

Dreaming With Bear

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Abstract

Lucid dreaming continues to be a source of personal, spiritual, and scientific interest, curiosity and even obsession. In the backdrop of these diverse efforts and foci, a more ancient connection between lucid dreaming (spontaneous or induced) deserves renewed scholarly interest. Specifically, there is anthropological evidence that lucid dreaming (dreams in general) had specific biosemiotic and ecopsychological functions, at least when it came to shamanism and other healing arts. Even though Paul Shepard (1993/2007)¹ does not use the terms above, he does use the word *kenning* which suggests an intimate biosemiotic journey and cognitive positive feedback loop between our experiences in nature, how we interpret and express these experiences, and their ultimate psychological impact, which includes dreaming “big dreams.” Thus, lucid dreaming is one more meaning-system within a grander biosemiotic coda which integrates our intimate learning of natural history with a psychological orientation that must adjust to these real and natural demands—an ecopsychology. Lucid dreaming remains an ancient door to a Paleolithic mind disturbed and confused by its synthetic and meaning-less modern surroundings.

¹ Paul Shepard (1999/2007). The Biological Basis of Bear Mythology and Ceremonialism. *The Trumpeter*, 23 (2), 74-79.

“I hack
a ravine in his thigh, and eat and drink,
and tear him down his whole length
and open him and climb in
and close him up after me, against the wind,
and sleep.”

--From Galway Kinnell's poem, *The Bear*²

Introduction

As I make my final revisions to this paper, my wife tells me of an incident with a wild cougar prowling the Chicago suburbs this past April 14. The confused and accosted cat was finally shot by a group of policemen. According to one of the five policemen who cornered the “wild beast” in a blind courtyard, it had to be shot, deadly force had to be used, because it “threatened us.” What else would a cornered and outnumbered beast do but growl and show its teeth? Thus, the big cat was perceived to be another outlaw or undesirable. The realization that in its wildness this cougar was bringing natural order into civilized chaos was obviously missed—as if in an urban and proper dream, the cat was merely an interruption of senseless, torpid sleep where nothing of significance ever happens, but when it does, it is viewed as a threat to urban passivity.

As a point of ecopsychological contrast, and without accusing the unfortunate cougar of any wrongdoing, but connecting its apparition to criminality nevertheless, to the extent that the human, homicidal lunatic perceives caricatures or veneers rather than full-fledged humanity, s/he has little compunction in unloading an automatic assault weapon onto innocent bystanders.

This paper employs, as the title suggests, the metaphor “dreaming with bear” to signify a persistent call from the depths of our psyche inviting projection, rejection, transmutation, assimilation, rejuvenation, identification, or transpersonalization into “the other.” To the extent that big cats or bears are fears at the margins of torpid and “civilized” consciousness rather than authentic aspects of an incorporated (digested even) Self, then we, as the human animal, will find it increasingly difficult to transcend or peel away the myriad of veneered personas being invented and imposed upon us by a decaying society. Poetry can sometimes convey the sense of nature alienation or estrangement, the crisis that marks the ethos of our civilized selves.

The opening stanza by Galway Kinnell, part of his well-known poem entitled *The Bear*,³ describes the hunting and dream journeys of an Inuit hunter and, finally, its transpersonalization into bear consciousness and nature. The Inuit hunter falls asleep in the insides of the dam-bear he had “hacked” into, then dreams while identifying with the very act of being hunted as a bear:

² Galway Kinnell, (1982). *Selected Poems*. Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Company. Pp. 93

³ Galway Kinnell, (1982). *Selected Poems*. Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Company. Pp. 92-94

And dream
of lumbering flatfooted
over tundra,
stabbed twice from within,
splattering a trail behind me,
splattering it out no matter which way I lurch,
no matter which parabola of bear-transcendence,
which dance of solitude I attempt.
which gravity-clutched leap,
which trudge, which groan.

At the end of the poem both transmutation and transpersonalization occur with the following and lasting ecopsychological insight:

the rest of my days I spend
wandering: wondering
what, anyway,
was the tick infusion, that rank flavor of blood, that
poetry by which I lived?

In a keen analysis of the same poem, Richard J. Calhoun⁴ addresses the very point that will be made in the next section and was summarized in the previous abstract, namely, that the *kennings* of authentic and sustainable hunting is part of an intimate biosemiotic journey and cognitive positive feedback loop between our experiences in nature, how we interpret and express these experiences, and their ultimate psychological impact, which includes dreaming “big dreams.”⁵ Dreaming, and specifically lucid dreaming, is one more meaning-system within a grander biosemiotic coda which integrates our intimate learning of natural history with a psychological orientation that must adjust to these real and natural demands—an ecopsychology. Calhoun writes of this poem:

The bear’s body is inhabited by the poet through an act of regression, a return to his origins. The poem develops into an account of the death of the ego in the poet. His exclusively human identity is transformed. The speaker has confirmed that he too “belongs to the wild darkness,” but he has also unearthed a new and regenerative vitality.

It is perhaps no literary fancy that Kinnell shares the transpersonal journey of an Inuit hunter, his journey being part of an established and well-researched circumpolar and boreal shamanic tradition where lucid dreaming is central to psychological transformation. Kinnell, the poet, dreams up a hunter dreaming a bear, and of a bear dreaming herself through the hunter. The poet too wishes to be transformed or is, truly, during his imaginative insight. Finally, the reader too is invited to at least imagine that this transformation could take place.

⁴ Richard J. Calhoun (1992). Galway Kinnell. New York: Twayne Publishers. Pp. 60-70.

⁵ Lucid dreams

A Fragment of a Fragment of Another Fragment

Another literary critic, Cary Nelson,⁶ remarked that *The Bear* “is a poem about American consciousness in search of its true body.” I think its theme is more universal than that. I may add that the poem is equally about any nature-alienated or estranged consciousness, not only in search of its true body, but of its dreaming world as well. Kinnell’s poem would not have gained in significance, would be incomplete, without the hunter’s dream journey. The poem would not be as viscerally eminent if the hunter did not carve a body to be used as a primal, even vaginal space for the dreaming journey. To accept the poem as written is to agree that Kinnell is aware of a Paleolithic or ancient mind that did not separate body from hunting, from dreaming, from eating, from defecating—all functions were one. Again:

I hack
a ravine in his thigh, and eat and drink,
and tear him down his whole length
and open him and climb in
and close him up after me, against the wind,
and sleep.

Certainly, the dead and carved body of the dam-bear is only one fragment of consciousness. By itself, it is not sufficient to invite a revelation just like the carcass of a wild cougar lying dead in a forgotten and alienating city informs nothing beyond shock, repugnance, or relief. The fragment that counts is the integration between the *kenning* of some authentic and mindful action, its dreaming, and the return trip to the original act seen in a new light—a transforming one. The complete consciousness-full journey only superficially seems to linger on the sacramental and digestive act while temporarily omitting incense, sinning, singing, redemption, salvation, pain, a church, a church state, dependency, obedience, and a central savior who insists on an ever after away from the terrestrial. Equally, a dream can be a fragment and only a fragment without drinking or spilling the blood.

It is now that ecopsychology, not just merely psychology, as an intervention or an investigation, becomes most useful. Ecopsychology is after the integration of all the fragments. More importantly, ecopsychology is interested in the full integration and realization in/with Nature. Kinnell’s imaginary Inuit hunter awakens to a specific insight after his dream:

I awaken I think: Marshlights
reappear, geese
come trailing again up the flyway.

⁶ Cary Nelson (1981). *Our Last First Poets: Vision and History in Contemporary American Poetry*. Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois.

After enlightenment the chair is a chair and something more—the soul of a tree, the laughter of a whale. The Self is not the ego but a bear or the bloody turd of a bear.⁷ Geese still fly, yes, but how they fly! Dreaming, like digestion, is an important function of the totality of Self. Dreaming may be even more important than juices flowing at regular intervals. Ecopsychologically speaking, night after night, dreaming, and for a few fortunate souls, lucid dreaming, can be a catapult for total consciousness, and always, an opportunity for integrative insight.

The mind-body becoming needs constant reminding of a connection with an ancient past when crucial lessons were coded in chemistry, long ago. The nail in the coffin, the final act, the strand of hair that breaks the camel's back, the authenticity that confirms beyond the mundane and prosaic is a dream.

A full semiotic circle that informs at all levels, looping unto itself in noetic iteration, is only possible when dreaming and awakening, and waking up, and dancing in/with nature, and intending a dream are interlaced in Self reinforcing cycles.

Conclusion

Paul Shepard,⁸ citing work related to how dream content changes developmentally, wrote that dreaming about animals is “nurturant among small children because animals are already synonymous with the mind's drive to find order and the heart's desire to affirm given reality.” If so, in addition to their important thematic and cognitive function, these experiences form part of a larger semiosis of which the spoken word is only one of many substantial *kennings* that shape a nascent intelligence. Lucid dreaming can be a powerful experiential singularity of this total semiotic coda owned by the individual on the way to interpreting inner and outer universes, the latter forever unfolding as processes rather than mere static or passive experiences.

When these experiences and their need for interpretation occur as part of an authentic intimation with Nature, while learning or deploying the authentic *kennings* associated with effectively maturing in a 24/7 ecological ethos, then we can speak of *biosemiosis* relating an unfolding ecological Self back to its origins. Ideally, this is a perpetual psyche machine where dreams are lubricating an ongoing ecopsychological unfolding. The lucid dream, more than any other experience (other than hunting, gathering, chanting, dancing, eating, or sex) establishes a link to a Paleolithic mind when it was less disturbed and confused by the synthetic and knew not of meaning-less modern surroundings, when it knew that the “others” were at least role models for imitable behaviors that could have induced a transforming shift in consciousness.

⁷ The 3rd stanza of Kinnell's *The Bear*: “On the third day I begin to starve, at nightfall I bend down as knew I would at a turd sopped in blood, and hesitate, and pick it up, and thrust it in my mouth, and gnash it down, and rise and go on running.”

⁸ Paul Shepard (1996). *The others: How Animals Made Us Human*. Covelo, CA: Shearwater Books. Pg. 76.

