The Dialogue of Dreams - Part II

By Sam Vaknin

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Dreaming (D-state or D-activity) is associated with a special movement of the eyes, under the closed eyelids, called Rapid Eye Movement (REM). It is also associated with changes in the pattern of electrical activity of the brain (EEG). A dreaming person has the pattern of someone who is wide awake and alert. This seems to sit well with a theory of dreams as active therapists, engaged in the arduous task of incorporating new (often contradictory and incompatible) information into an elaborate personal model of the self and the reality that it occupies.

There are two types of dreams: visual and "thought-like" (which leave an impression of being awake on the dreamer). The latter happens without any REM cum EEG fanfare. It seems that the "model-adjustment" activities require abstract thinking (classification, theorizing, predicting, testing, etc.). The relationship is very much like the one that exists between intuition and formalism, aesthetics and scientific discipline, feeling and thinking, mentally creating and committing one's creation to a medium.

All mammals exhibit the same REM/EEG patterns and may, therefore, be dreaming as well. Some birds do it, and some reptiles as well. Dreaming seems to be associated with the brain stem (Pontine tegmentum) and with the secretion of Norepinephrine and Serotonin in the brain. The rhythm of breathing and the pulse rate change and the skeletal muscles are relaxed to the point of paralysis (presumably, to prevent injury if the dreamer should decide to engage in enacting his dream). Blood flows to the genitals (and induces penile erections in male dreamers). The uterus contracts and the muscles at the base of the tongue enjoy a relaxation in electrical activity.

These facts would indicate that dreaming is a very primordial activity. It is essential to survival. It is not necessarily connected to higher functions like speech but it is connected to reproduction and to the biochemistry of the brain. The construction of a "world-view", a model of reality is as critical to the survival of an ape as it is to ours. And the mentally disturbed and the mentally retarded dream as much as the normal do. Such a model can be innate and genetic in very simple forms of life because the amount of information that needs to be incorporated is limited. Beyond a certain amount of information that the individual is likely to be exposed to daily, two needs arise. The first is to maintain the model of the world by eliminating "noise" and by realistically incorporating negating data and the second is to pass on the function of modelling and remodelling to a much more flexible structure, to the brain. In a way, dreams are about the constant generation, construction and testing of theories regarding the dreamer and

his ever-changing internal and external environments. Dreams are the scientific community of the Self. That Man carried it further and invented Scientific Activity on a larger, external, scale is small wonder.

Physiology also tells us the differences between dreaming and other hallucinatory states (nightmares, psychoses, sleepwalking, daydreaming, hallucinations, illusions and mere imagination): the REM/EEG patterns are absent and the latter states are much less "real". Dreams are mostly set in familiar places and obey the laws of nature or some logic. Their hallucinatory nature is a hermeneutic imposition. It derives mainly from their erratic, abrupt behaviour (space, time and goal discontinuities) which is ONE of the elements in hallucinations as well.

Why is dreaming conducted while we sleep? Probably, there is something in it which requires what sleep has to offer: limitation of external, sensory, inputs (especially visual ones – hence the compensatory strong visual element in dreams). An artificial environment is sought in order to maintain this periodical, self-imposed deprivation, static state and reduction in bodily functions. In the last 6-7 hours of every sleep session, 40% of the people wake up. About 40% - possibly the same dreamers – report that they had a dream in the relevant night. As we descend into sleep (the hypnagogic state) and as we emerge from it (the hypnopompic state) – we have visual dreams. But they are different. It is as though we are "thinking" these dreams. They have no emotional correlate, they are transient, undeveloped, abstract and expressly deal with the day residues. They are the "garbage collectors", the "sanitation department" of the brain. Day residues, which clearly do not need to be processed by dreams – are swept under the carpet of consciousness (maybe even erased).

Suggestible people dream what they have been instructed to dream in hypnosis – but not what they have been so instructed while (partly) awake and under direct suggestion. This further demonstrates the independence of the Dream Mechanism. It almost does not react to external sensory stimuli while in operation. It takes an almost complete suspension of judgement in order to influence the contents of dreams.

It would all seem to point at another important feature of dreams: their economy. Dreams are subject to four "articles of faith" (which govern all the phenomena of life):

Homeostasis - The preservation of the internal environment, an equilibrium between (different but interdependent) elements which make up the whole.
Equilibrium - The maintenance of an internal environment in balance with an external one.
Optimization (also known as efficiency) - The securing of maximum results with minimum invested resources and minimum damage to other resources, not directly used in the process.
Parsimony (Occam's razor) - The utilization of a minimal set of (mostly known) assumptions, constraints, boundary conditions and initial conditions in order to achieve maximum explanatory or modelling power.
In compliance with the above four principles dreams HAD to resort to visual symbols. The visual is the most condensed (and efficient) form of packaging information. "A picture is worth a thousand words" the saying goes and computer users know that to store images requires more memory than any other type of data. But dreams have an

unlimited capacity of information processing at their disposal (the brain at night). In dealing with gigantic amounts of information, the natural preference (when processing power is not constrained) would be to use visuals. Moreover, non-isomorphic, polyvalent forms will be preferred. In other words: symbols that can be "mapped" to more than one meaning and those that carry a host of other associated symbols and meanings with them will be preferred. Symbols are a form of shorthand. They haul a great amount of information – most of it stored in the recipient's brain and provoked by the symbol. This is a little like the Java applets in modern programming: the application is divided to small modules, which are stored in a central computer. The symbols generated by the user's computer (using the Java programming language) "provoke" them to surface. The result is a major simplification of the processing terminal (the net-PC) and an increase in its cost efficiency.

Both collective symbols and private symbols are used. The collective symbols (Jung's archetypes?) prevent the need to re-invent the wheel. They are assumed to constitute a universal language usable by dreamers everywhere. The dreaming brain has, therefore, to attend to and to process only the "semi-private language" elements. This is less time consuming and the conventions of a universal language apply to the communication between the dream and the dreamer.

Even the discontinuities have their reason. A lot of the information that we absorb and process is either "noise" or repetitive. This fact is known to the authors of all the file compression applications in the world. Computer files can be compressed to one tenth their size without appreciably losing information. The same principle is applied in speed reading – skimming the unnecessary bits, getting straight to the point. The dream employs the same principles: it skims, it gets straight to the point and from it – to yet another point. This creates the sensation of being erratic, of abruptness, of the absence of spatial or temporal logic, of purposelessness. But this all serves the same purpose: to succeed to finish the Herculean task of refitting the model of the Self and of the World in one night.

Thus, the selection of visuals, symbols, and collective symbols and of the discontinuous mode of presentation, their preference over alternative methods of representation is not accidental. This is the most economic and unambiguous way of representation and, therefore, the most efficient and the most in compliance with the four principles. In cultures and societies, where the mass of information to be processed is less mountainous – these features are less likely to occur and indeed, they don't.

Excerpts from an Interview about DREAMS - First published in Suite101

Dreams are by far the most mysterious phenomenon in mental life. On the face of it, dreaming is a colossal waste of energy and psychic resources. Dreams carry no overt information content. They bear little resemblance to reality. They interfere with the most critical biological maintenance function - with sleep. They don't seem to be goal oriented, they have no discernible objective. In this age of technology and precision, efficiency and optimization - dreams seem to be a somewhat anachronistically quaint relic of our life in the savannah. Scientists are people who believe in the aesthetic preservation of resources. They believe that nature is intrinsically optimal, parsimonious and "wise". They dream up symmetries, "laws" of nature, minimalist theories. They

believe that everything has a reason and a purpose. In their approach to dreams and dreaming, scientists commit all these sins combined. They anthropomorphesize nature, they engage in teleological explanations, they attribute purpose and paths to dreams, where there might be none. So, they say that dreaming is a maintenance function (the processing of the preceding day's experiences) - or that it keeps the sleeping person alert and aware of his environment. But no one knows for sure. We dream, no one knows why. Dreams have elements in common with dissociation or hallucinations but they are neither. They employ visuals because this is the most efficient way of packing and transferring information. But WHICH information? Freud's "Interpretation of Dreams" is a mere literary exercise. It is not a serious scientific work (which does not detract from its awesome penetration and beauty).

I have lived in Africa, the Middle East, North America, Western Europe and Eastern Europe. Dreams fulfil different societal functions and have distinct cultural roles in each of these civilizations. In Africa, dreams are perceived to be a mode of communication, as real as the internet is to us.

Dreams are pipelines through which messages flow: from the beyond (life after death), from other people (such as shamans - remember Castaneda), from the collective (Jung), from reality (this is the closest to Western interpretation), from the future (precognition), or from assorted divinities. The distinction between dream states and reality is very blurred and people act on messages contained in dreams as they would on any other information they obtain in their "waking" hours. This state of affairs is quite the same in the Middle East and Eastern Europe where dreams constitute an integral and important part of institutionalized religion and the subject of serious analyses and contemplation. In North America - the most narcissistic culture ever - dreams have been construed as communications WITHIN the dreaming person. Dreams no longer mediate between the person and his environment. They are the representation of interactions between different structures of the "self". Their role is, therefore, far more limited and their interpretation far more arbitrary (because it is highly dependent on the personal circumstances and psychology of the specific dreamer).

Narcissism IS a dream state. The narcissist is totally detached from his (human) milieu. Devoid of empathy and obsessively centred on the procurement of narcissistic supply (adulation, admiration, etc.) - the narcissist is unable to regard others as three dimensional beings with their own needs and rights. This mental picture of narcissism can easily serve as a good description of the dream state where other people are mere representations, or symbols, in a hermeneutically sealed thought system. Both narcissism and dreaming are AUTISTIC states of mind with severe cognitive and emotional distortions. By extension, one can talk about "narcissistic cultures" as "dream cultures" doomed to a rude awakening. It is interesting to note that most narcissists I know from my correspondence or personally (myself included) have a very poor dream-life and dreamscape. They remember nothing of their dreams and are rarely, if ever, motivated by insights contained in them.

The Internet is the sudden and voluptuous embodiment of my dreams. It is too good to me to be true - so, in many ways, it isn't. I think Mankind (at least in the rich, industrialized countries) is moonstruck. It surfs this beautiful, white landscape, in suspended disbelief. It holds it breath. It dares not believe and believes not its hopes.

The Internet has, therefore, become a collective phantasm - at times a dream, at times a nightmare. Entrepreneurship involves massive amounts of dreaming and the net is pure entrepreneurship.

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Writing Good Dialogue.

By Nicole Murphy

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There's nothing that kills a scene like hackneyed dialogue. Just stop and think about the average B-Grade Hollywood Movie. Sure, at times the plot is bad and the characterisation woeful but most of the time, what stops it from being a good movie is the dialogue. Cringe-worthy dialogue.

So, how do you write good dialogue? There are a number of factors and the most important one is: don't try too hard. Not every thing out of a character's mouth has to be scintilating. Sometimes, the best dialogue comes about because it's so simple and normal. So relax.

You need to let your characters speak. If they are highly educated, they will probably speak with great grammar and have a high vocabulary. If they left school at fourteen and have worked for five years in the local abottoir, their language is likely to be more colourful. If your character is a chatterbox, let them ramble. If they are the strong and silent type, let them be silent. Don't force words into their mouths and don't try to make them conform to your own views of good communication.

Good dialogue flows. The characters react to what another character has said. For example:

"I went to the show the other day."

"Really? Was it any good?"

"Not bad. The dogs were cute but the cows were too noisy."

"I was talking to George the other day."

Huh? How did talk about the show bring George into the conversation? To make it flow, it needs something more like:

"I went to the show the other day."

"Really? Was it any good?"

"Not bad. The dogs were cute but the cows were too noisy."

"Speaking of dogs, I was talking to George the other day..."

If you aren't sure if your dialogue flows, the classic way to test it is to read it aloud. You'll hear any problems, just like you do in the bad Hollywood movies. Better still, get

your family and friends to act it out for you. It gets them involved in your writing and you can stand back and really observe and listen to what is going on.

The other thing dialogue needs is connection to the action of the story. Stop and think about the conversations you have. They are always related somehow to the action of your day, whether it's a conversation you're having as you catch the bus to work or a conversation with a work colleague or catching up with your partner at the end of the day.

Keep the dialogue connected to the characters, the setting and the plot by surrounding it with action. The example above is quite bland. But surround it with action and it comes alive.

Carrie sat down, opened the sugar packet and sprinkled it in her tea and then stirred it. "I went to the show the other day."

"Really?" Sophie took a long sip of her coffee. "Was it any good?"

Carrie shrugged. "Not bad. The dogs were cute but the cows were too noisy." She poured milk into her tea.

Sophie put her coffee cup down and leant forward, eyes sparkling. "Speaking of dogs, I was talking to George the other day..."

Now the dialogue seems real, because we can picture the characters and their setting. We also get an idea of how they're feeling. Carrie's shrug tells us the show didn't really thrill her. Sophie's sparkling eyes tell us she's got something exciting to say.

So spend a bit of time developing your dialogue, and your stories will be much more successful.

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