"Senoi Dream Theory," Chapter 4

Chapter 4: Why Did Stewart's Ideas Have a Strong Appeal?

The Senoi do not utilize, or even know, the principles wrongly named Senoi Dream Theory. It was an American adventurer/vagabond/hypnotist/storyteller who proposed the idea that societies can benefit from sharing their dreams, and that dreams can be shaped through three simple principles of mind control. This is as clear as such matters can be, despite continuing efforts to cast doubt by implying that "just maybe" there were some Senoi somewhere who once practiced Kilton Stewart's theory. But we are left with a further puzzling question. Why did these ideas, in the guise of an ancient aboriginal practice, suddenly resonate with a new generation of psychologically minded young adults of college backgrounds a decade after Stewart first introduced them? And why do they continue to have some appeal?

The larger response to Stewart's ideas, which came in the 1960s, was first of all based on the dramatic social changes that spawned the human potential movement as one of their many consequences. For a brief moment, thanks to the civil rights movement and the election of a charismatic young president who promised to get the country moving again, it seemed to be a time when all things were possible. The economy was good, colleges and universities were filling up with the energetic youth of the baby-boom generation, the Peace Corps provided an outlet for idealism, and America was going to the moon. The ideas of the humanistic psychologists began to take hold, and people were experimenting with LSD and other drugs that promised to expand the frontiers of the human mind.

Senoi Dream Theory was one of the new possibilities that captured the attention of those who were seeking to expand human

consciousness in the 1960s. The idea that the sharing of dreams could bring about greater social harmony and that dreams could be shaped and changed through the application of the proper principles was attractive to social scientists and psychotherapists of the new humanistic orientation. Confront and conquer danger, go toward pleasure, extract a gift from dream characters -- these ideas made sense to a generation that rejected "conservative' notions such as the unconscious for the idea of self-actualization. Senoi Dream Theory was consistent with the interest in using meditation, drugs, and other techniques to attain "altered states of consciousness."

Senoi Dream Theory entered the human potential movement by way of one of its major wellsprings, Esalen Institute near Big Sur, California, 165 miles south of San Francisco. As might be expected, the Senoi idea arrived at Esalen, probably in 1965, via a copy of Stewart's 1951 paper in *Complex*. Most of the people I talked with who were there at the time think that the paper probably was brought to the attention of Esalen leaders by psychologist Charles Tart, who was one of the institutes supporters. Tart, now a professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis, had a strong research interest in dreams, hypnosis, and parapsychology, and he recalls coming across Stewart's article in the early 1960s in the course of his systematic search of all the past literature relating to dreams and altered states of consciousness. His personal experiences with the possibilities of dream control made the paper of immediate interest to him, but he is not sure whether it was he or one of his friends who actually brought the article to Esalen. [1]

Senoi Dream Theory was incorporated into Esalen planning for what was at first called the Experimental College and later the Residence Program. The idea was to go beyond weekend seminars and occasional visiting lecturers by developing a nine-month program that would gather together a diverse group of talented people under the tutelage of two fulltime faculty members and a series of visiting experts. The fellows would experiment with a variety of consciousness expanding techniques and then carry the best of

them to colleges, professional associations, and other organizations around the country:

> The curriculum would consist of meditation, encounter, sensory awareness, creativity, movement, emotional expression, inner imagery, dreamwork, and peak-experience training. There would be special sessions with the leaders who came to Big Sur to give seminars for the public; there would be continuing work with the Esalen residents: sensory awakening with [Bernard] Gunther, gestalt therapy with Fritz [Perls] and Tai Chi sessions with Gia-fu [Feng] in the mornings. The prospective faculty was an eclectic group that included psychologists and artists and priests and even the Stanford track coach.[2]

These elaborate and ambitious plans were presented to the heads of large foundations in New York with the hope of obtaining major funding. The secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare in the Johnson administration was contacted. However, neither the foundations nor the Washington bigwig would go beyond expressions of interest, and the size of the program had to be scaled down considerably. There would be only one faculty leader, Virginia Satir, a well-known family therapist, and no accompanying research program.

The new college of consciousness began in the fall of 1966 with seventeen resident fellows chosen from among about 200 applicants. They included an engineer; a Jesuit brother; a psychologist who had written a dissertation on meditation at the University of Michigan; and a professor of art from a community college in nearby Santa Cruz, California. As it turned out, the program did not work out very well at all. In fact, it was a disaster. Satir suddenly departed without warning or explanation after the first few weeks, and the fellows were left pretty much to their own devices. They floundered from experiment to experiment, including attempts to use Senoi principles of dream control, but none of the work was very conclusive. The program was somewhat more organized in its second year, but there was so

much anxiety, conflict, and acting out within the group and among the program leaders that it was scaled down even more and then abandoned in the next few years.[3]

Although the Residence Program itself was a failure, that did not deter an Esalen enthusiast from publishing an influential book that implied just the opposite. Entitled *Education and Ecstasy* (1968), it was written by George Leonard, a journalist and West Coast editor for Look magazine, one of the most widely read popular magazines of that era. After doing some reporting on the human potential movement, Leonard grew very interested in the Esalen experiment and joined it as a director and adviser in 1965. Defining *ecstasy* in terms of delight and wonderment, Leonard called for a more emotionally based approach to the education of children, and claimed that it drew some of its inspiration from the human potential movement. At the same time, his book also built on suggestions put forth by the behaviorist psychologist B. F. Skinner, who was as interested in the control of behavior as Stewart was in the control of dreams. He had written a utopian novel, *Walden Two*, in 1948 to show how "operant conditioning" based on "schedules of positive reinforcement" could create a better society. Leonard's book was serialized in *Look* just before its publication in 1968 and sold over 250,000 copies in its first few years. Leonard says he received about 5,000 letters in response to the *Look* serialization and the book, which gives an idea of the impact his work had on the general public.[4]

Stewart's claims about Senoi dream practices were introduced by Leonard in a futuristic chapter as one of the "Discovery Tents" at a school in the year 2001. The school was named Kennedy School, no doubt to capture the magic of the name that had rekindled hope for the young at the national level at the start of the 1960s. The section on the Senoi explained the principles in Stewart's 1951 article and suggested that in the future every American child would learn them -- along with biofeedback, body awareness, and other new psychological techniques that were just then appearing on the horizon.

Two chapters later, Leonard deceptively told his readers for the first time that everything he had proposed as the fourth aspect of a new approach to education allegedly was being tried at a place called Esalen Institute. After softening up readers by noting that Esalen had been described by one of the founders of humanistic psychology, Abraham Maslow, as "probably the most important educational institute in the world," Leonard then explained that the institute was founded in 1961 and was named after the tribe of Indians who had lived in that area.[5] He reported that its founder, Michael Murphy, whose family owned the Esalen land, had spent nine years in "ascetic study and contemplation in the Eastern disciplines." This allegedly huge number of years, which is hard for me to believe, included eighteen months during which he supposedly meditated for six to eight hours a day in an ashram in India. Murphy then "came back to his native California convinced that the human potential, even in the realm called 'mystical,' can best be achieved on an American model, through an affirmation of the sensory universe." Murphy and Esalen were said to be at the cutting edge of the human potential movement, and the new ideas were being spread through seminars, workshops, and a graduate-level Residence Program. The Senoi methods that did not receive much use in 1966 and 1967 were said to be part of this wonderful program, which certainly sounded organized and successful even though by 1967 it was clearly a failure:

> A residential program was initiated in September 1966, in which graduate-level fellows spend nine months as full-time free learners in the new domain. They practice meditation, intensified inner imagery, basic encounter, sensory awareness, expressive physical movement and creative symbolic behavior. They learn to control their brain-wave patterns, using the simple brain-wave feedback device developed by Dr. Joe Kamiya at the University of California Medical Center. They do extensive dream work, with the Senoi methods described in the school of the future. They also practice the all-action, anti-analytical Gestalt Therapy developed by the venerable Fritz Perls, in residence at the Institute.[6]

Thus, Esalen and *Education and Ecstasy* were the starting points in bringing Senoi Dream Theory into the mainstream of the human potential movement and to the attention of the general public. However, the avenue for bringing the ideas to a wide audience of psychologists and their students was the publication of Stewart's 1951 article in Tart's collection of readings, *Altered States of Consciousness* (1969), which sold over 50,000 copies in its first four years. Tart began his comments on the Senoi as follows: "You can imagine my amazement when I read that a whole tribe of primitive people, the Senoi of Malaya, had been practicing dream control techniques for centuries."[7] His amazement did not keep him from registering appropriate scholarly caution, noting that he had not been able to find corroborating accounts and that further research was needed. But his mild caution went unheeded, and he himself already was a firm believer based on his own earlier efforts at dream control. Instead, Tart's book gave further legitimacy to Stewart's claims. The psychologists who started Senoi dream groups in the late 1960s and early seventies often traced their work to a reading of Stewart's article in Tart's book.[8]

Although the original interest in Senoi Dream Theory arose as part of the optimism and enthusiasm of the early 1960s, a second push came, strangely enough, from the growing frustration and anger over America's widening involvement in the war in Southeast Asia. As young people turned against the war and the society that had produced it, they found great appeal in the fact that this new way of dreaming was not American. Instead, it was the practice of an allegedly nonviolent people who lived simply in another part of Southeast Asia and who were claimed to be in many ways the opposite of Americans in their attitudes toward confrontation, aggression, and group violence. It was at this point that Stewart's own moral fervor about the social possibilities for Senoi Dream Theory resonated with the needs of his readers.

As the war continued and broadened despite massive demonstrations and other forms of protest, the daily newspaper and television revelations concerning its horrors also grew apace. Soon there

was a growing rejection of anything connected with what was said to be an overly urbanized, industrialized, routinized, and intellectualized Western civilization. A mystique of the simple and the primitive gradually took hold. The Senoi were one small part of this mystique that included a glorification of Native Americans and their beliefs, especially their beliefs about dreams, visions, and healing, as popularized most successfully in Carlos Casteñada's alleged (but totally fabricated) conversations with a Yaqui Indian sorcerer, Don Juan.[9]

This rejectionist mood is best captured in Theodore Roszak's widely read and discussed book, *Where the Wasteland Ends* (1972), which uses Senoi Dream Theory to bolster its anti-Western critique. Roszak calls the environment of urban-industrial civilization "artificial" and "inhuman."[10] Even such sympathetic humanists as Buckminster Fuller and Jacob Bronowski come in for criticism, Fuller for being too fascinated with technological gimmicks, Bronowski for an allegedly elitist attitude toward the wisdom of tribal cultures. Scientists and Bible-quoting fundamentalists are lumped together as essentially similar because they both concentrate on an objective, factual world.

No stone is left unturned in Roszak's relentless rejection of the main currents of Western civilization, including the way we sleep and awaken, and it is here that Stewart and Senoi Dream Theory make their appearance. Americans see sleep as a dead loss of time, says Roszak. They awaken too quickly and immediately turn their attention to what they have to do that day. They do not take their dreams seriously. They have a "single vision" or tunnel vision. This allegedly superficial attitude toward sleep and dreams is then contrasted with what Roszak believes to be the superior wisdom of primitive cultures, and the Senoi are one of his primary examples:

> In some primitive cultures, like that of the Senoi of Malaya, dream exploration is a highly sophisticated skill and a form of pedagogy; indeed, Senoi oneirics makes our own poor psychology of dreams seem sadly immature by

> comparison. For the American Plains Indians, the more impressive dream visions of a gifted medicine man like the Sioux Black Elk could become the occasion for magnificent tribal ceremonials in which the dream was re-enacted in careful detail, a striking anticipation of what the Gestalt psychotherapist Frederick Perls has, in our own time, recreated as "existential dream interpretation."[11]

It was in this atmosphere that the two popular books mentioned in the introduction appeared in 1974. They completed the mystification of the Senoi. The first, Faraday's *The Dream Game*, was a "how-to-do-it" sequel to her 1972 best-seller, *Dream Power*. Whereas *Dream Power* had devoted only a few paragraphs to Stewart and his ideas, *The Dream Game* spent several pages on Senoi dreaming and gave every indication that the ideas worked.[12]

The second, Garfield's *Creative Dreaming*, as noted already in Chapter 1, was even more crucial. Not only did it sell just as widely as Faraday's, but Garfield allegedly provided independent evidence from her own discussions with the Senoi that Stewart was correct about them. Moreover, Garfield reported that she had talked with people in Singapore who were experts on the Senoi. Here she is probably referring to the anthropologist mentioned in the second chapter, Geoffrey Benjamin, who probably told her just the opposite of what she wrote Whatever Garfield actually saw and heard, her work was the clincher in creating the Senoi mystique because it provided the corroboration that was needed before the skeptics could be convinced. She seemed to be that necessary second opinion.

Yet Garfield's discovery of the Senoi and their dream theory was even more coincidental and happenstance than it had been for Stewart. As she tells the story in the foreword to her book, she was in Tokyo for the 1972 meeting of the International Congress of Psychology. She mentioned to Joe Kamiya, a pioneer dream researcher and the originator of biofeedback techniques, that she was going to visit Malaysia on the return trip. "If you're going to Malaysia, why not visit the Senoi?" Kamiya asked casually.

"The who?" replied Garfield.[13] Kamiya then told Garfield about Stewart's ideas concerning Senoi dream practices, based on his reading of Stewart's article in Tart's book. Garfield was intrigued enough to visit the area for a day or two, but she never came close to a Senoi settlement. Instead, as noted in Chapter 2, she talked to a few Senoi who were employed at an aboriginal hospital many miles from the jungle. She then reports: "I have studied Senoi dream practices by personally interviewing some members of the tribe (in English translated to Malay to Senoi who spoke both their aboriginal language and Malay)." This is of course a disgraceful claim for such a quick visit. But she also acknowledges a debt to Stewart, whom she first read after she came home. She describes him as an "American trained in both anthropology and psychoanalysis who spent several years in Malaysia observing the Senoi use of dreams with Herbert [Pat] Noone, the British anthropologist, who gathered the basic data on these people."[14] Stewart's grand total of ten weeks maximum in the presence of Senoi was now "several years," another indication of the inaccuracy of Garfield's books.

By 1974, then, the new myth was fully developed, and it was still going strong when I began my Senoi research late in 1982. Doubts were raised in 1978 when two documentary filmmakers came back from Senoi country with the news that they could find no morning dream clinics.[15] However, it was not until word of my findings and those of Dentan, Faraday, and Wren-Lewis began to get around, primarily through the *Dream Network Bulletin*, that the practitioners of the new dreamwork began to downplay the Senoi. Only in 1984, for example, did the Jungian-Senoi Institute change its name to the Jungian Dreamwork Institute.

To this point I have explained the appeal of Stewart's writings about the Senoi in terms of three factors: the currency and publicity given to them by the human potential movement that grew out of the optimism of the early 1960s; the legitimacy given to his ideas by dream experts; and the rejection of American society for a mystique of the primitive in the context of the antiwar movement. But this explanation is not complete. An emphasis on social change explains why people were open to new ideas in many

areas of their lives, but it does not tell us why these particular ideas, and not others, were so readily accepted.

Paradoxical as it may sound, I think that Senoi Dream Theory had a deep appeal for Americans at this time because it was a new application of their deepest and most ingrained beliefs about human nature, as presented in the context of an allegorical story about community and authenticity. Very simply, the "Senoi way of dreaming" actually rests on the unquestioned American belief in the possibility of shaping and controlling both the environment and human nature. For Americans, but not for most people, and certainly not for the Senoi, human nature is malleable and perfectible. Americans are what they make of themselves. They can do it if they try. Senoi Dream Theory is an extension of that basic precept to the world of dreams. The fact that it is unwittingly presented in a mystique of the primitive only makes it all the more attractive. It is independent evidence for American convictions.

In short, it is a giant group self-deception, a self-serving ideology weaved together by many different hands, none of which feels any personal responsibility for the overall fable and its consequences. The social scientists like Tart claim they were just "presenting" tentative findings, and furthermore noted that "replications" were needed, but no one did the replications or read the anthropological literature. The journalists say that they were just "reporting" what the social scientists had told them. Readers who spread the ideas in conversations with their friends saw titles like "Ph.D." and respected magazine names like *Look*, so they trusted what they read. Eager new converts then used the magazine articles to show how legitimate the ideas were. No one bothered to be skeptical. No one bothered to check. An ideology is the product of many people involved in a network of "organized irresponsibility." Everyone contributes, no one takes responsibility. At a certain point, when many people have a strong emotional and/or occupational investment in the organizational network created around the new ideas, any doubts are immediately cast aside, and any doubters are branded as heretics.

Perhaps the most famous American psychologist of the years from 1950 to 1980 was the behaviorist B. F. Skinner, whose ideas on education were incorporated into Leonard's *Education and Ecstasy.* Considering Skinner's general popularity and the near-fanatical loyalty of his followers, present-day readers who never heard of Skinner should not be surprised that he believed that all human behavior can be shaped and controlled through schedules of positive and negative (but preferably positive) reinforcement that are administered by agents of society. In terms of American psychology, then, Stewart is the B. F. Skinner of dreams, with his article "Dream Theory in Malaya" fulfilling the same utopian function among his followers that *Walden Two* did among Skinner's. It was Stewart's achievement to apply the same American beliefs that once gave Skinner's behaviorism its inherent appeal to the seemingly uncontrollable happenings called dreams. Just as Skinner believed that behavior could be controlled with tangible rewards, so Stewart believed that dreams could be controlled with the social approval of group leaders. At bottom, he was just another behaviorist, as first seen in his M.A. training in psychology in the early 1930s.

However, too much credit for the application of these basic American assumptions should not be given to either of these pioneers. American beliefs about the malleability of human nature received practical implementation long before psychologists happened on the scene. As several historians, sociologists, and psychologists have shown, Americans have embraced various techniques for self-control and mind control for many centuries. These techniques have ranged from Benjamin Franklin's system of self-betterment through "moral bookkeeping" (just write down the traits you want to improve and then work on one each week, keeping track of how you are doing), to the French psychotherapist Emile Coue's repeated phrase "Day by day, in every way, I am getting better and better," to Norman Vincent Peale's "power of positive thinking." Americans have made best-sellers out of self-help books since very early in the nineteenth century, and they have gone through numerous spiritual movements and mind control fads at crisis points in their history that are now largely unknown to those who think that the surge of interest

in such techniques and formulas in the 1960s, or 1990s, or early 21st century, is a new phenomenon. The only thing that seems to have altered is that now these ideas are often placed within a psychological and therapeutic framework rather than a religious one.[16]

Viewed in this way, Senoi Dream Theory is typical American can-do. Taking hold in the 1960s, it was part of an attempt to conquer "inner space" at the very time that "outer space" was being conquered by another set of new pioneers. Indeed, the analogy between the conquest of "inner space" and "outer space" was often made in the human potential movement, just as Stewart had done in the opening paragraphs of his 1951 article.

But the narratives that appeal to Americans the most usually contain more subtle messages than their most basic assumptions about human nature, and the story about the Senoi and their dream theory is probably no exception. Such narratives are also new allegorical stories that address fundamental issues about American society at specific time periods.[17] When Margaret Mead wrote years ago that young women come of age in Samoa with less tension than their American counterparts and then asks, in the final sentence of her classic book, "Will we, who have the knowledge of many ways, leave our children free to choose among them?" people sense they have read an allegorical story about the way in which a liberal and pluralistic American society might deal with the breakdown of traditional family patterns.[18] Nor does Mead try to hide this level of her presentation. "Throughout her book," writes the author I am drawing from, "Mead presents the Samoan case as a lesson in human possibility for a troubled society."[19]

From this vantage point, Stewart's writings on the Senoi are an allegory about the search for community and a lost authenticity, and this also gave them a special appeal in the 1960s and later. Certainly Stewart did not hesitate to draw such lessons throughout his writings, which I have shown to abound with biting critiques of civilization and appeals for human betterment. Senoi Dream Theory was a tale that fit the times as well as a story for

all seasons.

As many readers may be thinking, the dreamwork movement survived the critique of Senoi Dream Theory. This indeed shows that Stewart's theory was only one part of its underpinning. As I said in Chapter 1, there was also Jung, Perls, and the newly discovered frequency of dreaming. More than that, though, there was suddenly "lucid dreaming," which came along just in time to replace Senoi Dream Theory as the next Great New Thing for the dreamwork movement. But it can't be ignored that Senoi Dream Theory played a crucial role in the period 1965 to 1978 in solidifying the dreamwork movement, and is still probably believed by many, if not most, of its members.

Lucid dreaming, the quick fix for the problems created by the truth about the Senoi's dream practices, had been around for a long time, mostly in parapsychology and other fringe areas. Luckily for the dreamwork movement, it suddenly obtained the necessary solidity around the turn of the 1980s when it allegedly was demonstrated in the sleep laboratory by a lucid dream adept, Stephen LaBerge, that good lucid dreamers could signal their lucidity during REM sleep.[20] (I say "allegedly" demonstrated because, after all, 14 of the verified signalings came from LaBerge himself, and two of the other four participants did not do any successful signaling in three nights in the lab.) The hope for dream control was reborn in a new guise. But that's another failed hope that is discussed very briefly in the next chapter.

For now, it is enough to say that the acceptance of an idea does not necessarily mean it has any validity. The human capacity for individual and group self-deception is endless, which is why a scientific attitude toward ideas is so important.

Continue on to Chapter 5

References

1. This information on how Senoi Dream Theory came to Esalen

comes from telephone interviews with Tom Allen, Joe Kamiya, George Leonard, Edward Maupin, Michael Murphy, and Charles Tart in the fall of 1983. [<<]

2. W T. Anderson, *The Upstart Spring: Esalen and the American Awakening* (Menlo Park, Calif: Addison-Wesley, 1983), p. 122. This book shows that Esalen was in good part a sexual hunting ground for the various male gurus and group leaders who came to speak or reside there at various times. [<<]
3. Ibid., chs. 8, 9, 10. [<<]
4. B.F. Skinner, *Walden Two* (New York: Macmillan, 1948). Much of the information in this paragraph comes from a telephone conversation with George Leonard on November 28, 1983. The se-rialized material appeared in an article entitled "Visiting Day in the Year 2001 A.D.," *Look*, October 1, 1968, p. 47. [<<]
5. G.B. Leonard, *Education and Ecstasy* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1968), p. 194. Maslow may have revised his opinion considerably just a year or two later. When he came to Esalen in 1966 to give a series of seminars on his concept of "being language," he was taunted unmercifully by Fritz Perls. Perls began by challenging Maslow's claim that his massage in the Esalen hot spring baths by female masseuses was a "peak experience." "Bullshit," said Perls, "you are just turned on." When Maslow began his formal discussion using a question-and-answer approach, Perls interrupted by saying: "This is just like school. Here is the teacher, and there is the pupil, giving the right answer." Later, at the evening session, Perls began to crawl around on the floor, and Maslow told him he was being childish. So Perls made whining sounds and hugged Maslow's knees, as though Perls were at one of his own gestalt therapy sessions. Walter Anderson, who tells the story in his history of Esalen, then writes: "There sat kindly Maslow, a professor at Brandeis, the father of humanistic psychology, rigid as a rock in his crew cut and cashmere sweater while this crazy old man in a jump suit hugged his knees and made baby noises. 'This begins to look like sickness,' Maslow said." For the full account of this incredible encounter between Perls and Maslow, which

epitomizes the nonsense that went on at Esalen, see Anderson, *Upstart Spring*, pp. 133-37. [<<]

6. Leonard, *Education and Ecstasy*, pp. 210, 196. [<<]
7. C. Tart, ed., *Altered States of Consciousness* (New York: John Wiley, 1969), p. 115. [<<]
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13. P. Garfield, *Creative Dreaming* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1974), p. ix. [<<]
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17. J. T. Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory," in *The Making of Ethnographic Texts*, ed. J. T. Clifford and G. Marcus (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Publications, 1986). See also J. T. Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority," *Representations* 1 (1983):118-47. [<<]
18. M. Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (New York: William Morrow, 1928), quoted in Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory," p. 9. [<<]
19. Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory," p. 9. [<<]

20. S. LaBerge, L. Nagel, W. Dement, and V. Zarcone, "Lucid Dreaming Verified by Volitional Communication During REM Sleep," *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 52 (1981):727-32. For a popular account of the early work on lucid dreaming, replete with the usual emphasis on sexual dreams, but with the addition of how lucid dreaming can help people improve various kinds of skills, see S. LaBerge, *Lucid Dreaming* (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1985). [<<]

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