THE REVELATORY WORLD OF DREAMS

Patients should be motivated to look more closely at this rich source of self-understanding.

Gerald Epstein, M.D.
Department of Psychiatry
Mt. Sinai School of Medicine, New York

Dreams tend to seem bizarre, nonsensical, and befuddling. However, a close look at them can pay dividends. A dream may be a trenchant pictorial "commentary" about one's current life experiences.

Though most don't realize they have dreamt, almost everyone dreams during every sleep. Indeed, dreams occupy about 20% of sleeping time, so that over an eight-hour period about 90 minutes is spent dreaming. Rapid eye movements (REMs), vertical movements of the eyeballs beneath closed lids, usually characterize these periods, and a person awakened in the REM period can generally report the interrupted dream.

In modern clinical medicine we have found that certain clinical states alter dream activity. For example, in clinical depression there is marked reduction of REMs and of dreams. It seems here that dreams serve a vital function. If such patients can begin to dream again, their condition also tends to show improvement.

History of dream interpretation

Dreams have been studied and written about since antiquity, often viewed by the ancients as portents of the future and signs of God's presence. Alexander the Great had his dreams interpreted prior to battles to see how they would go. A famous example of the Hebraic approach is Pharaoh's dream interpreted by Joseph in which seven lean cows devoured seven healthy one, and seven scrawny ears of corn supplanted seven full ones. The interpretation was that seven years of abundance would be followed by seven of famine, and it spurred the Pharaoh to store foods and thereby save his people.
The 20th century's looming figure for dream understanding was Sigmund Freud. who tried to demonstrate that dreams usually represent disguised wish-fulfillments. C.G. Jung, Freud's contemporary, felt that dreams tapped our collective unconscious, a repository of what he called "archetypes"—overriding principles and symbols guiding human existence throughout the generations. Like Freud, he believed dreams enact our conflicts from waking life. Medard Boss, a Swiss psychiatrist, maintains that dreams reveal excellent avenues for action in everyday life. He also views dreams as important experiences, as valid as waking-life experiences. Modern sleep researchers have studied extensively the various sleep stages, including REM dream periods, and their relation to various clinical conditions. A small number of researchers have chronicled the themes prevalent in dreams at various ages and in both sexes. Psychoanalytic therapists have long utilized the contents of patients' dreams to try to gain insights into the issues troubling them.

**Common questions**

It is often asked why dreams are so readily forgotten; they seem so critical at the moment they occur, yet evaporate upon awakening. One factor is that dreams are not considered "real" they don't have anything to do with the practical matters of everyday existence. Being pragmatic, people feel no loss in forgetting them. In addition, they are puzzling, and not logical by waking-life standards. On awakening, everyday life intrudes and replaces the dream's logic with its own.

As dreams are not logical they transcend the rules of ordinary space and time. Instead of sequential unfolding of events, images and events "tumble in." Characters come from nowhere. Locations are switched instantly. On awakening, everyday reality displaces the nonlogical events and the dream—so clear and real moments before—now is baffling. Nevertheless the experience is real in emotional impact—often more moving than in waking life, and with direct relevance to waking life.

People often wonder why dreams do evoke such strong emotional responses. One possibility is that everyday logic is suspended and we are attuned to only one reality, that of the dream. The images are so directly connected to emotional life, and the buffer between us and our emotional responses provided by logic is virtually absent. There is no monitor of logic to say that the profoundly moving events we are imagining can't really happen.

Also, often in dreams a far wider variety of behavior and people are available than in daily life and fulfillment of desires meets little resistance. There are concurrent physiological responses going on along with the emotional responses. One researcher, Dr. Charles Fisher of Mt. Sinai Medical Center, New York City, has discovered that penile erection and vaginal lubrication accompany many dreams even when the content is not sexual.

It also is often asked why strange events occur in dreams. Why people may appear whom we have never known or who may have been at the periphery of our existence years and years ago? Also, why may we find ourselves at some place we've been to in the past and even at an age other than our current one? Dreams stimulate many questions. There is an ancient saying that an unexplored dream is like an unopened letter. However, explanations of dreams tend to be true but not correct—there is no one answer for a dream's meaning. The most important explanations come from the dreamer himself.

In my clinical work I request dreams to be written down. Patients who have been poor dreamers begin to make much more contact with dream experience, and dreams are both remembered and experienced more vividly.
Therapeutic signals

Every element of a dream reflects some aspect of the dreamer. It's as though the dreamer is looking into a mirror. Each dream reflects the physical status of the dreamer as well as various qualities, traits, and feelings. The language of dreams can be quite concrete and colloquial. For instance, a person who dreams of a monkey clinging to his back can easily translate that to the vernacular of a "monkey on my back" - a burden or problem weighing one down.

Dreams also reflect current situations. If the dream takes place in the past, it pertains to the influence of the past on the present. For instance, if a man of 40 dreams that he is in high school at age 14 and meets his former high school principal with whom he feels fearful, very likely in the face of authority he still responds as a 14-year-old rather than as a mature adult. Once he realizes this, he can ask himself if there might not be other, perhaps more mature, ways to respond to someone perceived to be in authority.

When utilizing the problem-solving value of some dreams, an allegorical or metaphorical sensitivity may be needed. One young woman dreamed of being at the top of a mountain where she met an old wise woman. This woman was going to teach her the sound of her heart. She woke up befuddled because this enigma was presented but not answered. Yet the dream had a poignancy that made the memory linger. Going to sleep the following evening, she yearned for a dream to answer the question of what was the sound of her heart, and why she must know it. Again at the mountaintop, the old wise woman showed her a tree, a flower, and a stone. The dreamer knows, in the dream, that in simple things she will know the sound of her heart. The dreamer later interpreted this as valuable advice to simplify her life.

An example of dreams providing the solution to more concrete waking life problems is the famous one of Kekule, discoverer of the benzene ring in chemistry. The answer for the benzene ring came to him in a dream image. Many find that a form of creative cogitation occurs in sleep, so that various elements of a problem at hand fall into place.

One truly fascinating observation I have made repeatedly and which has been supported by colleagues is that dreams may actually signal a physical disturbance in advance of overt symptoms. A man dreamed that a telephone was ringing but he couldn't hear it. Physical examination revealed him to be suffering from middle ear dif.
difficulty with attendant diminution of hearing. A woman dreamed of trying to eat spinach and was impressed by the vividness of the green color of the spinach. She was discovered to have a gallstone. She had had a couple of bouts of indigestion over the preceding two to three months, but had paid little attention to them. I believe vivid colors in dreams should be paid attention to, and have noted a direct correlation between the color and body area. Vivid yellow may point to kidney or urinary tract difficulty. Bright red may indicate heart or vascular involvement. Vivid orange may connect to a liver problem.

Dreams also can be fruitfully used within a family setting. It is beneficial for parents to encourage their children to relate their dreams and it is equally as helpful for marital partners to share their dreams. It has been my consistent finding that dream approaches such as I have outlined have been quite salutary for the participants, enhancing understanding of themselves and of the world around them.

Prophetic dreams

A professional man dreamed of an old friend whom he had lost contact with. In the dream the friend was ill and needed help. The following day the dreamer called the old friend and discovered that he had indeed been ill and trying to combat a digestive ailment. The dreamer was pleased that he had shown concern for an old friend, and was impressed both by the dream's impact and accuracy.

Another example of a portentous dream is one in which a young woman dreamt that she saw a male friend near the top of a mountain in Java. Suddenly, a monsoon swept over the scene, and both her friend and the mountain disappeared. She had never been to Java or to the Maylasian Peninsula. She also hadn't had much contact with this male friend for a long time. The next day she read in a newspaper report that a monsoon had literally destroyed a mountain in Java and a number of people were killed. After this dream she learned this friend had just been divorced.

It seems to be the case that in the dreaming state we are sometimes able to capture messages that are otherwise unavailable to us in everyday life experience. I have found that looking for such messages can be a very fruitful practice. Some other colleagues share a similar outlook. Dr. Robert Lifton, for example, writes in The Life of the Self that dreams are "notably prospective."

Conclusion

I believe it is important to distinguish dream life from waking life, rather than dream life from "real" life. Dream life should not be demeaned by implying it is "unreal." This perpetuates the habit of not valuing the dream. Dismissing the ex-
periences of the dreaming hours of each day of our lives denies appreciation of an interesting and valuable experience. Patients should be motivated to look more closely at this rich source of self-knowledge.

In treatment, I utilize dreams to help people solve problems of everyday living. I ask individuals to attempt to demand of themselves a dream that will answer a question posed before going to sleep. As the individual lies in bed with eyes closed, he or she imagines a white circle. Inside the circle they "write" the question that they wish the dream to answer, and then demand of themselves a dream to answer the question. Upon awakening, the dream should be written down and then studied to see what answer the dream may have revealed. This process is not to be abused, but is to be utilized when necessary as determined by the individual himself. If this technique is used gratuitously it loses efficacy.

In a brief article such as this I cannot extensively cover other methods of dream exploration. However, we should pay more attention to dreams, allowing them to inform our waking life.

REFERENCES