

It's All About Sex! Or Is It?

Reflections on Sexuality and Dreaming

It is time to focus on the “real” content of all (or most) dreams. It is time to focus on sexuality in dreams. Some readers might suggest that I am a prude or perhaps sexually repressed since I have been writing about everything in dreams except sexuality. After all, the premier of dreams, Dr. Freud, declares that any significant dream is ultimately a disguised expression of sexual wishes.

While I greatly admire the genius of Sigmund Freud’s interpretative work in his seminal study of dreams (S. Freud, 1900/2010), I beg to differ with him regarding the universality of sexuality in dreams—and am joined in this counter perspective by many interpreters of dreams. I might even include Dr. Freud’s daughter (Anna Freud) on this list—but I will get to this later in this essay.

Sigmund Freud’s Perspective: All Dreams Are Ultimately Sexual!

For Freud, the entirety of our life (waking and sleeping) ultimately concerns the addressing of sexual urges. This task was quite challenging for Freud as someone who lived in the highly repressive society of Vienna Austria. According to Sigmund, it seems that sexuality was on the “back burner” of the minds (and bodies) of every human being living during the Victorian Era in Europe during the late 19th Century and early 20th Century. This being the case, then all dreams must serve somehow as an indirect expression of this back-burner sexuality. While Freud acknowledged later in his life the role played by aggression as a powerful primitive instinct, the “die was already cast” – dreams were primarily if not exclusively devoted to the indirect expression of forbidden sexual desires.

Given the brutal nature of sexual repression in Victorian/Viennese society, the expression of sexuality in dreams usually had to be deeply hidden and creatively expressed. Freud was himself in full denial regarding the actual sexual behavior of Viennese men and women (especially men). Male members of their own family sexually molested many Viennese women—and these women were beginning to acknowledge this molestation. Sigmund Freud thought this abuse to be impossible given that “decent” Viennese men would never violate a female member of their family. Freud preferred to believe that women actually were wishing for and fantasizing about these sexual encounters.

In alignment with his psychoanalytic theory, Freud was being pulled in multiple directions by his own psyche. There was his liberating recognition of active sexual desires in both men and women. This Id-based perspective in Freud’s psyche existed alongside his repressive denial of sexual abuse. A strong Super-Ego would not allow for this abuse by the men Sigmund Freud encountered. It seems that Freud was correct in emphasizing early life influences. Perhaps, he should have been more cognizant of his repressive upbringing, resulting in his oppressive moral judgments as an adult (Rieff, 1979).

To kick off this exploration of sexuality in dreams, I will report specifically on dreams that were recounted by my colleague—who I will call “Frank” (because of his remarkably frank recounting of dreams related to sexuality). Frank is a 78-year-old retired college professor. He went through several marriages during his lifetime and had a healthy sex life when married and when not married. His latest wife died several years ago after a brief bout with cancer. Frank now lives alone.

Explicit Dreams About Sexuality

Frank has always had many dreams in which he is making love to a woman – sometimes his wife, sometimes other women he has known, and sometimes a celebrity (usually a movie star or political figure). He has often made love in his dreams to a woman who is a creation of his own imagination. Frank's specialty is meeting a darkly clad woman with long blond hair walking on a foggy beach. Frank admits that this fantasy is not very original. However, it does work for him, because after a brief interaction with this beautiful (but somewhat mysterious) interaction with her in front of a roaring fire at a nearby Inn (still not very original), Frank escorts her up to his room at the Inn and they make love in a gentle but quite passionate manner.

While the content of this dream is not particularly original, it is universally appealing. I must admit that I borrowed this dream from Frank in one of my previous essays (Bergquist, 2023b). Frank has repeatedly enjoyed this dream for over forty years of his adult life. During some evenings he sensed that he was to have this dream when he fell asleep. This often results in an earlier-than-usual bedtime. He never disclosed this reason for an early bedtime to his devoted wife. Frank even likes to spend time on a beach in the Pacific Northwest that is often foggy. Is he looking for this dream lover as a real-life woman on this beach? Perhaps.

Frank indicates that he is especially thankful to his “psyche” for providing him with this frequently generated dream and many other sexually explicit dreams—especially since the death of his wife. Love-making is often quite wonderful in his dreams. Frank admits that his dream-based sexual encounters can sometimes be even better than his real-life sexual encounters.

Frank sleeps with a large side pillow since his wife's death. He often wakes up after having a sexual dream with not only an erection but also with a “humping” motion directed toward his side pillow. Frank has not needed a blowup doll—he's got his surrogate (the side pillow).

Like many “healthy” men and women, Frank is a creator of dreams that allow him fully to enjoy sexual encounters. We are no longer living in a “Victorian” era when all yearning for sexuality is repressed (and in this repression gains power). Most men and women are now “liberated.” They can enjoy real-life and fanciful sex (including nighttime, dream-based sexuality) without feeling guilty.

However, is this enough? Are certain expressions of sexuality still “forbidden” for Frank? Are there still restrictions on the specific people (both male and female) about whom Frank can imagine being bed partners? Bringing in Dr. Freud once again, might we wonder if the censoring Super-Ego is still alive and well in Frank's psyche and in the psyche of most properly “socialized” men and women of the mid-21st Century?

Dreams that Symbolize Sexuality

The sexually saturated perspective on dreams that Sigmund Freud offered more than 100 years ago continues to linger in mid-21st Century life. Books about dreams have been filled with a list of dreams that provide a symbolic representation of sexuality. One can find a healthy dose of sexual symbolism in the many dream-symbol books found at the supermarket checkout line. The most commonly identified symbol is flying. I have suggested an alternative interpretation to flying in one of my previous essays (Bergquist, 2024).

Other more “obvious” symbols include dreams in which trains are entering or exiting a tunnel, a large flagpole is being erected or climbed, or a sword is being unsheathed and engaged in battle. Frank finds that he awakes with an erection when he has been dreaming about climbing a mountain, rowing a long thin boat (often in a race), or pulling hard on a rope that is attached to a horse he is trying to move into its stall. For Frank, sexuality seems to be related to physical action and specifically to the use of muscles in his loins. Obvious and not very symbolic!!

Other dreamers offer even more interesting and widely diverse symbolizations of sexuality. They may dream of an awakening Spring in which fauns are cavorting around the meadows (very Grecian!). Or the dream can be one in which a tornado sweeps one up in the air—only to fall into a land of beautiful witches. Or is this just a “perverted” version of the *Wizard of Oz*? Wait, maybe this movie is appealing to us because it actually is a sexual fantasy (with Dorothy coming of age sexually). Too much?? Too Freudian?? Probably.

Perhaps the most elaborate and creative symbolic expressions of sexuality are to be found in the dreams that Carl Jung and his Jungian colleagues write about and portray in pictures that they draw—see Carl Jung’s *Red Book* (Jung, 2009). In the realm of Jungian dream interpretation, sexuality is often portrayed in an image of unity (a mandala) or the joining of two primal forces (ying and yang) such as water and sky, or heaven and earth. For Frank, the dream of making love to a beautiful woman he meets on a foggy beach holds many archetypal images for a Jungian interpretation of dreams (Bergquist,2023b).

While all of these symbolic representations of sexuality play well to an audience of dream interpreters who never get much further than Dr. Freud’s coach, there are several alternative conceptions of what occurs with the expression of sexual desires in dreams. I offer two concepts that branch out from and refine a Freudian focus on sexuality and sexual repression. One of these concepts centers on a process called *Sublimation*, while the second concept centers on a process called *Secondary Autonomy*. I offer a brief exposition of these somewhat obscure terms and suggest how each concept might provide a somewhat different (and hopefully illuminating) perspective on sexuality and dreaming.

Sexuality and Sublimation

Many conceptual descendants of Sigmund Freud (including his daughter Anna) have focused on the defensive structures that come into play when dealing with potentially anxiety-provoking or threatening issues such as sexuality. These so-called “ego” psychologists focus on the adaptive functions served by our “psyche” rather than the more primitive impulses we encounter. Sublimation is one of these higher-order adaptive functions. This defensive mechanism is engaged when we displace our more “primitive” urge (such as sexuality) on an activity that is socially acceptable (such as providing a charitable act or engaging in a creative act). Dreams are wonderful venues for engaging in sublimation.

For Anna Freud, the sublimation process begins during childhood when we engage in play and fantasy in preparation for adult life. For example (A. Freud, 1966, p. 85):

. . . Dolls, besides being useful for all sorts of other games, create the fiction of motherhood, while railways, motors, and bricks not only serve to fulfill various wishes and provide opportunities for sublimation but produce in the minds of children the agreeable fantasy that they can control the world.

She later notes that the Ego uses sublimation to achieve “its purpose of diverting the instinctual impulses from their purely sexual goal to aims which society holds to be higher.” (A., Freud, 1966, p. 175).

George Vaillant offered a more recent summary of the sublimation process in conjunction with his longitudinal study of men adapting to life. According to Vaillant (1977/1998, p. 386), sublimation is:

Indirect or attenuated expression of instincts without either adverse consequences or marked loss of pleasure. It includes both expressing aggression through pleasurable games, sports, and hobbies; and romantic attenuation of instinctual expression during a real court-ship. Unlike humor, with sublimation "regression in the service of the ego" has real consequences. Unlike the case with "neurotic" defenses, with sublimation instincts are channeled rather than dammed or diverted. Successful artistic expression remains the classic example. In projection, one's feelings (e.g., anger) are attributed to another person. In displacement one's feelings are acknowledged as one's own, but are redirected toward a relatively insignificant object, often without satisfaction. In sublimation, feelings are acknowledged, modified, and directed toward a relatively significant person or goal so that modest instinctual satisfaction results.

Given these perspectives on sublimation as a “mature” defense, could some of our dreams make use of sublimation as a substitute for aggression—or even sexuality? On the one hand, we might dismiss sublimation as a process engaged in our dreams given that it involves an active though “indirect or attenuated” expression of some instinct. Just as children engage in play and fantasy, so as adults we often engage in playful activities. Johan Huizinger (2008) goes so far as to declare that human beings are deeply embedded in the desire to play (“*homo ludens*”). Our sublimated activities range from creative expression in the arts to altruistic caring for other people. We engage in waking life activities as a way to divert sexualized (or aggressive) energy to socially acceptable activities. We don’t engage in actual activities when we are dreaming.

On the other hand, like a child engaged in playful fantasy, we do “act” in our dreams—even if this activity is not “real” and does not result, as Vaillant notes, in actual “adverse” (or beneficial) consequences. In offering a summary of ego psychological perspectives, Greenberg and Mitchel (1983, p. 240) suggest that:

The use of imagery in fantasy may enable one to approach problems from a fresh perspective; it may suggest solutions that would not have resulted from more logical thought. . . . Fantasy can create an environmental “breathing space” from which one can return with new and creative adaptive possibilities.”

We might think of fantasy—and dreams—as producers of “pilot-tests” and “rehearsals.” Serving as “breathing spaces, fantasies and dreams enable us to try out alternative behaviors or test out a variety of solutions to real-life problems”—as we have noted when introducing the problem-solving function of dreams in other essays I have published in this series on dreams (Bergquist, 2023a). French and Fromm (1964) write about the essential role played by dreams in addressing lifelong focal conflicts, while Deirdre Barrett (2001) proposes that dreams serve as creative problem-solving committees. If dreams serve this vital problem-solving function, then sublimation might play a central role.

As Anna Freud suggests, it is through play (and perhaps dreams) that we meet the fundamental need to feel as a child or adult that we have some control over the world in which we live. We try out actions

while asleep that we can later engage in waking life. We can be a “better” person (as judged by our super ego and the society in which we live) if our dreams regarding sexuality (or aggression) involve the diversion of energy and behavior from directly meeting these primitive needs. We “test” out ways in which to interact with a sexually attractive colleague in a manner that is fulfilling but not sexual. We play a “rough and tumble” game but don’t try to wound or kill that person we are competing against whom we don’t really like in our waking life. It is in this sublimation that we not only find indirect satisfaction of primitive needs (as Vaillant states: “without loss of pleasure”) but also might fulfill just as strong a need for a sense of control in our life (Rotter, 1966; Bandura, 1997).

With this brief introduction to the world of sublimation, we can return to our examination of the dreams shared by my colleague, Frank. He reports many dreams during which he has done something wonderful with a woman in his life. He finds in his dream (and in real life) that he is attracted to women who are not just beautiful, but also skilled in planning for an upcoming meeting (in coordination with Frank), co-teaching with Frank in a college classroom, or simply taking a long walk with Frank on the sandy beach near Frank’s home.

Frank admits that he is hesitant to invite a woman colleague to the beach with him. It is too late in life to once again get emotionally involved. Furthermore, Frank is now retired—thus is no longer planning for meetings or teaching in a college classroom. The sublimation will have to be restricted to his dreams. Or is he using his dreams to “prepare for” engagement in a meaningful, perhaps even intimate, relationship with a woman? Ego Psychologists suggest that this “rehearsal” function being served by dreams can be highly adaptive.

Sexuality and Secondary Autonomy

Some Ego Psychologists go even further in their consideration of what might be called the “remnants” of sexuality in adult life. While sublimation is still considered to be driven by sexual drives—even though these drives are now being diverted in new directions—one group of Ego Psychologists propose that activities that were once driven indirectly by sexuality now have become functionally independent of the sexual drive.

Perhaps we can “go it alone” without sex leading the way. Heinz Hartmann, one of the principal theorists among the Ego Psychologists, writes about the Secondary Autonomy which is engaged by the maturing human being. When we are born and during the early years of life, our thoughts and behavior are aligned primarily with primitive drives—among which we find sexuality. Sigmund Freud’s Id is in charge. However, we also begin to develop and nurture reality-oriented and adaptation-oriented thoughts and behaviors. These are associated with Freud’s Ego. These emerging functions hold the attention of the Ego Psychologists – hence their name.

Many Ego functions operate independently of any conflict-laden zones as the child matures. Ego Psychologists suggest that basic cognitive functions such as perception, memory, and motility operate in this conflict-free zone (I tend to disagree with this assessment for these functions often are wrapped around primitive and deeply emotional forces). Obviously, those functions associated with Sexuality are NOT among those that are free of conflict. However, according to Heinz Hartmann, some functions that are highly charged in early life can begin to operate during our adult years in a manner that is independent of these primitive sources of energy. These functions gain Secondary Autonomy.

Ruth Monroe (1955, pp. 97-98) offers a clarifying description of this elusive process in her accounting of Hartmann's view of childhood development:

In his drive-connected relations with his parents or other significant adults, the infant develops types of behavior which then become important in themselves. He walks not only for fun but also for the increment of adult love that his new accomplishment calls forth. He masters the art of eating tidily and maintaining bowel control not only by virtue of his greater capacity for coordination but also in order to avoid the pain of parental disfavor. New patterns of behavior are thus built up in close relation to his instinctual trends and to the attitude of the parents toward them. Behavior patterns so established tend to be perpetuated beyond the situation which gave rise to them and to become elaborated in their own right. Thus, the habit of cleanliness, with a fear of any break in careful control, develops a *secondary autonomy* extending far beyond the nursery. It is "neutralized".

Monroe (1955, p. 98) also provides a clear accounting of the distinctive drawn by Hartmann between conflict-laden, conflict-free (primary autonomy) and post-conflict (secondary autonomy) behavior:

It is not easy for a child to forego defecating as he pleases in favor of a regime set by his parents, to eat "properly" when he is very hungry or when he is so little hungry that he would like to experiment with all sorts of new manipulatory and social techniques. In even the best-regulated household, such situations are conflict-laden for the child. They require complex organizations of behavior, with varying relationships between the autonomously developing patterns of the ego apparatuses and the instinctual drives to which they are necessarily connected. Hartmann's point is that organizational units constantly arise in the course of development which then tend to function autonomously. They arise in intimate connection with drive states. Although they employ ego apparatuses which tend to develop autonomously in their own right (primary autonomy), they have a special organization important in its own right.

We can apply Hartmann's notion of secondary autonomy to the dreams that Frank shared with me. Frank admits that he often sought to work with beautiful women during his early adult years because he had "lustful" thoughts about them. He had no intentions of luring them into the bedroom; however, he did find that the sexual energy he found in these relationships did "propel" him to high levels of performance and intense collaborative relationships with his female colleagues.

in some instances, Frank believes (or may know) that his female colleague was similarly attracted to him and found their working relationship to be not only enjoyable but also highly productive. This was sublimation in full force for Frank (and at times for his colleague). Frank was vaguely aware of the sublimation process (having read a few books on psychoanalytic theory) and knew this was motivating for him. Frank also knew that he had to retain strong boundaries with his attractive female colleague so that sublimation didn't turn into an actual bedroom encounter—which would inevitably be destructive to personal and professional relationship between Frank and his colleague.

Now, in his later years, the working relationships with all women (beautiful or not) tends to be enriching for Frank. Just as the child eventually finds walking to be enjoyable in its own right (regardless of their parent's approval), Frank finds his work with women to be particularly gratifying. He "loves" the unique perspectives that many of his female colleagues brings to their joint efforts. Furthermore, Frank acknowledges that many of the women with whom he works come to their collaborative relationship

with a considerably higher emotional I.Q. than he possesses. It is in this daytime transfer of energy from sex to collaboration that we find secondary autonomy operating in full force.

What seems to be operating in Frank's dreams? Is secondary autonomy also to be found in his nighttime events? I propose that this process operates in Frank's dreams. Here is one dream that Frank found to be particularly intriguing. He was sitting on a couch with his arm around the shoulder of a woman with whom he often works. This was a very tender moment that would usually turn into a sexual encounter in previous years.

This time, Frank's colleague began to cry. This crying would have been quite unusual in real life because his colleague is "strong-willed" and guarded in her display of any emotions (especially emotions that convey vulnerability). In the dream, Frank becomes a thoughtful and caring listener. His colleague speaks of her abusive childhood and of the recent death of her father—who had been the abuser. Frank could empathize with her (having been treated badly during his own childhood by a harsh and demanding mother).

Frank doesn't know if his colleague was actually abused as a child; however, he is now sensitive to her carefully guarded emotions. He listens attentively to her whenever she does share feelings (which has become more frequent). As I noted in a previous essay (Bergquist, 2023c), dreams can be a source of great insight regarding interpersonal relationships (cf. Fromm, 1951). This is particularly likely to be the case when a once-sexualized relationship in a dream is founded now on a considerate and caring search for mutual understanding and appreciation.

Frank has shared a second dream which seems to illustrate the presence of secondary autonomy. This is a more primitive dream than the one regarding tears and empathy. Frank often dreams of walking down a dark alley in a menacing section of a large city. He is fearful that he will be assaulted and robbed. His attention has typically focused on his own survival. In a recent dream, there is another person in the alley who is fearfully clinging to an alley wall and is trying to hide behind several trash cans. In this dream, Frank finds that he is no longer afraid but instead focuses on helping out the other person (who is a young woman).

In the past, this situation might have led Frank to become a hero—who eventually is rewarded by making love to the young woman. In this dream, Frank acts more like a caring father than a sexually charged warrior. He goes over to the young woman, offering words of assurance that he is not going to harm her. As in the case of his other dream, Frank puts his arm around the shoulder of this young woman and together they walk out of the alley and down several streets leading to the well-lit main street of this city. The young woman's parents are there to meet her. Frank bids them all goodbye.

Jungians would suggest that Frank has swapped the archetype of male savior for the archetype of caring and protecting father. Instead of charging as a knight on a white horse to swoop up the young damsel in distress, the all-knowing and all-caring father prevents the young damsel from getting into a distressing situation in the first place. This is an important shift for Frank. In the past, he often was tempted to play the (archetypal) role of heroic knight. Frank was attracted to women who were in trouble. His efforts to "save" these women (as a teacher or counselor) have often had strong sexual overtones. Strong boundaries have been established by Frank not only in relationships with beautiful colleagues but also with "needy" women. Now, he is pulled in his dreams to a "conflict-free" zone—or at least is attracted to a more constructive and age-appropriate caring-father archetype. In seeking to help the young

women without having any ulterior, sexually based motives, Frank dreamt of being genuinely helpful to another human being. His altruism was abundantly manifest.

Conclusions

There is one other matter that Frank brought up during our conversation regarding his dreams. Frank not only lost his wife several years ago, he also was diagnosed with a mild case of Prostate Cancer. While the cancer had not spread outside his Prostate Gland, he did have a P.S.A. (Prostate Specific Antigen) count of 11. Facing this rather high count, Frank had radiation treatment and received several injections of a drug which significantly reduced his production of testosterone. Frank's P.S.A. count is now well below 1.0. Frank, in essence, was "chemically castrated" (though none of his physicians ever used this term).

The remarkable thing reported by Frank is that he has rarely had a sexually oriented dream since being given the drug (and after completing radiation). It seems that testosterone is required for folks (at least men) to have not just an active sex life when awake but also an active sex life when asleep. Frank notes that he is more likely now to have a dream about helping out rather than making love to a woman. He dreams about snuggling up with a woman on his couch or simply walking hand-in-hand with a woman on that beach near his home. I would suggest that Frank's testosterone might have been replaced in his dreams (and perhaps in his waking life) by frequent production of oxytocin (which enhances bonding and nurturing functions).

Frank suggests that he might have become "a better man" since becoming less of a "sexual fiend." He is driven now more by his head and heart than by his loins. Together with a strong dose of sublimation and secondary autonomy, Frank's chemical castration has helped him change the content of his dreams--and perhaps some of his interpersonal relationships. His emotional I.Q. might have even moved up a notch with fewer sexual distractions. Frank is pleased with this transition in his life—though at times he still wishes that an occasional erection might be there when he wakes up after a dream!!!

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