



The Purpose of Dreams

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“Dreams are illustrations... from the book your soul is writing about you.”
— **Marsha Norman**, playwright

I observe the purpose of dreams is to resolve ambiguity. Resolving ambiguity is both a process and a goal. It’s something we do even if we don’t have a goal. We attack ambiguities in the same way we attack mosquitoes; we consider them a threat even if they aren’t biting us.

Much of our conscious intent has this goal. We see ambiguity as a risk and a hindrance to our freedom of direction. Dreaming is another of our mind’s processes—in addition to using intellect and emotions—that occupies itself with confronting, clarifying, and resolving the ambiguous.

We observe that when people are deprived of dreaming they start to exhibit psychotic behavior. Psychosis is the state of judging reality poorly and managing events unsuccessfully. Simply put, the purpose of dreaming is to better judge reality and manage events.

We’re clearly doing this with our intellect. We enlist facts, reasons, and goals for this purpose. We’re less clearly doing this with our emotions. Emotions take a wider, looser view of affairs but we still rely on our emotions to achieve balance and resolution. Dreams feel like a third approach, not limited to facts or feelings. Consider what we mean by ambiguity.

AMBIGUITY

Ambiguity refers to a choice that is unclear. The choice can be unclear because of obscurity in the situations, choices, or outcomes. We usually don't analyze every situation with academic precision, but we do make some attempt. We get an overall feel for situations and we do a soft kind of deconstruction of what's going on, our options, and the outcomes.

Ambiguity refers to all three of these, and all of these hang on our sense of reality. If we lose touch with reality, then all of our conclusions come unglued. In this regard, your sense of reality precedes your assessments and decisions. You don't even have a problem to solve until you have a reality you believe in.



REALITY

You must have some reality in order to act toward a goal. In fact, that's a good definition of reality: a system that supports acting to achieve a goal.

A living system manages its own dynamic reality. In contrast, the reality of a crystal is static and is defined by its structure. A crystal reacts with its environment in a way that does not change. Its reality is hard-wired.

Living systems are "soft-wired." We start with some potential and we build meaning into it. For this purpose, we have a boundary that distinguishes between our actions on the world and the world's actions on us. Our identity enables us to distinguish between our free will and unintentional actions.

Consider an amoeba. It senses the environment and it feels a need to live. It is hard-wired to recognize both of these. It has a hard-wired mechanism to resolve the problem of what to eat, but what it chooses to do depends on what it perceives. It must resolve the problem of what to eat, and it does this by matching what it senses in its environment with what it feels that it needs. "Thought" connects sensation with need, and we pretty much do the same thing.

RESOLUTION

We like it when things are clear, and we presume that things can be made clear. By resolution, we mean a clear and ordered understanding of our choices. Our choices may have uncertain outcomes but we like to be clear about the choices. This, again, presumes an underlying reality because if you're not sure of what's real, then you can't be sure of anything.

We focus on the dialectic, which is the weighing of alternatives. We take for granted what we perceive as real. We grant a bit more latitude to our feelings, as we're never quite sure our feelings are real in the same way as our perceptions. But even in the case of our emotions, while we question their legitimacy, we don't usually question their reality.

Our sense of reality underlies our thoughts. It's what gives us something to work with. We have an intellectual reality that we don't question. We have an emotional reality we sometimes question. If you add these two together, you get the two parts to "normal" reality: what you perceive and what you feel. This constitutes the reality we take for granted: the reality outside us and the reality inside us.

At some point, somewhere, we build this reality. Even if you subscribe to a fixed reality, we must still build our perception of it. Somewhere in our minds, we have "decided"—though it's not really an intentional act—on which perceptions and feelings we take to be real and which we'll discount.



DREAMS

We often take the things we don't know and lump them into one category. We do this with the subconscious. There is a lot of "stuff" in our subconscious that should be recognized as different, but we put it all behind us. Here, I want to distinguish between three things that come to us through our subconscious: thoughts, feelings, and reality.

Dreams involve all of these and mix them together. Dreams do not answer intellectual questions or resolve emotional feelings, though they certainly involve thoughts and feelings. Dreams certainly don't

hold to one reality. Think of your dreams as attempts to arrange thoughts, feelings, and realities. Think of them as an experiential process of testing what seems to work best.

In addition to these three aspects of your world—thinking, feeling, and accepting as real—we have memories, reflexes, and associations. The dream presents a “best guess” of what things mean, and, in our experience of the dream, the dream triggers our memories, reflexes, and associations.

For example, I had a dark dream centering on a creepy structure that was partly a house and partly a situation. I half woke up and pondered the best way out of the situation the dream presented. Should I think differently or engage in the conflict? I decided to destroy the question by bulldozing the whole structure, which I did with a revisualization in my half-awake state. I then fell back to sleep and had another dream in which I built a new structure on the bulldozed foundation from the first dream. After that, I woke up feeling relieved.

BLUEPRINTS

A construction blueprint details the foundation, construction, and mechanical systems of some structure. A dream blueprint details our reality, ideas, and emotions. While this is a metaphor, it’s fairly accurate: dreams do pull these things together. Our problem—that is the problem we need to work on—is playing a role in creating this blueprint.

We are not trained in designing dreams, and we are not given a role in producing the blueprint. Our role—that is to say the role of the person we consider ourselves to be—seems to be more the laboratory rat and less the designer of the experiment. We are the identity that is tossed into the situation and our subconscious, who plays the role of the mad scientist, watches how we cope and decides what alterations to make.

This is inefficient, though it may be the best that most of us can do with the tools at our disposal. With better tools, I believe we can play a more proactive role and, much like the greatest actors, we can participate in the direction and even rewrite the script.

I’m alternating between the metaphor of the construction blueprint and the dramatic script. Both feel apt. Normally, the actor’s role is entirely proscribed by the script in the same way the contractor must adhere to the blueprint. But in both cases—that of the master actor and the master craftsman—when the agent’s skills are greater than the separate skills of actor or director, journeyman or architect, then we can take things to a higher level. This is what we must aim for if we’re to be more than actors, or more than contractors, or, if you prefer, more than the rat in our dreams.



MASTER CRAFTSMEN

If you want to play a greater role in designing your life, you'll have to develop skills that are above average. The fact that we're talking about this means you have already elevated your vision. Vision is where growth starts and what keeps it going.

We all have a certain degree of experience in managing thoughts and emotions. Though they may be hard to control, thoughts are the easiest to judge. Learn to think clearly. Learn to avoid the logical fallacies we're taught to employ and trained to accept. Learn to distinguish emotion from intellect, and give each a wide berth.

Emotions are a more difficult problem. Many of us suffer from ingrained emotional patterns whose dysfunction we can't recognize, and for which we have no guidance in knowing how to repair. In this regard, the best advice is detachment: learn to maintain some distance between your emotions and yourself. Avoid being overwhelmed with any one emotion. Instead, learn to hold several, to make space for more, and to watch yourself think from one emotional vantage point or another.

A more serious problem besets those who don't have selected emotions, and this applies to quite a few of us. I've heard estimates that 15% of the population carry a degree of emotional dysfunction but, since this label is only applied when it becomes dysfunctional, I suspect that some degree of dysfunction is much more prevalent. It's useful to assume that you are missing certain emotional skills, or that your skills with regard to certain emotions can be greater. The best measure of what you've got in relation to what you need is how much you struggle.



Emotional expansion is one of the most dramatic effects of the hypnotherapeutic technique called “past life regression.” It’s often the case that in these regressions a person engages an emotional perspective that’s absent in their current life. Finding oneself alternatively, emotionally engaged almost guarantees that you’ll feel as if you’re seeing life from another person’s perspective. The result is an often life-changing expansion in one’s ability to empathize, and raises a person to a new level of self-understanding.

Recognizing alternate realities is a subtle skill. Most people—present company excluded—do not question their reality. In some cases, this results in a rigid notion of what’s real. In other cases, it results in a fluid and uncertain world-view. In either case, the person is neither aware nor in control. This leads to the fallacy that everyone else understands their world in the same way you do. This leads to irreconcilable differences at all levels: intimate, familial, social, and inter-cultural. Discussions about reality are not common in psychology, but I think they should be.

It may be correct to say that the first and last step in becoming a master craftsman of the mind is recognizing the fluid nature of reality. It is both a prerequisite for playing a constructive role in developing your identity, and it is a powerful tool for reshaping your dreams.

In a dream, you can alter your ideas and feelings without leaving the context of the dream. Alterations of these sorts will change the dream characters and their reactions, but it will not radically change the dream. On the other hand, changing the dream’s reality will reform the dream. If you are able to reject the reality of a dream, then the whole dream must change.

This is not to say that you should be forever changing your dream reality, rather, it is to say that the dream’s reality is its foundation. It is the presumption on which the whole structure rests. In many cases, our ambiguous feelings are due not to conflicts but to the uncertain foundations of them. That is, many of our unsolved problems are not rooted in our lack of solutions, but to the non-reality of the problems. In order to explore that possibility you need some ability in re-framing what’s real.

Adjustments to reality are often necessary. They constitute substantial changes to the script. Until you can recognize and make these changes, you cannot play a master role in the design of your dreams or your life. The way to gain this skill in your dreams, or at least one way, is to exercise this skill in your waking life.

Reality is what we take as fundamental: tables, chairs, walls, light, and air. These are not a problem and we don't need to challenge them. On the other hand, we should recognize that they're only as real as the roles they play in our experience. In our waking life we often confuse "real" with "necessary." They're not necessary, and it is a good practice to experiment with realities based on different "necessary objects."

For example, I've found it useful to be mindful in other environments. I've been involved in pursuits that have put me into the mountains, the ocean, and the air. When you're scuba diving, especially if you're diving at the maximum limit of your depth, your reality no longer contains tables, chairs, walls, or light; your only reality is air.

Even doing something as innocuous as driving a car puts one in a different reality where you must think differently. When driving, you also don't worry about tables, chairs, light, and air. Now all you worry about are walls and other things you might hit. You have to be empathetic regarding how other drivers think.

Another example is money. A life without money is frightening to those of us for whom it is a life-blood, but one certainly can live without it. To do so requires a change in one's reality. It may be useful to ask yourself which is more important, your identity or the reality of things that are not you?

Any situation that changes the objects of reality offers the opportunity to reflect on how our thinking and feeling has become ingrained. By taking these situations to heart we can start to loosen our grip on all the realities we cling to.



DREAM BUILDING

To use dreams therapeutically, play a role in designing them. First, you need to get enough sleep and remember your dreams. This is easy enough if you're committed to the program.

The next step is your imagination. Building anything requires imagination or the blank slate stays blank. Creating is not problem solving. Problems are just excuses for thinking of something new. You can use them if you want to, but they tend to limit your creative imagination. In the case of re-imagining reality, you would be better off if you start to by imagining what you want to achieve, rather than what's holding you back. The first will create a more detailed goal; the second a more detailed problem.

Sketching a dream is like sketching anything: consider all the factors and rearrange them. In this case the factors are your thoughts, feelings, and realities. It's not enough to list these factors; that has no life. You must create a narrative, script, or storyboard: lights, cameras, action! This is what we do in the past life regression protocol, and this is what we do in our dreams.

I'll talk more about this in the next post.

By Lincoln Stoller, PhD, CHt, <https://www.mindstrengthbalance.com>

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