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Dreaming in the 21st Century: Forgotten Dreams

Larry Brooks · Wednesday, September 16th, 2015

Dr. Larry Brooks was killed after being struck by a car on May 5, 2020, while walking near his home in Los Angeles's Arts District. Larry contributed several articles to Cultural Weekly describing his signature work in Social Dreaming. We are returning these articles to our home page each week to celebrate Larry and his vision. This article was first published on September 16, 2015.

“The ecology of forgotten dreams is the Infinite.” — Gordon Lawrence

We spend on average one third of our lives sleeping, and about 25% of this time in REM sleep, dreaming. Between 5 and 10% of our dreams are remembered. When remembered, they are often recalled in fragments and quickly forgotten. Or, if not forgotten, they are neglected. When forgotten, a random stimulus can trigger recall, suggesting that dreams, though forgotten, are mysteriously preserved.

It is puzzling why so few dreams are remembered, given the centrality of dreaming to sleep. Neuroscience can partially explain the mechanics of forgetting, and highlight some of the benefits of dreaming, but not its psychological or cultural significance. The eminent dream researcher Allan Rechtschaffen noted, “we have learned a great deal about the biology of dreaming without really knowing what dreaming is the biology of.” The hippocampus, which monitors activity of the cortex and is involved with memory consolidation, is less responsive to inputs from the cortex during sleep, allowing dreams to slip away on awakening.

REM deprivation studies suggest that REM dreaming is important for emotional regulation during the day. If there is a benefit to dreaming that does not necessitate recall, what is the significance of forgetting and or neglecting our dreams? Is there an unrecognized loss to the individual and the culture? Should we be concerned that we are not concerned that we are missing something of importance, that there is no discernable symptom to signal this loss? Is this unawareness itself symptomatic?

The presence of dreaming creates an epistemological puzzle. On a nightly basis sleep introduces us to an other-worldliness that we are intimately connected to, that we have mysteriously created, and yet seem estranged from. The presence of dreaming co-exists with waking consciousness creating an unsteady relationship between two psychological states: conscious and unconscious functioning.

James Hillman in his book, *Dreams and the Underworld*, asks, “What does the psyche want that it doesn't know to ask?” The psychological significance of dreaming and dream forgetting and

neglect reflect the dynamic and contentious relationship between our conscious and unconscious modes of functioning. Individual and collective dream neglect reflects a waking consciousness that doesn't recognize the vital relationship between what occurs at night and the psychological events of the day, nor the immense, potential benefit from tending to our dreams. The ego's eyes are blinded to the night. This phenomenon of neglect represents a profound alienation from the unconscious. Untended, it is left to wildly roam unrecognized through the day. Our waking world drifts unknowingly on the currents of the unconscious.

The cost of this neglect is subtle yet profound, though admittedly speculative. There is no diagnostic entity called "dream neglect syndrome." Individuals don't come to therapists complaining they can't remember their dreams. How might we understand this phenomenon? In *Dreaming Culture: Meanings, Models and Power in Us American Dreams*, Jeannette Marie Mageo points out that Tahitian culture doesn't have a specific word for sadness. She goes on to describe the experience of a Tahitian man who is disturbed when his wife and child leave for another island. Because he has no category for this feeling, he concludes he is ill.

This example calls into question how we see and understand our world. The sociologist Ernest Goffman defines frames of reference as "cognitive structures that guide the perception and representation of reality." To this definition I would add the dimension of unconscious thinking. When we don't have a conceptual frame that is attuned to the unconscious, psychological meaning is unmoored from reality that assumes an illusory objective status.

The unconscious seamlessly influences our conscious experience through the process of projection. We project our inner feelings onto people, places and things. Christopher Bollas, in his book *Being a Character*, asserts that the unconscious infuses our subjectivity, creating a dream-like veil over the waking world. We live in a play or perhaps a dream co-created by the unconscious and the world. The unconscious is distributed into the space and objects of our world that we mistakenly view as the objective world. The unconscious not only influences how we view the world, but also our behavior. Freud's oft quoted statement, "What is not remembered is acted out," suggests that much of our behavior is unwittingly driven by unconscious factors.

Let me illustrate the interplay between the unconscious and behavior. I have been seeing a man in psychotherapy for several years. He is in his 30's and had been experiencing major depression and panic attacks that significantly impacted his life. After several months of therapy, he recalled memories of being sexually abused by a neighbor as a child. This realization was both painful and illuminating, helping him to have a better understanding of what appeared to him as inexplicable, intense emotional reactions. One day he came into session stating that he felt "super blah." He had talked to his sister the night before and disclosed to her that he had been sexually abused as a child. This was the first time he had told a family member about the abuse. Throughout the day and into the night he described having a powerful desire to hide. His girlfriend had gone to sleep. He described going into the bedroom and lying on the floor by the bed in a state of terror. As we tried to understand this behavior, I suggested that his conversation with his sister triggered a post-traumatic stress response. He recalled the following memory: after he was abused he would go to his bedroom and hide under the bed. He recognized that he was re-experiencing the terror that he felt as a child. His feelings of "super blah" diminished as we talked through the experience.

The relationship between waking and dreaming realities is variable and complicated. Dreams span the continuum from bizarre and incomprehensible to the strikingly clear. I had the following dream before attending a workshop on social dreaming.

I am walking with my wife, talking about writing an essay on social dreaming. She is making suggestions that I don't agree with. And she is becoming dismissive of me. I blow air gently in the direction of her third eye.

There are many ways to look at this dream. For the purpose of this essay let's assume that my wife is both my wife and the ideas that I am married to. In other words she is both my wife and a symbol representing a part of me. As I write this, I am conscious of the many trivial arguments we have had that seem embodied by the dream. What ideas am I married to? To what extent am I dismissive of other people's ideas and resistant to hearing what they have to say? To the extent that I don't recognize the conflation of internal and external reality, I am more likely to have conflicts with people in the world. To the extent that I am aware that other people might represent parts of myself, there will be less emotional activation more understanding of the multiple layers that characterize interpersonal interactions.

Gordon Lawrence, who developed the technique of social dreaming, believes that dreams reflect social as well as personal meanings. They hold a collective, cultural meaning, a social unconscious comprised of dissociated social, political, and cultural experiences. He states, "Provided we can remember our dreams, we can have confidence that we are in touch with our unconscious, and if we can associate to them, and use amplification, we are on speaking terms with our unconscious. If that is made possible, we can minimize the possibility of being caught up in psychotic-like social processes, because we can speak with our own psychosis."

To be "on speaking terms with our unconscious" helps us to be attentive to projective mechanisms that distort our interpersonal perceptions, and create confusion between our internal world and external reality. The failure to recognize this effect leads to "psychotic-like social processes" that are manifested in marital conflict, as well as the violence and cruelty that pervades our world. The hated "Other" whether wife, husband, Muslim, Christian or Jew is often a dissociated part of our self-hate-filled psyche.

What does it mean "to be on speaking terms with our unconscious?" Hillman views dream work as an attempt to "speak with our own psychosis." He states, "We must reverse our usual procedure of translating the dream into ego-language and instead translate the ego into dream-language." The value of a dream is to help the ego experience the unconscious—all that is messy, terrifying, and repugnant: all that is Other to self. He states, "The dream-work cooks life events into psychic substance by means of imaginative modes... The dream is an initiation that moves the ego into the world of the *imaginal*." The imaginal is a quality of thinking "on speaking terms with the unconscious" that makes waking experience psychologically meaningful through this "cooking process."

Paul Lippman, in his book *Nocturnes: On listening to dreams*, suggests that the unconscious and the conscious mind require each other for survival. The mind evolves on the basis of acquiring knowledge by making use of unconscious, undigested, unformulated experience. Dreams are the material upon which psychological experience is constructed and a form of thinking that operates on the level of the imaginal.

One far-reaching consequence of dream neglect is the failure to develop the imaginal Ego, the source of creative thinking and the quality of mind that evolves. Dreaming helps us think new thoughts, to realize thoughts that we are unable to think until we dream them. Lawrence writes, "cognition and consciousness arise out of thinking, which will have its basis in dreaming." He

states, “The ecology of forgotten dreams is the infinite,” and the infinite is “a *mental space* that contains all that has ever been thought and is capable of being thought.”

A parting dream....

I walk into a family room of a friend or client and lay on a very large bed-couch. I believe the wife is there and maybe an older child. The husband walks in. I say something like this is better than being walked around on a leash. He is a Psychologist. He walks toward me and takes my belt and wraps it around my neck and says in a forceful but not threatening way, “I will show you what it is like to be led around on a leash.” We walk outside. I am trying to explain that I was speaking metaphorically and if you make it real it loses its meaning. I am barefoot. As I am being led, I feel unsteady like I could fall. We walk passed a rectangular, plastic, (maybe light pink) contraption. As we pass it shoots out 4 or 5 radiant, rainbow colored funnels of water that momentarily freeze in the air. I am trying to release the belt so that I can take a picture of this, but can’t do it quickly enough.

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