

**Things That Mattered to Monte:  
Dreams, Authenticity, and the Proper Role of "Professionalism" in  
Dream Work**

Deborah Hillman

Among the healing gifts that Montague Ullman left behind, his dream work process has had the furthest reach. I first met Monte when he lectured about it at The New School for Social Research, during my grad student days in anthropology. It was 1979, and Monte was in his 60s, having pursued a varied professional path to arrive at dream work. *Working with Dreams*<sup>i</sup> was just coming out, and few had encountered his method. His talk, that evening, served as my introduction. In it, Monte described the dream group process that he had developed, and spoke of our cultural bias regarding dreams. His hope (as he wrote to me many years later<sup>ii</sup>) was to make "our dream life a cultural asset," instead of the wasted resource it had become. Dream work, for Monte, was truly a calling, and he was devoted to it. The love that he felt for his work was an inspiration. Nearly three decades after we met—just short of his ninetieth birthday—he sent me a letter reflecting on how it happened. He wrote of the many roads he had taken prior to finding his passion, and discovering that the "mystery of dreams was closest to [his] heart."

From hypnosis and psychosomatic effects, strokes and the personality changes they entail, the response of warts to suggestion, psychoanalysis via the cultural school and finally becoming a community psychiatrist & researching dream telepathy—all this until I finally discovered what I was put on this earth for—turning people on to their own dream life. [S]ort of going up many roads before finding the right one at the age of 57 where I finally felt at home with myself and could use whatever ability I had. In other words I found joy in the work I was doing.<sup>iii</sup>

Monte's lecture that night, in lower Manhattan, struck a deep chord.

Within a few weeks I became a participant observer in one of his dream groups, sensing that what he was doing with dreams was anthropologically significant.<sup>iv</sup> The "Ullman method," as it's sometimes called, releases the dream from its clinical constraints and makes its "forgotten language"<sup>v</sup> accessible to dreamers. It was designed to bring to light the metaphors inherent in dreams, and in so doing to protect the emotional safety and well-being of the dreamer.

Making sure that the dreamer felt safe was very important to Monte, and he saw it as something that had to be learned and practiced. He knew that, to bring into public view the private imagery of dreams, entailed tremendous courage and vulnerability. Thus, although he returned the dream to the dreamer—its rightful authority, the dream group leader was tasked with avoiding the pitfalls that might interfere. The leadership role is not a

clinical one (nor is it hierarchical), but it does require a level of expertise, as Monte conceived it.

That issue became an increasing concern for him, toward the end of his life, and he hoped that I'd help to bring it to wider attention. I see no better way to begin than to let him speak for himself, and then to elaborate on it as best I can. He raised his concern in a letter to me after reading a chapter<sup>vi</sup> I'd written, one describing the dream work movement in this country.

Many thanks for sending me the chapter.[...] I hope you will try to get it into a venue that will reach the people who are doing dream work in the United States.<sup>vii</sup> The problem of safety and honesty in the continuing spread of dream groups is one that concerns me greatly. I don't want it to go in the direction of professional "professionalism" but there is a problem of false claims to competence. I know of many instances of people who have had one training workshop with me[,] and claim to use my method to charge for their services[,] and who I feel were not ready to set themselves up as "professionals" in the only meaningful way the public thinks of the term professional—someone whose training and background warrants a fee for service. My books are geared to the public in the hope of their starting dream work with friends[,] and if they wanted to go public to learn more about the problems [of] management that arise in the course of dream work.

Your chapter raises important issues that should come to the attention of the "dream" public.<sup>viii</sup>

The passage to which the letter refers addresses the term *professional*, which takes on particular meanings in the context of dream work. I wrote that

In dreamwork circles, the word *professional* is commonly used in two ways. In one sense, it refers, *collectively*, to clinicians and dream researchers—scholars, scientists, therapists, and others, whose work encompasses dreams. It is also used, however, to refer *exclusively* to therapists, thus distinguishing clinicians from non-clinicians. This latter meaning is the one implied by the phrase, "de-professionalizing the dream."<sup>ix</sup>

There is an element of irony, then, that as dreams become more "public," a new, non-clinical dreamwork professional is emerging. This new breed of practitioner ("nonprofessional," in traditional parlance) engages in some form of fee-for-service dreamwork. Included in this category are dream-group leadership, one-to-one dreamwork counseling, and dream education in classroom and workshop settings. Since formal dreamwork training programs were entirely nonexistent, the role took shape in peer-guided, self-styled ways. Most — if not all — of these dreamwork practitioners have college (or graduate) degrees, and all are experienced with dreams on a personal level. (Nowadays, dreamwork courses are finding their way into formal curricula, for example in conjunction with programs in consciousness studies.)

Dream groups are frequently organized and led by these new professional dreamworkers, but other kinds of arrangements exist, as well. Along with dream groups led by members of the new professional genre, are groups whose leaders *do* have clinical training. Both of these types can involve a fee, but many dream groups do not—instead they are offered by laypersons, free of charge. Furthermore, one can find leaderless peer groups meeting without fees, as well as groups that rotate the leadership role. With all of these permutations in form, the question necessarily arises, what do we mean when we speak of a *grassroots* dream group?

I would suggest that community-based dream groups,

organized by and for laypeople, constitute grassroots efforts within the movement. A “layperson” is a dreamwork practitioner who has not had clinical training, even if she or he practices dreamwork professionally. Such groups run the gamut from those that are leaderless, informal, and free, to those that are led by the newly defined professionals, for a fee. Still, reserving the “grassroots” label for groups that fit this description is not to deny that clinicians have helped to further the grassroots cause.

So Monte's intention not to go in the direction of "professional 'professionalism'" refers to the fact that his dream group process is not a clinical method, but rather a means by which ordinary dreamers can learn to appreciate dreams. Still, for Monte, the matter of charging a fee is far from trivial, steeped as it is in questions of expectation. To charge for a service implies a level of skill on the part of the provider, including an ability to handle the various problems that might arise. Monte felt that, in order to acquire such skill as a dream group leader, one would need not only an adequate training, but also experience.

Over the years, he offered dream group leadership training workshops, held at his peaceful home in Ardsley, New York. They were a chance not only to spend a long weekend working with dreams, but also to learn the art of leading dream groups—Monte style. On several occasions, I had the good fortune of being involved in those gatherings (first as an anthropology student exploring the dream work movement, and then as a

colleague, friend, and fellow dreamer). They were an opportunity, too, to deepen my connection with Monte, and to witness the qualities of spirit he brought to dream work.

One of those qualities—a firm belief in the healing power of honesty—runs like a thread through Monte's life and work. It comes into play in his sense of the dream, itself, as a bearer of emotional truth, and also in his abiding wish to uphold professional standards. Monte's concern was not to prevent other leaders from charging a fee, but rather to insure that those who hang out a shingle (and charge for their services) have a solid, reliable grasp of the process.

Unlike many dream work methods that flourish in the dream work movement, Monte's is highly structured, and the leadership function is meant to preserve the integrity of the process, itself, as well as protect the dreamer's emotional safety. Dreams can offer a shining window onto the world of feeling, but in order to make those truths our own, and live with authenticity, we need to practice the art of waking honesty. Monte expected "professional" dream group leaders (who charge a fee) to base their work on an honest self-assessment. Doing so (in every sphere of life, professional and otherwise) can help to mend the fragmentation that Monte so poignantly spoke of, and to strengthen our sense of what he called "species

connectedness." Thus, for those who seek to further his work in various contexts, nurturing a spirit of integrity and wholeness is integral to those efforts.

Monte—who felt that he found his deepest purpose in his fifties—encouraged and supported the authenticity of others. His gift for discovering the resonance between, and among, many different ideas, contributed to his own original thinking. He was a private person, at heart (strikingly reticent at times), but made no attempt to hide his vulnerability. Although he possessed a quiet, unassuming strength and confidence, he was not immune to occasional shyness. It often appeared in settings that clashed with his gentleness and sense of decorum, but it wasn't enough to dampen his knack for humor.

Once, in the 1980s, he was a guest on a radio show, one whose exuberance far outweighed its propensity for thoughtful discussion. Not wanting to go it alone, he asked me to come along, despite my own misgivings about the adventure. There we were, two captive souls, making the best of it all; fielding questions on déjà-vu and assorted side roads of dreaming. When it was over, and we were ecstatic to find ourselves out in the hall, Monte turned to me with an impish grin. "That was an *expérience*,"

he proclaimed (emphasizing the French), and I've made good use of the expression ever since.

My friendship with Monte was not an *expérience*, but a heartfelt experience—one that enriched my life in countless ways. I did not agree with him at each and every turn, but always felt a deep respect for who he was as a person, and the mirror he gave us to witness our own humanity. Late in his life, when physicist David Bohm was on his mind, he wrote to me about the affinity between them. "I think in Bohmian terms," he declared, and then went on to explain:

The implicate order is an order of wholeness—holographic in structure. [...] It is a kind of universal unconscious out of which all matter—inorganic, organic, sentient (including human consciousness) arises. The implicate order not only creates matter [but] it also sustains matter. We cannot get at the implicate order directly. We get into it through dreams, art, play, and love. We are authentic when we experience it and ego-driven when we don't.<sup>x</sup>

And that is surely the crux of what mattered to Monte.

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## NOTES

<sup>i</sup> Montague Ullman and Nan Zimmerman, *Working with Dreams* (Los Angeles: Jeremy Tarcher), 1979.

<sup>ii</sup> Letter of November 23, 1993.

<sup>iii</sup> Letter of July 19, 2006.

<sup>iv</sup> See "Dream Work and Field Work: Linking Cultural Anthropology and the Current Dream Work Movement" in Montague Ullman and Claire Limmer, eds., *The Variety of Dream Experience*, Second Edition (Albany, NY: SUNY Press), 1999.

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<sup>v</sup> Monte borrowed the term "forgotten language" from Erich Fromm.

<sup>vi</sup> The chapter, entitled "The Emergence of the Dreamwork Movement in the United States," was later published in Stanley Krippner and Debbie Joffe Ellis, eds., *Perchance to Dream: The Frontiers of Dream Psychology* (New York: Nova Science Publishers), 2009.

<sup>vii</sup> The chapter was originally intended for a Spanish translation published in Chile. (Two previous versions had already come out in English.)

<sup>viii</sup> Letter of February 28, 2005.

<sup>ix</sup> See Montague Ullman, "On Relearning the Forgotten Language: De-professionalizing the Dream," *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 18, 1982, pp. 153-59.

<sup>x</sup> Letter of February 10, 2006 (parentheses added).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Deborah Hillman has worked as a cultural and clinical anthropologist, and currently paints in her studio in Vermont. Her long and fruitful friendship with Monte began when she was in graduate school and lasted until the end of Monte's life.