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Opinion

A Dream Come True

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Abstract

It's a dream come true is today a mere metaphor expressing hope for the future. This sense of the dream is attributed worldwide. The drift away from its literal truth is the result of the superficial interests of science whose main focus is on the visible and tangible. The result is the neglect of the metaphysical aspect of human endeavour. A remnant of the original sense of the dream is in the term 'weird', which we attribute to it when we don't understand its meaning and function. It dates back to Shakespearean times where it appears in Mac Beth's weird sisters signifying oracular voices. In her sleep laboratory, Rosalind Cartwright has devised one of the most decisive tests of the dream's function, demonstrating it is without a doubt the precursor of the waking phase. Suppressing the REM functions and substituting them with the solution of mathematical problems has resulted in massive dream rebounds. On the other hand, the substitution of REM dreaming with imaginative developing of the beginning of a REM dream while awake, has shown to be the equivalent of nocturnal dreaming. It is tempting to presume that nocturnal dreams can thus be overridden by daydreaming. Not according to the view held by Robert Louis Stevenson.

Keywords: Daydreaming; Disruption; Dream rebound; Physics; Metaphysics; Nocturnal dreaming; REM; Weird/wyrd

Opinion

We often hear someone exclaim, it's a dream come true! And we think no more about it, for we know that this phrase was meant to be a metaphor and not a literal truth. We take it for granted that the person who had exclaimed it, simply meant to express his or her surprised relief and delight that a long-cherished wish had been fulfilled. In fact, it has become a tacit understanding that the word 'dream' in such phrases is no more than an expression of hope for the future. Such employ of the dream is not limited to the English-speaking world, but, is evidently a global phenomenon. A list on the Web, for instance, records over thirty equivalents of 'dream' in this sense in as many languages, beginning with various Germanic terms such as Traum, covering those of Roman and Baltic/Slavic roots like somni and sen, then travelling the globe, taking in Russian, Chinese, Japanese and even Telugu of South India.

In other words, it is an attitude that today pervades most of humanity. It is a view of the dream that goes hand in hand with the spread of western scepticism that was born of the scientific discoveries and advancement of the so-called Age of Enlightenment. It flourished because the predominant impetus of the scientific approach fostered enquiry into the visible and tangible. This engendered a predilection for the physical with the inevitable neglect of the metaphysical. The proverbial iceberg palpably illustrates the mentality that resulted from practising science in such a superficial manner. It hardly needs spelling out that its tip is analogous to physics, while metaphysics corresponds with the volume below the waterline.

In light of this, it would seem that we have generally distanced ourselves from the reality of the nocturnal dream. Indeed, there is hardly another subject in which science professes so many varied views as it does with regard to the function and ultimate purpose of the dream. Certainly, there is nothing to be found among scientific papers that might approach anything like a consensus. In the hundred odd years since Freud's declaration that dreams were kinds of wish-fulfilments (Freud, passim) very few groundbreaking findings have emerged. And, as far as the general public is concerned, the expression, I had a weird dream, is quite telling.

While this expression generally casts a disparaging shadow over the nocturnal dream, the matter begins to change noticeably when we return to Shakespeare's days and find in his Mac Beth the scene of the Weird Sisters. There are three of them, gathered around a boiling cauldron in a cavern. They are engaged in predicting the future deeds of Mac Beth, 'his dread exploits'. Their name refers to their role as oracular voices. Weird, or rather wyrd, as it should be spelt, is an Anglo-Saxon word referring to the future. The modern

German equivalent is 'werden', which is an auxiliary indicating the future tense.

It is not a little curious, that we today are habitually applying the term weird to our dreams when we want to express our puzzlement and incomprehension of their structure and function, although this very term leads us straight back, albeit unwittingly, to a time when it was clearly an adjective that was to take us directly forward to the future. It seems, as if the dream did not want to let us forget that at one time it was in the service of prediction; that it was not willing to surrender all of its original potency, resisting surreptitiously our will to reduce it to a mere metaphor, thus leading it away from its metaphysical realm. One of the most telling experiments undertaken in dream research that demonstrates that dreams, contrary to Freud's view, are most definitely forward looking, is the series of sleep laboratory tests undertaken by Rosalind D Cartwright, published in her book 'Night Life' [1]. The various tests set up by her can be reduced to two principle experiments.

In the first one of these, the onslaught of REM was interrupted in order to prevent further dreaming. After the subject was asked what he had dreamt, he was made to solve mathematical problems after which he was allowed to go back to sleep. Subsequent REMs were followed up in the same way except for the one expected to occur at the end of the night. In other words, the subject was given free reign over his last sleeping phase. What occurred at the end of this mathematically disrupted night was a massive dream rebound. In other words, the sleeper spent more time in REM towards morning than he did during a normal, uninterrupted night of sleep.

In the second test the onslaught of REM was also interrupted, again in order to prevent further dreaming. And, after the subject had been asked what he had dreamt, he was encouraged to complete the dream in his imagination while awake. And, as in the first test, he too was then allowed to go back to sleep, only to be woken again at the next onslaught of REM, again with the same invitation to weave the dream experienced so far, to an imagined end. And, as in the test of the first subject, he was given free reign in the last phase of sleep. Interestingly enough, in this second case the dreamer experienced no rebound whatever.

These two tests clearly demonstrate that dreaming, if prevented, has to be compensated either with dream rebound or with imagination. This not only establishes dreaming as an indispensable precursor to waking, but it also suggests that dreaming awake, or daydreaming is a valid equivalent of nocturnal dreaming. As well as that, it hints at a close relationship between dreaming and the realm of imagination. From a point of view of healing, the fact that daydreaming is a valid substitute for nocturnal dreaming is a prospect worth exploring. It is tempting to surmise that an imagined scenario might well be able to override the drift of the nocturnal dream. But here it must not be forgotten that in the Cartwright tests it was always the nocturnal dream that initiated and so determined, or at least influenced, the drift of the waking compensation for the thwarted part of REM. Since there is no way of establishing a 'control test', this remains speculative. In fact this leads us to a habitual dreamer like Robert Louis Stevenson who said, 'the little people of the night', do one half of my work while I am fast asleep, and in all human likelihood, do the rest for me as well, when I am wide awake and fondly suppose I do it myself [2].

Acknowledgement

For a detailed analysis of the predictive nature of dreams see my essay, to test or not to test; that is the question. Is there a way of verifying the validity of the interpretation of our dreams? published by the University of Heidelberg, Germany in their 'International Journal of Dream Research.

Conflicts of Interest

No conflicts of interest.

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2. Grant John (1986) Dreamers. Grafton Books, London, UK, pp. 94.