



What Are Dreams?

Lincoln Stoller, PhD, CHt 2020. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International license (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

www.mindstrengthbalance.com

“Nothing contains more of your own work than your dreams! Nothing belongs to you so much!”
— Friedrich Nietzsche

If you want to understand your dreams, learn who's speaking to you and why. Half of understanding your dreams rests on how well you know yourself, the other half on what you hide.

There is a lot of psychological literature on dreams. I've read enough to notice it's narrow-minded. The fact that many authors still defer to Freud and Jung—explorers from before the time of the scientific study of dreams, global cultural awareness, and the emergence of psychedelics—should tell you how little progress has been made.

Dreams are a holistic phenomena. Approaching them from psychology is—like any one approach to a many-faceted phenomena—another story of three blind men and an elephant. You've to get to a holographic view, a view in which the whole is not just *more than* but *different from* its parts. I'll give you a brief view of my understanding of dreams, from my background as a dream therapist with a background in scientific theory, experiment, spirituality, psychology, and the arts.

Neurological

You're dreaming all the time. When you sleep your brain is cleaning up and reorganizing. We call these reorganizations "dreams" when we recognize that they're moving around our conceptual furniture, but reorganization certainly happens at lower levels, as well. That is to say, we "dream" at nonverbal and non-visual levels that we cannot picture, too far removed from experience to recall.

You're dreaming while you're awake. This is how your mind works, and just because you can't hear the tapping on the keys of the typewriters of your mind doesn't mean your mind isn't writing various stories behind the curtain of your awareness. They say that given enough time a chimpanzee could produce the works of Shakespeare. Well, you're working on it. We're all working on it!

If you could fit more than one thought in your head at once, you would become aware of secondary, simultaneous thoughts. But we don't think simultaneous thoughts, we put them in order: "on first thought... but on second thought..." These thoughts were already there before we expressed them. Our minds are busy Santa's Workshops.

Psychological

Your awareness of the world is spotty. You're aware only of disjointed bits here and there. It takes a lot of work to make sense of the world. The world is a hellacious jig-saw puzzle, and you're trying to make some kind of sense of it. It never lets up until you shut it out.

There are many disturbing thoughts and images, and few of them are welcome. In addition, we know that the more we think about things, the more ingrained they become. So how is one to consider, confront, and conquer negative ideas if to give them voice is to give them power? The answer is to consider them when you're in a state that won't remember them. This is the dream state. You play with dynamite in the dream state. No matter how many dreams you remember, you've still forgotten 99% of them.

Somatic

If aspects of your mind are stored in the structure of your body, and sleep is a process of restoring your mind, then what does sleep do to psychosomatically restore your body? I find no evidence that anyone has asked this or has anything to say about it. Yet it stands to reason that part of sleep's function is to address, in some way, your body's psychological scars.

We know next to nothing about the whole event of sleep. We know bits and pieces, seen through the microscope of experiment. The fundamental problem is that we don't know how the body works. We know little about how the parts communicate or the languages they use. There are things that we can extract, such as chemicals, and results that we can measure, such as size and shape, but we don't follow the process. Cells communicate, and not just through the central nervous system, they communicate directly.

What happens in your tissues when you sleep, do your cells dream? Your brain cells radically change their state, not just collectively but individually. Your glial cells—whose function we hardly understand—shrink to allow ten times the amount cerebrospinal fluid to pass between them, and your neurons shrink by 10%.

Your pituitary, a central source of hormones, is most active at night. To the extent that hormones relay your brain's messages to your body, it's during the night that your cells are responding to these messages.

Your immune system relies on memory, but a form of memory stored in the lymphatic system not the brain. It's suspected that through some entirely unknown mechanism your leukocytes, which are circulating through your body during the day, migrate to your lymph nodes during sleep in order to “learn.” Whatever this means, the result is that sleep is essential for your immune system.

Therapeutic

From the Western psychological perspective we say, “the mind does so-and-so and through this means the mind finds balance.” From this point of view, the reality and understanding we achieve is in our minds. This is a materialist point of view.

If you relax this point of view—that which gives primacy to the ego and its experience—then you can turn things around. You can say that these “characters” that we construct are actually our primary identity, and that the person we identify as “us” is built from them.

Your idea of what you are is made of little more than soggy paper maché. For most of us, our identities have quite a few weak spots. That's OK; we inherited most of them epigenetically. We're all fairly out of shape, mentally. Dreams offer us exercise.

It takes very little to disassemble your identity, and the sooner you master doing that, the better off you'll be. The root of therapy is personal reassembly, and you've got to take it apart before you put it back together.

Social

Dreams are a holistic experience. They are your mind's attempt to bring many things together for the purpose of organizing your conscious awareness. It is in this sense that dreams “consolidate” memory. They consolidate personality: organizing how memories are connected and determine which will be more accessible to you.

One of the first results of sleep deprivation is psychosis, which is a losing touch with reality. A psychotic person is someone who has assembled reality in a non-consensual way. That is to say, they've put events and forces together in a way that you, I, and the natural world disagrees with.

We are all borderline psychotics. We hold ourselves together with self-identity and social conformity. That, I believe, is one reason why we elect such mediocre leaders. Mediocrity is reassuring, and the more things get out of hand, the more we circle the wagons of small thinking.

Another reason for our being culturally dysfunctional is that we are chronically sleep deprived. The solution to the problems wrought by humans is not to build better technology, it's to build better humans. Sleep, and learn to master your dreams.