



Attending to Your Dreams

If your intellect draws your focus, and your emotions motivate you,
then dreams are your recollection of who you are.

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*“Before embarking on a journey it is always important to take stock, consider the destination,
what will be required and that you have it available.”*
— **Martin Milton**, ecopsychologist (2009)

We follow Milton’s advice in waking life, but in dreams, we never do. Dreams are what happen when we don’t plan; when we let the conscious container dissolve.

I tell the people I work with in counseling that they should attend to their dreams, but I don’t think people know what this means. In most cases, people cannot attend to dreams because they have no relevant connection to them. How does one attend to something whose meaning escapes

you?

Dreams speak to us at a level below our emotions, at the level of our identity. They are like vandals swinging baseball bats at the mailboxes of perception. They grapple with your identity, so that attending to one's dreams means paying attention to who you are.

Last night, I had a dream full of symbols from my distant past. The symbols addressed the issue of the viability of myself. Most dreams involve strange characters and situations whose context, while clear at the time, escapes us upon reflection. This dream involved strange ideas which I could not verbalize.

If you consider how you think about yourself and your world, you'll notice that your memory settles in layers. The top layer is your memory of connected events. Below that are your feelings and attitudes. The next layer down is your focus, maintenance of attention, and executive function.

Near the bottom of your personality lies your sense of self. This is a combination of memories, associations, feelings, and ideas all slightly out of reach. They must be out of reach, or else they'd be subject to change as the result of current events. Your personality must be protected, out of the wind, and relatively indifferent to the flow of feelings and ideas.



Relax and Float Downstream

Dreams tend to muck-about at this lowest level. Their lack of sense and difficult recollection protect our personality from being otherwise disrupted. If you lived with clear dream recollection and their chaotic emotions, you'd be schizophrenic during your waking hours. The dream focused on an unfamiliar idea of sustainability, one that was psychic rather than literal. I do not have an intellectual concept of this, so it manifested allegorically as a tool that I carried, a kind of camp stove or solar collector.

This “camping out” was not a matter of tents and sleeping bags, but my sense of self. It was a matter of building a sustainable psychic space. What does this even mean?

This is what dreams do: they make real the unrealizable. This is why they're hard to remember and don't make sense. They deal metaphorically with issues at the boundary of our recognition and understanding.

Those who study dreams say that they compact our memory by moving short-term recollections into long-term memory. This is an anthropocentric description of Aboriginal dreamtime. It feels less accurate because it fails to recognize that dreams do more than just file and store, they create.

The conventional interpretation of dreams says they are difficult to remember because they're

vague, incomplete, or irrelevant. Yes, they are vague and incomplete, but that is because they reflect our self-identity.

They are anything but irrelevant; they are the polar opposite: they are relevance incarnate. They create relevance. We have such a thin grasp of who we are that when we encounter ourselves in the dreamtime, we barely appreciate what's happening.

In dream life, we encounter ourselves as an uncoordinated mixture of pieces from different jigsaw puzzles. But it's more dynamic than that because dreams don't just rearrange old symbols of our identity, they create new ones.

In our waking life, we take this nonsense assemblage of memories and associations to be the personality in which we are invested. What in dreams makes little sense is our real self, to wit, our real selves don't make sense. Our personality, that in waking life seems so well constructed, is a total hash.

Dreams make little sense because we don't. This is what I would like my therapy clients to understand. Their problems are due not simply to a failed strategy in navigating a sane and well-ordered world, because the world we experience is neither sane nor well-ordered. The self we struggle with in waking life is a nest of contradictions. The importance of dreams lies in the view they can provide of who we really are.

In the movie *The Matrix*, the protagonists wake up to a real world totally different from what they presumed in waking life. This is facile and optimistic. The reality is that in dreams we wake up to our real inner world, and it is almost incomprehensible. You would be well served spending as much time as you can contemplating the paradoxes and contradictions of the dreamtime, as these underlie who you really are.



Lucidity is Just Another Dream

In my dream, I realized I was achieving self-sufficiency. In the dream, the image was that of having a sustaining source of food and energy that is both sufficient to both support who I am and those who depend on me. Those who depend on me are not my dependents, they are the people I struggle with in life, some of which have real identities, and others are imagined representatives of the society that I believe I inhabit.

Imagine that your attention is a beam of light. The things that you see in the “real world” are objects that reflect this light. The “real world” is your awareness being reflected back at you. Similarly, what you touch is not what’s there, it’s only what your sensations encounter. We depend on these objects as we feel our way forward, and so we call them “real.” They are not real objects. They are only events we might encounter as we move forward, and most of them we don’t encounter.

Our “real” dependents are people who we “co-reflect.” We project images of what’s real onto each other in a kind of puzzle-fitting game, moving each other around in our attempts to create defining relationships.

In this way, we test the structures of our relationships, both with each other and in the world. When they appear weak and we feel strong, then our version of the world becomes stable. When they appear strong and we feel weak, then our version of the world begins to shrink. We avoid those areas by redacting them; they have less presence for us, and so they have less reality.

Our “unreal” dependents are the unresponsive pictures of people and the world that we take into ourselves from news, events, and casual encounters. Unreal dependents are the clerks you meet at checkout counters, the faces you see in oncoming cars, the posturing of celebrities, and the talking heads who tell you the news.

One puts one’s mental health in jeopardy by ascribing too much reality to unreal dependents. Social media can be dangerous when psychopathic personalities weave illusions into the social fabric. We rely too much on our unreal dependents, and, ironically, the more unstable we feel, the more we rely on things in our environment to strengthen our containers.

This is the real problem: we rely on what’s unreal because it’s the consensus. We lose contact with what’s real because it’s complex and uniquely ours. When threatened, we avoid responsibility, retreat to the consensus, and become vulnerable to illusion. This all happens because we’re threatened by the dreamtime.

Screwing Up Your Courage

There are two steps to how I engaged with my dreams. First, I spend a lot of time reflecting on them. Some of that is thinking about what they mean, some of it is feeling moved by them, and some of my effort is spent simply replaying them. In this way, I keep my waking self more connected to my dreams.

When bedtime rolls around, I’m already leaning into the night’s dreams. I don’t have to resolve to remember my dreams, I’m already eager to do so. Dreams are not a separate thing that needs attention, they are part of my waking life. My other trick is more practical. I drink a large glass of water before retiring.

The main factor in remembering dreams is to wake up while they are ongoing. This leaves the inevitable feeling that the dream is interrupted and unresolved, but resolution is never the purpose of a dream, and it’s unclear if they ever would leave a sense of conclusion. The dream’s purpose is creative self-exploration. Resolution is an illusion pursued by the waking mind.

Toward morning, the depth of our sleep makes several oscillations up to near wakefulness before we wake up. These high points occur between our REM dream cycles and, because we normally don’t awake until the REM cycle has finished, we normally don’t remember our dreams.

By drinking a lot of water, the growing pressure of my bladder moves the high points of my morning sleep cycles closer to wakefulness. Close enough to inject an added element of wakefulness into my dreaming, giving me greater lucidity. Like a fish trying to jump out of water, rising higher toward wakefulness affords greater conscious awareness to my dream mind.

A broader hypnopompic state creates a navigable bridge between sleep and wakefulness. I find myself gaining half consciousness, recollecting my dreams while being aware that I haven't quite woken up. All this is given greater impetus by an underlying need to pee.

Dreamwork takes effort. It is a disturbance on a rhythm that otherwise separates the sleeping from waking states. Attending to your dreams is not a nighttime affair, it's an involvement you have to wrap your life around. That's why few people do it.

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