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DREAMS--A GUIDE TO THE SUBCONSCIOUS OF MAN

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DREAMS--A GUIDE TO THE SUBCONSCIOUS OF MAN

The first thing one learns when trying to get information on sleep, dreams, and the interpretation of dreams is that very little is known about any of these subjects. The study of dreams is a relatively new field--only about fifteen years old, although dream interpretation has been studied in many ancient civilizations. The story is told in the Bible (Genesis 41) of the symbolic dream that Pharaoh had and Joseph's interpretation of it.

Many primitive people thought dreams to be the soul's night-waandering away from the body. Among some tribes, waking a sleeping person was a serious offense because the sleeper's soul might not have time to return to his body. During the Dark Ages, people thought that witches and devils invaded a person through dreams, so it was not wise to tell one's dreams due to the danger of being burned at the stake if the dreams sounded demonish enough.¹

Although human beings spend, on the average, one-third of their lives asleep, it is still one of the most vague and mysterious aspects of our lives. The main problem in researching dreams is that there is no scientific method

¹Marion Gough, "Mystery of Sleep and Dreams," House Beautiful, 110:68, March, 1968.

for gathering data. Since all information has to come by word of mouth from volunteer "dreamers," much correctness, imagery, and atmosphere is lost in the process.

The biggest advance in the study of dreams was the discovery of REM (Rapid Eye Movement) sleep. This is a phase of sleep in which the sleeper's eyes move rapidly underneath the closed eyelids as if he were watching some activity. It was discovered that it is in this phase of sleep that dreaming is done. After this discovery many new fields of dream research were opened. It is now possible to find out what happens when a person is deprived of dreams, or to wake a sleeper in the midst of a dream so that it is still fresh on his mind.

In experiments conducted on volunteer sleepers, it was discovered that if a sleeper is deprived of REM sleep, but is allowed the other phases of sleep, he becomes very hostile, irritable, and filled with anxiety.² It was not possible to prove that this was a result of the lack of dreaming or from some other phase of REM sleep that has not yet been discovered.

Some scientists have noted that in some cases of persons who, for some reason, were not able to dream, hallucinations were sometimes experienced, the reasoning being that the images he was missing at night were coming to him while he was awake. Other scientists feel that if a person were

²Edwin Diamond, "The Interpretation of Dreams," New York Times Magazine, February 12, 1967.

stopped from dreaming for a long period of time, he might eventually become like an alcoholic, subject to delirium tremens.

As for the reasons why we dream, there are many varied and conflicting opinions. Freud was famous for his statement "Dreams are the Guardians of Sleep"³ He thought that dreams were a safety valve. For example, when an unconscious worry threatens to wake the sleeper a dream occurs. He also felt that dreams are symbolic of forbidden desires. Another scientist went a step further with this idea and said that humans all have built-in censors that keep watch over the subconscious and in order to get the "forbidden desires" past the censor, it is necessary that they are presented in symbols. When the symbolism becomes too thin the censor-alarm goes off, and the sleeper wakes up and has had a "nightmare." Still another view states that dreams are mans method of bringing the day's stresses and problems to mind and working them out during sleep so that the next time a person faces the same situation, he will be better prepared to cope with it.⁴

There are basically two different approaches that can be taken in the study of dreams. Dreams can be interpreted either in terms of telepathic or precognitive interpretations, or in terms of the subconscious reconstruction of past events.

³Diamond, op. cit.

⁴"Learning through dreaming," Time, 93:63, April 25, 1969.

To comment briefly on the first manner of interpretation, there are many documented reports (too many for sheer coincidence) of telepathic and precognitive dreams. There are many reports of people foretelling their own death, or the death of a friend or a relative from a dream. Other reports tell of people seeing in dreams, rooms that they have never seen before only to find that these rooms really exist and are identical in every detail to ones in their dreams. Although there is proof that these telepathic and precognitive dreams do exist, there is no way, as of now, to explain them scientifically.

Dreams, as interpreted in the second sense, are windows through which a person may look deep into his subconscious if he will take the time to carefully study his dreams. Andre Sonnet has said that it is practically impossible for a person to know himself fully without dream analysis because "dreams are the most complete statements that exist concerning the relation of man with the world and with the totality of life."⁵ It is almost generally accepted that dreams are very symbolic. It is, however, impossible to make a list of symbols (as has been done many times and give steadfast interpretations of each symbol because often one symbol in a dream can symbolize more than one thing and can have several correct interpretations. It is impossible to analyze a person by interpretation of dreams if the personality of the patient is lost

⁵ André Sonnet, The Twilight Zone of Dreams (Philadelphia: Chilton Company Book Division, 1952), p. 197.

through the use of mechanical techniques which have become standardized for every patient.⁶

Sigmund Freud is perhaps one of the best known men in the field of dream interpretation. His method, rather than to interpret the whole dream, was to choose an important detail of the dream and use "free associations" of the patient to try to trace the dream back to the patient's subconscious.⁷

One of Freud's most famous pupils, Carl Jung, disagrees with Freud's use of association. Jung feels that "free association" gets away from the dream itself instead of finding a cause for it. He is afraid that the analyst will impress his ideas on the patient rather than finding the patient's subconscious. About symbolism he says, "Learn as much as you can about symbolism; then forget it all when you are analyzing a dream."⁸ An important part of Jung's theory about dreams is symbols he calls "archetypes." These are hereditary factors which all humans have that are common to all men. These symbols appear regardless of race, creed, or color. They occur not only in dreams, but appear in myths and fairy tales of every culture, past and present. For example, shadows symbolize the dark parts of a man's soul--suppressed desires or drives considered inferior. Jung realized that it was impossible for him to

⁶Ibid. p. 198.

⁷Ibid. p. 89.

⁸Carl G. Jung, Man and His Symbols (New York: Doubleday and Company Inc., 1964), p. 56.

hear a dream and then just hand down an interpretation to a patient. He learned that dream analysis had to be what he called a "dialectical exchange between two personalities."⁹

The main thing that almost all sources agreed on was the fact that dreams do contain symbolism. The ideas on exactly how to interpret these symbols--as universal symbols or as individual symbols--differed, but even the advocates of the universal symbolism agreed that these universal symbols should be interpreted based on the individual.

⁹Ibid. p. 57.