

## *Dream Time*

### **Crow Woman, A Dream Messenger**

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I have just completed a book (Gackenbach, in press) about a Canadian Native woman who died four years ago at age 49. The undercurrent of the story of this remarkable woman is how her death was in part a product (socially and culturally) of what's happened to the First Peoples of Canada. Crow Woman was caught between two worlds - the Cree culture in which she was raised and the Western culture which surrounded and dominated her life. Her quandary was finding a balance between these worlds. The paradox of her finally attaining psychological health and in the last weeks of her life profound spiritual transcendence, at the time of her physical bodies disintegration is a story which is in some ways characteristic of North American Natives today. Crow Woman's life echoes the extremes in Native communities: the existence of bodily illness in the mentally healthy; histories of violence/abuse paralleling states of spiritual ecstasy; and a pattern of family and community obligations and support in the context of a larger culture which stresses individualism. Whereas many in the dominant white culture seem clustered in the hill of the normal distribution curve, Aboriginals cluster at both ends at once. Raised in a dysfunctional family and repeating the pattern in her adult life, as have her children, Crow Woman became involved in the recovery movement through individual and group work and successfully recovered from alcoholism and drug addiction. She herself became a counselor. The hundreds of people at her funeral and constant stream of visitors during her last weeks attested to the success of her personal efforts at helping other Natives to recover from their own histories of addiction, violence, and abuse. At the time she was diagnosed with cancer, she was deeply committed to her culture's traditional beliefs and practices. Despite a grim prognosis, she rejected surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy as culturally inconsistent. Instead she immediately turned to the "Old Man", an 82-year-old shaman who speaks six Native languages. She lived with his family, fasting, using poultices and herbal/root remedies the Old Man prepared, and taking sweats to purge the cancer from her body. As was her personal goal, the telling of Crow Woman's story strives for understanding and integration of the extremes in life. By looking at these extremes we are able to see the full range of human experience into which we are all thrown. Her shaman spoke to this during a sweat in Crow Woman's honor after her death. The Old Man explained that you

need suffering because you can only teach from your own suffering. Crow Woman suffered psychologically throughout her life and physically in the end of her life. She rose above it, not through denial, but rather through deep self awareness and thus the integration of her psychological and physical suffering made her and makes her a great teacher.

### Dream Messenger After Death

The story of Crow Woman does not end with her death. Because of the sensitivity of the Cree for dreams and their belief that dreams are the "place" where one receives "visits" from those who have passed on, Crow Woman has continued to be a major influence in the lives of those close to her. Her messages are not always welcome or immediately understood but their impact is clear. Here are a few excerpts from my forthcoming book, "The Traditional Death of Crow Woman" (Gackenbach, in press) which illustrate her dream role. When Crow Woman's cousin, Jessy, went to sleep she was feverish to point of almost delirious. And when she woke the dream was vivid and compelling. In it Crow Woman told her distant cousin to sit down, "There are some messages I have to tell you that you have to pass on to people". Jessy was reluctant but Crow Woman insisted. When Jessy woke she thought, I am not doing this. When I asked this young Native woman what her resistance was about, Jessy said the messages were like Crow Woman, straight forward and direct. Jessy also felt, why me? First of all she and Crow Woman did not get along that well before Crow Woman died and despite being a family member, Jessy was kind of new to the family dynamics having been raised in another province. So when she asked Crow Woman in the dream, "why me", it was because I know you will tell them. Then Crow Woman told her cousin the messages. One was for the Old Man's Wife, who was an elder herself to which this heavy set Cree woman, replied, "there is no way I can tell Jen that. The grandfathers were telling Crow Woman that Jen had to heal her psychological garbage before she could represent them in the teachings. If she didn't the people would have a hard time hearing the true teachings. It was a lot for a young Native woman to pass onto an elder. Then Crow Woman told Jessy, you know you've got one coming too. Jessy mumbled, Yea, I kind of figured I did. Her message was that Jessy had to get over her pettiness. You have a lot of work to do and we don't have time for you to be petty. "It just hit me like a sledge hammer." Although she knew she was capable of being petty, she had worked very hard to hide those inner thoughts from others. It was a deeply secret part of herself. In fact, when Jessy told me I too was surprised as I had known her well for almost four years and pettiness was the last thing I would have thought about Jessy. It was indeed well hidden. Jessy's reaction to what Crow Woman said is indicative of the perception that is widely spread in Crow Woman's family. The dream comes from out there and is NOT simply internal unresolved personal issues. With my western scientific hat, I might say, "of course Crow Woman knew about your pettiness because it was your dream thus it was simply you telling yourself about yourself". But to say that to Jessy or to any of the family members about many, but not all, of their

dream experiences of Crow Woman would be to strip them of their meaning, source, and importance. As I conducted the interviews for this book gradually I found it easier to think of their experiences as somehow otherworldly. It is clear to me that this view of reality is one that I struggle with sharing yet deeply respect. The subtleties of their appreciation of the dream and its spiritual aspects has also emerged in research I have been conducting with Don Kuiken on cultural differences in dream experiences. Whereas, EuroCanadians clump the spiritual with the personal aspects of their dreams, Native American Canadians conceptualize them as separate dream types (Gackenbach, Kuiken, 1995).

### Mothering Her Children from Death

About three years after Crow Woman died her eldest son, Wil, and his common-law wife, Carla, separated. Carla and their children had moved to a downstairs apartment. At 28 years of age, this tall young man is not only good looking and well built but he has a personal presence that makes many a woman's head turn which may have been instrumental in their separation. A day after the separation Wil had a powerful dream of his mother. The room where Wil slept seemed so empty without the baby's crib and the other things that make a home with children seem so much a home. He had taken in a roommate who slept in the same room. The roommate liked to sleep with the window open and Wil felt quite cold that night as he fell asleep. He dreamed that he was with his mother and his older sister, Shelly. There was only us three through that whole dream and we were quite simply having fun". He continued, "I can remember us joking around, having fun, actually being happy. It's nothing I felt before. He wished he had written it down but the thing that stood out the most for him was how "happy, really, really, happy they were. It was like she was alive, it wasn't now, it wasn't like it was before. It was like it [would have been] now [and mom and] Shelly were with me and we were having fun. It wasn't something that has to be explained. We were close. It was a sign for me that that is how it would be if she was here. Then he awoke. "It was dark, it was cold, and it was dead silent. I felt so scared. I couldn't go to sleep. I couldn't move. It was totally different. It was like I was pulled from good to evil." He was so scared that he could not sleep. So he got up and went downstairs to his wives apartment. I went into the bedroom and I [picked up] my daughter and hugged her. Everything in that room downstairs was so opposite of what it was upstairs. If you can ever understand what love feels like that was it." He cried for about 10 or 15 minutes while his tiny daughter stroked his head. "It was almost like my mother was saying 'what are you doing up there, you should be downstairs with your family.' I did not try to understand why that happened or why those emotions were so strong. . . . It felt like she pushed me, she made me, she was there, I know she was there. He pointed out that ordinarily he would not have gotten out of bed and sought out his wife and child because of his pride.

Dream Interpretation: Scientific Reductionist or Native Realism

As with his cousin Jessy's story of a dream message from Crow Woman, Wil's story can also be easily reduced to internal psychological mechanisms interacting with previous real life events in order to create the dream. As a scientifically trained psychologist it is easy for me to use such reductionistic thinking when faced with such stories including my own. Not only do I stay within the accepted limits of my science but also the limits of my cultures view of reality. Yet, I would be doing Wil and Jessy a disservice if I were to approach their dreams in this fashion. Further, I would be doing both my professional and personal self a disservice. In the cases of these young Native people it wasn't the dreams per se that caused their actions rather it was their belief about the reality of the source of the dream which resulted in the powerful impact of the dreams and the actions that were subsequently taken. Jessy could be petty and Wil knew he could be prideful. In Jessy's case it was very well hidden, if she believed that the dream was only her inner self acting on the minds play ground, she may have been impacted by it but I doubt to the extent that she was. Jessy only told the messages after struggling for several days and finally lost her voice. It would have been easy to have contextualized the message of her dream with her waking rational voice as, "well, there may be truth to these messages but I have no right to say these things to these people. I have no right to represent Crow Woman who I didn't even get along with. So too for Wil, upon awakening if he didn't have the belief system he had in the reality of the presence of his mother his waking pride may have kept him in bed. But Jessy's belief that Crow Woman came from the spirit world of the dead to deliver these messages from the grandfathers via Jessy was so deep, that by not doing it she lost her voice. Only when she began to deliver the messages did her voice return. So too, Wil's belief in the reality of the visitation caused him to take an action which resulted in the purging of some deeply held hurts as his daughter and his wife looked on. So for me as a western psychologist to say, well, that's all well and good but you're just deluding yourself, after all its all make believe, is to strip the experience of it's importance. I would be placing the same ethnocentrism on these young Cree people as my ancestors did on their ancestors. I've learned enough from my science as well as my own experiences to say I'm not so sure anymore. I prefer to be a critical thinker and much prefer, nay NEED, my ontology, but also I increasingly suspect I'm missing something. Thus although I retain doubts about the spiritual reality of the many dreams of Crow Woman which the family has experienced, I also wonder about their foundation being solely psychological.

#### Reference

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