

INTERPRETATION OF DREAMS

The interpretation of dreams refers to a process of discovering the connection between the dream and the emotional life of the dreamer. The way we should go about interpreting dreams has been a matter of concern and debate all through our recorded history. Existence of this problem for at least the last 2,000 years is demonstrated by the records of dream guide books dating from as long ago as 500 B.C. Clay tablets with information on interpreting dreams were very common during that period. To dream of flying meant impending disaster. To drink water in a dream meant a long life, but to drink wine foretold a short one (Van de Castle, 1971). Some people still look for the meaning of their dreams in such dream "dictionaries." These may be fun, rather like fortune cookies, but they are not to be taken seriously.

The early Egyptians had the ancient equivalent of our modern sleep laboratories in their temples. People came to sleep there to find the answer to questions of importance to them. They would "incubate" dreams by praying or fasting beforehand. Dream interpreters, known as the Learned Men of the Magic Library, had offices in these temples and offered to decode the dream answer sent by the gods (Wallis-Budge, 1899).

Artemidorus, an Italian physician writing in about A.D. 150, had a rather more sophisticated

view of what the interpreter needed to know before pronouncing what a dream was about. He stressed the importance of having more than one dream, preferably a sequence of dreams to work with, as well as some knowledge of the dreamer and his or her present circumstances (White, 1975).

The answer to the question, "What do dreams mean," and even "Do they mean anything at all," has been sought by many philosophers, physicians, poets and priests and continues to be asked today with only somewhat better methods to help in the hunt. The difficulty comes about because of three facts: (1) Dreaming is a plentiful but uniquely private mental experience; (2) it is common to us all throughout our life span, yet occurs spontaneously, outside our will; (3) dreaming occurs in a form quite different from our waking thoughts, so that it appears to us as strange. In other words, dreams are common but unique, our own but outside our control, and created by us but not understandable. What should we do with this experience? Being creatures of enormous curiosity, we try hard to find meaning in all our experience, and so we have invented many different ways to understand the meanings of our dreams.

The modern era of dream interpretation begins in 1900 with the publication of Sigmund Freud's major work "The Interpretation of Dreams" (1966). Freud gave us two keys to finding the meaning in our dreams. The first was his distinction between the obvious or manifest content of the dream (the dream story) and its hidden purpose or latent content. The important part is the latent content, which requires a skilled person to understand. The second key to the meaning of dreams came from Freud's idea of their function. He believed that dreams express unfulfilled wishes left over from early childhood—hidden away in our unconscious mind but still active. They are banished from our waking awareness because they are unacceptable in polite society. Even in sleep they must only show themselves in disguised form. To understand dreams we must use an indirect route. Freud's method was to train the patient to let his or her mind float freely. To help this along it was important that the person lay on a couch with the dream interpreter behind and out of sight. The patient's job was to say whatever came into his or her mind and not to follow the logical connections between the dream imagery and waking life. Presumably, these free as-

sociations would get at the underlying pattern of emotional connections between the dream and the past. These emotions are expressed in the dream through various tricks such as condensation (where one object or person perhaps represents several emotionally important streams of thought that are condensed into one image).

To interpret a dream correctly according to Freud, one needs to understand his theory of the mind—particularly the role of the unconscious—and to use the method of free association. This technique circumvents the barriers between our conscious and unconscious minds, barriers erected to keep the forbidden impulses "out of sight and out of mind." This approach proved to be too esoteric an idea and too slow a method to satisfy the more pragmatic-minded fast-track Americans.

Theories of the next generation of dream doctors differed greatly regarding how dreams are interpreted. Thomas French and Erika Fromm (1964), for example, saw the purpose of dreaming to be a search for solutions to current interpersonal problems. Their method, like that of Artemidorus, requires working with dreams in series rather than one at a time. Their emphasis is less on the dreamer's free association and more on the empathic intuition of the dream analyst. It is the analyst's job to fit together the dream's references to the past with the dreamer's present emotional situation.

These changes—from an emphasis on the past to looking for meaning in the dreamer's present, from the free association method, which was difficult to learn, to trusting to the listener's intuition—have culminated in new, typically American ways to approach dream interpretation, such as the group methods of Montague Ullman (Ullman and Zimmerman, 1979) and Gayle Delaney (1991).

Ullman and Delaney are professional therapists who have developed similar methods for understanding dreams. They believe that a dreamer can be helped to "see what the dream means" more clearly by being offered intuitions from other people not emotionally involved with the same problem as the dreamer. Dream groups using these methods meet in many communities.

Quite a different and more intellectual approach has evolved from the work of the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1981). It is a more formal structural analysis developed to understand the myths of primitive people, and

Kuper (1983) has applied it to dream interpretation. This method, too, goes back to Artemidorus's point that we need to work with a series of dreams if we are to discover their meaning. According to Kuper, dreams consist of a series of variations that obey a strict set of rules. The variations reflect a problem of the dreamer along sets of opposites like in-out, male-female, superior-inferior. These dimensions are the personal elements the dreamer uses to construct dream stories, all of which are attempts to deal with an emotional issue. To interpret the dream, one must identify the dimensions that will be used over and over, sometimes on one side and sometimes on the other. The elements are shifted about until the dreamer reaches some satisfying conclusion about the meaning of the dream.

Whether we take a theory-based approach to dream interpretation, an intuitive approach like Freud's, a group method like those of Ullman and Delaney, or a formal structural analysis approach, such as Kuper's, or some combination of these, the general consensus is that a dream's meaning lies in the current waking emotional life of the dreamer alongside what is in the memory bank of past experiences that are related to current problems.

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