

# Amazing Dreamers: Interview with Sheila Asato

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How often in life do we meet a healer?

And when we meet one, do we recognise her gift?

Ten years ago at an IASD conference, I attended Sheila Asato's Healing Collage workshop. With scissors, glue and intuition, we cobbled together cut-out magazine images. Then the deep play began as under Sheila's guidance we looked at our dreamlike collages and asked searching questions about our lives. When I look at what I wrote back then, I see how much my younger self knew about my future self; her fears, hopes and longings. I was struck by Sheila's wisdom and her deep understanding of dreams and imagery.

Sheila is an award-winning artist, embodied imagination coach and the director of Monkey Bridge Arts, a center for art, dreaming, and creative spirituality. She has a passion for bringing dreams into education, cross-cultural communication and integrative healthcare. Sheila is a dream teacher and a dream healer.

In answer to my question: "How often do we meet a healer and recognise her gift?" I'd say that we meet healers all the time, but rarely recognise their gifts, either because they do not use them in noticeable ways as Sheila does, or because we still haven't recognised our own healing ability.

The fact is, we are all healers because we are all dreamers, and dreams carry gifts of wisdom and healing. Yet dreams are still widely ignored, and we need more hands-on dreamworkers like Sheila Asato to raise awareness internationally. When Sheila flew to Japan after the earthquake and tsunami and facilitated healing dreamplay with school children, the teachers who watched her sessions were astonished to learn that the children were suffering from nightmares linked to the tragedy. As the children compared dreams ("Yes! The buildings in my dream keep shaking too!") and exchanged banter about whose nightmare was the scariest, laughter filled the classroom and the healing process began.

Here Sheila shares her insights into self-healing through dreams.

**CJ: Sheila, what made you first realise that dreams are a source of healing?**

SA: When our youngest son, Sachi, was placed with us for adoption in 1995, the nature of my dreams changed dramatically. I was plagued with intense nightmares related to his undiagnosed autism. His adoption, which took four years, became one of the most complicated cases in the history of the adoption agency. At that time, the dreams rose up in a profound way, offering

strength, practical advice, and clear descriptions of Sachi's disorder which led to an accurate diagnosis.

I started working with a therapist, Kiyomi Saotome, who specialized in working with the mothers of children with severe communication disorders. She found the most effective way to help us was through dreamwork and the arts, especially collage therapy, a highly developed non-verbal form of therapy in Japan that comes out of the sandplay therapy tradition. Our work spurred me on to take dreams seriously enough to attend graduate school, develop my own healing collage process and become a professional dreamworker.

**CJ: You have helped people with life threatening diseases and chronic illnesses to access the healing power of their dreams. But healers often require healing themselves. How does the healer heal herself?**

SA: The following dream came out of the work I was doing to heal from severe endometriosis. Doctors recommended a complete hysterectomy. The dreams were very clear that surgery was not what was needed. I chose instead to take an integrative approach to healing which included Embodied Dreamwork and sessions with a massage therapist who was key to my healing journey. The pain finally eased up for the first time in years.

## **The Dance of Healing**

*There is a stage. It is dark. A small light shines on in the upper left part of the stage. I am on a massage table. My massage therapist comes in. He lights a candle in an oval dish. I am tense but he pulls the sheet back and begins to soothe and calm me.*

*A new spotlight comes on. I am there now, in a beautiful, wispy white ballet skirt. My therapist is beside me all in black except for his hands. His face is hidden. At first, I am still, like a wooden puppet. His hands slowly animate me, bringing me to life. Eventually the hood falls aside and his face is revealed. He takes me slowly through a series of ballet stretches—things I cannot possibly do on my own in waking life. With great tenderness he lifts me up into the air. My arms are outstretched and I feel as if I am flying. It is absolutely wonderful. I start to believe that it is possible, that I can indeed fly. Higher and higher.*

*I become scared of the intensity of feelings I am experiencing. I suddenly become very heavy and find myself back on the massage table in great pain. My therapist works on me, coaxing me back to center stage where we will continue our dance of healing. “Dance with your soul, dance your healing with all your heart,” his hands implore me.*

*Now I am back on stage, surrounded by a group of women all dressed like me. They echo my movements, reaching high when I do and coming down low when I do. I see that they are all the healing women in my life: my doctors, therapists, energy healers, dreamworkers. There are about 5-7 of them. I am filled with gratitude and joy to be surrounded by them. They are all reaching higher, showing me how I should and can move.*

*My therapist lovingly places his hands and cheek on my belly. Through the dance, he has implanted his seed of healing within me and new life is stirring within. I am pregnant with my own desires and healing. I am astonished. Now I am free to go off into the world and birth my own healing which will benefit others too. I am filled with awe and wonder. I leave the stage, ready to return to my life.*

### **CJ: What did this powerful dream teach you?**

SA: I finally felt strong enough to start exploring movement in my waking body. Having been plagued with chronic pain for so long, this was a great challenge. It meant first and foremost viewing my body in a whole new way. Cultivating strength, flexibility and grace rather than disassociating from the body to cope with pain. About a

year and a half ago, I decided it was time to try dancing in waking life. It was incredibly terrifying!

It took a tremendous amount of courage to step onto the dance floor for the first time. I was literally shaking throughout my body during those early lessons.

Today, I dance at least two hours a day and take a private lesson weekly. I cannot imagine a day without dancing! Through dance, I have learned how to continue exploring and holding the dream in my body in the partnership with others, in a way that has deeply enhanced my art, teaching and healing.

Dance has become a conduit for the dreams to flow into my waking world and then back into sleep. I am eager to see where this new dance takes me.

### **CJ: That’s a heartening story. Dreams can help us to transcend overwhelming obstacles. What else can they teach us?**

SA: When we pay attention to our dreams, we learn that there is so much more to life than the waking physical world! By attending to dreams, we practice being in the presence of mystery and learn how to welcome awe into our lives. This is very enlivening. The more I work with dreams myself and with others, the more compassion and love there is to share. This makes the world a better place for all of us. Dreams are essential to our own health, as well as to the health and wellbeing of the world. By honouring dreams, we learn how to honour all aspects of life more fully.

Don’t be afraid to get up and dance with your dreams!

### **CJ: That’s wonderful advice, Sheila. Keep dancing!**

Readers can learn more about Sheila’s work here: <https://monkeybridgearts.wordpress.com/>



Sheila Asato with dance teacher Shinya McHenry

**Clare Johnson, PhD** (Clare Jay) has written two lucid dream-based novels, *Breathing in Colour* and *Dreamrunner*—see [www.clarejay.com](http://www.clarejay.com). The first doctoral researcher to explore lucid dreaming as a creative writing tool, Clare’s workshops combine dreams, art and yoga with her Lucid Writing technique. Her new website just went live: [www.DeepLucidDreaming.com](http://www.DeepLucidDreaming.com)