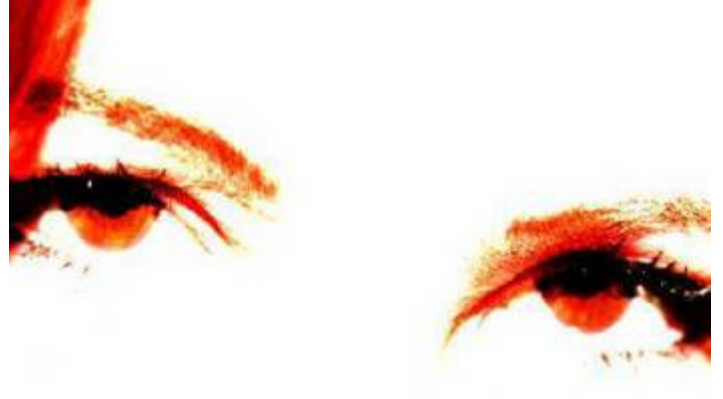


# Dreaming the Family Spirit: Intergenerational Shared Dreams

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One morning late in 1994, I woke from a dream which, if it was not a nightmare, came very close to it. I was still shaking. At the end of the dream, I was being chased by a red-haired, shape changer named Sheena.



This was a complex dream, which began with me meeting a well-dressed career reporter named Sheena in the audience of a lecture I was giving. It was only later that I discovered she was a shape changer, who was on her way to California.

I seldom have nightmares, but I was not surprised at the timing of this one. Up in Michigan, my mother was in a nursing home following a fall. I planned to leave that day to visit her, making time in an already busy schedule.

On my desk was a note to call my niece Carol, to give her an update on my plans. Carol is my sister's daughter, and the two of us have been friends since I heard her say at age four to my mother: "Gramma, do you remember when I was the mommie and you were the little girl?" Despite the laughter from my mother and sister, the look I saw in my niece's eyes was infinitely wise.

Carol and I often share conversations about dreams, so it was not unusual for me to comment in my phone call to her that I had awakened that morning from a really powerful dream about a dream character named Sheena who was a shape changer—and was traveling to California, where Carol lived. I laughed, expecting her to laugh along with me.

Instead there was a long silence on the other end of the line.

“Is this person a redhead?” my niece finally asked. “Like with shoulder-length hair, kind of curly? Oh yeah, I’ve dreamed her.”

As a dream researcher who had conducted a multitude of experiments to determine whether people could intentionally share dreams, I should not have been surprised at this pleasant little synchronicity, but my mind shivered to attention. Who was this Sheena character, and why was my niece dreaming her along with me?

I put these questions aside to prepare for my flight to Michigan. My mother was experiencing some difficulties with delirium and disorientation (later traced to contraindicative medications), so there was good reason for concern. Her advanced age, and the Parkinson’s she had suffered with for years, left her in an already fragile condition.

When I arrived late in the day, there was little time to visit with my mother before her bed time, so I said only a brief hello. She brightened at my being there, and our conversation seemed ordinary enough for me to wonder whether the nursing staff’s concerns had been exaggerated.



However, the next morning I arrived at the nursing home before my mother awoke.

“She’s been sleeping a lot more than usual,” an aide whispered to me in the doorway to my mother’s room. “And she’s disoriented when she wakes up. Talks about people coming into her room. You might want to wake her up. It’s almost time for her breakfast.”

I stood by my mother’s bed, watching her familiar face as she slept, watching the rise and fall of her chest. Suddenly her eyes opened wide, bright with terror.

“Are they here?” she asked.

Startled, I looked around. “Is who here, Mom?”

“I can’t tell you. They’re the ones who set the fires.”

There was no recognition in her face of who I was or what I might be doing there.

But I captured her gaze. “Who is it?” I asked. “What are they doing?”

“I can’t tell you. They’ll punish me.” But she tugged at my arm to pull me closer. “I’ve never told anyone,” she said in a conspiratorial whisper.

“It’s Sheena and Michael and Jennifer Freed. They set the fires. They live in there.” Her eyes made a quick glance out the window toward the nursing home’s laundry facility nearby.

At this, she pulled herself up on her elbows and reached for the pad she kept on her bedside table.

“They write the scripts for the next day,” she said, showing me a page in her own script with a trailing line at the end where she had fallen asleep.

Needless to say, my mind was reverberating like a struck gong with the discovery that the shape-changing character from my dream, the same character apparently shared by my niece Carol, was also living in the laundry room of my mother’s nursing home facility, setting fires and writing scripts for the next day!

In itself, this triply-shared dream would have been strange enough to qualify for the strange-dream category, even if it had not continued. But it did.

Long after my mother’s medications were adjusted to relieve her symptoms of delusion and paranoia, and even

after my mother's death, my niece Carol and I continued to dream of Sheena—a changing Sheena, who seemed to be maturing. We both puzzled over this, and began calling Sheena the family spirit.

Then a few years ago, when Carol's daughter Shannon was nine, she asked her mother one morning: "Do you know someone, a woman with red hair? She was in my dream last night...."

And with that, another family member, another daughter, joined the members of my family dreaming of Sheena.

Prior to my initial dream, I had never considered the name Sheena. I knew there was a superhero character by that name currently featured in a Saturday morning kid show series, but I had never seen the show. Nor had Carol, who admitted to a similar lack of interest in the name. My mother, whose attention to television extended only to the news, which she watched religiously at six and eleven, had never heard of the name; nor had Shannon, who has continued to dream the family spirit along with her mother, and occasionally, me.

At the level of symbolic meaning, there are many significant pieces of information that can be derived from Sheena's visits to my dreams, just as there are from other aspects of the dream state. Both Carol and I have worked with Sheena-as-symbol in a wide variety of ways. In that sense, Sheena has been a useful dream character. She has taught us quite a lot about ourselves, both as individuals and as members of a particular family.

Yet there is another aspect of Sheena which naturally raises questions. What sort of dream character appears repeatedly in the dreams of multiple members of the same family? Is there a long-term shared reason for this happening? Are there other families who share these types of experiences?

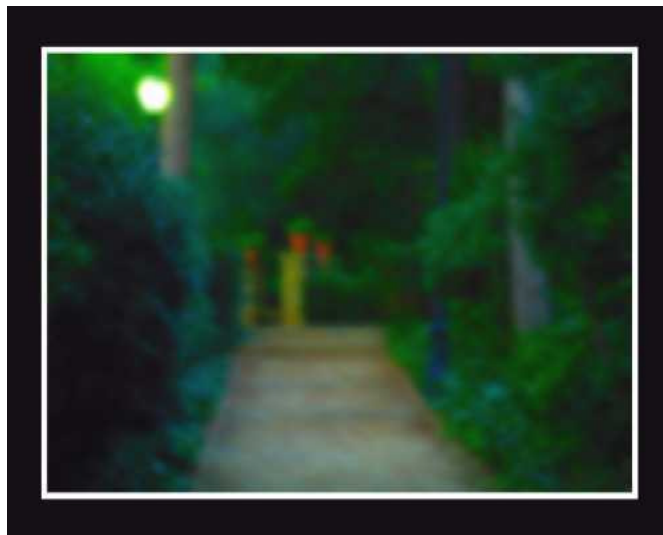
I have been doing shared dreaming research for over twenty-five years now. For my book *Group Dreaming: Dreams to the Tenth Power*, published in 2006, I researched the literature available on family dreams quite exhaustively, only to discover that very little has been written on the subject.

Despite the fact that researchers in the area of mutual or shared dreams tend to agree that spontaneous mutual dreaming most frequently occurs between partners, in families, and among others who share physical sleep space, the literature on dreaming contains no examples of intergenerational dreaming that I have found.

For that is what these Sheena dreams might be called: intergenerational, occurring among the female members of a family over four known generations.

I have to wonder if—as was true of mutual dreaming when I first began my research, or like lucid dreaming around that same time period—dream researchers might deny that these dreams exist simply because we have not asked the right questions.

So I am asking you—presenters, volunteers, participants in this year’s PsiberDreaming Conference—to help me answer these questions:



Does your family dream together in the way I’ve described, or something resembling it? Do you have a tale to tell? I’m betting on the possibility that, like me, you might have encountered a few shared family dreams; and that maybe (like me) you haven’t talked about them for lack of a word to describe them.

I invite you to tell your intergenerational family dreaming stories here. Maybe together we will learn something.