

In Dreams Awake

"Our truest life is when we are in dreams awake."

- Henry David Thoreau -

For something that all of us do, we know remarkably little about what dreaming is all about. We study dreaming, we interpret dreaming, we measure dreams and we make use of dreams but we still don't really understand dreaming.

There are those who think dreams are little more than random images that are triggered within the brain and after the fact we attempt to tie them to a somewhat sensible story. Of course anyone who has had a rather complex but coherent story-line in a dream knows that this explanation doesn't hold water. Alternatively there are those who ascribe great and deep psychological meaning to dreams that in reality appear to be little more than nonsense. So, perhaps it would be best to conclude that not all dreams are created equal.

One of the few things we really do know about dreams is that we all apparently have them and sometimes we even remember all or part of dreams that we have. We also seem to have some fundamental need to dream. In fact, when people are deprived of dreams over an extended period of time they begin hallucinating while awake; essentially having waking dreams. So there is something about dreaming that we need and that is very important to our wellbeing.

There are a number of interesting aspects to dreaming. One of these is that characters in our dreams, other than we ourselves, act as if they have minds of their own. That is, they don't seem to do what we might want them to do. Furthermore we don't seem to have any insight as to why they are doing the things they are doing. This is particularly odd since anything they say or do is coming from our mind. It would seem that somehow, even in our sleep, we are able to compartmentalize our thought processes to the point where we can give life to characters in our dreams without even knowing how or why they say and do the things that they do. It's as if we have somehow endowed them with free will.

Another interesting aspect to dreams is our ability to rationalize logical inconsistencies seemingly without any difficulty whatsoever. For example, in a dream we might be in a conversation with someone only to find the person we are talking to changes into someone else in the middle of the conversation. Not only does this not disturb us, but in the dream it seems perfectly natural. Typically we only realize such changes have happened if we recall the dream after awakening. It's then that we realize switches in people or location took place without any rational reason. Sometimes we might dismiss this as having forgotten some part of the dream, but in reality it is often true that there simply was no explanation for the change.

Yet another interesting aspect of dreams is their ability to hand us answers to questions we have wrestled with while awake or to simply provide us with creative input. For example, Paul McCartney claims the melody of the famous song "Yesterday" came to him in a dream, and he was not sure for some time that the melody was original. He was so concerned about this that he played the melody to many people to see if they recognized it, because he was sure that he had subconsciously "borrowed" it from somewhere.

In other cases people are sometimes given clues to solving problems. Elias Howe had been struggling with how to make a functional sewing machine for quite some time. Then, in a dream, he found himself taken captive by natives who were dancing around him with spears. In the dream he noticed that the spears all had holes near their tips. Recalling this from his dream he set about incorporating the feature of a hole near the tip of the needle in his sewing machine and in 1845 he succeeded in producing a sewing machine that works on this principle which is still in use to this day.

Dreams are certainly fascinating, but could Thoreau be right in a literal sense that our truest life is when we are somehow awake in our dreams?

At various times people have explored the possibility that it is our dreaming self that is reality and what we see as our waking self is really asleep. Even in pop culture it has been considered that it may not always be clear cut whether reality is a dream or dreams are reality. In one episode of the TV show “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” the title character “awakes” to discover she is actually in a mental hospital, she’s not a vampire slayer, there are no vampires, her dead mother isn’t really dead and she’s simply been mentally ill for quite some time. As she flips back and forth between the two awake-asleep realities she finally chooses which one to believe and accept as “real.” She chooses to be the super hero rather than the victim.

In the 2006 season ending episode of “House” the title character is shot early in the episode. Recovering in the hospital as the poor patient that most doctors are known to be, he finds himself faced with a set of symptoms for a patient he is treating that defy diagnosis. Eventually House starts noticing that there are aspects of his own life that aren’t making sense. He sees that his colleagues are not acting quite as they normally would. He also notices unexplained missing time in his life where he suddenly finds himself somewhere without knowing how he got there. He eventually concludes that he is trapped in a coma dream state and the only thing that will allow him to get out of it is to do something completely unthinkable. House chooses to kill his patient believing he won’t really be killing anyone and knowing this inconsistency should drive him out of the dream. After succeeding in murdering the patient, House finds himself standing there for a few moments wondering if he could have been wrong, then his eyes open while he is being wheeled to the operating room for the surgeons to remove the bullets and sew him up.

Ultimately everything we experience as reality is presented to us by our brains. Our eyes collect light, but it is our brain that sees. Our ears respond to vibrations but it is our brain that hears. The nerves of our skin respond to touch but it is our brain that feels. So, if our brain presented us with a sufficiently coherent story in which we participate would be able to tell if it was a dream rather than reality? In fact, considering how easily we can disregard illogical situations in dreams, a dream scenario presented by our brain doesn’t have to be perfect to appear to be completely realistic. A dream reality can have gaps in time and even completely unexplainable changes in people that are not even noticed by a dreamer. As a result, determining that one is dreaming rather than participating in reality could be very difficult.

Any test one might conceive to determine a dream versus reality situation could be “faked” in a sense by the very mind that conceives it. For example, the standard, “I’ll pinch myself to see if

I'm dreaming," doesn't really work because the pain itself can be manufactured in the mind. Also, to say that one is experiencing reality because everything looks the same as it did yesterday doesn't work. After all, the very memory of what yesterday looked like is under control of the mind as well. There just is no magic "red pill" that we can take that reveals whether or not we are in reality or are just in "the Matrix."

So, how do we tell whether or not what we are experiencing is reality? Are you just dreaming you are reading this? Am I just dreaming that I am writing this? Or, are we all just players in someone else's dream? Perhaps only those "who are in dreams awake" know for sure.