

On The Street of Dreams: Its Interface with Reality

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There was a popular song of the early 20th Century, called “On the Street of Dreams” that exemplifies the functions served by dreams in confronting the harsh realities, such as were found in the early 1930s (Great Depression) and early 1940s (World War II) in the United States:

Love laughs at a king,

Kings don't mean a thing on the street of dreams

Dreams broken in two can be made like new on the street of dreams

Gold, silver and gold

All you can hold's up there on a moonbeam

Poor, there ain't nobody poor

Long as love is sure on the street of dreams

In part, the lyrics to this popular song, composed in the midst of the American depression (1932-1933), suggest that dreams can provide a venue for denial of the bleak reality of life during this tragic moment in American history (“there ain’t nobody poor”). The lyrics to this song, sung by Bing Crosby and played by Ross Columbo, and Guy Lombardo, also offer an alternative to denial. One can find sufficient sustained support from other people (“long as love is sure”) to meet the challenges of the American Depression.

We find this song, sung by Frank Sinatra and the Ink Spots, once again emerging during the Second World War (1942), when a new set of challenges had to be met. We were encouraged to find love so that we “laugh at kings [such as Hitler or Moussalini].” It is by envisioning a better life in our dreams (“on a moonbeam”) that we can sustain a sense of hope and purpose in a world that is trying to pull us into despair, fear, and a sense of hopelessness.

In this concluding essay on dreams, I explore the interplay between our street of dreams and the real world in which we live. I begin by inquiring into the way our reality influences (and even sometimes determines) our dreams. While dream researchers have long known that content from our daily activities (often called “day residue”) can influence the content of dreams that come into our sleeping life during the following night, much of the attention among those studying dreams is devoted to those dreams that are not directly (or simply) reviewing activities and concerns of the previous day. Among these “more serious” dreams are those that seem to be related to stressful events and feelings of anxiety that were precipitated by activities and events of the previous day – or present time. I turn first to these dreams.

From Reality to Dreams I: Stress and Anxiety

While Sigmund Freud (1900/1990) originally wrote about the wish-fulfilling aspects of dream functioning, there appear to be many dreams that are addressing a much more immediate and basic function. They are addressing the impending threat that we have experienced prior to falling asleep.

Impending Threat

Many years ago, I was involved tangentially in a major study of stress and dreams. I helped to set up one of the first dream labs in the United States at the University of Oregon, in Eugene Oregon. This lab was under the supervision of Louis Breger and Les Davidson. A second temporary lab was set up at a hospital in Portland Oregon. This second lab was placed in this hospital so that patients waiting to undergo surgery

would graciously agree to have their dreams recorded before and after they were “going under the knife.” Specifically (Breger, Hunter and Lane, 1971, p. 101):

Five subjects scheduled to undergo major surgery were selected for intensive study by means of interviews, psychological tests, rating scales and behavioral observation. Their dreams were collected by EEG-REM methods on four consecutive nights before their operations and during a relatively less stressful three-day postoperative period.

What better occasion for studying the impact of waking life on dreams than to collect dreams when there is the impending threat of surgery. There is rarely an anticipated event that is potentially just as impactful. We will get injured from a fall or from a knife cutting our skin; however, these intrusive events are usually not anticipated; surgery, on the other hand, is an intrusive event that we choose in most instances to allow in our life. Breger, Hunter and Lane found that the dreams collected prior to elective surgery were often filled with imagery and themes that relate in some way to that which is about to occur. Furthermore, the dreams often displayed a unique way in which each of the people being studied were preparing unconsciously for the surgery.

Breger and his colleagues (Breger, Hunter and Lane, 1971, p. 178) offer these brief descriptions of distinctive dream strategies engaged by three of their subjects:

For Al, the impending operation represented the threat of reduced mobility and surrender to his desire to be taken care of. In his dreams these threats were symbolized by objects or people whose mobility was obstructed, and by themes which expressed conflict about being dependent on others. In Penny's case, the prospect of hospitalization and surgery aroused some fear of parental abandonment, and intensified her conflict about becoming independent. Accordingly, over half of her preoperative dreams depicted the main character in the act of leaving. In Melvin, the anticipation of surgery aroused neurotic fears of losing his strength, his masculinity, and his sources of nurturant support; and over half of his preoperative dreams contained references to losses-including the danger of objects or people losing their physical support and falling-and to bodily defects and inadequacies.

The three authors (Breger, Hunter and Lane, 1971, p. 178) went further in suggesting that:

The fears and conflicts symbolized in the dreams rarely appeared without an attempt to resolve or cope with them in some way. Each subject's attempts at defense in his dreams were consistent with his waking style. Attempts at solution were represented most clearly in the subject's interactions and roles as a dream character.

This finding is particularly noteworthy. These preliminary findings suggest that there is not an independent style of defense and coping that operates during the dream as compared to that operating during the daytime.

Between Day and Night

If we were to bring in French and Fromm's (1964) model of dream work as the dreamer's attempt to resolve focal conflicts in their life, then we might propose, given these surgery findings, that attempts during waking hours to address focal conflict might be similar in scope and character to the approach taken in one's dreams.

Breger, Hunter and Lane (1971, p. 179) expanded on this perspective:

The consistency with which each subject represented his fears and conflicts is seen in the recurrence of specific dream elements. Al's dreams contained high frequencies of defective objects, threats of blockage, water as a threat or discomfort, repair and construction, references to legs and feet, and acts of cutting. Melvin's dreams contained bodily defects and inadequacies, blockages, lost objects, acts of removing objects, and references to food and eating. Penny's dreams made reference to

defective objects, lost objects, acts of leaving, cutting, and references to food and eating. In all three subjects, the incorporation of these elements was more frequent in the preoperative period when the specific threat of surgery was greatest.

It is particularly interesting that the strongly repetitive themes are most often apparent in the subjects' preoperative settings, when the greatest stress exists. They are less often apparent in the post-operative settings where we can assume that stress is lower (Breger, Hunter and Lane, 1971, p. 179).

One of the most striking ways in which the preoperative stress seems to have affected dream content was in the repetition of elements and themes. The great majority of incorporated elements for the three subjects were repeated in a higher percentage of the pre- than of the postoperative dreams. Interestingly, this was true not only of stress-related incorporations, but of almost all the elements and themes in the preoperative dreams. The narrow range of symbols and themes had the general effect of constricting dream content. For example, four times during the preoperative period Penny had a dream which not only contained the same basic content as an immediately preceding one, but was actually a continuation of its activities and events. Such a sequence occurred only once in her postoperative dreams. This repetition and constriction of dreams when the dreamer is under stress is similar to the repetitive, frightening dreams reported by soldiers in battle conditions. It was just this kind of data that led Freud to the ideas of the repetition compulsion and the role of dreams in attempts at mastery of threatening experiences.

Perhaps this means that we are more likely to turn during our waking hours to themes that appear in our dreams when we are confronting focal conflict that are highly stressful. We approach and portray focal conflict with a repetitive set of themes and strategies. We find that the stress associated with confronting focal conflict during the nighttime and perhaps during the daytime is likely to precipitate the use of these themes and strategies. This suggests that there may be a reinforcing and accelerating relationship between stress, focal conflict and our repetitive engagement of specific themes and defensive strategies.

There is another important point made by Breger, Hunter and Lane (1979, p. 182) as related to addressing reality through use of dreams:

In general, the findings suggest that the amount of incorporation was related more to the level of emotional arousal than to the degree of preoccupation with surgery during the day: the dreams, rather than simply reflecting waking experience, seem to have dealt with unassimilated emotionally arousing information. For example, three subjects—Melvin, Penny, and Paul—had stressful experiences with drainage tubes for which they were not psychologically prepared. In each case the experience seems to have stimulated dreams which incorporated and dealt with the incident in a central way. In the dreams of all the subjects, the individual fears and conflicts are expressed in altered form. That is, the stress-related stimuli appear to be recoded, symbolized, displaced, or condensed so that their expression is at least one step removed from the primary source of stress. It is interesting, for example, that none of the subjects dreamt directly about surgery itself, and that there were generally more symbolic than direct incorporations.

Several important insights are contained in this summary statement. First, the stress associated with the “real” (awake) situation centered more on the emotions associated with situation than with the events occurring in this situation. It may be that we are stressed about our stress more than we are stressed about a threatening situation. We don't like the experience of feeling angry, frightened or confused. In preparation for a potentially threatening event (such as surgery), we may be more concerned about how we handle our emotions regarding this event than we are about the event itself.

Another important insight concerns the dream itself. Breger and his associates found that the surgery was not directly addressed; rather there were indirect associations with this event. This would seem to be in alignment with Freud's premise that dreams are mostly in the business of indirection and covering over potentially anxiety-provoking experiences—though Breger and his colleagues frame this function of dreams more as an assimilative process. Borrowing from Piaget (1923/2001), they thought of the dream as taking in outside experiences (such as impending surgery) and incorporating (assimilating) these experiences within existing frameworks, themes and strategies. Furthermore, while Freud was focused on the threat of sexual arousal, Breger's subjects were focusing on and assimilating the threat of the surgery—or the emotions associated with this impending intrusive event.

Assimilation and Testing

An additional insight offered by Breger and his colleagues (1971, p. 182) concerns another aspect of the assimilating process of dreams. They suggest that there is a broad representation in the subjects' dreams of feelings associated with the impending surgery. A recoding, transforming or assimilating process:

... is central to the adaptive function of dreams. The thoughts and feelings aroused by surgery are integrated with, or assimilated into, an organized network of memories. This process of assimilation not only transforms the stress stimuli into forms which are familiar to the dreamer, but opens up psychological means of coping with the threat. For example, in his dreams Al tackled the job of repairing damaged objects on his own, rather than having to depend helplessly on the skill of a surgeon to restore his mobility.

It is in this statement that the doorway is opened to the engagement of dream-related themes and strategies to the outside world. We "test out" the theme or strategy in the dream and then can engage it in addressing the real-world conflict—particularly if it is a long-enduring focal conflict (French and Fromm, 1964). Breger, Hunter and Lane (1971, p. 188) made the appearance of this doorway quite clear and critical to the adaptive function of dreams:

Dreams ... provide the possibility of integrating contemporary material into the adaptive "solutions" worked out in the past. This idea is central to our hypothesis concerning the integrative function of dreams. Consider, for example, the patterns of relating to other people that become established within the family. These patterns, together with their very important emotional effects, persist, and guide later relations with other people. ... It is not surprising that what our subjects dream about is ... in relationships with those others, past and present, that they feel strongly about.

It is at this point that the doorway is flung wide open, with the process of accommodation being linked with the process of assimilation (Breger, Hunter and Lane, 1971, p. 191):

But such assimilation, no matter how creative, will have no effect if dreams remain private; if they are not integrated into the person's waking conception of himself. In Piaget's terms, dreaming is "pure assimilation," which means it plays no role in adaptation to the world, since adaptation must always involve a balance between assimilation and accommodation. In psychoanalytic terms, we can speak of dreams as "pure regression," making essentially the same point as Piaget. Both pure assimilation and pure regression imply that something more must be done with dreams if they are to have an effect on the person's life. As dissociated fantasies which "come to the person" they may be interesting, but they remain essentially foreign intruders on the mind.

Our three authors bring this important conclusion back to the findings from their surgery study (as well as a related study regarding group therapy) (Breger, Hunter and Lane, 1971, p. 191):

Our experience with the subjects in both of the present studies confirms this view. Without work directed at integrating the dreams—at breaking down the dissociations that are present both in the dreaming and the reporting—the subjects do not learn anything about themselves. Just as one must work hard in the real world to transform a creative inspiration into a poem, a painting, or a piece of music or literature, so one must work hard at making individual sense of one's dreams if they are to be more than fleeting, uninformative glimpses of what is within.

It is with a similar commitment that I have offered my own set of studies regarding the nature and dynamics of dreams – as well as the broader functions served by sleep. Given the role of Louis Breger as my mentor (and later a teaching colleague at my graduate school), it is probably not surprising that for many years I have been interested in the way that reality not only influences our dream, but also our dreams, in turn, can influence reality.

Before leaving this matter of reality influencing dreams, I wish to offer a different perspective that concerns a more mundane (yet vital) function we serve in anticipating what will happen in our life (waking and sleeping).

From Reality to Dreams II: Crossing the Bridge via Anticipation

As sentient beings, we are blessed (and cursed) with the capacity to anticipate what is about to happen and then adjust our thoughts, feelings and actions in response to this anticipation (Bergquist, 2026). We live in the very near future (*homo futurus*). This means that we have the capacity to anticipate that which can actually do us harm and that which we only imagine will do us harm (Sapolsky's imagined lions). Our dreams provide a venue in which our anticipations can be dramatically visualized, and in which alternative responses to what is anticipated can be considered.

From Conscious Life to Dreams

We find that the capacity of humans to anticipate what is about to occur has evolved and been institutionalized in many contemporary enterprises, such as the insurance business and the “futures” market found at the stock market. In the case of insurance companies, concern must be directed not only to the anticipation of those working inside the company, but also the anticipation of the customers that these companies serve. Much as in the case of most modern organizations, those working in an insurance company will be highly motivated to work hard and will manifest high morale if they anticipate being treated well by others in the organization. Those leading the modern insurance company must also anticipate the level of positive and negative anticipation of their customers regarding their personal and collective future.

I mention this two-way focus of insurance companies because the committee of sleep that many of us convene every night often operates like a metaphoric insurance company (Barrett, 2001). Dreams represent both our conscious, real-life concerns about what we personally anticipate, and our concerns about the anticipations of people whom we care about and serve during our waking hours. For instance, many people report dreams that accurately predict something that soon occurs in their life—such as the death of a relative or their good luck in winning a lottery. Our dreams are filled with these anticipations.

On the one hand, Sigmund Freud believed that positive anticipations, which he called wish-fulfillment, play a foundational role in dreams. On the other hand, the imaginary lions identified by Robert Sapolsky exemplify the negative anticipations that are common in our life and dreams. We are attacked in our dreams by monsters, thieves, or witches. A large wave comes crashing through our home. Or, in our dreams, we are the “white knight” who saves our loved ones from harm. Or we are the powerless person who furtively watches our loved one being carried off by an evil figure. Our dreams truly operate as metaphoric insurance companies as we portray positive and negative anticipations coming to pass. And as we portray ways in which

we could confront these anticipations. Or how we feel about the impact that the anticipated future has on our loved ones as well as ourselves.

Specifically, we carry our anticipations with us as we fall asleep. Our early dreams at night often focus on these anticipations (concerns). Freud (1990/2010) considered this “day residue” to be extensively present in our dreams. However, this residue is to be ignored, for it serves as unimportant “noise” in the system (to use a term from communication theory) or as the “cover” for some underlying and unacceptable thought or feeling. However, other dream interpreters invite us to pay close attention to this day residue, filled with anticipatory hopes and fears. This residue provides us with important insights regarding the agenda for our transactional dreaming.

We attempt to solve problems in our dreams that arise from what we anticipate. Alternatively, our dreams yield scenes filled with Awe (Keltner, 2024) or Flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) because we anticipate that there will soon be an occasion in our real life for this kind of experience. Or we sadly anticipate that the opportunity for Awe or Flow will be passing us by, given that we must attend to other priorities or lack the money, strength or ability to avail ourselves of this experience.

Dreams are produced that lead us into consideration of transformations that we anticipate will occur, or at least hope will occur in our life. In our transformational dream, we “test-drive” the anticipated “new self” in our dream to see how it feels and how other people will react to this self. Our dream is concerned with the journey we are about to take in real-life as we confront anticipated barriers and enemies; the destination of this journey is often clouded in mystery or is only revealed once we are underway. Much as in the case of our real-life journey, we are not quite sure why we are beginning the journey and are not always confident that we have reached or ever could reach the desired endpoint. We anticipate confusion, misdirection, and discouragement when we are awake. These feelings are openly manifest in the misfortunes we encounter while on our journey. Hopefully, there is a portrayal of ultimate triumph at the end of our dream-generated journey.

From Unconscious Life to Dreams

Freud’s major interest in dreams comes from their own impenetrable barrier. Freud suggested that dreams are created primarily to deal with unconscious life of the dreamer. And for Freud, dreams are the royal road to the unconscious.

If we live into our near future through our anticipations regarding what is about to happen, then we might inquire into the determinants of this anticipation. The state of our body might determine, or at least influence, what we anticipate. We “feel in our guts” that something good is about to happen, or something bad resides just around the corner. Peter Sterling (2020) writes about our brain being in the business of anticipating what is about to happen in our body as it reacts to the outside world. We adjust our physiological baseline in response to this biological anticipation. He calls this Allostasis. It is certainly possible that what we psychologically anticipate from moment to moment is determined primarily by this allostatic process, or by the somatic template that sums up our physiological state at each moment. As Michael Polanyi (1969) has proposed, we are always attending from our body to whatever we anticipate, thus opening the door for the physiological determination of our anticipations.

It is also likely that what we anticipate is based on our “realistic” assessment of what is occurring out there in the world. We are indeed rational, thoughtful beings who attend to the outside environment and adapt our thoughts, feelings, and behavior to this environment. It is through what we anticipate that this adaptation occurs. I use the term, “Polystasis” to label this process of anticipation and adjustment (Bergquist, 2026).

These processes of Allostasis and Polystasis make sense in describing the way we operate each moment of our waking life. What then happens when we fall asleep? Our day residue might be filled with the remnant of

our daytime anticipations and adjustments; however, at night, there are ghosts, goblins and angels that come out of hiding to impact what we anticipate. This is where the Jungians can provide the most guidance. They write about mythic archetypes that bring new content and perspectives to our dreams (Jung, 1978). It is the introduction of themes and personifications from our deep (and potentially collective) unconscious that adds complexity and richness to the imagery of dreams that is associated with the day residue. Important insights can be gained from this new, expanded set of anticipations portrayed in our dreams. These insights might be concerned with our focal conflicts (French and Fromm, 1964) our interpersonal relationships (Fromm, 1951) or our competencies (White, 1959; Bergquist, 2024).

From Dreams to Reality

This is the interchange that is ultimately of greatest interest. In what ways, if any, does the content of our dreams influence our behavior when we are awake? There are multiple answers being offered to this question, ranging from dreams being unrelated to daily life to the content of dreams lingering in the “back of our minds” throughout the following day and influencing our behavior in profound, but often unacknowledged ways.

Before moving to this matter of daytime influence, I want to reflect briefly on a much more extreme version of the impact of dreams on daily life. This version is contained in a novel written by the noted Science Fiction writer, Ursula LeGuin. In *The Lathe of Heaven*, LeGuin (1971) describes the impact which one man’s dreams had on the entire world. As an homage to Philip K. Dick, another noted Science Fiction writer, LeGuin (1971) identified a reality that was constantly changing, though this change was not noticed by people living in this reality. For LeGuin reality shifted to match the content of one man’s dreams – this man being “George.” Hooked up to equipment like we used in Eugene and at the Portland hospital, George was being treated by Dr. Haber, a psychiatrist, and in having his dreams linked to the electronic equipment, George’s dreams became “effective”—having an impact on the real world. Soon, the world was changing radically as George wrestled in his dreams with nightmarish images. It is poignant to note that all of this took place in Portland, Oregon and was written at about the same time as our studies were done in Portland. Several people visited our temporary dream lab on the hill in Portland. One of these people might have been Ursula LeGuin . . .

On to the more mundane link of dreams to real reality . . . though nightmares aren’t very mundane.

Nightmares

These are among the most compelling manifestations of dreams having an impact on waking life. We are aroused in the middle of the night by a nightmare that leaves us sweating and hesitant to fall back asleep. We worry that the monster, massive wave or lurking murderer will return to our sleep and dreams. While we might not often remember our dreams in the morning, this nightmare is well-remembered. Or we at least knew that we were “frightened to death” by something that occurred during the night.

John Mack (1992) has written extensively about nightmares. He (1970, p. 16) declares that:

Nightmares are concerned with life-and-death matters. . . [T]he analysis of nightmares regularly leads us to the earliest, most profound, and inescapable anxieties and conflict to which human beings are subject: those involving destructive aggression, castration, separation and abandonment, devouring and being devoured, and fear regarding loss of identity and fusion with the mother.

If dreams are intended to satisfy some primitive wish, such as Freud (1900/1990) suggests, to resolve some core conflict in one’s life (French and Fromm, 1964), or simply to entertain us (Bergquist, 2022), then they are doing a lousy job when it comes to the production of nightmares. These horrific dreams are satisfying no wishes, solving no problems, or providing no entertainment (unless we consider horror movies to be “entertaining”). When it comes to nightmares, it is hard to even declare that dreams are merely a random

clustering of neutral firings. Nightmares are much too tightly knitted and much too compelling to be considered in any way “random.” As Mack declares, nightmares are about profound and inescapable anxieties and conflict that are masterfully crafted by our dream-maker “to scare the living (or not so-living) daylights out of us”.

Given these challenges associated with determining the function served (or not served) by nightmares, what might a theory of nightmares look like. John Mack offers several criteria. According to Mack (1970, pp. 205-206), any theory of nightmares must:

... take into account [the] fact that nightmares—or at least awakening from an apparently fearful hallucinatory experience—can occur in children of about one year of age whom the development of psychic structure has advanced very little. Also, it must explain how such severely disturbing dreams can take place, not only in emotionally disturbed individuals, but also in persons who otherwise appear to function well or give little or no evidence of being anxious, troubled, or especially “neurotic” during waking life. The theory must be consistent with the widespread occurrence of nightmares and therefore be applicable to persons of other cultures, including primitive societies, who seem to have no immunity from such disturbing dreams.

At this point, Mack (1970, p. 206) offers a particularly intriguing finding regarding non-REM sleep:

We need also to consider the fact that, unlike other dreams or mental phenomena that occur during sleep, the most severe nightmares seem to take place in non-REM periods rather than during REM periods, of which dreaming is regarded as more characteristic. Finally, our explanations must account for the fundamental clinical characteristics shared by nightmares at any age: the feelings of helplessness and powerlessness, the perception of severe danger, the overwhelming or life-and-death quality of anxiety and, finally, the threat or actual presence in the dream of violence and destructiveness.

In formulating his own theory of nightmares, Mack returns to the insights offered by Sigmund Freud later in his career. First, as Freud noted (and later ego psychologists confirmed), a child is confronted with ongoing anxiety while navigating a life with big people, big threats, and little ability to defend oneself. There is a strong sense of powerlessness that is only overcome later in life when the child becomes a competent (and BIG) adult. The nightmare might return the dreamer to this earlier, vulnerable state.

Mack (1970, p. 212) relates this childhood experience of powerlessness to the regression that may be occurring in our nightmares:

Ego-regression may contribute to the intensity of anxiety in nightmares and especially to the quality of utter helplessness that is usually experienced in those dreams. It appears as if, in the nightmare, the ego state that once accompanied childhood fears is revived along with the fears themselves. Thus, even the adult nightmare victim confronts his nemesis, not as the competent person he may actually have become, but as the small and helpless child surrounded by a world of large people and dangerous forces that he perceives in much the same way as he did the earlier period when they confronted him daily with his powerlessness.

Mack brings in a second important insight offered by Sigmund Freud. Freud (1936/1990) wrote about something he called “signal anxiety.” As adults, we become anxious when something in our life touches on a wish in our unconscious self that is unacceptable. Mack (1970, p. 211) puts it this way:

... small amount of anxiety under the control of the ego may act as a signal to prevent the development of a traumatic situation, in which there occurs anxiety of overwhelming proportions. . . This signal or sample anxiety given the ego the opportunity to avoid the danger situation or to bring

into play judgment, reality-testing, and various psychological defense that may help to prevent anxiety of overwhelming intensity from arising.

I like to say that anxiety is a splash of cold water on our face that is telling us to somehow avoid or get out of a situation where a “forbidden” impulse is lurking around or seeping up through our unconscious. As I have already noted, a process of peremptory ideation will be provided a little later in this essay that could account at least in part for the lurking or seeping source of threat. It may be that this signal anxiety is operating when we have a nightmare. Something unacceptable is threatening to appear while we are “unguarded” by our ego while we are asleep and inclined to offer dreams that, as Freud suggests, are directed toward the satisfaction of often primitive wishes.

We might even speculate that nightmares occur in non-REM sleep as a precursor to an emerging dream that contains content that is unacceptable. The non-REM nightmare “signals” the dreamer that adjustments should be made in the impending dream or it should be cancelled all together. While this speculation might be giving too much credit to ego functioning that could be monitoring dream production and content, it is also possible that this signal functioning is working during the night, given (as Freud suggests) that it is operating when we are awake.

We are left once again with an intriguing proposition: the processes of ego defense, symbolization, story creation, and anticipation may be operating both when we are awake and when we are asleep. The barrier that is often placed between waking and sleeping life might not exist. We now know that we are processing daytime memories when we are asleep (e.g. Luborsky and Shevrin, 1956); we might also be engaged in quite complex cognitive and affective processes while we are asleep. Along with this mature ego-functioning, we might be regressing cognitively and affectively in our dreams. Much as many ego psychologists write about regression in the service of the ego that occurs when we are being creative (Kris, 1953), our regression while dreaming might also ultimately be constructive, especially if monitored by the threat of nightmares, if the regression “gets out of hand”.

Pain and Growth

There is some further evidence of this potential regression in the service of the ego. The pain that is experienced in the dream can also lead us to new insights into our own needs, assumptions and fears, and to resulting growth and maturation of our psyche. I offer one of my own dreams as illustrative of this potential interplay between pain and growth:

I have had a long late-night dream in which I am teaching a course regarding personality theory – a course that I have actually often taught. In the middle of the course, which I was co-teaching, we broke into two groups. I took one of the groups and we began to share some of our personal life stories. The session went on for a long period of time, extending late into the evening. For some reason, in the middle of this extended session, my group got up and crossed a bridge. On the other side of the bridge, the session continued and got very intense. It took on the quality of a Black church service, with call and response.

In crossing over the bridge, it was as if we shifted to a different cultural setting. The dream shifted to the next morning, when both groups came back together to “debrief” what had occurred. The other group had remained rather “objective” and content centered. Some of the themes they addressed were identified. And then our group was to report out our “findings.” There was a long pause. Several members of my group simply indicated that it was a very intense session and that they felt uncomfortable sharing the personal nature of what was revealed during this session.

One member of my group who was African American, however, did reveal her very powerful story of her brother getting into trouble, and her own inability to help him. She expressed deep pain and sorrow in sitting back helpless as her brother sunk deeper into crime. She began to cry. Then several other members of my group shared some of their personal stories. I was pleased that they shared but also concerned about our evening session moving beyond the usual boundaries of a graduate course. I offered my own observations regarding what had occurred and spoke briefly about my students (and me) opening to varying extents during our long, evening session.

I mentioned the transition that seems to have occurred in the way our session took on the characteristics of an African American church services (I have had the opportunity to attend several services). I also mentioned that there were important personal insights gained from the sharing of painful personal experiences during this session. I woke up with a strong statement lingering in my mind: “There is pain that comes with any significant personal growth; and there is significant personal growth that comes with painful experiences in our life.” I spend a few minutes when first awake, reflecting on the painful experiences in my own life, what I have learned from these experiences and how I have “grown” from these experiences.

I suspect that many significant dreams in our life relate to this interplay between growth and pain. This is especially the case with transformation dreams. The journey within the dream inevitably contains hills to be climbed, evil forces to be confronted, and failures to be accepted and absorbed (allowing for new learning).

Untreated Pain and Dream of Helplessness

There are also dreams, unfortunately, where the pain does not seem to be growth-inducing. Rather, the dream leaves us in a state of helplessness. Once again, I can convey something about one of my recent dreams. As a background to this dream, I should note that I had just experienced very painful gout and have endured many incidents of intense (7-8 on pain scale) pain from the gout-inflicted toe. My gout sometimes occurs during the weekend. During the day before I had my dream, the Gout hit hard. It was Sunday when I called my primary care office.

The physician I spoke with couldn’t order the Prednisone I took to ease the pain without seeing me. I would have to wait until Monday. However, I could travel into town on Sunday and go to the Urgent Care center. I saw a nurse practitioner and she ordered the Prednisone. I picked up this medication and immediately took two pills (as prescribed). However, these pills do not relieve the pain; they only reduce the production of uric acid that forms crystals and get stuck in the toe’s joints, rimming the blood vessel—hence the pain. I “lived with” multiple episodes of the pain during the rest of the day and evening. I was told to take ibuprofen, but it did little to ease the pain.

I was frustrated, angry and feeling helpless when I went to bed and eventually fell asleep. I had the following dream about pain and helplessness:

The protagonist in this dream (was it me) was being harassed and injured by another person. The protagonist was a young man. The harasser even went to the extreme, cutting out the eyes of the protagonist. The protagonist was suddenly in an arena filled with many people. He was pleading with all the people in the arena to receive help and protection from the harasser. No one came forward to help him and protect him. The protagonist finally just found a seat next to someone he knew and broke down in tears. He seemed to be longing for someone very ‘Motherly’ to hold him and quiet his fears [powerful, Jungian archetype]. I then woke up in a sweat.

Is untreated pain a potentially important source of anxiety? Is the state of helplessness (Seligman) a result often of pain that is not treated? The answer is a qualified yes. We find in the history of pain that the absence

of pain is a strong goal and that patients will approve of almost any treatment plan if it leads to the absence of pain. In this regard, it is important to note that analgesics have been a major breakthrough in medicine (Morris, 1991). Pain could now be relieved. However, this meant that the agenda of the physician (who can use the pain as important diagnostic source) differs from the agenda of the patient (relief of pain). My own memories of going to hospital because of kidney stones (another uric acid-related highly painful medical problem) exemplify the pain-elimination priority. I immediately wanted relief from the intense pain when I entered the emergency ward of the hospital. However, the physician needed to hold off on the pain-relieving medication until they found out more about the source of the pain in my kidney and/or urethra.

My dream portrayed my frustration in rather dramatic terms. As in the case of findings from the Breger study of patients awaiting or recovering from surgery, my dream was concerned not directly with the pain. The dream was more closely aligned with my feelings about being in pain and with the seeming indifference of other people (particularly the physician) about my pain. I was regressing in my emotional state, looking for a “mothering” figure to eliminate my pain. In some ways, it ends up that the “mother” for me (and perhaps many other patients with Gout or kidney stones) was the painkiller I was taking. This certainly would seem to make my medications dangerous as a source of addiction.

Mood

I move on to other emotions as they relate to the interplay of dreams and reality. Obviously, our dreams will often impact our mood. In a recent study (Schredl and Göritz, 2026), 11 percent of participants indicated that remembered dreams influenced their mood. In many ways, we don’t have to be convinced by the research. After a joyful dream, many of us wake up ready to enjoy the day ahead and savor the special moments that await us. Conversely, after a dreadful dream or nightmare, many of us wake up anticipating a lousy day. Erich Fromm (1951) would suggest that we are inclined after a night of troubled sleep and painfully insightful dreams to view people we meet with a critical eye. We “see through them” and gain a better appreciation of the risks we lead in “hanging out” with them.

Dreams might set the day for a specific mid-set. We enter the day with specific anticipations that often trigger behavior which reinforces the mind-set and confirms predictions associated with this mind-set (called “self-fulfilling prophecies”). Dreams also set the stage for what some researchers call “brain wandering.” For instance, we might find that our daydreams are influenced by the previous night’s dreams. Daydreams, in turn, help to set or re-set our mood. Even more common are the passing thoughts and feelings that were triggered by the recalled dream—or even dreams that were not recalled. Later in this essay, I will suggest that “brain wandering” might, in turn, relate to a powerful ongoing intrapsychic process that I have introduced previously in this series of essays on dreams. This process is called “peremptory ideation.” In essence, how we feel and what we are thinking and imagining when we wake up, impacts our daily life.

It is also worth noting that the causal connection can move in the opposite direction. We can go to bed in a “bad mood” and wake up feeling much better. One or more dreams of the night might have provided some processing that positively impacted our waking mood. There is also the matter of mood being impacted not by the dream, but rather by our awake pondering and even interpreting the meaning of a dream we have recalled. Louis Breger (1961) emphasizes the difference between a dream and interpretation of the dream. What is done with dream material may have a greater impact on our daytime life than the dream itself.

Interpersonal Relationships

In one of my previous essays, I rely on Erich Fromm’s (1951) analysis of dream functions to suggest that dreams influence how we view and relate to other people (Bergquist, 2023). In this essay, I want to expand on this analysis by bringing in the concept of attribution and attribution errors (Jones, 1972). Substantial research on human perceptions of oneself and of other people suggest that we hold strong assumptions

about the “cause” of our own behavior and the behavior of other people. In some instances, we attribute the cause of behavior to internal motivations (or more generally one’s “personality” or “character”), while in other instances we attribute behavior to externally induced motivations (such as reward systems, societal norms and values, and perceived opportunities and threats).

I would suggest that dreams might play a role in determining attribution and that the influence of dreams is often unconscious but powerful. While there is an inclination on most of our parts to attribute our behavior to external forces, we might find that “empowering” dreams in which we find ourselves being able to “leap tall buildings with a single bound” or at least defeat our threatening enemies, leads to us feeling powerful during the day. Martin Seligman writes about “learned optimism (Seligman, 1991/2006) and a sense of hopefulness (and I would suggest “powerfulness”); these attitudes might be created or at least reinforced in our dreams.

Conversely, we might dream of being overwhelmed by someone in our life or somehow being vulnerable to the negative inclinations of another person. I remember dreaming of a colleague coming at my face with a sharp-edged knife. He was cutting my face, but in such a skillful manner that I didn’t even know I was being cut. I soon found that I was bleeding and was racing around looking for something to block the bleeding. I woke up. Soon I found myself being quite careful in relating to my colleague. I found that he was skillfully “cutting” me by offering faint praise and faint criticism. I would leave my meetings with him feeling terrible about myself but not knowing why. My dream taught me to be more aware of what was happening. I needed to “empower” my own sense of self and become more attuned to the destructive effect of my colleague’s behavior.

It is also important to note that our dreams can lead us astray regarding another person in our life. During our dream, we can readily regress and characterize one of our current friends in a manner that reminds us of a threatening or nurturing relationship that existed when we felt powerless as a child. There might be nothing more than a physical similarity between our current friend and our childhood acquaintance. Or they share similar speech mannerism or frequently offer a phrase that triggers strong responses in us (e.g. “I know you can do better.” or “I certainly don’t want you to take this in the wrong way.”).

Psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapist speak about the “transference” process, suggesting that their patients might transfer feelings onto them from a significant person in their life (often a parent). This “transference” might be much more commonly occurring in our life. Michael Polanyi (2009) writes about the tacit dimension that is to be found in all aspects of our life. We hold unconscious (tacit) perceptions of other people that come from a variety of sources that might relate only tangentially to that person. Some of these perceptions could be created in our dreams or reinforced in the way we play out and often distort their daytime behavior in our dreams. They become heroes or villains in the regressive way we portray them during our dreams, and in the way our committee of sleep and dreams judges their behavior.

Creative Tasks

In one of my previous essays on dreams, I referred to the writing of Dierdre Barrett (2001), who wrote about the way dreams can assist us in addressing everyday challenges and opportunities. Assembling what she describes as a “committee of sleep”, Barrett suggests that we can learn from a variety of dream characters and find that these characters provide both insights and guidance for us to employ when awake. I wish to re-introduce several concepts from earlier in this essay that help to exemplify or expand on the functions operating in Barrett’s committees.

Regression in the Service of the Ego: I have mentioned the notion of regression in the service of the ego as this process is related to the functioning of dreams. I also mentioned that this process is engaged when one seeks to be creative in producing something new (such as a painting or poem) or solving a pressing problem. We

also find that this process can be engaged when using dreams to be creative. Regression in dreams can take at least two different forms.

First, the dream can serve as an “inspiration” for some creative act. There might be a regression back in time, with the dreamer enacted a moment of creative success from their childhood. As already noted, we can feel quite powerless as a child and are likely to recall a moment when we painted something that our parents or teacher praised. Or we re-enact a short piece of theater that we wrote and presented at a school pageant. This moment is re-enacted in our dream as an adult. It encouraged us to move outside our “comfort zone” as an adult when seeking to be creative.

The inspirational dream might instead be regressive in terms of taking on a primitive form. The dream might contain an archetypal figure (such as Carl Jung would identify) who is all wise and powerful (Jung, 1978). It might be a wizard who can change the heavens or a Neptune-type figure who can create beautiful images by swirling the water around them. We are inspired by the actions of this figure to take on the task of being creative in solving a major organizational problem (our own heaven) or painting that abstract picture containing swirling colors.

Our dreams can also contain regressive content that later helps us be creative. Once again, our dream might return us to childhood and to our imagining a fairy god mother who brings us magical gifts. We wake up and decide to write a poem to our granddaughter that moves us far out of our comfort zone. Or our dream, once again, is regressive in its use of primitive forms. Our dream might contain one of Jung’s mandalas (circular image contains many colorful images) (Jung, 2009). When awake, we decide that our mental health patients would benefit from drawing their mandalas. We are being creative in our introduction of this new creative-producing process in our therapeutic practice.

Translation of Dream Content into Real-Life Planning and Action: We also can make use of a dream that represents something that is current rather than from our childhood and is quite realistic rather than being regressive in form. To illustrate this translating process, I will weave a fictitious tale about a man and his dream.

First, let me set the stage with some real-life facts. I live on the rugged Maine coast with my wife. We live across an inlet of the Atlantic Ocean from a building that for many years served as a quite successful restaurant, featuring Maine lobsters. While the owner of this restaurant was able to keep it open for more than twenty years, he faced a major problem each day. No water was available on the rocky ledge where his restaurant was located. He had to import water and served all his dishes on paper plates, with drinks served in paper or plastic cups, and utensils all being plastic and disposable.

Eventually, the owner ran out of his financial reserve. He had to sell some of the property surrounding his restaurant to a builder who constructed a seaside home on this property. Unfortunately, this meant that there was no longer sufficient parking space for customers. The restaurant closed and switched hands several times, as new owners grappled with the problem of no water and no parking. The latest owner, whom I will call Jim, was also struggling with plans for the use of this building. It had been sitting vacant for a long time and seemed to be of little value to anyone.

I begin to weave the fictitious tale regarding Jim, the most recent owner of the now-closed restaurant:

Jim decided one day to journey with his wife to Monhegan Island, a legendary artists colony off the coast of Maine [this island and its artistry does exist]. Jim spent several days on the island, observing many artists with their palettes and easels placed near the edge of the sea painting crashing waves, sea gulls, lobster boats and colorful sunrises and sunsets. Jim returned home and had a dream the first night back home.

Jim dreamed of being an artist himself, who set up his easel near the Monhegan cliffs. He was painting with great passion and was soon joined by his wife, several of his friends and then members of his own childhood family. They were also painting and talking with one another about art and life lessons. Jim was totally enthralled with the creative work being done and the richly textured conversations taking place.

Suddenly, the scene shifted to the building he had recently purchased. To his surprise, his wife, friends and family members were still painting. Their easels were now located in his vacant building. They were now painting from memory of their time on the Monhegan seashore. Jim found that his own easel and palette were awaiting him. He began to paint a picture of a Monhegan oceanside crevice where the sea was swirling about. Jim then woke up.

Almost immediately, Jim began to imagine turning his restaurant into a set of studios where local artists could work and sell their wares. Many artists reside in my Maine village. Most of them work out of their homes. Jim could bring them together so that they might interact with one another (as in the dream) and so that they could readily sell their finished work in a highly visible collective setting. And there would not be the problem of limited water (no meals to serve!) and the parking would not be a problem since there would only be the artists and occasional visitors.

This is where the fiction ends and reality returns. The actual restaurant was recently turned into a set of studios for artists, an art gallery, and a public space for the offering of workshops and art-related educational events. While I imagined the dream, this whole narrative emerged for me in one of my own dreams and in a set of hypnagogic (waking) images I had that I was able to assemble into this fictitious narrative.

I wish to highlight several aspects of this narrative that are not fictitious. First, the transformative process is common in dreams. The critical shift of settings from Monhegan to Jim's building exemplifies a frequent dynamic taking place in dreams. I would suggest that these transformations often signal the emergence of an important insight or moment of guidance. Using Barrett's metaphor, the committee is convened and is about to "get down to business."

Second, I suggest that the selection of people to serve on the committee is important. Jim chose to bring his wife, friends and childhood family members to Monhegan and then to his building. His committee was composed of people he trusted. This trust might be critical to Jim's decision to take on the challenge of "thinking [and envisioning] outside the box" when considering setting up a collective art studio rather than a restaurant.

Third, Jim saw himself doing some of the creative work. While he would not have a place himself at the studio he envisioned, Jim could conceive of himself as being highly creative in re-inventing the restaurant as a collective studio, and in envisioning not just a gallery where paintings were sold, but also a series of workshops and educational events that would benefit his Maine community in additional ways.

The studios of the newly re-envisioned building are already filled, the art gallery opened last week to great acclaim, and the first set of workshops are planned for this Fall (after the tourists leave). Whether or not there was a Monhegan-based dream, a dream-like envisioning of this buildings' owner has produced something that is the creative rendition of a creative "play space". It seems that dreams are often "play spaces" (Winnicott, 1971) for dreamers who are faced with difficult decisions regarding such matters as use of a vacant building standing on a rocky Maine seashore.

Play Space: I find that I often use my dreams as play spaces where I am working on a task—such as writing or preparing a lecture. Sometimes, I am fortunate. The task I engage in the "play space" of my dream is related to the "non-playful" task in which I am engaged when awake. For instance, my dream about Jim's experience

on Monhegan Island turned into the narrative I offer in this essay. I often get ideas for a book or essay I am writing from the fertile and “wide-open” play spaces that are created in my dreams.

Unfortunately, sometimes my play space work ends up being unrelated to the task I am facing when I am awake. When awake, I must acknowledge that the “important” task in which I am engaged in a dream has no base in Reality. For example, I wake up with great idea for a book I am writing and then realize that I am not writing this book! Or I do extensive editing of a section of manuscript, only to wake up realizing that this manuscript doesn’t exist in the waking world.

It is interesting for me to note that my dreams that are most “playful” tend to relate to real life projects, while the more “serious” work I do in my dreams tend to be of no consequence and little relevance to my actual daytime interests and commitments. I suspect that my “serious”/meaningless dream-based tasks are in the business of teaching me that I sometimes take myself and my projects too seriously. I need to “relax” and enjoy the process—perhaps like Jim hopes will occur in the art studios he has established. Hopefully, these studios will be “play spaces,” Just as the office where I write books will continue to serve as a “play space” for me.

Imagery and Cognition

I wish to push the matter of dream-functioning a bit further and in doing so will be turning as I have in other essays in this series to psychoanalytically oriented research conducted by George Klein at New York University. In one of his many essays, Klein (1967) introduced an interesting concept regarding the dynamic unconscious processes operating deep in our psyche. He described a process called Peremptory Ideation that I have suggested in several essays may relate to the nature and content of our dreams.

As I have mentioned, Klein proposed that in our internal world (psyche), we create a specific idea or image that begins to “travel” around our psyche (head and heart). It operates as a strange attractor, recruiting thoughts, feelings and behaviors as it courses through our psyche. This train, which is already filled with ideas and images, picks up fragments of unconsciously held material (memories, feelings, and thoughts) along the way. The ideational train operates much like the avalanche, pothole, and other forms of “strange attractors”. The train becomes increasingly rich and emotionally powerful as it picks up new intra-psyche material. It gains increasing energy from this unconscious material.

At some point, this ideation begins to pull in material from outside the psyche. External events suddenly take on greater saliency (more emotional power and vividness). This may be a point when our objects of value gain even greater saliency, for they are aligned with and are picked up by the moving psychic train. Klein suggested that this ideation takes priority when valuing, attending, and remembering in the external world. It assumes a commanding (“peremptory”) presence.

A positive (reinforcing) loop is created, with the external material now joining the interior material. They all cluster around the original (often primitive) ideation. Vibrance is to be found in their clustering. There is a strong pull—a strange attractor—that leads to patterning of our behavior. As the train travels once again to a specific unconscious place, it will pull for specific behavior in our waking life, thus adding to the repetition of behavior, hopes, and fears. Furthermore, there is good reason to believe that our dreams participate in this ideational process. The dream content may hitch a ride on the train or even at times gets the train moving with some deeply motivating image in the dream serving as a trigger point.

Catching the Train: While Klein focused on the internal dynamics of peremptory ideation, I propose that this internal ideation might align with an external ideation arising from challenges in our life—these challenges are often related to dilemmas and polarities that we encounter. We can envision the internal ideation “hooking

on” to the ideological “train” passing by us from an external source. We hitch our thoughts and emotions to an outside train. Irrational and anxiety-saturated external ideation can be particularly attractive, given that this internal ideation is likely to be quite primitive (often taking on a “haunting” presence). The internal ideation may be “haunted” by ghosts and goblins of Regret, Loss, and Anger from childhood and early adulthood. The external ideation contributes to the content of our dreams, as does the internal ideation.

Some of our committee members might hitch a ride on this train when we are asleep. This means that members of our committee of sleep might be just as biased and just as “haunted” as those influencing and even guiding our daytime actions. This can also mean, however, that our committee members can be particularly thoughtful about the “haunting” (fears and biases) and can teach us, through the content of our dreams, about the nature of this haunting and about ways to get beyond the fears and biases. However, the challenge of discernment might be quite great for members of the committee, for we may be haunted, in addition, by a collective unconscious inherited from our ancestors and culture.

It can be traumatizing when the train is drawing in the peremptory ideation of many people. We find that there are many societies in which there is a history of collective regret, loss and anger (slavery, war, ostracism, etc.). These collective, unconsciously held regrets, losses and experiences of anger produce what is now called the “social unconscious” (Hopper and Weinberg, 2019). Members of this traumatized society held a common set of troubling images.

A colleague of mine in Israel, for instance, reports on common themes related to the holocaust that appear repeatedly in the dreams of Israeli citizens. Israelis and members of other traumatized societies often report stressful dreams related to loss. Feelings of anger are easily triggered by events that produce nothing more than mild stress in the citizens of many other societies. With this powerful alignment of internal and external material, we become victims of personal and collective peremptory ideation both in our dreams and in our waking life. This new unconscious coalition demands attention. We are obsessed, closed-minded, passionate, and regretful. Sometimes, we are driven to action.

Anxious Passengers: Collective emotions (such as loss, sorrow and regret) can escalate collectively engaged peremptory ideation. Everyone on the train (including committee members) is uneasy about what is happening in society or what has occurred in the past. Racism, prejudice and attendant violence loom big and often unacknowledged in American societies (Weitz and Bergquist, 2024). The anxiety associated with strong emotions can, in turn, be produced by and can escalate the loss of confidence in a chosen leader or by mild public protests regarding some social ordinance. It might very well be that the “social unconscious” material appears in our internal peremptory ideation. This being the case, one can imagine that an ideational train carries or is at least aligned with external images—such as one’s impressions of a leader or a public protest.

A “perfect” storm of prejudice, intolerance, fear of the “other,” and (eventually) violence is created (Weitz and Bergquist, 2024). This is where the alignment of Freudian psychology with Marxism through the Frankfurt School comes to the surface. We find the work of this school manifested in the major American studies of authoritarianism (Adorno, et al, 1950/1964) and in the critical review of American society offered by Erich Fromm (1955). Above all, the societal criticisms offered by those of the Frankfurt School provide us with potential reasons to be anxious personally and collectively. We are given good reasons to worry about our political future and our potential loss of true freedom (Bergquist, Weitz and Pomerantz, 2026).

One final point. It is more likely that this ideational train will be fully operational and pulling on external images when we are tired and overwhelmed. Such a state is not uncommon when living in what several social observers have identified as the conditions of exhaustion (Newport, 2016; Stoycheva, 2022). We step on board the train in an anxious and fatigued condition. We soon find that the train is filled with passengers who

match our anxiety and fatigue. They also hold an often-unacknowledged feeling of regret regarding their personal life as well as their collective life. Together, we create and maintain even more bizarre fictional accounts of the menacing world in which we now live and work. These accounts appear and are amplified in our dreams. It is from these often-challenging dreams that we can learn individually and collectively about not only the nature of the perils we face but also the potential pathways to a world that has successfully confronted these perils.

Across a Collateral Chasm

As we have explored dreams from many perspectives in this series of essays, it has become clear, at least to me, that dreams are a very special invention of the human psychic. Dreams are not only, as Sigmund Freud proposed, the royal road to the unconscious; they are also the precious pathway to another world—another reality from which we can gather great insights and guidance toward finding or constructing a viable pathway in our waking life.

Collateral Status

Specifically, we should consider our dreams, and more generally our hours of sleep, to be “collateral” to the world in which we live when awake. Our sleep/dream world operates by quite different principles than our waking world. As Freud himself first observed, dreams don’t obey the decorum of the “civilized” world and certainly mess around with all rules associated with an orderly and stable reality. In some civilizations, the collateral life of sleep and dreams has been considered just as important and just as real as the life we live when awake. As in the case of collateral organizations (Zand, 1974) where new ideas can be discussed and tested, the collateral life of sleep and dreams can provide an invaluable venue for exploration, testing and growth.

How, then, might a venue for exploration, testing and growth be established. First, there is the matter of acknowledging that communication can be engaged between these two worlds, and that a new, integrative reality can emerge from this communication. Harry Stack Sullivan (1953) suggests that we create an evolving sense of self from our interaction with other people. Our sense of self differs when interacting with each person we meet. Leslie Brothers (2001) moves even further in suggesting that we create a distinctive, new reality as we relate to one another. For Atwood and Stolorow (1979/1993) this amounts to an intersubjectivity, with our sense of self and reality being defined within a specific set of interpersonal relationships and social settings. I would propose that there is another form of intersubjectivity that exists when our dream/sleep world interacts with our awake world.

Intersubjectivity and Dialogue

Atwood and Stolorow suggest that there is no “real” objectivity in our waking world, because with intersubjectivity the observer of their world becomes the observed. For Atwood and Stolorow (1979/1993. P. 189) “human experience is always embedded in an irreducible engagement with others.” Furthermore, there is an “essential inseparability of the psychological investigator from the worlds of experience he investigates.” Most importantly, “every individual’s personal reality is subjectively and historically shaped . . . therefore no one’s personal reality is inherently more true or valid than another’s.” Each human being holds their own reality tightly in their head and heart; no one is “objective” or knowing of any fundamental principles of human behavior or the reality of the physical world and multiple societies in which we all live.

On behalf of discovering or creating a dialogue between the two collateral worlds, I propose that it is not only that our awake world is primarily constructed by the society in which we live (Berger and Luchmann, 1967) and that we can’t objectively observe this world that has been constructed for us. I would similarly propose

that a new world integrating the two collateral worlds of awake and asleep/dream cannot be independently observed. For, once again, the observer of these two worlds is living in and experiences both worlds. The observer is being observed. The dialogue between these two worlds is inherently embedded in an intersubjective awareness that an integrative reality involving both worlds is always a construction that increases understanding rather than a validation process that confirms some “truth.”

Furthermore, it is important to affirm that we can’t dismiss our sleep/dream world as somehow “less” than our world when we are awake. For our total experience in life contains both worlds. We are “real” in both our dreams and the place where we work when awake. Our relationships with real and fictitious people are just as “real” and impactful as our relationship with a loved one when we are awake.

Conclusions

A dialogue that can take place between these two “real” worlds is, indeed, an invaluable source of exploration, testing and growth. As emphasized by ego psychologists, the fundamental point to be made here is that dreams can be of great value, even critical, in the adaptation to a constantly changing environment. As Breger, Hunter, and Lane (1971, p. 188) note, dreams “provide the possibility of integrating contemporary material into . . . adaptive ‘solutions’.” This use of dreams to integrate adaptive solutions is critical in our mid-21st-century environment, where constant change is intertwined with volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, turbulence, and contradiction (Bergquist, 2026).

Under these challenging VUCA-Plus conditions, adaptivity requires an agility (“dancing between the raindrops”) that is fortified by clarity and purpose. It is in the venue of dreams that we can find a safe place (a “play space”) for the exploration and envisioning of ways in which agility with clarity and purpose can be achieved. It is in the dynamic intersubjectivity of the conversation across a collateral chasm that we find a valid pathway to a fully integrated world of multiple realities.

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