# When I Grow Too Old to Dream

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There is an old American Standard song with words written by Oscar Hammerstein. It begins with the refrain, "When I grow too old to dream." This richly textured and memorable song concerns the memories that remain with us when we grow older. It suggests that we replace our dreams with the waking recall of former times and relationships – and a loving relationship in particular:

*When I grow too old to dream, I'll have you to remember*

However, we do continue to dream as we grow older. In fact, we spend most of our time when asleep in a state of sleep that is conducive to dreaming. I personally do an extensive amount of dreaming in my old age, and my aging colleagues report that they also recall many dreams during their older-age nights.

Some of this recall of dreams results from the frequent arousal during the night, with the frequent need to urinate or recover from sleep apnea (and the related snoring). We recall our dreams because we are frequently awakened during a time when we are dreaming. However, the lack of deep-level (stage three and four) sleep and the preponderance of "light" sleep (stages one and two), account for much of the increase in recalled dreams.

While many older adults report fewer dreams than was the case when they were younger, it might be a matter of the declining capacity to remember things during the day. If we don't recall the appointment that we scheduled three minutes ago, then we might also fail to recall the dream that we had just before waking up in the morning. There are also so-called "white dreams" – those that we recall having but that now are nothing more than a blank screen. These dreams are often reported during our senior years. Once again, this might be a matter of memory failing us concerning dreams, much as this cognitive function often fails us in old age when we try to retain information about dates, agreements, and even names during our waking hours.

## The Normal Dreams of Older People

As is the case with dreamers of all ages, the content of an older person's dreams is often dependent on the so-called "day residue." We are all inclined to process the events and interpersonal relationships of our previous day when we are dreaming (especially early at night). For older people, this might mean dreaming about events surrounding their health. Several years ago, when I was being treated with radiation for prostate cancer, I had several dreams about a large machine swirling around my head (replicating the experience of the radiation treatment I was receiving). Dreams regarding invading disease entities are common, as are dreams about meeting with our physician or physical therapist.

Dreams about people in our life are also common among older people, especially the significant people in our life. For most older adults, there is a decline in the number of people with whom they interact on a regular basis. This means that their interpersonal dreams are likely to focus on a few people in their life (unless the dream concerns someone they knew earlier in their life). Understandably, these interpersonal dreams often involve providing care for another person or receiving care from them.

There are also dreams that seem to convey something profound about the impending death of oneself or a significant person in one's life. While, as I noted in a previous essay in this series (Bergquist, 2023) the dreams of earlier adulthood often tend to focus on focal conflicts arising from earlier childhood experiences, the dreams of later adulthood might focus on existential matters of life's meaning or purposes, or the anticipation of death and its aftermath. One does not have to be religious in order to dream of heaven (or hell), nor does one have to be a churchgoer to dream of spiritual matters (such as an archetypal image of a divine presence radiating light or benevolence).

## Nostalgia and Dreams

While Oscar Hammerstein offered lyrics that were misleading about the absence of dreams in later adulthood, he might be identifying something important in his exploration of memories intertwined with or substituting for dreams:

> *When I grow too old to dream, your love will live in my heart.*

It does seem to be true that our daytime life when we are old tends to focus more on the past than the future. We often linger on memories of the past and are frequently nostalgic about that which is no longer in our life. With this shift from the future to the past, there might no longer be the need for recollections of the past in our dreams.

We might no longer need to fight old battles in our dreams (the focal conflict model I addressed in a previous essay), for we can now simply reflect on these battles without having to solve them. We no longer have to use our dreams to test out the resolution of daytime conflicts in our relationship with other people, because we are now interacting with fewer people each day. We no longer have to seek out passion in our relationship with a loved one; we can now simply savor this passion as it existed at a precious point in our waking life. Our dreams no longer have to provide an indirect expression of our sexual passion, for we have found a safe way during our waking hours to reflect on this passion in a dispassionate and often appreciative manner: "Ah, yes, I remember it well" (as sung by Maurice Chevalier in the movie "Gigi").

While this perspective on the replacement of dreams with nostalgia might hold some truth, I would also suggest that the interweaving of dreams and nostalgia might also occur. Our dreams might be filled with content that was aroused during the previous day when we were reflecting on past experiences. Those who speculate on the nature of dream content often talk about the inclusion of "day residue" in our dreams (especially early night dreams). What if the "day residue" is mostly about our memories of past events and relationships?

I would suggest, as I have done in previous essays in this series, that a process called "peremptory ideation" might be operating in the intertwining of dreams and memories. As George Klein (1967) has proposed, there might be an unconscious process operating in our psyche that relates to a specific theme (such as love, loss, intimacy, achievement, or forgiveness). Something triggers this theme (such as an especially gratifying or disturbing interaction with a loved one). We begin to reflect on this theme at the back of our mind. We begin to bring in old memories, lingering feelings, and both hopes and fears. I have related this ideational process to an avalanche. Both the avalanche and peremptory ideation pick up debris as they move forward. The ideation and avalanche are both "peremptory" in that they gather up new material without regard to other considerations, such as the weight of a stone picked up by the

coursing snow, or the "sensible" position of an idea when drawn into the powerful and expanding ideation.

I envision a train of ideation moving through the back of our mind. It picks up passengers as it passes through several sectors of our brain, especially our hippocampus (the source of many memories and a vehicle for emotional processing). This might often include passing through our amygdala (the source of many feelings), which resides in our limbic system, alongside the hippocampus. Most importantly, this train is likely to bypass the prefrontal cortex or at least selectively gather content from this regulatory sector of the brain. In traditional psychoanalytic terms, we might say that the "conductor" of this ideational train might be the Id, with the Ego being left at the train station, and the Superego only engaged occasionally as a breaking function.

While this notion of an ideational train is metaphoric, it does relate directly to various studies done by George Klein and his colleagues at New York University. Several of their studies were featured many years ago in *Science* and *the Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*. These studies involved what was identified as "subliminal perception" and featured in a best-selling book written by Vance Packard (xxx).

I would suggest that Klein's ideational train doesn't shut down when we are asleep. In fact, it might be most fully in operation during the nighttime hours when our conscious mind is not in operation. The ideations could appear in our dreams during the night. These ideations would include memories that have been picked up while the train is moving through the memory-filled sectors of our brain. Furthermore, the train is likely to pick up memories that we are savoring when awake. Furthermore, the train could be picking up passengers from our dreams.

This being the case, there could be a rich interweaving of memories and dreams during both our daytime and nighttime.

## Shift in Daytime and Dream Content

There is a fair amount of evidence suggesting that many of us tend to retreat at least a bit when we grow older. The Jungians would suggest that we become more introverted as we grow older. This certainly has been the case for me.

Related to this shift is a potential change in the content of our daytime life and our dreams. Do we leave behind our extraverted, externally oriented activities when we are awake, but still operate in an extraverted manner in our dreams? I have found this to be so in my own life and in the life of other people in my life who are also in the senior years of their life.

I wish to bring in a specific personality theory as a way to make sense of what is occurring. This theory is called the *Enneagram* (Palmer, 1991). It is only of the oldest and most respected ways in which to describe different personality types.

During most of my adult life, the Enneagram Seven best describes the way in which I have operated in my waking life. As an Enneagram Seven, I have spent my life dreaming of new ventures and often enacting them. I have been the optimist who sells ideas to other people and creates new programs. While at my core, I am Introverted and enjoy spending time alone (and creating new ideas in isolation (this being one of my faults), I have spent most of my life operating in an extraverted manner, bringing to life my dreams.

Now I am old. I find that my Introversion has kicked in full force. I now operate more out of an Enneagram Five position. I spend my time writing (such as this essay) rather than operating out in the world. However, my dreams are still filled with Enneagram Seven activities. I still dream of operating as president of the graduate school that I once led. I am still dreaming of new ideas and envisioning the enactment of new ventures.

I find this also to be the case with several of my colleagues. When we share the content of our dreams, I find that one of my colleagues retains his Enneagram Eight position that was prevalent in his life, as a leading figure of several organizations in Washington D.C. He was an Enneagram Eight "warrior" who fought many battles on the D.C. beltway. Now, in retirement, he has retreated to a position where Enneagram Six has become his primary waking perspective, while continuing to dream of battles in Washington, D.C. With an Enneagram Six perspective becoming dominant, my colleague is now deeply disturbed by what is occurring not only in Washington, D.C. but also elsewhere in the world. The evil forces have expanded in his vision of the world. Frustrated that he can no longer fight any of these forces, my colleague is often despairing of the world in which he is now living in his old age.

Another of my colleagues has also shifted her daytime and dreamtime perspectives – but in a manner that is less disturbing than it is for my former Washington D.C. leader. This second colleague has been a doer throughout her adult life, serving as an Enneagram Three. She produced a checklist each day and delights in completing it. As a highly productive contributor to the organizations with which she has worked, my colleague entered each day with considerable energy and determination. She is now retired and older. Her Enneagram Three primarily resides in her dreams. Many tasks are still being completed in her dreams – but not as many in her waking life. For this colleague, the shift is to Enneagram Five (as it has been for me). However, just as the theme in the content of my D.C. leader's daytime and dreamtime is still related to societal challenges, so is my book-reading colleague still focused on completing tasks. It is now the completion of many books each week, rather than completing tasks at her worksite.

If I think about what has remained the same for me in my daytime and dreamtime lives, I will have to admit that my daytime activities still have a "dreamy" character. I am now dreaming of new ideas that I put in essays (like this) that I have composed or in books that I write. I am still active in my life; however, this activity is more likely to occur in my brain than in my work with other people (except in the essays and books that I co-author).

Perhaps, we don't really change as we grow old. We just shift the platform. Perhaps, we are not too old to dream. We use the Dreamtime platform as a way to continue playing out our daytime perspectives and practices.

## A Jungian Perspective on the Dreams of Old People

Carl Jung (1974) had much to say about the dreams that appear in the lives of people during the second half of their life. While most psychologists and psychotherapists holding a psychodynamic perspective focus on the events of early life, Dr. Jung was among the first to consider the dynamics operating in later life to be just as interesting and informative as those occurring in childhood. Several of the most influential of Carl Jung's essays focus in particular on later adulthood (Jung, 1969). His own autobiographical account also includes late-life accounts as well as early life experiences (Jung, 1963).

What then would Carl Jung have to say about the dreams of late life? First, he would emphasize the role of ego integration during the last years of our life. For Jung, the dreams of old age often represent the

process of individuation. And the fusion of conscious and unconscious elements in our psyche. We focus during these last years, not only on new experiences and new learning about self, but also on the way the various conscious and unconscious elements of self are related to one another. Dreams during late life, therefore, are often concerned with bringing together diverse elements of our psyche. We dream of a wedding between two psychic entities that represent specific aspects of ourselves. Our dream involves a journey through several different lands that exemplify certain features in our personality—in particular, our feminine (*anima*) and masculine (*animus*) features.

The dreams of old age for Jung may also portray aspirations regarding the ideal of aging. A wise wizard or elderly woman of worldly wisdom might be present in the dreams to guide the dreamer on their journey to individuation. While most psychologists and therapists with a psychodynamic inclination view fundamental psychic conflicts in life (such as independence vs. dependence) as essentially remaining unresolved throughout life, Jungians often consider these conflicts to be resolved or at least reframed via the deeply creative and growth-directed processes of the self. Much of this integration of conflicting processes might be taking place in our dreams, as well as in the ways we re-process and re-envision memories from throughout our lifetime. For Jung, this journey of re-processing and re-envisioning is not only the key developmental task of late life. It is also fundamentally spiritual in nature.

## Hypnagogic and Hypnopompic States

The two semi-conscious states in which we dwell before (hypnagogic) and after (hypnopompic) episodes of sleep might play a more prominent role among older adult sleepers because they more frequently wake up and fall back to sleep during the night. Furthermore, the content of these two states might interplay with the rich memories and dreams of the older dreamer.

The peremptory ideational train might pass through the hypnagogic and hypnopompic states, picking up content from these states as well as adding content to the imagery and fantasies to be found in these two states. These states will often linger as we settle in for a long night of sleep and as we linger in bed before getting up in the morning. Some of the individuation that Carl Jung emphasizes might be taking place not just in our dreams but also in these twilight states—with the assistance of our ideational trains.

For instance, I am writing this essay in early December. My radio is awash with Christmas Carols. I recently fell asleep while listening to one of these carols. In my twilight/hypnagogic state, I began recalling events from my childhood that related to Christmas. Then, after I fell soundly asleep, I had a dream that related to my mother and her preparation of cookies for Christmas. My mother soon turned into a news broadcaster whom I admire. She was "serving up" some good news (which is rare today). I woke up after this dream and lingered for a while in a hypnopompic state. While in this state, I savored the positive feeling associated with my mother and with this broadcaster.

I soon realized that the broadcaster reminded me in some ways of my mother. I then recalled how I often felt when my broadcasters offered negative news (especially the death of someone I cared about in public life). I remembered my mother telling me that my grandfather had died. I was deeply disturbed when witnessing my mother's grief. My hypnopompic attention suddenly shifted to another time and place. I recalled the moment when Walter Cronkite, one of my other favorite broadcasters, reported on the death of President Kennedy. I found Walter's own grief (a hitch in his voice) to be disturbing. I

suddenly decided that it was time to wake up, having faced these disturbing memories from my past, as they swirled around my hypnopompic psyche.

I suspect that a positive ideational train was produced or at least enhanced by the Christmas Carol I heard before falling asleep, or a host of Christmas Carols that were playing when I was awake. The hypnagogic state that was engaged as I was falling asleep would have contributed to the ideation and led to the dream involving my mother and the broadcaster. The Christmas Carols, memories of Christmas, and dreams about a loving mother would have been stitched together by a positive affective tone that accompanied and perhaps helped to drive the ideational train.

During my post-sleep hypnopompic state, I experienced a car on my ideational train that was much less pleasant. I would speculate that our ideational trains grow much longer as we age. There are many more cars (themes, feelings, images, memories, etc.) that attach to the trains, leading to a much richer and more diverse set of emotions when we reflect on past experiences. We do indeed dream as we grow old. And the dreams are in full cinemascope!!!

## Ideational Trains and Christmas

Distinct memories of Christmas and other Holiday events often attend Ideational trains that are driven by emotions associated with this holiday season. I suggest that these ideational trains frequently play an important role in the creation of challenging psychological conditions for many older people during the December holidays. Christmastime dreams during our senior years are often filled with powerful, emotionally laden content and images. One need only reflect on the disturbing dreams of Ebenezer Scrooge, as portrayed in Charles Dickens' *Christmas Carol*. These dreams, along with the hypnagogic image of Ebenezer's ghostly business partner in chains, led to major revelations and reforms in this stingy man's life.

Many elderly adults commonly experience depression during this time of year when we are all supposed to be "jolly." The depression might relate to their spending the holiday alone or without cherished family members. Family members and friends who have passed away are remembered at this time of year. This depression might also be induced by nostalgia for the experiences of childhood Christmases. For some older people, depression might relate to early, challenging events that commonly occur in many families during the holidays.

All of this comes together with the deeper affective trail left by the ideational train that is traveling through our aging psyche. The passengers on this train would not only be the rich and abundant memories of childhood (producing nostalgia in us), the grieving for loved ones no longer with us, and the negative conditions from childhood of unfulfilled Holiday-related expectations (the gift not received, the joy not experienced). These emotional memories would exist alongside difficult family relationships that inevitably arise during our affectively heightened interactions with parents and siblings during this time of year.

## Conclusions

For many of us in our senior years, our ideational train is full during the Holiday season. This train is often full at other times of the year. Many passengers from our extended past are on board when we are dreaming during our older years. The train picks up riders (such as my favorite broadcaster) who are not directly related to a specific event in our life but are somehow related in our dreams to special

people and special events in our life. Like Ebeneezer Scrooge, we might find that our dreams during this time offer us rich insights regarding expectations and values in life. As Ebeneezer discovered, it is never too late to discover something new about ourselves, nor do we need to bypass the opportunity to become better human beings. Not only are we not too old to dream, we are not too old to learn and grow from our dreams (as well as our hypnagogic and hypnopompic states).

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