



We sleep to

'knit the ravel'd sleeve of care'

Macbeth



Why We Dream

By Karen Van Zino, M.D.

Those mysterious hours of sleep often leave us wondering just what is happening inside our heads. How and why do we dream? From whence comes this nightly theater of the fantastic and the mundane? And is it necessary to dream? Some dreams seem like junk while others leave tremendous impressions. Are these necessary to our physical health, our emotional health, or both? The answers to these questions have been as varied as the cultures considering them.

The ancients took for granted the Divine voice of dreams. To them dreams spoke the language of the Divine Intelligence. Whether one named that divine intelligence God, or Creator, or Great Spirit didn't matter. It was the transcendent voice outside of us that mattered. Not understanding was not only a given, it was beside the point. We weren't *meant* to understand. The gift was offered and was accepted.

Dreams have a language all their own. Once we understand this language we can interpret its meaning and make use of the tremendous insight and good counsel it offers. It remains only to trust this inner advisor and allow its effect into our waking lives. For example, the primitive Pacific islanders acted on their dreams. If they insulted their neighbor in a dream, then come morning they apologized. No brewing grudges there. You might think of it as visiting a counselor with a problem and receiving sound advice, except this advice comes from our own head and no appointment necessary.

The ancient Egyptians knew this as did the Greeks. In Epidaurus on the coast of Greece the Asclepion, the most famous healing center of the ancient world, was under the auspices of Asclepius, the Greek god of healing. It offered a dream clinic where a patient could come and tell his concerns to a dream doctor/priest, sleep on a special bed in a room writhing with harmless snakes (snakes being the ancient symbol for healing and immortality) and dream. Come morning he would receive interpretation, diagnosis and treatment. Testimonials written on the clinic's walls express the joy of the cured patients. Ancient Egyptian papyri, the scrolled manuscripts of their day, are chock full of dream interpretations. The Ancients knew the power of dreams; yet why for so long didn't, or wouldn't we?

The goodie bag of scientific discovery bulged as the 19th century dawned and in the Western world there was a sense that man had arrived. Science, that weighty tool so proudly wielded, was now providing answers. These answers saved lives and stamped out diseases. Man felt safer than ever from nature's whims and ever so optimistic. Who needed other-worldly advice? Man was rational with a capital R and dreams were tossed aside as merely fluff; until that is, the genius of Freud and Jung reopened the unconscious treasure chest to the conscious mind.

Our bodies have evolved protecting and fostering the ability to dream. Take for instance the existence of sleep stages with the very special

state called REM, named for 'rapid eye movement.' In REM, only the eyelid muscles and no others, fluttered away approximately 90 minutes of each night. It is during this REM stage that our physiology dramatically adjusts with the turning off and on of neurotransmitters like serotonin and dopamine. Without these muscle activators we are paralyzed and thereby prevented from bounding out our bedroom windows enacting a lovely flying dream. Now that wouldn't be a good idea.

And everyone dreams, even if they think they don't, given they have enough oxygen reaching their brain. They don't think they dream because they don't remember their dreams, a skill modern man has for the most part lost. Yet another biochemical trick involving the same neurotransmitters allows for the cementing of the memory of the dream. For the most part this occurs just upon emerging from a dream. By pushing aside dreams upon this sleepy awakening we effectively cast away our opportunity to remember and record this nightly briefing.

So why these 90 magical minutes and why this fancy physiology: there must be a purpose. The purpose of any well-honed bodily function is to help us live more successfully, i.e. better at reaching adulthood, having offspring and raising them up to do likewise. There is no better way to aid this process than to help us keep our psychological wits about us.

Sleep and its intricacies have been the subject of intense study since Aristotle's book written in the 4th Century BC, On Sleep and Dreams, and no doubt long before; but it has only been recently, with the perfection of the EEG machine in the 1950's, that we have been given a physiologic glimpse into that mysterious 3rd of life: the unconscious human mind.

So here we are sleeping nightly with a foreign language spinning tales in our head. We get to play all the major roles, it's entirely private, and it's free. And these tales may prove more powerful than the most illustrative myth or meaningful fairytale, awaiting only our interpretation.

And like any other language it can be mastered. True there are those of us who take to languages more quickly than others, but we can all learn with some proper schooling. Being open to this learning is perhaps the most important step. After all we wouldn't be surprised upon visiting China when we didn't understand the banter of the local natives. Why should we?

We sleep to, as Macbeth tells us 'knit up the ravel'd sleeve of care.' We dream to have something with which to knit. Dreams are windows into our unconscious mind. Here resides a treasure trove of booty standing to help us deal with life's challenges and live more successful lives. It's free, it's available every single night, it's confidential, and it has no side effects: the perfect ally to the human soul.