

Why We Dream

There is a
definite answer.

By James M Carroll

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There a Definite Answer.

Dreams...mental images, stories, and emotions, conjured up by the subconscious mind, they are part of everyone's sleep cycle. Occurring intermittently through out the sleep period, the total amount of time spent in the dream state averages about two hours per night, with seven being the number of dream stories per sleep period.

The subject of dreams has fascinated mankind down through the centuries. Through dreaming one experiences entry into another world, where the mind is filled with irrational and sometimes terrifying images. Often these dreams may be considered to portend events, warning the sleeper to beware, prompting the dreamers to have their visions analyzed for hidden messages about the dreamer or the dreamer's life. Dreams have also been considered as positive experiences, a rehearsal for a real-life event; a way to heal the mind and body, a way to be creative, or a way to get in contact with the true self.

The ancients believed that, during sleep, the soul left the body and roamed through a world of spirits. In ancient Hindu literature, the world was divided into three states: the state of living, the state of death, and the state of sleeping. In the state of sleep, through dreams, the sleeper experiences at times what might be called self-illumination or revelation. For example, in the Bible, dreams were a message from God. Jacob dreamed of a ladder going from earth to heaven. Joseph interpreted the dreams of his fellow prisoners. Daniel interpreted the dream of a king. Joseph, the husband of Mary, was warned in a dream to flee to Egypt with the child Jesus. Also, the father of Buddha had

a dream of seven fears, which when interpreted pointed to the great work his son Buddha would do. There are even stories in Greek literature of cures coming through dreams.

What exactly is a dream? The Random House Dictionary definition is as follows: “a succession of images, thoughts, or emotions occurring during sleep”.

The Greeks divided dreams into five categories:

1. Dream: hidden message in symbolic form
2. Vision: seeing while awake what one saw in sleep
3. Oracle: call of God
4. Fantasy: wild images caused by events of the day
5. Apparition: ghost-like figures

To the Greeks, there were two main types of dreams:

1. Speculative dreams: related to an event
2. Allegorical dreams: related to events that did not or will not happen

The theory that dreams are caused by events dates back to ancient times. Part of this theory suggests that dreams are caused by certain desires that cannot be satisfied in the conscious world. Thus, during a dream, one may modify events experienced during _ the day in order to satisfy basic desires. To act out the event in reality would likely cause harm to self or family. The American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson said that dreams have within them the “infirmities of our character.”

Before looking at some modern theories which attempt to explain why we dream, let’s examine the environment in which dreams occur—sleep. By focusing our attention on sleep processes, we may be able to gain a greater understanding of the dream process. Sleep is a

series of stages in which one goes from being conscious to being essentially unaware of his surroundings. There are four stages of sleep, each representing a deeper level of unconsciousness. After initial drowsiness, the person moves from Stage 1 sleep to Stage 4 sleep. After about an hour, from Stage 4 to Stage 3. During this period, one may experience rapid eye movements (REM). This episode is followed by a return to Stage 4. After about 90 minutes, the person has another REM. Then it's back to Stage 3. After about 90 minutes, the person will experience another REM. The rest of the sleep period will be an alternation between Stage 2 and REM. Each REM grows progressively longer.

By monitoring the REM periods in sleep, researchers have determined that a person may dream anywhere from ten minutes to an hour. This conclusion contradicts the older notion that a person dreams only a few seconds before awakening. Researchers have also found that everyone dreams every night and the longer one sleeps, the more one will dream. The rapid eye movements coincide with movements the eyes would make if the dreamer were actually watching the dream. Body movements decrease in the period of rapid eye movements, leading researchers to believe that the increase in body movements signals the end of a dream. However, the question still remains: why should the eye and body move during sleep?

Before attempting to answer the question, we turn our attention to some of the theories that have been put forth for dream activity. The theories are divided into two types: one, the psychological theories; and, two, the physiological theories. Turning first to the psychological theories, we look at the work of Freud. To Freud, dreams were formed because the unconscious is, in part, made up of the sexual and hostility drive. During sleep, these

impulses are free from conscious control. The dream is the expression of these two forces. It is the repression of these two forces that gives energy to the formation of a dream. What has been experienced and remembered forms the basis for the dream story. Freud called these impressions “day residues.” and they come into contact with memories already in the mind. The organization of these memories does not appear to follow a logical patterning in a dream, so the repressed impulses are usually not fully or accurately expressed. They may even be in disguise.

Freud’s contemporary, Alfred Adler, theorized that there is continuity in thought between the states of wakefulness and sleep. He believed that dreams couldn’t contradict the thoughts of the wakeful state. The dream is an attempt to solve the problems of the day. However, the solutions may be deceitful. To Adler, the symbols in the dream are more expressive than repressive (in disguise).

Later research has shown that both Adler and Freud were wrong in suggesting that people dream as means of solving problems. According to research findings, people dream in cycles, regardless of personal problems. Freud’s idea that a dream bursts out into a visual form like a firecracker exploding has been proven wrong. Dreams are part of ongoing activity. The longer the REM period, the more likely the dream is to be dramatic, and perhaps frightening. The Adlerian theory that a dream is in response to a problem begging a solution has also been disproved by research.

What Freud and Adler did was to give the world the possible effects of dreams—the releasing of impulses, the solving of problems. However, their theories did not explain the causes of dreams.

Mention should be made at this point of the theories

of Carl Jung, another psychologist. He theorized that dreams were related to archetypes, the residue that people inherited from their ancestors. However, like the theories of Freud and Adler, his theories attempt to account more for the effects of dreams, rather than the causes for them.

The second group of theories related to why people dream are physiologically oriented. One finds a variation of these theories in the idea that a nightmare is due to what one ate the night before. According to Thomas Hobbes, English philosopher, the cause of dreams is the upset of the body. He theorized that if anger caused a rise in body heat while one was awake and that if body heat rose while one was asleep, then the dream produced would be one of anger. The medical doctor Wilhem Wundt theorized that dream content is controlled by bodily sensations. When one is asleep, the increase in excitability is due to increased sensory input.

According to George Trumbull Ladd, dreams are caused by the excitation of the retina of the eye. Eugene T. Gendlin suggests that we let the body interpret the dreams. He theorizes that an interpretation correct if a physical shift is felt. However, each of these theories still fails to account for why the body would be excited in the first place and thus begin the dreaming process.

To review, the ancients saw a connection between the cause of dreams and religion. The founders of modern psychology viewed dreams as the expression of desires. The theorists, who believed that dreams have a physiological cause, tried to locate the source but did not explain the origin of the cause.

The question as to why people dream will now be answered.

While the mind is a single entity, for the purposes of

discussion, let us consider the mind as being divided into two parts, the conscious part, which we are aware of when awake, and the subconscious part, which we are not aware of. The body is composed of two types of muscles: the voluntary muscles, which move at the command of the conscious mind, and the involuntary muscles, which move at the command of the subconscious mind.

The involuntary muscles work automatically, keeping the organism in equilibrium by controlling heart rate, breathing, temperature, and hormone secretion, to name but a few. The involuntary muscles are under the control of the subconscious mind. The voluntary muscles work in response to the commands of the conscious mind. They receive input from the five senses and then synthesize or process that information. This synthesizing operation of the conscious mind can be called the “sixth sense” or the “creative function” of the mind. If the subconscious mind sends the conscious mind a message, the conscious mind will use this sixth sense, this creative, decision-making function, to determine whether to put the voluntary muscles into action.

Rudyard Kipling expressed the idea in his poem “If” when he wrote that one should dream (be aware of ideas coming from the subconscious) but not let dreams be the master (decide with the conscious mind). The conscious mind is capable of overriding suggestions from the subconscious mind and sending other messages to the voluntary muscles. Thus each part of the mind, the conscious and the subconscious, is a mechanism with a specific job to do.

When one sleeps, the conscious mind shuts down, halting the actions of the voluntary muscles well. In sleep, the conscious mind and the voluntary muscles no longer

respond to the five senses. For example, if you are awake and I say, "Please pick up the book", you hear there-quest and decide to comply. To do so, you send a message from your conscious mind to your voluntary muscles, reach down and pick up the book. If you are asleep and I give you the same command, you will not hear me. Your five senses have shut down. Therefore, a message will not go from your conscious mind to your voluntary muscles to affect motor movements. The command will not be executed. In fact, you will not even turn over while asleep without your conscious mind is suing orders to your voluntary muscles to make the tum. In a bed, the body is in a chaotic state. Problems arise from the need to adjust the body's position in order to maintain balance. An arm placed too long in a certain position will be out of balance with the rest of the body: muscle cramps and numbness will result as the blood flow is impeded. Sleeping too long on one's side will cause an imbalance in the weight distribution of the body, with one side of body supporting the rest of the body weight.

But the conscious mind is not responding to the five senses, not synthesizing the information, and hence not activating the voluntary muscles. So one might wonder how the body is to be kept in a state of equilibrium? Here's where the unconscious mind enters the picture. As the pressures in the body rise, the subconscious mind sends signals to the conscious mind in the form of dreams. It's as if the subconscious mind were using the dreams to get the attention of the conscious mind. As the conscious mind watches the dream, it reacts to the unfolding of events by sending signals to the voluntary muscles, moving those areas of the body and shifting weight to reestablish equilibrium where the need is most critical. Thus blood

pressure, breathing pressure and other physiological parameters are adjusted. In a sense the front door to the mind (the five senses, the state of conscious awareness) is shut, so the subconscious mind must use the back door (dreams) to get the attention of the conscious mind.

Dreams are the creation of the subconscious mind brought on by unequal pressures in the body.

A man might say that he dreamed he had been in a boxing match all night long and felt more tired than when he went to bed; that he was never able to get comfortable. What he was really saying is that uneven bodily pressures stimulated his subconscious which in turn caused him to dream of being in a boxing match. Again that was his subconscious mind's way of getting the attention of the conscious mind. The conscious mind reacted to the mental boxing match by sending messages to the voluntary muscles. This activity called "dreaming" is under the control of the subconscious mind. Thus, one is not able to control dreaming or the content of dream.

When a person is awake, the conscious mind and the subconscious mind interact with each other. It is as if the front door and the back door of the mind are both open at the same time. Thus, no dreams are required to signal the conscious part of the mind to move the voluntary muscles. However, when one is asleep, the conscious part of the mind shuts down, and awareness is suppressed. It is as if the front door of the mind is closed. Only the back door of the mind, the subconscious is still open.

The subconscious mind uses a number of approaches to reach the conscious mind. It may generate a series of dreams because the subconscious mind does not want to shock the person's conscious mind into a state of awareness. If pleasant dreams or even slightly upsetting

dreams are adequate for stimulating the conscious mind into action, then the dream will not be disturbing. However, if necessary, the subconscious mind will use natural fears and concerns to shock the person into a state of awareness. This is the origin of “nightmares.” If the dreams do produce awareness, the violent and disturbing nature of the dream may continue to increase until the objective is reached.

A question arises. If we assume that dreams are the result of the subconscious mind’s attempt to get the attention of the conscious mind so that it will send messages to the voluntary muscles and thus relieve bodily pressures, we might ask if astronauts dream in space. Space is a weightless environment, so there can be no pressure points on their bodies due to gravity. Would there then be a need to dream? The fact is that astronauts do dream in a weightless environment. What’s the explanation? We find that astronauts still experience disequilibrium. Under the direction of Dr. Donald Vincenzi, chief of biological research at NASA, investigators in space medicine have discovered that a zero G environment dramatically disturbs the vestibular balance regulating mechanism in the inner ear. Specifically, the distress is due to a build-up of fluids in this part of the body, which in turn produces elevated pressure levels. This abnormal condition of the space traveller is detected by the subconscious mind and it communicates via dreams with the conscious mind while the astronauts are asleep. The fact that astronauts dream in space supports further the notion that dreams are the subconscious mind’s creative efforts to stimulate the conscious into action so that equilibrium will be reestablished.

The logic of this theory, which explains the real reason for dreams, becomes obvious with a bit of casual

observation. Try this yourself. While standing, shift your weight to your right foot. Keep the weight on this foot to build the pressure on the right side of your body for several minutes. Soon you will notice that your discomfort level is rising. In time, it builds to a point such that you feel an intense desire to relieve the pressure. This is perceived as your conscious mind sending a signal to the conscious brain centers, and then to the voluntary muscles. Finally, you can tolerate it no longer. You shift your weight. Now with the weight bearing down on another area of the body, blood flow in the deprived region returns to normal... equilibrium is restored.

Try the same experiment in the sitting position. You will find that eventually you will feel the need to shift your weight to relieve discomfort.

This readjustment process is made carried out perhaps hundreds of times throughout the day without your having your think about it. The next time you catch yourself twisting, turning, fidgeting or even scratching an itch, ask yourself why you made such a movement. Likely it was because of an uneasiness in a part of the body, an uncomfortable feeling brought about by an imbalance in some normal bodily process. In moving, you corrected the problem and relieved the discomfort.

You can test this idea for yourself at night as well. In the laboratory of your own bed, order your mind to remember the dreams that you will have during the night.

If you awake during the night, write down your dreams, even if you only remember the key points. Try to remember your body positions before and after the dream. You will see that there is indeed a correlation between dreams and the change in the body's position. See also if there might be any relationship to the dream content or the

emotion you felt and the type of movement you made.

This approach may be used in a sleep laboratory as well by recording brain wave activity to detect dreams and observing the individual for accompanying movement.

Verification may also come from observing other people, those on TV talk shows, or even the President as he makes a speech. Watch how each person shifts body position. Their shift body position is in response to a command from the conscious mind. Once again the pressure builds within the body and a shift occurs in order to maintain the equilibrium in the body.

We may use this theory to explain particular findings in the area of sleep research. For example, REM in sleep is now thought to be the result of physiological pressures on the body, pressures which cause the body to readjust position in order to maintain balance. REM is a voluntary muscle response from the conscious mind, which watches the dream being created by the subconscious mind. The dream captures the conscious mind's attention and movement is the result. The finding that the body shifts at the end of REM sleep is consistent with the explanation.

What about the theories of Freud, Adler, and Jung? Do they fit into the explanation? Yes, in the sense that the pressures of blood and breathing on the body cause a feeling of aggression, a feeling of confinement. These feelings are indicative of a problem that needs to be solved. The balance needs to be maintained. So the subconscious mind goes through the "back door" of the mind to the conscious mind in dream form to solve the problem. The solution is a shift in body position. The archetypal aspect of dreams is due to the fact that we have inherited bodies that require the maintenance of body balance even in sleep.

Thus, dreams are not the mysterious flight of the soul

to another world. Dreams are not, caused by the problems of waking life or the repressions of society. Dreams are the result of the need for the body to maintain proper position in order to prevent muscle cramping, poor blood flow, and breathing irregularities. Messages in the form of dreams are sent by the subconscious mind to the conscious mind. The conscious mind, in acting on the activity in the dream, sends messages to the voluntary muscles. These muscles, in turn, change the body position of the dreamer, ‘and thus relieve body pressure.

Perhaps those engaged in psychological and psychiatric research would do well to probe the nature of communication between the subconscious and conscious mind, especially during sleep. There is much to be learned about their interaction, i.e. what is the mechanism by which the subconscious enters the “back door” of the conscious mind to trigger a dream? Exactly how might this intrusion into the conscious mind result in dreams?...Are the dreams “tailor-made” to fit the circumstance? For instance, if the sleeper is experiencing heartburn, will the subconscious initiate a dream about fire in the conscious mind? What kinds of neurotransmitters are involved? Who knows where the answers to these and other similar questions might lead. Who knows what benefits might result from finding answers to these basic questions.

For those with an entrepreneurial spirit, these principles of dream causation may have some practical application. Consider for a moment the sequence of events: during the night the body lies in a stationary position for an extended period; blood flow is partially reduced to certain areas, and a disequilibrium results; the subconscious mind, in response, conjures up dreams intended to arouse the conscious mind; the conscious mind, prompted by these

intrusions, sends messages to the muscles; muscles move the body and the stress is relieved.

Suppose now the subconscious mind never has any need to disturb the conscious mind with dreams. Wouldn't that make for a more restful sleep, something every person needs? Such blissful sleep could be produced by designing a bed to eliminate pressure points. How? Imagine small cams, each with pressure sensitive transducers, placed under the mattress. As soon as the weight of the body becomes greater in one area than in another, the sensor sends a message indicating an imbalance to a computer. It, then, relays a signal to the cam motor, causing the cam to rotate downward, thus relieving the stress. Actions of these motorized cams, directed by the computer, would have the effect of equally distributing the body's weight over the entire surface of the mattress, and the response would be immediate. Disequilibrium could not exist. Under such circumstances, the subconscious mind would have no need to petition the conscious mind with dreams... no interruptions the whole night through.

Perhaps dreams of another sort will come true for insightful individuals who put such concepts to work.

