his closet. One day, a friend came to visit, wandered into that closet, and got himself locked in. It was 3 days before the man happened to open up the closet door. When he did so, his friend came stumbling out of the closet, saying: "Thank God! I would have starved if not for those blessed potato chips and mayonnaise!"

Potato chips and mayonnaise! So *that* was the image in my dream! I was dumbfounded to have this long-buried memory suddenly pop into my mind at such a critical time. It had been over 3 years since I had had that dream, never understanding the reference to the strange food the Old Man was providing the drunk. Now, for some strange reason, I had recalled that childhood joke that obviously was the source of that reference. I could then, from my studies, recognize the significance of the image: it was a reference to the mystery of the homeopathic principle as declared by the Oracle of Apollo, "the wounder heals" (Kerenyi, 1959). It is the notion that an illness itself brings its own cure. "Licking your wounds," for example, is a common phrase that reflects the truth that there is something in an illness that heals, if you will but incorporate that into your life. In my dream, the Old Man used booze as a lure to teach the secret of the healing power of woundedness.

I recalled that the god of dream incubation, Asklepios, was regarded as the archetypal "wounded healer," and then I realized that the method for dream incubation that I had so laboriously constructed was prefigured in my own 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 had been profoundly mistaken to have assumed that it was my cleverness to have designed this experimental ritual, for 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, all along my dream had been solving my problem without me knowing it. The synchronistic timing of my recall of my old 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. These realizations cleared away my inhibitions, and I went ahead with my plan. I announced the availability of the tent and began a program of research that was quite successful in demonstrating the continued operation of the mystery of dream incubation (Reed, 1976b).

My story of how I came to value my alcoholism is one of amazing grace, marked by lucky moments of recollection, fostered by several sources of helpful support, culminating in a double-barreled surprise of meaning. I now see the purpose of my drinking in the following way. It came to rescue me from a one-sided existence. 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. When I reflected upon my "reasons" for drinking, I recalled that I always felt that life was too "concrete," and that I was always "scraping my knee" against the hard realities. I found drinking to be a protective lubricant. Just as I had rejected the necessity of suffering, and had avoided it, so had I rejected the value of the Old Man's "food." But in time, the drink brought me face to face with my wounded knees, made me acknowledge the inescapability of my dependency, and made me give proper recognition to the importance of its spiritual basis. Rather than attempt to conquer life through power, like the willful captain of a motor boat, I now feel more comfortable as a skipper of a sail boat, utterly dependent upon the spirit of the winds and the moods of mother nature. I continually revalue my alcoholism as an affliction of the "gods" that only they can relieve. As Jung (1974) wrote in his famous letter to Bill W., the founder of AA, "spiritus contra spiritum," it is pitting spirit against spirits. I was wounded by the spirits and I was healed by them. What I have learned from alcoholism I share with others, in my counseling, as I help them accept the healing power of their own woundedness.

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Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging.

Proverbs 20:1

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