Life Catcher

By Robert Moss

Copenhagen, June, 2004

I am spinning a web from my solar plexus. It expands outwards, like an immense spider web, until it covers a large community.
What is going on? Am I becoming a spider?
I realize I have generated a huge dreamcatcher, except I want to call it a LIFE catcher. Its mesh will screen out negative energies and projections, while welcoming positive, life-supporting influences and visitations.
Within the safety of the web, the community can grow shared visions of life and possibility, and find ways to manifest them.
Scouts can move across the skeins of the web, spying out things that are developing at a distance.

I wake excited from this dream, rolling out of the narrow bed in my closet-sized room in the Copenhagen hotel.

The web reminds me – as in the dream itself – of the Native American dreamcatchers. The original dreamcatchers, an Onondaga friend once told me, were actual spider webs. The modern ones, whether made in China or Arizona, are imitation spider webs, and the idea is that they'll catch the bad dreams and let only the good ones through.

But the web in my Copenhagen dream is something more. In the bathroom, I remember hearing that there are some indigenous peoples who practice a form of group dreaming that involves growing a kind of communal energy web. On a remote island chain (I can't

remember where) a people of fierce hunter-gatherers sleep together in big houses. As they approach sleep, they chant together, synchronizing their take-off into the dream lands. While they dream together, they create a web that allows them to travel safely wherever they need to go. They move across it like human spiders, tracking game animals, or shoals of fish, scanning their environment for possible dangers.

"Did you remember any dreams?" my friend Wanda Burch asks me when we meet for breakfast in the hotel dining room. We never ask, "Did you dream?" We are dreamers, and we know that – even in the view of the hardheads of cognitive neuroscience, some of whom will be at our conference – nearly everyone dreams every night. Anyone who says, I don't dream, is really saying, I don't remember.

I tell her my dream of spinning the web as I wield the cheese cutter on the buffet. Cold cuts for breakfast is the Danish way. I don't mind a bit, since my body hasn't really known the time since we flew in yesterday.

"Maybe you should get in touch with the Spiderman script writers," someone else from the conference quips, listening in on our conversation. "Spidey hasn't gone that far yet."

"How did you feel when you woke up?" Wanda asks.

"Juiced. Full of energy. Almost high."

"Could anything like this happen in the future?"

I look at her doubtfully.

"Is there some way you could spin a web like that for others? What did you call it, a Life Catcher?"

"Oh, I'd love that."

"What do you want to know?"

She was asking the questions we always ask about dreams in our everyday dream sharing game.

What I want to know is: did I dream the way back into an ancient way of dreaming? Is there a clue here to bringing back something we need?

We fast-walk along the Esplanade in the summer rain. Around us, umbrellas are sprouting everywhere like giant mushrooms. Water trickles down the back of my neck, inside my collar. From the boat dock, we take the yellow water bus, the *toldbot*, across the canal to the Holmen district, where the conference of the International Association for the Study of Dreams (IASD) is taking place in the School of Architecture. The IASD is a wonderful and singular entity, bringing together the world's top experts and devotees of dreaming from many disciplines, from psychiatrists to filmmakers.

The presenters range from neuroscientists who describe dreams as "delirium" to anthropologists who have broken the glass and lived with tribal peoples who dream the hunt and communicate with gods and spirits. Patricia Garfield is giving a lecture on the dreams of Hans Christian Andersen, newly translated from old Danish, and how he may have tried to play therapist for his unhappy life by writing happy endings for the dreams that most troubled him.

The keynote speaker, that soggy morning, is a Finnish psychology professor, Antti Revonsuo. His white hair shines like a tight cluster of icicles. He has an ambitious title, "Towards a Unified Science of Dreaming and Consciousness" – and a promising graphic to open.

At a click of a mouse, the big screen fills with a scene of two pretty young men, dozing side by side on a canopied bed. One is clutching poppies; the other has an abandoned lyre near at hand. They look like they are sleeping off an antique bender. The style is unmistakable.

This has to be the work of J.W.Waterhouse, the dreamiest of the pre-Raphaelite painters, famed for his mermaids and nymphs. The title of this canvas is "Sleep and his Half-Brother Death." It draws from the classical understanding that there is a close affinity between sleep and death because in both states we leave the body and travel to other realms, including those where the dead are alive and at home.

My attention drifts towards the blurry background of the painting. Behind the droopy ephebes and a brazier that may be smoking, there is a portico with Corinthian columns, and indistinct shapes in the dark beyond. I can imagine leaning forward and traveling through that gate.

Professor Revonsuo pulls me back. He has a very generous view of dream content, for a cognitive scientist – a breed notorious for trashing dream content – but he is not here to talk about traveling to realms of the dead. I like the pragmatic thrust of his remarks. What goes on in dreaming, he tells us, is a process of "world simulation". I wonder if he is going to compare these environments in the dreaming brain to online role-playing games like Second Life. He's going somewhere else. This is about evolution more than entertainment.

Revonsuo offers a bold thesis: that dreaming is central to human evolution – maybe to human survival – because in the "simulated world" of the dreamspace, we practice "threat simulation." This has been going on since the Pleistocene era, and it helped get humans through life when we were just "bipedal hominids" being stalked for breakfast by vastly more efficient predators. Threat simulation has two aspects. It improves our ability to *identify* threats, and it sharpens our ability to *respond* quickly and effectively when a threat appears. Revonsuo believes we are all engaged in threat simulation, inside our personal dreamspace, every night. It is going on even when we don't remember our dreams. Indeed, as he tells it, whether or not we

remember dreams is of almost incidental importance. What is of primary importance is the practice we are getting, every night. We get the benefits even if we have no recollection of what we were doing through the sleep hours.

I like all of this, though "threat simulation" theory stops far short of what ancient and indigenous dreamers – and active dreamers today – know: that dreaming is traveling. We are not confined to a "simulated world" inside our own heads. We can travel across time and space, and scout out the possible future. We not only rehearse for generic threats; we can identify specific threats, to ourselves and our communities, and bring home information that can inspire specific and effective action.

My mind goes back to the Life Catcher dream.

More is possible, on the dream web, than the scientists of sleep and dreaming are generally willing to recognize. We must go outside the sleep labs, into the lived experience of people everywhere whose dreams help them to get through life, in order to understand.

After the Copenhagen conference, the IASD journal *Dreaming* published a fascinating account of how the Andamans – a hunter-gatherer people who live on islands in the Bay of Bengal – grow a nightly web of dreams to produce life-supporting information for the community. In their communal big houses, they enter dreaming together with a shared story or intention. They may want to scout out where the best supply of jackfruit, or wild pigs, or a shoal of fish, can be found to feed the people the next day. They spin a shared web and venture out on its skeins, like human spiders.

This account reminded me of my Life Catcher dream.

At the end of that same year, the terrible Asian tsunami triggered by an earthquake of Sumatra on December 26, 2004, brought home just how vital to life the web of dreaming can be.

The aftershocks of the earthquake hurled great waves across the Andaman islands. At that time of year, the Andamans were usually to be found in their seasonal fishing settlements along the coast. When the ocean calmed, their shelters were gone. The Indian government, which claims possession of the islands, assumed that the Andamans along the coast had been drowned, as nearly 250,000 people had been throughout the region. Then the Andamans reappeared on their forested hills, shooting arrows at an Indian government helicopter that was scouting the terrain. They *knew* the tsunami was coming, and got out of its way by quietly abandoning their fishing huts and taking to the hills. They knew because they observed the movements of animals, and listened to the voices of wind and water, and because they travel on the web of dreams.

The dream web can truly be a Life Catcher.

Robert Moss is the pioneer of Active Dreaming, an original synthesis of shamanism and modern dreamwork. He leads popular seminars all over the world, including a three-year training for teachers of Active Dreaming and a lively online dream school. A former lecturer in ancient history at the Australian National University, he is a best-selling novelist, journalist and independent scholar. His seven books on dreaming, shamanism and imagination include *Conscious Dreaming* and *The Secret History of Dreaming*. His website is www.mossdreams.com.