

Dreams

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Dreams are a common phenomenon that occur every night, yet we know very little about them on a scientific, cultural, and spiritual level. We are creatures of evolution; therefore all of our characteristics are what enable us to have a better chance of survival than someone without them. Then why do we dream? Surely it would seem more legitimate for our brains to almost completely shut down during the night to save energy. Yet they do the complete opposite. Our brains are actually more active in certain parts of our sleep patterns than when we are awake. We have also evolved a method to paralyze our body so that we don't hurt ourselves when we dream. So why would our species, and many other species, evolve methods that make it capable for them to have vivid hallucinations when they are unconscious? Could they help us survive, give hints to future events, or possibly have a connection to a supernatural realm? The one thing that dreams do show us that we can be sure of is how little we know about ourselves, as spiritual and physical beings. I believe dreams to be the holy grail of creativity because you are not bound by reason. I think that just as we use some parts of our brain and not others while we are awake and conscious, we use some parts of our brains and not others while we are asleep, causing us to perceive, process and see things differently.

Where do dreams manifest? Surely this is the first step in understanding them. We do know that they have something to do with the occipital lobe, which is located in the very back of the brain. This is the area of our brain where our visual signals are sent to be arranged into an image. What is significant about this is that people who have experienced a stroke and suffered damage to this region of the brain report lacking the ability to dream. This didn't seem realistic until a scientist named Mark Solms investigated this phenomenon in stroke patients further, and to his amazement he found that these rare few had lost the ability to dream.¹ As scary as it sounds to lose the ability to dream for the rest of your life, this is a stepping-stone into understanding where dreams come from. Personally I think that it would be obvious that the occipital lobe is in use during dreaming because dreaming is a visual hallucination, as well as audible, which includes the use of your cerebral cortex.

Even though your brain is active during sleep, that doesn't mean that all of it is. During sleep your prefrontal cortex almost completely shuts down, which is where your conscious decision-making takes place. If the prefrontal cortex fails to shut off during sleep or for some reason becomes active during sleep, the dreamer would most likely experience a lucid dream. A lucid dream is a dream when the dreamer becomes, or has been aware that they are asleep in a dream state, giving them the ability to make decisions and have partial, or complete control of their dream. Since most of the time the prefrontal cortex shuts down during sleep your subconscious mind is able to run free without your conscious mind questioning why there is a floating crab octopus in the room.

From personal experience I have had an array of dream significance, from spiritual revelation, to literally eating a sandwich—just a sandwich, nothing else, and waking up. The lack of consistency in dreams only furthers the illusiveness of their cause making them more mysterious and questionable. It has been hypothesized that dreams create practice scenarios so that if we were caught in one of those scenarios in the wild we would be able to respond with some knowledge of how to survive.² This in theory sounds correct, and could be backed up by having a role in survival, which in turn caused us to evolve to dream. But then why have I dreamed of eating a sandwich? Surely eating a sandwich is not a life-threatening scenario that I would encounter.

¹ "What Are Dreams?" *PBS*. PBS, n.d. Web. 13 May 2014.

² *Ibid.*

Sigmund Freud rekindled people's fascination in dreams and dream interpretation in the 19th Century. He believed that in order for humans to have a modern civilization, we must suppress many of our "primal desires," and the only way for these "primal desires" to be released was through dreams, where our unconscious mind could roam free without question or judgment from others, or ourselves. We have all heard the belief that dreams predict the future, unfortunately in our modern time science is completely disconnected from spirituality, meaning that everything that we do must have a scientific purpose and explanation, and perhaps this is why we know so little about dreams and the brain in general.

From what we know so far about dreams, which is by no means the full picture, dreams are created by the subconscious mind which is "psychic activity just below the level of consciousness,"³ or a part of brain activity that acts independently from your conscious mind and decisions. During sleep our body goes into sleep paralysis—that is when our body becomes paralyzed during sleep. This happens every night and is the natural way that our bodies fall asleep. What is interesting about this is that our brains actually go into sleep separately from our bodies. Our body does not know when our consciousness has gone to sleep, so it sends signals. If you have ever been lying down or even sitting still for a long enough period of time you have probably felt these signals. They are impulses telling you to roll on your side, cross your legs, cross your arms, wiggle your toes, or scratch your face. All of these are tests that your body sends to your mind. If you respond to any of these tests by crossing your legs or rolling on your side your body will know that you are still awake and it too will remain "awake." If you do not respond to these signals because you are asleep or doing a meditation that involves ignoring these signals then your body will paralyze itself. This meditation practice is recommended to people who are new to lucid dreaming and astral projection, because it allows your consciousness to disconnect from your body, making transitions into other frequencies of consciousness easier—which if you are not ready can be a terrifying experience. Not only is sleep paralysis scary because you cannot move, but your body has evolved to make it difficult for you to consciously stay awake and let your body fall asleep. The terror aspect of sleep paralysis is what I believe to be another method of your body checking that your mind is asleep. The problem with sleep paralysis is that since you are paralyzed you physically cannot respond to any signals that your body sends to your mind. Terror induced from sleep paralysis could also be due to the fact that you are still somewhat in a dream state when you are in sleep paralysis. I once had a dream that I woke up and there was a spider descending from its web to my face so I threw my pillow at it. Then I woke up in sleep paralysis still thinking that there was a spider descending towards my face, and I was trying to grab my pillow to hit it but I could not move. It was not until I slowly came out of sleep paralysis and was able to open my eyes that I realized there was no spider and I had been in sleep paralysis.

Once your mind is asleep and your body is paralyzed you will go through your sleep patterns. Your sleep patterns are different stages of sleep accompanied by a unique brain frequency for each of these stages. The final stage of sleep is REM sleep, or rapid eye movements, because during this stage of your sleep cycle your eyes move rapidly. During REM sleep your subconscious uses schema to create your dreamscape. Schema is knowledge and

³ "WordNet Search - 3.1." *WordNet Search - 3.1*. N.p., n.d. Web. 02 May 2014.

experience of the world that you have built up and stored in your mind.⁴ Schema really show the limitations of our mind, and how it cannot create anything that is not based off of what we have already seen or experienced. A depressing thought really, to think that our minds are so limited that we can create nothing completely original, but if you don't believe me try thinking of a color that you have never seen before. So your subconscious uses schema, your cerebral cortex adds sound, your occipital lobe adds visuals, and bam—you got yourself a realistic hallucination of a floating crab octopus while your body is unconscious and paralyzed.

Dream interpretation was practiced religiously in many cultures. In modern times it is not believed to have any scientific significance, but that does not mean that it is any less interesting or significant. Freud believed that all dreams and everything in every dream was an interpretation of suppressed sexual desires. In Tibet dream interpretation is an important aspect of medicine and mental training. It has been practiced since ancient times and is both scientific and spiritual. Tantra (a style of meditation and ritual) believed that dreams were an illusion similar to the Bardo state, which was believed to be a state of consciousness experienced after death up until the point of reincarnation.⁵ In this state the mind sees memories of its previous life, and tries to interact with family and work, because it is so difficult for consciousness to realize when death occurs. This is similar to dreams because maintaining consciousness into a dream state (thus inducing a lucid dream), is similar to maintaining consciousness when transitioning into the Bardo state. This is why it is so important to be conscious in the moment and always question your superiors and surroundings. Most of the time in our modern culture we are forced to rush and always think about what is coming next, without the privilege to stop and question what is it that you are doing in the moment. Because of the similarities between the dream state and the Bardo state Tibetan practitioners use dreams as practice in what is called dream yoga, to recognize illusionary states for what they are and prepare for the realization of death at the moment that it happens.

There are no scientific studies or research that support the idea that dreams connect us to a higher spiritual plane. Only by observing and meditating on your dreams can you answer the question for yourself. I have one dream that is very personal and dear to me that I had when I was very young.

I was on a beach and it was sunset, and I was holding a gold statue of Ganesh. It didn't have any weight and it felt like a part of me. I immersed it underwater and let it go. I couldn't see the statue anymore but I could see its golden shine through the translucently light blue water. Its gold light started to be pulled out into the ocean by the tide. I was suddenly scared, not ready to let go of the statue yet. I ran out into the ocean after it until I ran into a invisible wall of energy that wouldn't let me go any further. I watched as its golden light moved farther and farther away until it went over the horizon along with the sun.

I remember trying to describe this dream to my mom, but she could not understand, probably because I could not have been older then four. It was not until I saw a figurine of Ganesh that I pointed him out and told my mom that it was the same statue that was in my dream. Even though I had this dream at least 13 years ago I still feel the same anxiety that I felt in it when I recall it. To me this dream has spiritual and even religious connotation, considering that I knew nothing

⁴ "How Are Dreams Created?" *Infinite Minds*. N.p., n.d. Web. 25 Apr. 2014.

⁵ Tantra." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 21 Apr. 2014. Web. 25 Apr. 2014.

about Ganesh, or the Hindu tradition Ganesh Chaturthi, which is a ritual where Hindus sculpt a statue of Ganesh and release it into a large mass of water.

Dreams are intriguing yet frustrating. They take up about 25 years of our life, yet after thousands of years studying them we still know so little. They are also neglected to an almost humorous extent. People will risk their health taking acid or mushrooms to have a hallucinatory or spiritual experience, but they will not put in five minutes of their morning to write down and remember a spiritual, scientific, and personal experience that is unique in the sense that no one else has or ever will see exactly what you saw. It is the unfortunate trait of human nature to label something as insignificant because of how common it is. Though different cultures approach understanding dreams in a different way I do not believe we will fully understand anything until science and spirituality can co-exist.

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