

## URSULA K. LE GUIN

### Social Dreaming of the Frin

*NOTE: Much of the information for this piece comes from An Oneirological Survey on the Frinthian Plane, published by Mills College Press, and from conversations with Frinthian scholars and friends.*

On the Frinthian plane, dreams are not private property. A troubled Frin has no need to lie on a couch recounting dreams to a psychoanalyst, for the doctor already knows what the patient dreamed last night, because the doctor dreamed it too; and the patient also dreamed what the doctor dreamed; and so did everyone else in the neighborhood.

To escape from the dreams of others or to have a private, a secret dream, the Frin must go out alone into the wilderness. And even in the wilderness, their sleep may be invaded by the strange dream visions of lions, antelope, bears, or mice.

While awake, and during much of their sleep, the Frin are as dream-deaf as we are. Only sleepers who are in or approaching REM sleep can participate in the dreams of others also in REM sleep.

REM is an acronym for “rapid eye movement,” a visible accompaniment of this stage of sleep; its signal in the brain is a characteristic type of electroencephalic wave. Most of our rememberable dreams occur during REM sleep.

Frinthian REM sleep and that of people on our plane yield very similar EEG traces, though there are some significant differences, in which may lie the key to the Frinthian ability to share dreams.

To share, the dreamers must be fairly close to one another. The carrying power of the average Frinthian dream is about that of the average human voice. A dream can be received easily within a hundred-meter radius, and bits and fragments of it may carry a good

deal farther. A strong dream in a solitary place may well carry for two kilometers or even farther.

In a lonely farmhouse a Frin's dreams mingle only with those of the rest of the family, along with echoes, whiffs, and glimpses of what the cattle in the barn and the dog dozing on the doorstep hear, smell, and see in their sleep.

In a village or town, with people asleep in all the houses around, the Frin spend at least part of every night in a shifting phantasmagoria of their own and other people's dreams which I find hard to imagine.

I asked an acquaintance in a small town to tell me any dreams she could recall from the past night. At first she demurred, saying that they'd all been nonsense, and only "strong" dreams ought to be thought about and talked over. She was evidently reluctant to tell me, an outsider, things that had been going on in her neighbors' heads. I managed at last to convince her that my interest was genuine and not voyeuristic. She thought a while and said, "Well, there was a woman—it was me in the dream, or sort of me, but I think it was the mayor's wife's dream, actually, they live at the corner—this woman, anyhow, and she was trying to find a baby that she'd had last year. She had put the baby into a dresser drawer and forgotten all about it, and now I was, she was, feeling worried about it—Had it had anything to eat? Since last year? Oh my word, how stupid we are in dreams! And then, oh, yes, then there was an awful argument between a naked man and a dwarf, they were in an empty cistern. That may have been my own dream, at least to start with. Because I know that cistern. It was on my grandfather's farm where I used to stay when I was a child. But they both turned into lizards, I think. And then—oh yes!" She laughed. "I was being squashed by a pair of giant breasts, huge ones, with pointy nipples. I think that was the teenage boy next door, because I was terrified but kind of ecstatic, too. And what else was there? Oh, a mouse, it looked so delicious, and it didn't know I was there, and I was just about to pounce, but then there was a horrible thing, a nightmare—a face without any eyes—and huge, hairy hands groping at me—and then I heard the three-year-old next door screaming, because I woke

up too. That poor child has so many nightmares, she drives us all crazy. Oh, I don't really like thinking about that one. I'm glad we forget most dreams. Wouldn't it be awful if we had to remember them all!"

Dreaming is a cyclical, not a continuous, activity, and so in small communities there are hours when one's sleep theater, if one may call it so, is dark. REM sleep among settled, local groups of Frin tends to synchronise. As the cycles peak, about five times a night, several or many dreams may be going on simultaneously in everybody's head, intermingling and influencing one another with their mad, inarguable logic, so that (as my friend in the village described it) the baby turns up in the cistern and the mouse hides between the breasts, while the eyeless monster disappears in the dust kicked up by a pig trotting past through a new dream, perhaps a dog's, since the pig is rather dimly seen but is smelled with great particularity. But after such episodes comes a period when everyone can sleep in peace, without anything exciting happening at all.

In Frinthian cities, where one may be within dream range of hundreds of people every night, the layering and overlap of insubstantial imagery is, I'm told, so continual and so confusing that the dreams cancel out, like brushfuls of colors slapped one over the other without design; even one's own dream blurs at once into the meaningless commotion, as if projected on a screen where a hundred films are already being shown, their soundtracks all running together. Only occasionally does a gesture, a voice, ring clear for a moment, or a particularly vivid wet dream or ghastly nightmare cause all the sleepers in a neighborhood to sigh, ejaculate, shudder, or wake up with a gasp.

Frin whose dreams are mostly troubling or disagreeable say they like living in the city for the very reason that their dreams are all but lost in the "stew," as they call it. But others are upset by the constant oneiric noise and dislike spending even a few nights in a metropolis. "I hate to dream strangers' dreams!" my village informant told me. "Ugh! When I come back from staying in the city, I wish I could wash out the inside of my head!"

Even on our plane, young children often have trouble understanding that the experiences they had just before they woke up aren't "real." It must be far more bewildering for Frinthian children, into whose innocent sleep enter the sensations and preoccupations of adults—accidents relived, griefs renewed, rapes reenacted, wrathful conversations held with people fifty years in the grave.

But adult Frin are ready to answer children's questions about the shared dreams and to discuss them, defining them always as dream, though not as unreal. There is no word corresponding to "unreal" in Frinthian; the nearest is "bodiless." So the children learn to live with adults' incomprehensible memories, unmentionable acts, and inexplicable emotions, much as do children who grow up on our plane amid the terrible incoherence of civil war or in times of plague and famine; or, indeed, children anywhere, at any time. Children learn what is real and what isn't, what to notice and what to ignore, as a survival tactic. It is hard for an outsider to judge, but my impression of Frinthian children is that they mature early, psychologically. By the age of seven or eight they are treated by adults as equals.

As for the animals, no one knows what they make of the human dreams they evidently participate in. The domestic beasts of the Frin seemed to me to be remarkably pleasant, trustful, and intelligent. They are generally well looked after. The fact that the Frin share their dreams with their animals might explain why they use animals to haul and plow and for milk and wool, but not as meat.

The Frin say that animals are more sensitive dream receivers than human beings and can receive dreams even from people from other planes. Frinthian farmers have assured me that their cattle and swine are deeply disturbed by the visits of people from carnivorous planes. When I stayed at a farm in Enya Valley the chicken house was in an uproar half the night. I thought it was a fox, but my hosts said it was me.

People who have mingled their dreams all their lives say they are often uncertain where a dream began, whether it was originally theirs or somebody else's; but within a family or village the author of a particularly erotic or ridiculous dream may be all too easily identified. People who know one another well can recognise the source dreamer from the tone or events of the dream, from its style. Still, it has become their own as they dream it. Each dream may be shaped differently in each mind. And, as with us, the personality of the dreamer, the oneiric I, is often tenuous, strangely disguised, or unpredictably different from the daylight person. Very puzzling dreams or those with powerful emotional affect may be discussed on and off all day by the community, without the origin of the dream ever being mentioned.

But most dreams, as with us, are forgotten at waking. Dreams elude their dreamers on every plane.

It might seem to us that the Frin have very little psychic privacy; but they are protected by this common amnesia, as well as by doubt as to any particular dream's origin and by the obscurity of dream itself. Their dreams are truly common property. The sight of a red-and-black bird pecking at the ear of a bearded human head lying on a plate on a marble table and the rush of almost gleeful horror that accompanied it—did that come from Aunt Unia's sleep, or Uncle Tu's, or Grandfather's, or the cook's, or the girl next door's? A child might ask, "Auntie, did you dream that head?" The stock answer is, "We all did." Which is, of course, the truth.

Frinthian families and small communities are close-knit and generally harmonious, though quarrels and feuds occur. The research group from Mills College that traveled to the Frinthian plane to record and study oneiric brain-wave synchrony agreed that like the synchronisation of menstrual and other cycles within groups on our plane, the communal dreaming of the Frin may serve to establish and strengthen the social bond. They did not speculate as to its psychological or moral effects. From time to time a Frin is born with unusual powers of projecting and receiving dreams—never one without the other. The Frin call such

a dreamer whose signal is unusually clear and powerful a strong mind. That strong-minded dreamers can receive dreams from non-Frinthian humans is a proven fact. Some of them apparently can share dreams with fish, with insects, even with trees. A legendary strong mind named Du Ir claimed that he “dreamed with the mountains and the rivers,” but his boast is generally regarded as poetry.

Strong minds are recognised even before birth, when the mother begins to dream that she lives in a warm, amber-colored palace without directions or gravity, full of shadows and complex rhythms and musical vibrations, and shaken often by slow peaceful earthquakes—a dream the whole community enjoys, though late in the pregnancy it may be accompanied by a sense of pressure, of urgency, that rouses claustrophobia in some.

As the strong-minded child grows, its dreams reach two or three times farther than those of ordinary people, and tend to override or co-opt local dreams going on at the same time. The nightmares and inchoate, passionate deliria of a strong-minded child who is sick, abused, or unhappy can disturb everyone in the neighborhood, even in the next village. Such children, therefore, are treated with care; every effort is made to make their life one of good cheer and disciplined serenity. If the family is incompetent or uncaring, the village or town may intervene, the whole community earnestly seeking to ensure the child peaceful days and nights of pleasant dreams.

“World-strong minds” are legendary figures, whose dreams supposedly came to everyone in the world, and who therefore also dreamed the dreams of everyone in the world. Such men and women are revered as holy people, ideals and models for the strong dreamers of today. The moral pressure on strong-minded people is in fact intense, and so must be the psychic pressure. None of them lives in a city: they would go mad, dreaming a whole city’s dreams. Mostly they gather in small communities where they live very quietly, widely dispersed from one another at night, practicing the art of “dreaming well,” which mostly means dreaming harmlessly. But some of them become guides, philosophers, visionary leaders.

There are still many tribal societies on the Frinthian plane, and the Mills researchers visited several. They reported that among these peoples, strong minds are regarded as seers or shamans, with the usual perquisites and penalties of such eminence. If during a famine the tribe's strong mind dreams of traveling clear down the river and feasting by the sea, the whole tribe may share the vision of the journey and the feast so vividly, with such conviction, that they decide to pack up and start downriver. If they find food along the way, or shellfish and edible seaweeds on the beach, their strong mind gets rewarded with the choice bits; but if they find nothing or run into trouble with other tribes, the seer, now called "the twisted mind," may be beaten or driven out.

The elders told the researchers that tribal councils usually follow the guidance of dream only if other indications favor it. The strong minds themselves urge caution. A seer among the Eastern Zhud-Byu told the researchers, "This is what I say to my people: Some dreams tell us what we wish to believe. Some dreams tell us what we fear. Some dreams are of what we know though we may not know we know it. The rarest dream is the dream that tells us what we have not known."

Frinthia has been open to other planes for over a century, but the rural scenery and quiet lifestyle have brought no great influx of visitors. Many tourists avoid the plane under the impression that the Frin are a race of "mindsuckers" and "psychovoyeurs."

Most Frin are still farmers, villagers, or town dwellers, but the cities and their material technologies are growing fast. Though technologies and techniques can be imported only with the permission of the All-Frin government, requests for such permission by Frinthian companies and individuals have become increasingly frequent. Many Frin welcome this growth of urbanism and materialism, justifying it as the result of the interpretation of dreams received by their strong minds from visitors from other planes. "People came here with strange dreams," says the historian Tubar of Kaps, himself a strong mind. "Our strongest minds joined in them, and joined us with them. So we all began to see things we had never dreamed of. Vast gatherings of

people, cybernets, ice cream, much commerce, many pleasant belongings and useful artifacts. ‘Shall these remain only dreams?’ we said. ‘Shall we not bring these things into wakeful being?’ So we have done that.”

Other thinkers take a more dubious attitude towards alien hypnogogia. What troubles them most is that the dreaming is not reciprocal. For though a strong mind can share the dreams of an alien visitor and “broadcast” them to other Frin, nobody from another plane has been capable of sharing the dreams of the Frin. We cannot enter their nightly festival of fantasies. We are not on their wavelength.

The investigators from Mills hoped to be able to reveal the mechanism by which communal dreaming is effected, but they failed, as Frinthian scientists have also failed, so far. “Telepathy,” much hyped in the literature of the interplanary travel agents, is a label, not an explanation. Researchers have established that the genetic programming of all Frinthian mammals includes the capacity for dream sharing, but its operation, though clearly linked to the brain-wave synchrony of sleepers, remains obscure. Visiting foreigners do not synchronise; they do not participate in that nightly ghost chorus of electric impulses dancing to the same beat. But unwittingly, unwillingly—like a deaf child shouting—they send out their own dreams to the strong minds asleep nearby. And to many of the Frin, this seems not so much a sharing as a pollution or infection.

“The purpose of our dreams,” says the philosopher Sorrdja of Farfrit, a strong dreamer of the ancient Deyu Retreat, “is to enlarge our souls by letting us imagine all that can be imagined: to release us from the tyranny and bigotry of the individual self by letting us feel the fears, desires, and delights of every mind in every living body near us.” The duty of the strong-minded person, she holds, is to strengthen dreams, to focus them—not with a view to practical results or new inventions but as a means of understanding the world through a myriad of experiences and sentiences (not only human). The dreams of the greatest dreamers may offer to those who share them a glimpse of an



order underlying all the chaotic stimuli, responses, acts, words, intentions, and imaginings of daily and nightly existence.

“In the day we are apart,” she says. “In the night we are together. We should follow our own dreams, not those of strangers who cannot join us in the dark. With such people we can talk; we can learn from them and teach them. We should do so, for that is the way of the daylight. But the way of the night is different. We go together then, apart from them. The dream we dream is our road through the night. They know our day, but not our night, nor the ways we go there. Only we can find our own way, showing one another, following the lantern of the strong mind, following our dreams in darkness.”

The resemblance of Sorrdja’s phrase “road through the night” to Freud’s “royal road to the unconscious” is interesting but, I believe, superficial. Visitors from my plane have discussed psychological theory with the Frin, but neither Freud’s nor Jung’s views of dream are of much interest to them. The Frinthian “royal road” is trodden not by one secret soul but by a multitude. Repressed feelings, however distorted, disguised, and symbolic, are the common property of everybody in one’s household and neighborhood. The Frinthian unconscious, collective or individual, is not a dark wellspring buried deep under years of evasions and denials, but a kind of great moonlit lake to whose shores everybody comes to swim together naked every night.

And so the interpretation of dreams is not, among the Frin, a means of self-revelation, of private psychic inquiry and readjustment. It is not even species-specific, since animals share the dreams, though only the Frin can talk about them.

For them, dream is a communion of all the sentient creatures in the world. It puts the notion of self deeply into question. I can imagine only that for them to fall asleep is to abandon the self utterly, to enter or reenter the limitless community of being, almost as death is for us.