

## Podcast #29 TEXT --What Do Dreams Really Mean?

All of us dream, although we may not remember our dreams. Why do we dream? What function does it serve? And what are the essential differences between how we think when we dream vs. how we think when we're awake?

Because, you know, dreams are a form of thinking. Sure—dreams are usually highly visual, imagistic, and not logical. Sometimes they seem more like delusions and hallucinations. But they incorporate categories that are typical of wakefulness-- like people, faces, places, objects, and animals. The EEG of someone in REM sleep—the phase of the sleep cycle most associated with dreaming--looks a lot like the EEG of someone who is awake. And brain scans show that brain metabolism is comparable between wakefulness and REM sleep

Although often confusing, relying heavily on metaphor, dreams create stories filled with actors and scenarios, much like we do when we're awake. And,

further, these actors and scenarios have a clear sensory character—that is, they are seen, heard and felt—and are not mere thoughts or abstractions.

Now, to be sure, the way we think and feel when we're dreaming is—also-- often quite a bit different than when we're awake. Reflective thought is altered, for instance—it's quite common that it can hold contradictory beliefs, and a dreamer easily accepts impossible events such as flying, inconsistent scene switches, sudden transformations and impossible objects—you know, like a pink elephant.

Now, Freud believed that the function of dreams was to preserve sleep in the face of unconscious wishes and conflicts. And he marshaled a lot of clinical evidence to support his contention that if you investigate a dream in enough depth and detail, you will invariably find an unconscious wish or desire, often one with an aggressive or sexual meaning.

I want to talk today about another way to understand dreams that I think is more useful in

therapy and in our own attempts to understand what's going on when we sleep. This approach starts with a couple of assumptions. It assumes that people are always working to solve their problems, to master the psychological traumas that they have experienced. In this way, my approach to dreams is, from the start, different than Freud's. I believe that people want to grow and develop, to adapt, and to get better.

So, this is a point of view that would ask the question: How do dreams try to help us? After all, all mammals dream. If evolution has shaped us in ways that insure our survivability, then dreams must be designed to help us adapt as well. If so, how do they help us adapt exactly?

This notion that dreams help us adapt is drawn from the work of the psychoanalyst Joseph Weiss. And so I will draw liberally from his work on the subject.

Weiss relates the findings of a researcher P. Balson who studied the dreams of soldiers who were POWs during the Vietnam War. Before they were captured,

they reported frightening dreams of being captured. The function of these dreams—their “meaning” if you will-- was to help the soldier stay on full alert against danger. The dreams were saying, “Be careful or this might happen.” While in captivity, they had dreams that were often blissful, in which they were gratified, powerful, and serene. These dreams helped them adapt to a horrible situation. They helped the soldiers sleep more deeply and offered a measure of hope. The dreams, in other words, were consoling. They were telling the dreamer to “keep hope alive.” After being released, the dreams were often traumatic, filled with frightening memories of their internment. Their purpose was to help the soldiers master the horror and fear connected to their trauma.

Note that in each case, the purpose of the dreams was to help the soldier cope with or master a highly problematic psychic situation.

In this view, dreams are trying to help us, perhaps teach us something we need to learn, or to warn us

about something that we aren't facing in our waking lives, or to help light the way to some type of psychological growth. It's in the very nature of dreams that you can't tell their meaning directly from their imagery. For example, Weiss argues that a man's dream—let's say--of walking down the road by himself might be expressing a wish, a fear, or an expectation. Weiss points out that the meaning of such a dream isn't obvious off the bat. "He may be telling himself 'I hope I'll be in this situation,' or 'I'm afraid I'll be in this situation,' or 'if I finish my work in therapy I'll be able to put myself in this situation,' or 'If I continue to provoke my colleagues, I'll find myself in this situation.'" It all depends on the person's feelings about and associations to the dream. The dreamer gives the dream meaning—always. You can't look up the meaning of a dream in a dream dictionary.

A patient of mine was traumatized by the discovery of her husband's infidelity. After a few years of ruminating in painful ways about this trauma, she and

her husband sought couples therapy. She found it tremendously helpful and began to feel closer to her husband again, for the first time in years. She then had a dream in which she found her husband flagrantly cheating on her. When she awoke, her first conscious thought was, "This isn't true." The dream served two functions: First, it said to her "not so fast, there's still some risk here," and, second, by contrast, it helped her see and accept how much better she felt and, thus, it helped her feel optimistic and strong in her marriage. This latter meaning illustrates how dreams can sometimes help us by depicting a situation that is the opposite of reality.

Some dreams function as warnings, telling the dreamer to, in effect, "watch out." I've had several patients who have such dreams as they were getting better in therapy. One male patient who was in the process of getting over his fear of confronting his wife for her bad behavior had a dream in which someone was crying at a gravesite. The dream's "caption" might

have been, “You worry that standing up for yourself is like killing a woman.” This made sense in the context of our work and the dream made this work more explicit.

People sometimes have examination dream in which they fail an important test that they are actually confident they can pass or succeed at as a way of warning themselves not to get too cocky. Such dreams then help the person see how guilty they feel about success and, in so doing, they, paradoxically, encourage the person.

Sometimes dreams even employ irony and reduction to absurdity. One male patient of Weiss’s dreamt of himself enjoying Christmas with his family of origin. In fact, his childhood was miserable and his family highly abusive. The dream helped him face his traumatic past by painting an absurd picture of it.

Another of his patients had a mother who was a former ballerina, flamboyant and charismatic. The patient grew up by compliantly assuming that he’d have to marry a woman like that. However, he found himself

falling in love with a woman who was low-key and unpretentious. He struggled with being critical of her—again this was a sort of compliance with his mother. He then had a dream that used metaphor to help him face these issues. In the dream, he and his friends were taking a walk in a bucolic area and they came upon an art fair in a small town. The paintings were predictable landscapes and still lifes. They were old-fashioned and unpretentious, and some he found beautiful. The meaning of the dream was “This is ordinary but I like it.” He was unconsciously trying to help himself face the challenge of separating from his mother and what she represented and to, as a result, enjoy his unpretentious pleasant girlfriend.

One adolescent patient of mine dreamt that his father was having his backbone surgically repaired. During the procedure, the surgeon looked at my patient and shook his head, signifying that the father was beyond help and would soon die. This patient felt constantly bullied by his father who took every



opportunity to compete with his son and win. The patient almost always undermined himself in order to insure that his father would win, proving to himself that his father was right. As a result of dream, he came to understand that his father wasn't really strong and that the son, my patient, was stronger than he, himself, believed (had a stronger and better "backbone").

I believe that the part of the day when we're asleep isn't just restorative to our brains and bodies but has been designed by evolution to help us psychologically as well. The way it does so is through dreaming. Our dreams are not cries from the dark unconscious but helpful guides to psychological adaptation and health. They are not always easy to understand, but—when they ARE understood—they can light our way forward.