

DO WE DARE TO DREAM?

"That which the dream shows is the shadow of such wisdom as exists in man, even if during his waking state he may know nothing about it..." Philip Aureolus Paracelsus

Hippocrates, the Greek philosopher and healer known for the celebrated Hippocratic oath, so regularly quoted and misquoted in popular media, said that prayer is good, but while calling on the gods, man should himself lend a hand. Dreams have helped humans to lend such a hand, and from the earliest times we have used dreams to understand and communicate with the unknown and to improve our fate. Whether these sleep-time narratives are considered voyages of the soul, messages from the gods, a doorway to the unconscious or just accidental by-products of insufficient oxygen to the brain, thoughtful men and women have always sought to learn more about this intriguing aspect of sleeping consciousness.

A dream is one mysterious event that all people have experienced personally, and probably most of us have been disturbed by and led to ponder the meaning of many dreams. In fact, it often feels as if secrets from the unknown are disclosed to us in an individual and private way. Very likely, most of you will immediately link what you are going to read in our essays on dreaming to your own dreams, irrespective of the value you give to dreaming in your everyday life. This is because few experiences feel as private and unique as one's own dreams. Whether a frightening nightmare, remarkable adventure or humbling vision, a dream will always leave a sense of distinctive personal identity mixed with otherworldly mystery.

Moreover, we cannot choose to attend to only one aspect of our lives during a dream, as we often do in waking consciousness. Most of us have experienced how sensation, feeling, thinking, imagination, intuition and foresight seem to happen simultaneously during a dream, creating a deep sense knowing. If we remember that the difference between health and illness is always more than the misbehaving of a single subsystem or organ at a specific time, the inner nucleus of our coherent self that is visible behind dream images may supply the sense of wholeness that sustains us during hardship and illness.

It thus makes a lot of bio-analytical sense to explore the role of dreams in health and healing.

deepening the shadow...

"I was not looking for my dreams to interpret my life, but rather for my life to interpret my dreams." Susan Sontag

In prehistoric and ancient cultures, people probably perceived dreams as from a world beyond their own waking identity. Whether a dream was shown to them by an ancestor or whether their soul had to travel to the world of spirits and gods during sleep, people believed that through dreams they were able to communicate with and receive wisdom from what was beyond time and space. This enabled them to understand



their fate, know themselves and improve their health.

Today, our global culture expects us to take personal responsibility for everything, even the creation of our dream images. Yet, in the background, we still hanker after a possibility that dreams may come from a realm beyond our own control. In other words, even if *'the voices of the gods'* have evolved to become our own inner voice, dreams are still experienced as separate from our waking self. This dispute between taking personal responsibility for the content of dreams on one hand and, on the other hand, having an anxious or indifferent acceptance of whatever is dreamt, seems to be inherent to human reasoning and to our pursuit of reality. From ancient Egypt to present day neuro-science research laboratories, this unresolved rivalry between *'us creating our dreams'* or *'our dreams creating us'* has kept philosophers, healers, artists and scientists endlessly busy.

In ancient times, people usually said: "I saw a dream". Today, in modern English, we say, "I had a dream", which, although it now indicates individual ownership, still hints at something not inherent to our being. In the end it is a dispute about which is the most important: the dream or the dreamer.

It has only been in the last few decades of the past century that medical science has tried to avoid this debate by overlooking dreams all together. Whatever could not be measured in a research laboratory and predicted as a statistical formula no longer had any value to modern medicine. However, the brain is mapped out now, and irrespective of controlled chemical and physical manipulation, we are still faced with eerily subjective experiences. There is thus a tendency for neurological research, even within the confines of the modern electronic laboratory, to rethink the artificial barriers between matter and thought, between chemical reactions and imagination, and once again bring dreams to the forefront of human exploration.

Maybe a combination of integrative observation and the large amount of electronic data that the digital age can manage, could advance our understanding of dreams.



who speaketh...

"As the light of nature cannot speak, it buildith shapes in sleep from the power of the word." Paracelsus

For now, we have to accept that much of this widely experienced aspect of our inner organisation is still inaccessible to most modern neuro-scientific methods of investigation. Even philosophers presently prefer to steer clear of the indefinite inner worlds of people and rather concentrate on social interaction and human communication. It is sad, though, that this lack of critical inquiry into dreaming often leaves the door wide open for pseudoscience and tainted pragmatic views.

In the time of Hippocrates, nobody doubted that dreams were a direct route to 'calling on the gods'. To the intellectual minds of his time, the study of dreams was both philosophy and practical science. Dreams were directly connected to the unknown, and healing, religion, myth, and folklore relied heavily on dreams to explain the laws of nature. This meant that whatever happened in dreams was seen as just as valid as that which happened in the outer world. Dreams were part of everyday life and people talked about them, listened to them, tried to change them and used different techniques to remember them. They were thus a crucial part of healing and were used regularly to diagnose illness. Healers from prehistoric and ancient cultures all over the world believed that the thoughts and feelings of dreams were created by the various organs throughout the body. These organs were understood to communicate with specific gods or divine forces, each in its own particular way, and then cause changes in the body that are beyond conscious control.

The practice of healing diseases through dreams was called **egkoimesis** by the Greeks and **incubatio** by the Romans. Temples to Asclepius were erected throughout the ancient Mediterranean. Those seeking healing would make pilgrimages to these holy sites where they had to perform prayers and sacrifices, make monetary gifts and spend the night in the temple to dream. This dream was then mediated by a priest or priestess and became the source of the oracle's advice. In fact, the word symptom comes from the Greek word *symptoma*, which was the complementary dream dreamt by the priests who mediated at the oracle of Delphi and the temples of Asclepius.

Today in a modern setting, dreams are frequently shoved into the realm of imagination created randomly by a sleeping brain, and we now live in a world where cognitive neuro-science explains the personal unknown - how we lift our finger, why we sleep or what part of the brain makes us religious. Dreaming too has now become an accidental phenomenon that originates during restorative brain functioning, and its content has no conscious value to the dreamer.

Personally I hope, for the sake of future evolution, that the explanation is not as straightforward as this, and that we will find new ways to admit to the ancient insight that there is more to the extraordinary state of dreaming than a mere random noise of brain cells.



who listens..?

Those who lose dreaming are lost. Australian Aboriginal proverb

By the time we are seventy five, we probably would have spent at least twenty of those years in the inner world of dreams, and it makes sense that to most people dreaming is a valued individual experience, one that mystifies, entices and maybe even heals. Whether dreams are seen as divine intervention or as Freud's "royal road to the unconscious", most people have a strong subjective feeling that their dreams communicate something of importance.

Because attention to dreams combines an imaginative mindset with an intuitive sense of self-confirmation, views about dreaming seem to be resistant to modern pragmatism. In my practice, where I have often seen strictly matter-of-fact businessmen in their struggle with the health consequences of stress, it always amazes me how susceptible they are to the illogical persuasion of their own dreams. It is as if participation in this weirdly familiar, yet unsubstantiated world is the most personal reality they could experience.

In spite of this, sleep and dreams are neglected in a modern lifestyle, where most of us ignore the moment when natural evening darkness sets in, or when the moon is full, and our contact with the benevolent symbolic images that originate from the natural rhythms of our biological system is so easily ignored or discarded. Furthermore, there is no way, apart from personal experience, in which we could verify the effect or value of dream images in terms of present medical research. The claim that dreams could include information about the organisation of our inner biological system is more than medical science would like to cope with at the moment.

I find it sad that in Western culture children have to sleep on their own since birth and cope with dreams all alone, or if attended to, be told that it was "... just a dream...". Here in Africa, and many other less Westernised places, children sleep amongst adults. They learn to be comfortable with dreaming, and experience this mystical and sometimes scary world in the immediate environment of adults who are interested in, but unperturbed by the contents of dreams. The weird and

Once again, I hope we will be wise enough to rethink our attitude towards non-ordinary states of consciousness such as dreaming, and bring their contents back into medicine as a practical part of our everyday reality.



obscure but not false...

"Nature is often obscure or impenetrable, but she is not, like man, deceitful. We must therefore take it that the dream is just what it pretends to be, neither more nor less. If it shows something in a negative light, there is no reason for assuming that it is meant positively." CG Jung

During the first decades of the previous century, natural sciences still kept an eye on the elusive light of the inner unknown, although it was soon to be obscured by the thick veil of twentieth century pragmatism. Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, with their theory of an unconscious that is the source of dreams, made scientific sense to clinicians for about half a century. Few were bothered by the fact that the *unconscious* was no less mysterious and undefined than the goddess of a nether world in previous times. However, psycho-analysis lost its dominance once a mechanical outlook of medicine and psychiatry, based upon a behaviouristic interpretation of human consciousness, was established.

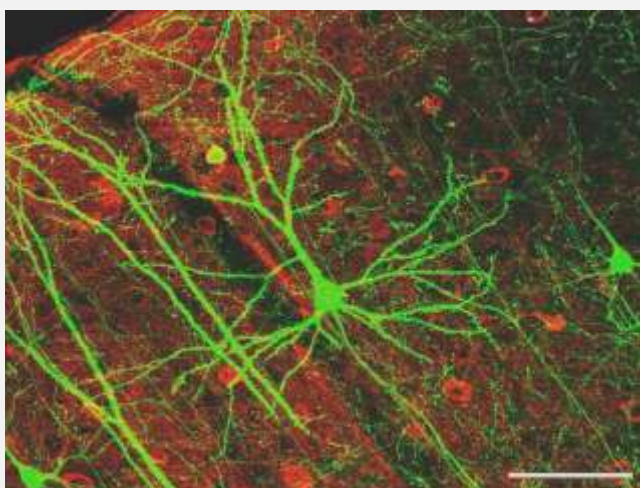
For the rest of the past century dreams had to move into a small corner of neuro-scientific research, until they had been reduced to little more than random brain activity during sleep. People were seen as being

directed by the outer world and became the sum total their learned behaviour. Medical scientists discovered REM and NREM sleep and started to do objective biological measurements of brain function during sleep and dreaming. Psychometric evaluations, neurotransmitter levels and functional brain scans gave them the confidence to define dreams as mere by-products of the recovery processes of the brain during sleep.

What they could not explain, however, was the creative order and intelligent logic visible in dreams, and how dream content often seems to make sense to the dreamer. In other words, although medical science has brought scepticism about the purpose and meaning of dreams, it is still faced with the possibility that dreaming communicates realities about our inner world. So, the real problem lies in understanding what is said, now that we no longer have ancestors, spirits, gods or an unconscious world to help us in translating the highly metaphorical dream images into a comprehensible reality. At the moment neuro-science's way out of this dilemma is to declare that the brain is fundamentally creative and that all activity, albeit random, is spontaneously creative, especially during sleep when there are no sensory, cognitive, moral, and other influences from outside.

Most people find it easier to express their dream experiences in *as-if* associations, such as *"...it was as if I was in this dense forest, but there was lots of sunlight, as if it was a happy safe place..."* At the moment modern science would find it difficult to research such a sentence with traditional research methods. Even modern philosophers would become bogged down in the murky particularities of language. As a matter of fact, psychotherapy too, in tune with our modern tiptoeing around a personal inner life, seems to have turned away from exploring the language of dreams. Sadly, on the other hand, the Jungian or analytical psychology viewpoint, where dreams are seen as symbolic scripts originating from a personal inner unconscious as well as from an intuitive but hidden knowledge of collective human evolution, has become more popular in alternative health models, where dream material is often used indiscriminately.

Now, maybe I'm wrong, but this to me sounds the same as saying that we have an unconscious intelligence, which creates meaningful scripts for dreams.



a complex of thoughts...

"...essential dream-thoughts emerge as (a) complex of thoughts and memories of the most intricate possible structure..." Sigmund Freud.

If we accept that the brain is fundamentally creative during sleep and that most people experience their dreams as meaningful, it makes sense to persist in

exploring the language of dreams and to try and understand this intricate aspect of our inner organisation.

We all know that a large part of the coordination of our system and its identity happens during sleep. Only a fraction of this activity is translated into images available to waking consciousness. However, the

intensity of feelings during and after the snippets of night time restructuring that we remember should point towards the importance of this weird and imaginative logic that is part of our system's regular organisation. In other words, it seems reasonable to find a way to understand dream material, not only to enrich our insight into intra-psychic processes, but also to explain the dynamic processes of our biological system as a whole.

We should not shy away from this task just because dream images are often too intangible to understand within the context of biological processes or because the images of dreams cannot be adequately articulated in terms of medical terminology. It is therefore crucial to find an integrated system of dream research and analysis that can translate the symbolic and the biological, the dream and the dreamer, into a common descriptive language, a language that the scientist and the philosopher, the healer and the artist can share, as in ancient times.

In other words, although there seems to be a complex and peculiar logic to the content of dream consciousness, we have to remember that the same anatomical and biochemical systems and ordering processes underlie dreams and waking life.



a living metaphor...

A wonderful harmony arises from joining together the seemingly unconnected." Heraclitus

If our system is low in salt, we consciously take in salt because the bodily need is translated into a mental image that forces us to find salty food. If our system struggles to maintain our identity, we will remember dreams that light up specific parts of our fragmented self-definition. Analysing a dream image will tell us when an event has damaged our coherent identity during interaction with the outer world, damage that would have changed not only our self-image, but also our immune system, energy production, and even the size of the hypothalamus in our brain.

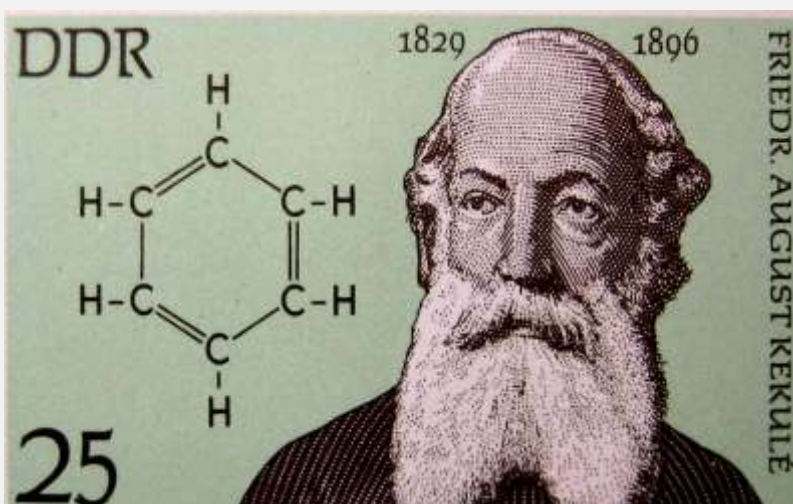
Thus, if our dreams are a product of our system's inner organization, there is no reason why we should not also consciously act on our system's needs when they are translated into dream images. During prehistoric times, our system had to cope with hunger, pain, cold, birth and death in a direct and one-dimensional way. Although we can never know for certain, early hunter-gatherers seem to have dreamt more about food and shelter in ways that related to their everyday needs. Today similar human experiences, from hunger to fear of death, have many nuances and abstract meanings. Our system now has to handle a complex mixture of associated inner and outer realities such as multiple self-images, emotional self-discipline, need for achievement, abnormal sleep rhythms, and food fetishes, all of which play havoc with basic survival feedback cycles and disturb our coherent identity on all levels of existence, and will be portrayed in our dream content.

In other words, most of the survival challenges or stressors now come from an indefinable source 'inside our head' rather than from the physical environment, and we find it even more difficult to escape them when we sleep. Since there is a good chance that dreams contain the coherent symbolic constructions that were created out of the outer and inner transformations that have happened during the day, they may play an important part in restructuring our coherent identity. It is thus reasonable to assume that today they could have an even greater impact on our sense of self than the direct stressors of physical survival. Actually, dreaming could be more important to the intelligent organisation of our system and its survival in this modern age where we ironically try to reason for its irrelevance.

Modern waking life flows at a breakneck pace. Combine this with the continual challenge to our inherent identity - whether from pollution on our immune system or noise on our nervous system or just because the media argues for a different 'model human being' every week - and it seems that dreaming is more crucial than ever before to maintain our sense of coherence. Because we dream with a deep sense that the dream world is our own, it ensures that the inconceivable is accepted without excessive defence responses.

The prehistoric and ancient view that dreams are an important source of knowledge to our waking consciousness is thus still valid, even when we now assume that the brain and its networks is the sole source of their content. Dreams creatively resolve the imbalance between the chaotic elements of waking life and our coherent identity. Through the bizarreness of dream images our system's organisation guarantees individual adaptation and development while at the same time also informing us of the collective survival strategies that have maintained life throughout human history.

A functional utilisation of dreams and their content may therefore help us to understand both physical wellness and disease in relation to individual psychodynamics, personality structure and interaction with the outer world.



in service of wholeness...

All dreams come in the service of health and wholeness, even nightmares. Only the dreamer can say with any certainty what his/her dream means." Jeremy Taylor

It does not mean that those of us who need a sense of mythical confirmation through dreams should despair. As in many other fields of science, medical researchers are cautiously starting to agree with our ancestors that our mythical relationship with the unknown is as personal and biologically real as our ability to feel pain or hunger. All it takes is to agree that mind and body are part of the same organisational system and that dreams are as much part of a creative mind as they are of the body or brain. Integrated research of dreaming may take us to a point where dream analysis can be used in clinical settings without a loss of

wonder for the creativeness of dream content. In other words, dreams not only help to redress existing and active feedback cycles in the body but may indicate novel possibilities for future coordination (similar to the divine messages of ancient times).

Few examples illustrate the body-mind division in pragmatic science better than the attempts to discount the dream of the German chemist, August Kekule, who said he dreamt of a snake biting its tail and only then defined the benzene ring which became the basis of organic chemistry. Many scientists wasted hours trying to prove that the dream vision was irrelevant in the process, demonstrating the lack of associative thinking that would actually be necessary in future if science wants to explore the value of dreaming. Eventually, it was August Kekule's dream that gave him the insight and courage to put into effect the image of the benzene ring, irrespective of what he knew beforehand.

The challenge thus lies in finding a modern approach that can take us beyond mere interpretation of dream images, and utilise dream content to strengthen our sense of

coherent self in order to improve our overall health and well-being. This means we should ultimately widen our viewpoint and reasoning in order to explore even illogical dream content as facts, not as random fantasy, but crucial information from the whole of our inner organisation.

Only then will we be able to translate the language of dreams into a form of logic that allows for meaningful research without losing sight of the magic that lies in individual creativity.

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