

DREAMS AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON HUMAN LIFE

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Every person on earth dreams pretty much every night, and evidence suggests that all mammals do also. It follows then that something extremely important must be going on while we sleep and dream, yet in the industrialized world, the majority of people pay little attention to dreams, and sometimes shortchange themselves on sleep because it is perceived as lost time, or at best unproductive. How astonishing that we generally ignore this third (and possibly far more) of ourselves.

Dream related mental skills such as dream recall or dream interpretation and information on subjects such as the meaning of nightmares or precognitive dreams isn't often taught in our schools, and the majority of our parents knew or passed on little about the value of dreams as we grew up. So it's no big surprise that many adults remember few or no dreams, and even more rarely contemplate or set out to interpret the guidance and mine the jewels of creative inspiration hidden just below the surface of consciousness in dreams. Basically, nobody told us or showed us how dreams can be extremely practical.

This long-standing trend of modern society often disregarding dreams has created an artificial rift within many individuals, and may indirectly or even rather directly be the source for many of our current cultural, social, personal, political and planetary environmental challenges.

One solution towards rebalancing and integration on a personal and eventually a planetary level, is for each of us to realize and begin to investigate how our personal dreams, at very least, each night offer a direct means to explore inner reality and gain unique, undeniable experiences of deep personal value. Further, there is overwhelming evidence that they can be applied in many ways to improve waking life, supporting Shakespeare's age-old claim by MacBeth that sleep and dreams are the "chief nourishes in life's feast". Dreams do indeed offer opportunities for fun, adventure, wish fulfillment, creativity, deep personal insight and healing – and dreams offer all this at no cost and with no line-ups!

What are dreams? Dreams are successions of images, ideas, emotions and sensations occurring involuntarily in the mind during certain stages of sleep. The content and purpose of dreams are not yet understood, though they have been a topic of speculation and interest throughout recorded history. The scientific study of dreams is known as oneirology.

Throughout history, people have sought meaning in dreams or divination through dreams. Dreams have also been described physiologically as a response to neural processes during sleep; psychologically as reflections of the subconscious; and spiritually as messages from gods, the deceased, predictions of the future, or from the Soul. Many cultures practice dream incubation with the intention of cultivating dreams that are prophetic or contain messages from the divine.

There are various theories which describe the influence of dreams. Sigmund Freud had proposed that dreams are the means of one's expressions of his/her unconscious wishes. He had said that bad dreams allow the brain to gain control over the feelings that are a result of distressful experiences. Carl Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist suggested that dreams compensate for one-sided feelings borne in consciousness. According to Ferenczi,

a Hungarian psychoanalyst, a dream bears something that cannot be expressed outright. Some theories say that dreams involve one's repressed emotions that are fantasized during the sleep while other theories suggest dreams to be an outcome of the cleaning-up operations of the brain.

Hartmann believes that dreams give a person an opportunity to organize his/her thoughts. Blechner's theory of Oneiric Darwinism, which attributes the generation of new ideas to dreams, is quite supportive of Hartmann's analysis. Griffin, through his recent research has proposed the expectation fulfillment theory of dreaming, according to which dreaming completes patterns of emotional expectations.

According to the theory of emotional selection by Richard Coutts, dreaming is a way to modify one's mental schema. The theory of emotional selection is about a process of executing a set of dreams during the non-REM sleep. A second set of dreams is executed during the following REM sleep in the form of test scenarios. It defines an accommodation as the process of reframing one's mental representation of the external world to fit new experiences. If the accommodations performed during the preceding non-REM dreams reduce one's negative emotions, they are selected for retention, else they are abandoned. Thus emotional selection says that the psychology of dreams is usually about the enhancement of mental schemas, it's about increasing one's social abilities.

Eugen Tarnow suggests that dreams are ever-present excitations of long-term memory, even during waking life. The strangeness of dreams is due to the format of long-term memory, reminiscent of Penfield & Rasmussen's findings that electrical excitations of the cortex give rise to experiences similar to dreams. During waking life an executive function interprets long-term memory consistent with reality checking. Tarnow's theory is a reworking of Freud's theory of dreams in which Freud's unconscious is replaced with the long-term memory system and Freud's "Dream Work" describes the structure of long-term memory.

Robert (1886), a physician from Hamburg, was the first who suggested that dreams are a need and that they have the function to erase (a) sensory impressions which were not fully worked up and (b) ideas which were not fully developed during the day. By the dream work incomplete material will be either removed or deepened and included into memory. Robert's ideas were cited repeatedly by Freud in his *Traumdeutung*. Hughlings Jackson (1911) viewed that sleep serves to sweep away unnecessary memories and connections from the day. This was revised in 1983 by Crick and Mitchison's "reverse learning" theory, which states that dreams are like the cleaning-up operations of computers when they are off-line, removing parasitic nodes and other "junk" from the mind during sleep. However, the opposite view that dreaming has an information handling; memory-consolidating function (Hennevin and Leconte, 1971) is also common. Dreams are a result of the spontaneous firings of neural patterns while the brain is undergoing memory consolidation during sleep.

Fritz Perls presented his theory of dreams as part of the holistic nature of Gestalt therapy. Dreams are seen as projections of parts of the self that have been ignored, rejected, or suppressed. Jung argued that one could consider every person in the dream to represent an aspect of the dreamer, which he called the subjective approach to dreams. Perls expanded this point of view to say that even inanimate objects in the dream may represent aspects of the dreamer. The dreamer may therefore be asked to imagine being an object in the dream and to describe it, in order to bring into awareness the characteristics of the object that correspond with the dreamer's personality.

Dreams were historically used for healing (as in the asclepieions found in the ancient Greek temples of Asclepius) as well as for guidance or divine inspiration. Some Native American tribes used vision quests as a rite of passage, fasting and praying until an

anticipated guiding dream was received, to be shared with the rest of the tribe upon their return.

The recall of dreams is extremely unreliable, though it is a skill that can be trained. Dreams can usually be recalled if a person is awakened while dreaming. Women tend to have more frequent dream recall than men. Dreams that are difficult to recall may be characterized by relatively little affect, and factors such as salience, arousal, and interference play a role in dream recall. Often, a dream may be recalled upon viewing or hearing a random trigger or stimulus. A dream journal can be used to assist dream recall, for psychotherapy or entertainment purposes. For some people, vague images or sensations from the previous night's dreams are sometimes spontaneously experienced in falling asleep. However they are usually too slight and fleeting to allow dream recall. At least 95% of all dreams are not remembered. Certain brain chemicals necessary for converting short-term memories into long-term ones are suppressed during REM sleep. Unless a dream is particularly vivid and if one wakes during or immediately after it, the content of the dream will not be remembered.

According to surveys, it is common for people to feel their dreams are predicting subsequent life events. Psychologists have explained these experiences in terms of memory biases, namely a selective memory for accurate predictions and distorted memory so that dreams are retrospectively fitted onto life experiences. The multi-faceted nature of dreams makes it easy to find connections between dream content and real events.

In one experiment, subjects were asked to write down their dreams in a diary. This prevented the selective memory effect, and the dreams no longer seemed accurate about the future. Another experiment gave subjects a fake diary of a student with apparently precognitive dreams. This diary described events from the person's life, as well as some predictive dreams and some non-predictive dreams. When subjects were asked to recall the dreams they had read, they remembered more of the successful predictions than unsuccessful ones.

Modern popular culture often conceives of dreams, like Freud, as expressions of the dreamer's deepest fears and desires. In films such as *Spellbound* (1945), *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) and *Inception* (2010), the protagonists must extract vital clues from surreal dreams.

Most dreams in popular culture are, however, not symbolic, but straightforward and realistic depictions of their dreamer's fears and desires. Dream scenes may be indistinguishable from those set in the dreamer's real world, a narrative device that undermines the dreamer's and the audience's sense of security and allows horror movie protagonists, such as those of *Carrie* (1976), *Friday the 13th* (1980) or *An American Werewolf in London* (1981) to be suddenly attacked by dark forces while resting in seemingly safe places.

In speculative fiction, the line between dreams and reality may be blurred even more in the service of the story. Dreams may be psychically invaded or manipulated (the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films, 1984–1991; *Inception*, 2010) or even come literally true (as in *The Lathe of Heaven*, 1971). Such stories play to audiences' experiences with their own dreams, which feel as real to them.