

The Importance of Dreams

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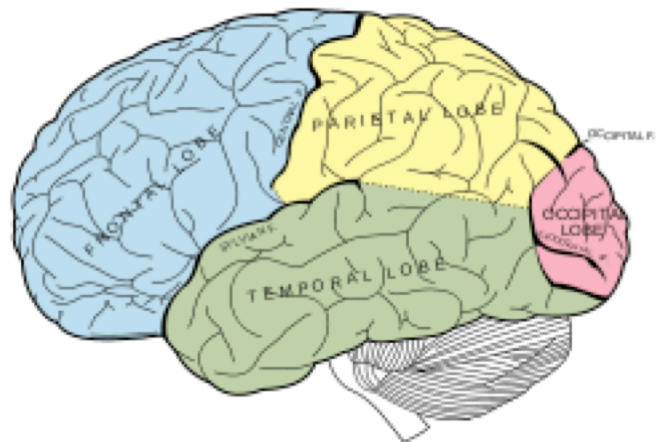
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Every night before falling asleep we slowly drift out of physical consciousness. This does not mean that our brains are not active. While we are sustaining a physical state of immobility, our minds are wandering; sifting through all of the information that they are bombarded with on a daily basis.¹ Dreams are defined in their basic forms as “a series of thoughts, images, or emotions occurring during sleep.”² Throughout history, mankind has wondered about these visions that come to us during sleep. Egyptian civilization thought that dreams were messages from good and evil spirits, the Greeks built shrines to serve as “dream oracles,” and during the dark ages dreams were considered evil entities trying to contact us.³ In my experience, dreams are a space for our conscious to speak to our subconscious.

During the last 100 years there have been enormous break-throughs in both dream analysis and brain study and collectively these have contributed to what is known today about dreams. Sigmund Freud articulated his theories about how dreams are expressions of repressed urges and desires, C.G. Jung wrote about the “collective unconscious,” along with his own personal experiences with dreams, and many other neurologists and psychologists have shared their opinions about the subconscious and its relation to dreams.⁴ In my experiences with dreams I have found both personal truths and fallacies in the theories of past philosophers and psychologists, but more significantly it seems that dreams are an important way for my brain and subconscious to rationalize daily life, and for my conscious and subconscious to have a space to communicate.

The human brain plays a crucial role in the formation of dreams. The brain is a complex mechanism that encompasses many different components, formed from four different “lobes” that each play a fundamental role in its overall function. The first is the frontal lobe. This lobe contains most of the dopamine system and is involved in most of our conscious thoughts. The dopamine system is a system that rewards our brain with dopamine and is associated with attention, long-term memory, and planning. The parietal lobe plays a role in our senses, and our visual perception of where objects are in relation to us. The occipital lobe deals with nearly every aspect of our vision. It contains visual residues of things that we have seen throughout our life and contains the “primary visual cortex” which is where many dreams originate. The fourth lobe is the temporal lobe, where we manage our senses of smell and sound. In the temporal lobe we store most of our long-term memory and process complex stimuli such as faces and scenes.⁵ When we dream, all of these lobes are active in different ways. Activity could be recreating a scene that you experienced the previous day, or unlocking a memory that has been repressed since your early childhood. My dreams often take place in locations that I



¹ David Fontana, *The Secret Language of Dreams* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle, 1994) 9.

² "Dreams." *Merriam-Webster Online*. Web. 08 May 2011. <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dreams>>.

³ Fontana, 10.

⁴ Fontana, 24.

⁵ Charles Hampden-Turner. *Maps of the Mind*. (New York: Macmillan, 1981. Print.) 72.

have not seen or been to in years, or places that my mind completely constructs itself that vaguely remind me of a thought that I had in the past. It could be my best friend's house from childhood, or somewhere related to an image I saw that day.

What we dream about often has to do with what stage of dreaming it occurs in. These "levels," proposed by Freud and added to by Jung, were formulated to understand why we dream of certain things. The first level primarily deals with thoughts and ideas that are accessible to the conscious upon demand; this could be events that occurred recently or people you saw that day. The second level tends to deal with material from your "personal unconscious." This is where memories both suppressed and forgotten lie, along with motives and urges you may or may not be aware of. The third level is a phase that draws from the collective unconscious, a "genetically inherited" level of the mind that contains symbols and archetypes of the world's myths and religions.⁶

These stages of dreaming could be questioned, and are often disputed by people who do not believe that dreams have any significance. I have not personally experienced a third level dream that I have remembered, or am aware of, but I am not against the idea of their existence. I believe that Freud, Jung, and others had studied dreams enough to create a fairly accurate, if not mostly accurate, idea of where the human mind wanders during sleep.

Sigmund Freud was a neurologist who focused on the interpretations of dreams. He believed that the mind was comprised of three main parts that we were born with and that ultimately influenced our dreams. The first is called the ego; it deals with all of our perceptions and conscious thoughts. It is the part of the brain that is most aware of itself; the ego is where we would consider our "common sense," which tries to create balance between the other parts of the mind. The second part is called the super-ego; it is what most influences all of our moral decisions and is based mostly on how we view our parents in relation to our own lives. The third is called the id, which is a part of the mind that is deepest in our subconscious and influences our decisions and thoughts based entirely on passion. The id most directly influences the "symbols" that Freud states are in our dreams. Freud declared that the ego relaxed its hold on the mind and allowed the id to influence what we see. He believed that often dreams are too psychologically damaging, so our brain tries to repress them before we awake.⁷

C.G. Jung, who worked with Freud for many years, also had his own theories both similar and different to Freud's. Jung focused less on the idea of different influencing parts of the brain and more on the meanings behind dreams. Like Freud, Jung believed that all dreams contained symbols that could be interpreted to mean different things. He believed that these symbols could be directly associated with things that we believe them to be associated with. An example would be if I dreamed about a plane crashing, it could be related to my experience of 9/11, which happened when I was in second grade. Jung believed that there is a series of symbols "built" into every person from birth. This stockroom of ideas is called the "collective unconscious." It is where symbols from all religions, myths, legends, and stories from history are supposedly stored in our minds. Jung believed that the deepest stages of dreaming drew directly from this collective unconscious and had less to do with personal inhibitions.⁸

Fredrick Myers and Fritz Perls are among others who have contributed to theories on the origination of dreams and their importance. Myers proposed the idea of hypnogogic and hypnopompic dreams. Hypnogogic dreams are the images that you see when you are first falling

⁶ Fontana, 23.

⁷ Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id* (New York: Norton, 1989. Print.) 13-45

⁸ Hampden-Turner, 44-47.

asleep, and hypnagogic are the images that come to you as you are first awaking. Perls claimed that all dreams represent an emotional hole that we are trying to deal with in our personal lives. Both of these figures have contributed to today's standards on what dreams mean and why they are important.⁹

I have pondered the importance of what all of these neurologists and psychoanalysts have said, and tried to synthesize my own thesis on why dreams are the way they are, in order to determine their significance to humans as individuals. As I have previously stated, I believe that dreams are effectively a place for the human subconscious to engage the conscious in uncensored communication. Over the past few weeks I have been keeping a dream diary, trying to recreate my dreams in a series of words and sketches to understand the way I dream, and perhaps decipher the purpose of my dreams. As an overarching theme, I am finding that my dreams often reflect anxieties, fears, desires, people I am close to, people I think about often, things I have thought about the previous day, things I thought about weeks or months ago, old memories, and places important to me, along with themes and ideas that have been present in the past few years of my life. In the past few years I have struggled a lot with leaving my comfort zone, specifically in the form of moving away from places I consider safe. This basically stems from when I moved away from Austin the summer after 8th grade in 2008. I was only 13 years old and had lived there for the majority of my life. I have found that in a lot of my dreams, my family moves to a new place, and in the new place something always goes wrong.

In one dream, my family and I move to a new house because my dad lost his job. The first night that I sleep there, I have nightmares and believe the house to be haunted. I wake up from the nightmares shaken and the house is empty. I proceed to exit the house and it burns down as I run away. In another my mom brings us to an apartment that she says we will be living in. Shortly after she brings me there, our dog bites an electrical cord. I consider the house too chaotic to stay in, and leave. These dreams are not just loose information leaking from the far corners of my brain. I think of these dreams less as my mind struggling with leaving a comfort zone, and more of a way of my mind to try and get over these anxieties of being in a safe place. All of these dreams have occurred at Oxbow, a place where I have stepped out of my comfort zone in many ways.

In a study where a professor examined the dreams of recovering addicts, it was shown that addicts who dreamed about drugs or alcohol were less likely to relapse.¹⁰ In the same way, I think that through these dreams of leaving my comfort zone, or moving to a new place, my mind is slowly overcoming the fear and anxiety that comes along with it. Another point that I have noticed about these dreams is that they usually end in the new place being damaged in some way. I feel that this is just a reflection of both the anxiety of something bad happening in these situations as well as a way for my mind to try to mentally overcome it by showing that I can get over the anxiety.

Another thing I find very interesting about the dreams I have recorded are the locations in my dreams. Most of the locations in my dreams are either reminiscent of, or combinations of, the neighborhoods around my childhood homes, my immediate surroundings, or just images I have had of places in my head. I suppose that these places could be connected with memories that I have had there, or what those places mean to me, but I feel that they could also signify something deeper. Could these be reflections of where I place my anxieties? Places linked to memories that

⁹ Fontana, 16-17

¹⁰ "What Are Dreams?" Nova. PBS. 24 Nov. 2009. Television.

have been scarring? I think that the importance of place in dreams differs from dreamer to dreamer but ultimately is one of the more important things about dreams for myself, because of the connection I have between place and a feeling of comfort. Perhaps the idea that sleep, in itself, is a place of safety is why my mind feels comfortable exploring my anxieties around pushing the boundaries of comfort. Exploring my anxieties in sleep seems more of a way for my mind to expose itself to a problem that I struggle with and through this exposure, find a solution.

Recently there have been studies regarding the content of dreams in rats, and place is an incredibly important factor. In the study, rats were put into a maze to find cheese and while this happened their brains were connected to electrodes that measured their brain waves. The patterns in their brain waves were connected to different places in the maze and showed what the rat was thinking about while trying to solve the maze. Later the rats' brain waves were recorded while they slept and dreamed. While they were sleeping, the brain waves were similar to the patterns that happened while the rats were trying to solve the maze. It was concluded that while the rats slept, they were reliving the events that had happened that day and that their brain was trying to solve the maze again.¹¹ Does this mean that our brains are trying to solve problems that we have been or are dealing with? A rat's brain is obviously different from a human's, but I sense that this research has substantial importance. So does this study relate to how I connect with place? I believe that the rats reliving the obstacle of the maze is reminiscent of a brain trying to decipher problems that it is handed on both a long-term and a day-to-day basis. When I am pushed out of my comfort zone for an extended period of time, I often have trouble sleeping. I wake up from a dream that I don't remember with a heavy feeling of either anxiety or frustration and can't shake it. I interpret this as a signal that even in sleep my brain is mulling this problem over and trying to decipher the nature of the problem.

In another study, a group of college students were asked to solve a series of difficult math problems in which there was an easy solution if they noticed a specific pattern. The first day not many of the students were able to solve the problems. The next day the students were allowed to nap in the middle of the day and after the nap a much larger percent of the students were able to solve the equations. The conclusion that the professor drew was that during sleep, the brain focuses on the problems that you are consciously struggling with.¹²

The mind is a complex mechanism and contains everything we have observed, learned, seen, heard, or touched, and all the memories that we have collected over our lifetime. Our conscious mind analyzes these, often unknowingly, but perhaps the problems that emerge from both our perspective on situations and our analysis of our past and present experiences are what emerge when we drift into an unconscious state at night.

Being away from home, I have had many dreams where I am out doing something with my family or with friends from back home. Could this be my brain bringing me back to where I feel comfortable? I am not sure that the brain would try and create such a short-term solution like this, but I do feel that it could be exploring why it is so important for me to be in these comfortable situations. In all of my dreams a problem emerges at some point, something to disrupt the comfort that is present at the start of the dream. This could be losing my little brother that I am suppose to be responsible for, or unknowingly breaking a rule and have people chasing after me trying to apprehend me. I strongly believe that this is my mind pointing out a true issue that my subconscious thinks is a problem.

¹¹ "Rats Dream about Their Tasks during Slow Wave Sleep." *MIT*. Web. 03 May 2011. <<http://web.mit.edu/newsoffice/2002/dreams.html>>.

¹² "What are Dreams?" Nova.

From all the bombardment of information we get during the day, it makes sense that dreams would be a place to solve or sort through both information and problems that we have. The brain compartmentalizes information in its many lobes, and does not allow our conscious mind access to all of this information. Sleep is a time for our resting minds to allow information to come forth. Through dreams our subconscious is communicating with our conscious about anxieties, problems we dealt with throughout the day, and fears and desires that we struggle with day to day. Every person dreams uniquely. Their way of thinking and processing information plays into the way that they dream, and the information that is present in dreams. Dreams are a window into both the human mind and into the psychology of individuals both in their problems, flaws, and successes. By studying dreams we are entering into a surreal landscape that could open up key information about how humans function emotionally, psychologically, and biologically.

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