

- NINA MOINI:** This is *Minnesota Now*. I'm Nina Moini. In the early 2000s, people all over the country could get insight into their dreams by calling up a different radio program. *The Dream Doctor* was a nationally syndicated show hosted by Charles McPhee. In this clip, a caller named Jessica is sharing a recurring dream where her teeth fall out.
- JESSICA:** And I was frantically looking for my-- this dream, it was my brother. I was looking for my brother. And I'm like, I lost my teeth. And he says, don't worry about it, we won't tell Mom. We'll get you some dentures. It'll be OK, but your dentures are going to hurt. So then the rest of the dream I spent looking for dentures, trying not to tell my mom.
- CHARLES MCPHEE:** Yeah, Jessica, when did you first have these dreams?
- JESSICA:** I've had at least four of them a month for the past six months. So I'm curious, because it's driving me crazy.
- CHARLES MCPHEE:** Yeah, Jessica, I want to know what's been going on over the last couple of months where it's been a hard time for you. You're maybe feeling a little bit insecure about your appearance and your presentation in public.
- JESSICA:** Yeah.
- CHARLES MCPHEE:** And it's letting us know, maybe I'm not up to par.
- JESSICA:** Yeah, that could be it.
- CHARLES MCPHEE:** Hey, what's going on?
- NINA MOINI:** That is a familiar dream for many, and that's the familiar voice of Charles McPhee, a.k.a. the Dream Doctor, who died of ALS in 2011 at the age of 49. His sister, Larkin McPhee, lives in Minneapolis. She's won Emmys and Peabody Awards for her documentary films, but for her brother's story, she turned to writing. She's out with a book this month about their relationship. It's called *I'll See You in my Dreams-- A Sister's Memoir*, and Larkin McPhee joins me in the studio. Thank you so much for being here, Larkin.
- LARKIN MCPHEE:** Thank you, Nina, for having me.
- NINA MOINI:** I noticed as we were listening there to the clip of your brother advising people with this neat gift that he had, it made you emotional. And I just wonder, how does it make you feel when you hear his voice, and when you think of all of his contributions?
- LARKIN MCPHEE:** Well, what I really hear is this vitality in his voice. Not long after the diagnosis, his voice was one of the first things to go. In fact, listeners called in to this radio show and said, Charles is slurring his words. What's going on? Is he drinking? And of course, he wasn't drinking. It was the beginning of what's called bulbar ALS, where it travels from the top down, meaning the vital organs like your voice and breathing and swallowing. So it's wonderful to hear that voice. He loved radio.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, thank you for sharing that. It was a beautiful voice, and you're right, so many people take for granted or don't think about something like being able to use your voice every day, and so it's beautiful to listen to that and to remember it. So you included the transcript, as well, of that call in your book. What does it mean for you in terms of how your brother interacted with his callers?

LARKIN
MCPHEE: You know, he had such a deft touch. He would be so kind and gentle with people, and I just marveled at his ability to decipher these really weird, complicated dreams. He'd ask a few questions and he'd get the context of a person's lives. He would call it, what's the headline news in your life? And he would really quickly figure out these symbols and help people and give them relief, or whatever it was that they wanted to understand. He would always nail it. And he had this whole dream dictionary that's actually on his website, because he actually amassed half a million dreams in his database over his career.

NINA MOINI: Wow.

LARKIN
MCPHEE: Which is amazing, from all over the world.

NINA MOINI: And you were pretty close in age, right? He was less than two years younger than you. How did he get so interested in dreams? Do you remember the moment where you thought, oh, this is going to be more than just a little interest here, or a little hobby?

LARKIN
MCPHEE: Yeah, when we were teenagers Charles started to lucid dream, which is when you become conscious of dreaming in the dream and you become the author of your dream. So suddenly Charles said, wow, I can walk through this wall, or I can go grab the sun. He was really thrilled by it. And he got to college and he tried to talk his junior thesis advisor into his thesis on dreams, and his advisor said no.

And then Charles went and did research, had to create his own curriculum. There were only about five books in the library on dreams. There was no curriculum. But he was so fascinated and he was very persistent. He also got into sleep studies. He worked at NIMH and Cedars-Sinai, so he got a great grounding in sleep as well.

NINA MOINI: I know your brother, you mentioned, was diagnosed with ALS. This was 20 years ago, 2006. It's also known as Lou Gehrig's disease. And for those who don't know, it causes the brain to lose connection with the muscles, and it is progressively more severe over time. What do you want people to understand about what it's like to have ALS, or to lose someone to this disease?

LARKIN
MCPHEE: If you think about the kinds of things that can happen to us, I think ALS is really difficult. A lot of people, when they get this diagnosis, the suicide rate jumps six times. And only in the first few months, because it's such an enormous shock. You're about to lose complete control over your body. You can't even-- it's something. So it's really scary and frightening. But what I would say is that Charles was an extraordinary leader to the family and he never complained, which was sort of hard to believe, but he was always steps ahead of the family.

And what I discovered on these multiple trips to California to see him was that if I just surrendered and accepted what happened to him, that was a form of empowerment, and that I could be fully present for him because he was so present for his life, and his whole life. And I think that was the lesson I got in this-- that we have loved ones who are sick, no matter what it is, and instead of mourning what was, we have to be there with what is. And that's what I really gained from him, or I tried to be. During that time, and certainly now, this was a terrible thing that happened, but what can we take from it? What can we alchemize from it that's good? Because that's what Charles did for me my whole life.

NINA MOINI: Well, and that's what your writing in this book can do now for so many other people who are looking for stories like this, and looking to understand more. And sometimes when you write something down on a page, it's not only cathartic for you, but hopefully for other people as well. And I know in your book include a piece of an essay that your brother wrote about his illness. Would you be willing to share that?

LARKIN I'd love to share it.

MCPHEE:

NINA MOINI: Thank you.

LARKIN This was from the *Princeton Alumni Review*. He wrote, not long after he became ill, beautiful essay, and this is a part of it.

MCPHEE:

"Today I am buoyed along in the currents of a quick-moving river. As they say, you're never more alive than when you're standing next to death. I realize I have entered a new community, the vast legions of people living with illness, cancer, and other bad diagnoses, and I am hardly alone. Most dramatic is my liberation from the illusion of time-- that there will always be more time to see a friend, to repair a marriage, to spend time with a child, to develop a hobby, or to concentrate on one's spiritual life. There will not always be more time, even for those who are healthy. I have learned that in death's mirror, the magic and beauty of life truly are illuminated. It feels good not to be blind."

NINA MOINI: What do you interpret those words like, or what do you think he wanted to convey?

LARKIN Just to be awake for life right now. And I think from this, the message I took was I was making my films, and I was very happy, but I was writing in between them. And when I finished my last film on psychedelic medicine, I said, you know what? I still felt this tug on my heart about Charles and I thought, if I don't write this book now, I'm not going to write it. And I better do it, because even for those who are healthy, who knows what's going to happen in our lives? And I'm here now, and I have this opportunity, and I was really drawn to it. One of my friends says, go where the energy is. And I thought, I really have to try this. And I think he helped me with that, this message.

NINA MOINI: It's remarkable when people are able to live the way they want to live and practice what they preach, and actually be present and in the moment, because that's something that so many of us want. It's the biggest gift to yourself, I think, is to be able to live in the moment, but it is so hard for many people. But I wonder if his exposure to dreams-- I mean, I don't exactly know what lucid dreaming would be like, but imagine the level of presence and the different levels of consciousness that someone is working with. It's remarkable. So I mean, do you think that was part of the whole gift there?

LARKIN Yeah, that's a wonderful way to say it, these multiple levels of being present. I've never thought of it that way. I

MCPHEE: love that. Yeah, and he had that effect on everybody. I mean, we say sometimes, you're in a room with someone and it's as if you're the only person there. But it's really true with him. And the other beautiful thing about him was when he was dying, even in the last moments of his life, he was thinking about everybody else. He was orchestrating the last moments of his life, thinking about his children, the fact that I was flying out there, my sister was going to be there. And I just loved that about him.

NINA MOINI: Going back to the dreams, in addition to analyzing people's dreams on his radio show, your brother shared advice to help people remember and interpret their dreams on their own. So he recommended recalling as much as you can, the moment you wake up in the morning, and then writing it down. He said it doesn't have to be long, just four sentences. And I know you say he cared so much about setting other people up for success, so let's hear some of his advice.

CHARLES You want to always pay attention to the location of the dream. And if it's not a place that you're familiar with in

MCPHEE: your waking life, where did it feel like it was? Who were the people in the dream with you? Were you by yourself or were there other people there? And if they were indistinct, did they remind you of someone? What was the key image in the dream?

And most important of all, what was the key feeling? And I'm going to be talking about feelings a little bit later on in the show, because feelings are the most important part of dreams. There's a great wisdom about dreams. Feelings and dreams are never disguised. How you're feeling in a dream, while the dream is going on, is how you're feeling somewhere in your waking life.

NINA MOINI: Right. So it's not just about interpreting your dreams for fun, right? There's something deeper and at the core that he wants people to try to access.

LARKIN Very much so. And he helped me so many times because I would have challenging dreams, and it was like a

MCPHEE: therapist was talking to me from my subconscious. I mean, they can convey your deepest wishes in a positive way, and also your deepest fears or your deepest concerns. And I had issues with self-esteem, and I had such clear dreams, but not so clear to me. And Charles would help me, and that was wonderful. And other dreams motivated me to move on in my career, from beautiful workplaces, just because I was ready for the next challenge. So I think the more we pay attention, the more we learn about ourselves, it's like completing ourselves.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, that's so fascinating, and so valuable for people. This is the legacy of your brother, and for you to put that into words and give him this act of love is really beautiful, and we just thank you so much for sharing, Larkin. Is there anything else that you want to say about your brother, that you'd like folks to remember about him?

LARKIN Well, certainly to pay attention to ALS and to acknowledge all those people out there who are disabled, to look

MCPHEE: them in the eye. Really, there's no difference. There's absolutely no difference. And then the other thing I would say is I've had a lot of friends come to me from reading the book or at my launch and say, I'm having dreams now and they're really pretty wild or informative dreams. And I'm so happy because I just wanted to pick up that legacy and carry it on, because Charles was doing really great work and making it fun and entertaining on the radio.

NINA MOINI: Larkin, thank you so much for sharing and congratulations on the book.

LARKIN

Thank you so much, Nina. It's been a pleasure.

MCPHEE:

NINA MOINI:

Larkin McPhee is an award-winning documentary filmmaker and the author of *I'll See You in My Dreams-- A Sister's Memoir*. Her book is out now.