

I Dreamed I Was Flying: A Developmental Representation of Competence

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As a young man, I loved the songs delivered by Paul Simon (with and without his partner, Art Garfunkel). One of my favorite songs contained the phrase “I dreamed I was Flying.” I especially resonated with this phrase because I was often flying in my dreams. I simply had to lift up off the ground and would soar around the Mid-West home where I lived during my late childhood. In the Fall, I could glide over trees of beautiful Autumnal colors. In the Spring, I loved to linger above the gardens to be found in our city park.

There was nothing quite as wonderful as gliding by my neighbor’s home or even taking flight in my living room or school room. These were some of my favorite dreams. I would fall asleep hoping for flight rather than fright. I could escape from the monsters that stalked around my bedroom at night and appeared in my dreams. I could soar away or even swoop down to give the monster a kick. I would then swoop away.

Sexuality and Flying

We all know that flying represents repressed sexuality. This is what books about dreams tells us. Obviously, I was an adolescent with budding sexual desires and could only express these desires in a disguised manner through the act of flying. As an American boy raised in a law-abiding family during the 1940s, I was not allowed to have sex with some “loose” young woman – or even have “dirty thoughts” about sexual encounters. So “I dreamed I was flying” rather than dreaming I was making love to someone (however this was supposed to occur since I was not supposed to read about “these things” until I was older). Clearly, I was experiencing sexual arousal during flight. Furthermore, the release of tension when lifting off the ground is analogist to experiencing an orgasm. So, I was getting it all wrong. First, the orgasm and then the arousal!

As an adult, I no longer dreamed of flying. Was this because I was finally actually making love to someone about whom I cared. Or was it simply because sexuality was now “OK” to think about and enact. That which is no longer forbidden becomes the focus of one’s waking life rather than one’s life during a dream. This would seem to be the nature of dreaming—at least from what might be considered a “psycho-dynamic” perspective as first introduced by Sigmund Freud and later expanded by his acolytes.

I wonder . . . Is this the only way in which to interpret the meaning of a flight during my dreams—or the dreams of many other people. Could flying represent something other than the sexual act? Why did I swoop down and kick the monster? What about the differing thrills that took place when viewing a Fall day or a day in the Spring? Perhaps (as the Freudians themselves have declared), an activity during a dream can have multiple meanings. In an earlier essay in this series on dreaming, I wrote about a dream element that I collected in a dream laboratory that seemed to have multiple meanings (Bergquist, 2023). This word was “Bridge.” The dream I collected contained a physical structure, card game and structural element of a nose that could all be called a “bridge.” The physical experience of flying can similarly relate to several different sensations—not just sexual arousal and fulfillment. It can relate to the

exhilaration of soaring at great speeds and minimal effort, or to the enthrallment that comes from looking down upon the world from a great height. Is Superman not a compelling figure when he is flying through the air (“up, up and away”)? Is not Peter Pan at his most theatrically exciting when soaring through the air?

At this point, having raised the question regarding what “flying” in a dream really means, I wish to introduce a quite different interpretation regarding the presence of flight in the dreams of young people and the absence of flying dreams (at least for me) later in life. My interpretation derives from the work of Robert White, one of Freud’s acolytes who focused on adaptive (“ego”) functions rather than the more primitive (“id”) functions on which Freud focused. White focused in particular on a powerful motivator that he identified as *Competence*.

I Dream I Am Flying: Discovering Competence

In an important essay that was published more than sixty years ago, Rober White (1959) wrote about competence. He suggested in the title of this essay that the basic framework of motivation needs to be reconsidered. While most existing theories at the time focused on the reduction of basic drives (such as hunger, thirst, shelter –and sexuality), there was no accounting for playful and exploratory behavior. Why join in a basketball game or ride on a roller coaster. They tend to increase levels of arousal rather than reduce these levels or fulfill any “primary” need. Up to this point, some psychologists wrote about something called an “arousal jag.” Gratification apparently comes from increasing arousal and then reducing this arousal. This is a variant on the old adage that we should bang our head against the wall since it feels so good when we stop.

Other psychologists simply gave up and began to use the term “autotelic” (self-guided) when categorizing these playful and exploratory behaviors. “Autotelic” behavior becomes anything that doesn’t fit with the existing theories of motivation. It seems that psychologists have found themselves facing what the scientific historian, Thomas Kuhn (2012), would call an “anomaly.” According to Kuhn, it is an unsolved mystery (anomaly) in any specific scientific discipline that can no longer be ignored which can produce a “revolution” and a whole new approach to solving this elusive mystery. Such was the case regarding the purpose of play and exploration in the domain of human behavior. Something had to change! And the change did occur. White’s reconsideration of motivation led to the “revolution” in psychology that occurring during the following four decades. So-called “positive psychology” began to address long ignored aspects of human behavior such as hope, generosity, and courage.

What then is the case being made by Robert White for the upending of traditional concepts of drive-based human motivation. White (1966, pp. 247-248) is making his case based on the fundamental adaptive function being engaged by playful and exploratory behavior:

A clear advantage in terms of survival would appear to lie with a creature at spontaneously explored and manipulated things, building up out of sheer curiosity a certain knowledge and skill in dealing with the environment; this prior competence might well make the difference between life and death in a crisis provoked by hunger, thirst, or external danger. But we need not rely on speculation. Observation of young animals and children reveals a great deal of playful, manipulative, and exploratory activity that seems to go on without the instigation of visceral drives. These activities are done for the fun of it, but they serve a serious biological purpose.

Part of the fun can be described as a *feeling of efficacy*—or sense of mastery—and the biological purpose is clearly the attaining of competence in dealing with the environment.

White (1966, p. 248) recognizes that his model of competence and efficacy is playing havoc with the established models:

To conceive of this striving as a drive is apt to create confusion. It appears to originate in the nervous system itself rather than in visceral tension. It does not follow typical patterns of drive arousal and reduction; it shows as a more or less continuous activity while the animal or child is at peace with his drives but still wide awake, and it subsides only with the gradual onset of fatigue. Nevertheless, the frequency and persistence of such activity in children entitles us to rate the need for efficacy as a fundamental motive that is highly important in the growth of personality.

White (1966, p. 248) more fully establishes the value of his model by showing its broader applicability:

This need [for efficacy and competence] provides a broader basis for being interested in things that is implied in the concept of drive. . . . [The feeling of efficacy] is, of course, not all that is involved in human interests, but it greatly improves our power to understand what keeps people absorbed in enterprises for their own sake. There are ways of being quite directly interested in things even when drive satisfaction is a remote contingency.

Given the pervasive and beneficial role played by competence in our life, then couldn't the experience of efficacy be represented in the liberating experience of leaving the constraints of being earth-bound? Couldn't we experience competence in finding ourselves able to fly "up, up and away" like Superman? Couldn't we find the same delight as Wendy, John and Michael Darling when they found that they, like Peter Pan, could fly—and find liberation in sailing off to Neverland?

Were my early dreams perhaps about my emerging sense of competence. Was I experiencing "effectance" while soaring in the sky. When I gave my monster a kick, perhaps I was experiencing a bit of my own competence in dealing with fears in my life. When I was looking down upon both the leaves of Autumn and the Gardens of Spring, was I beginning to explore my world. Was this evidence of an early appreciation for diversity? Was I coming to see that beauty is often found in diversity?

Stages of Competence

A colleague of mine, Bob Shukraft, suggested many years ago that during the first half of life we develop by expanding and extending the use of new skills and knowledge. This concept of development focuses on deficits. Furthermore, this focus is quite appropriate given that deficits are inevitably associated with youth and the processes of maturation. However, Shukraft suggests that a different meaning should be assigned to the term *development* during the second half of life. Development now refers to shifting priorities and perspectives. We don't so much develop by gaining new knowledge and skill. Rather, we develop by seeing the world in new ways and shifting our personal values, needs and ways of engaging other people.

I find it instructive to bring the insights together that have been offered by Robert White and Bob Shukraft. If Shukraft is correct, then the competencies of greatest importance at any one time during our life might be shifting. Early in our life, we are concerned about skill and knowledge-based competence. We want to be able to

achieve something of importance making use of the skills and knowledge we have acquired. Playful behaviors might be considered the learning of, testing out or “auditioning” of specific competencies. Some children “played house” as a child so that they can gain a sense of what it would be like to be an adult who takes care of a family. Other children “played” the role of police officer or fireman so that they could not only try out a specific role, but also learn how to engage more general skills (such as assisting another person or lifting something that is heavy) that they will need later in life.

As I grow older, the desired competencies turn more inward. I am playful and exploratory in my behavior so that I can expand my perspectives and explore new priorities. I travel to new lands not only for the excitement of meeting new people and viewing new and beautiful vistas but also because I can learn more about myself and my own society. I wish to become emotional competent (Goleman, 1995). New experiences enable me to become cognitively more mature and competent (Kegan, 1982 Kegan, 1994). I reflect on my own perspectives and practices in a more competent manner (Schön, 1983).

And my dreams change . . .

I Dream I am Climbing: Learning About Achievement

While my early dreams were about flying, my later dreams (in my 30s and 40s) were often about climbing mountains. I have always been inspired by the song “Climb Every Mountain” and the last scene in Rogers and Hammerstein’s *Sound of Music* where the Trapp family is in fact climbing a mountain to escape from Nazi repression (a revision of what really happened in the life of the Trapp family). I also often dreamed of climbing a mountain during the middle of my life. I dreamt of arriving near the peak of a very high mountain. I was more than 14,000 feet above sea level. This was higher than the elevation I did reach when climbing the highest peaks in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. I had done much hiking and camping in this magnificent mountain range as a much younger man. I also had vivid memories of hiking up to alpine pastures with my two children when living for several years in Boulder Colorado.

I had repeated dreams of struggling past large boulders and slowly making it to the top of the mountain. In my dreams, I could gaze out over many lower mountain peaks all around me. I suspect this is what it would look like if I had ever climbed to the top of Mt. Whitney (the tallest peak in the Sierras) or to one of the peaks in Colorado. I recently listened to Richard Strauss’ *Alpine Symphony* and was reminded of my mid-life dreams about climbing (like Strauss did) toward the top of a mountain. My old dreams were elicited as I listened to this symphony. Near the end of the symphony (when Strauss had reached the peak), there are not only the broad sweeping and triumphant sounds of the brass (Strauss loved the horns – which his father had played) but also the softer tremolo sounds of the strings. Triumph was mixed with the tentative, anxious feelings of being not fully grounded when standing at the peak. I felt this way in my dreams.

My dream-based journey was both exhilarating and tense. It was like the Flow experience described by Mihali Csikszentmihalyi (1990). Influenced by the anthropological analyses of Victor Turner regarding initiation rituals and threshold experiences, Csikszentmihalyi studied and wrote about the “threshold” experience that comes with facing a challenging situation that holds the promise of being successfully addressed. Located in the space between anxiety (too much challenge) and boredom (too little challenge), the Flow experience is highly motivating and leads one to a state of great time-less pleasure. It is such an experience of Flow that leads many people to climb mountains (or ride bikes up steep

roads, play chess, or author complex books). We might find that Flow is experienced in an imagined manner during our dreams – just as we can fancifully or indirectly fulfill our sexual needs in a dream.

While flying (as a young man) was an easy way to demonstrate competence and readily demonstrate achievement, mountain climbing is a more “anchored” form of moving upward. For me in my dreams, the experience of climbing to the top of a peak was very difficult. There was good reason to celebrate having arrived at the top of the mountain. In my dream, I was out of breath (this being a high-altitude peak) and I was exhausted given the difficult climb. However, there was another emotion that was a bit harder from me to understand. I would always feel anxious. While I was on sound footing at the top of the mountain, I always feared in my dream that I would somehow fall from the peak. It was no longer a Flow experience for me. My balance had tipped from feeling of competence and achievement to a sense of vulnerability and profound fear of falling. As a middle-aged adult, it seems that my dreams were teaching me that competency is ultimately founded on hard work. Furthermore, achievement will always be not only hard-won but also a bit precarious.

I Dream I Am Being Me: Exploring Aspects of Myself

My dreams now often are based in reminiscence—as is my waking life as an old man. In my dreams I often squish together and modify existing experiences from previous times in my life. The narratives I generate in my present-day dreams often contain a bit of my failures as well as my successes. The obstacles I face in these dreams often concern psychological states of mind—such as moments when I am being arrogant or times when I am being self-serving or too competitive. Everything is mixed together—the good and bad, the appropriate and inappropriate, the generous and selfish.

It seems that my dreams are becoming more like my waking life—though they offer me a bit more insight than I often gain when awake and preoccupied with the ongoing activities and adjustments of thoughts and feelings in my life. It seems that my dreams are now more likely to be instructive and even a bit provocative rather than being drive-fulfilling or aspirational. I have arrived at a point in my life when I wish to look inward (and backwards in time) to find out more about myself—particularly the meaning and purpose in my life. This is more of a spiritual journey than a journey in which I am seeking to fill some fundamental biological need or to fill some higher-order aspirational need. My dreams are serving as a teacher rather than acting as a source of (disguised) gratification or (mature) motivation.

Conclusions

I find it to be more personal value to reflect back on the changing nature of my dreams over the past eighty years. The varying challenges I have faced and the diverse opportunities that have appeared in my life have been documented in my dreams. Am I alone in gaining rich insights when comparing my dreams over a lifetime? Can other people similarly gain insights regarding their own developmental history by examining their dreams over time? Even more specifically, can they gain insights regarding the changing nature of competency and the drive toward self-efficacy in their life by looking at their dreams?

I propose that these insights are available to those people “who take their dreams seriously.” It is a bit like spending time looking at the rings of a large cut tree. It appears that the challenging life led by trees are recorded in their rings. Fires they have withstood, droughts they have weathered, and infestations they have repelled are all evident in their rings. The tree’s growth and protection are also documented

in these rings. We can even find out about the environment in which the tree has resided by examining its rings. There is a whole field of environmental studies called *dendrochronology* that focuses on the analysis of tree rings. Sadly, the only way we can study the rings is by cutting down the tree and examining the rings that appear when a slice of the tree's trunk is examined. When alive, the tree "hides" its rings behind a protective shield of wood and bark.

A parallel case might be made for the rich information that be gained from examining an aspect of human life that is also hidden from view. Our dreams portray our own personal battle with challenging forces in our environment. As in the case of tree rings, I propose that our dreams also document our growth and protection. Furthermore, like a tree's rings, the dreams that occur at night are usually hidden from view. We protect them not with bark but with neurological blocking and assignment of dream content to areas of the brain that do not contain memory-retaining neurotransmitters and neurons. Psychoanalysts would say that we also engage psychological defense mechanism.

While our dreams are protected by the blockage of memory as well as muscular movement (except our eyes and throat muscles), there is occasional or (for some of us) frequent "linkage" of dream content into our waking life. It is in the recall of our dreams that we can potentially analyze our own "rings"—the content of our dreams.

I believe that there is an important message embedded in this analysis of dreams that potentially are portraying something about competence. *The changing content of our dreams might be providing us with an insightful record of our ongoing personal development as a human being.*

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