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Dreaming and Daring: Meeting the Unknown Every Night

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Death of a Dream Seal

I'm visiting Mom in the hospital, but when I arrive at her bedside, I find she's a magnificent seal—with gold highlights in her glossy coat. After a moment's hesitation, I accept this, telling her how beautiful and precious she is as I stroke her long back. Now, the seal is Dad instead, and I accept this, too. I notice there is blood on my hand. Dad, the seal, is bleeding. I shout for help while I try to find the wound and stop the blood. There is too much blood. He is suffering. I struggle to keep him alive. Finally, understanding that he is going to die, I tell him, "I love you, Dad, I love you." A doctor bursts into the room, but instead of helping, he brings a shotgun. I try to stop him, but he shoots the seal—several loud shocking bangs! Someone is setting off fireworks to cover the sound of the shots. I wake overwhelmed with emotion.

Dream Crazyiness

The intensity and unpredictability of dreams like this one might be dismissed as crazyiness by the waking mind. The dream has a narrative structure and contains recognizable processes such as reasoning, interaction, and experimentation—yet it’s all askew. The crazy elements include not only the overblown emotional situation, but also the malleability of the story’s trajectory, which requires the dream-ego to repeatedly adjust her expectations and responses. Dreams might also be called crazy when they challenge our rules of time and identity with characteristics such as simultaneous, overlapping, or reversible sequences of events; transformations of the dream-ego; and telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, or lucidity.

Actually, most remembered dreams are somewhat crazy—they simply do not fit our beliefs about *how things really are*, or our sense of *what might happen next*. I use the term “crazy” intentionally, because of its root meanings. In addition to its familiar definitions (insane, out-of-proportion, wild, or infatuated), “crazy” literally means “cracked.” A surface is “crazed” when scatters of fine cracks zigzag everywhere. In popular jargon, a “craze” is when something catches on and spreads unpredictably in all directions, like the crazy cracks that make the cliff fall apart under Wile E. Coyote.



The crazyiness in dreams “cracks us up” by breaking open the shell of the known world. Sometimes such crack-ups lead to grand paradigm shifts; sometimes they are just confusing. Like a good joke, a crazy dream is experienced in the vivid present moment and evokes an immediate response, but can be difficult to recall and retell. In fact, most dreams are probably too crazy to be reconstructed with any coherence that would be recognized by the waking mind, which is why we do not remember them, or remember them only as vague impressions.

I am suggesting that the crazy nature of dreams is precisely what makes them useful and meaningful. Each night when we sleep, dreams combine fragments of our personal lives (memories, recent incidents, perceptions, sensations) with something more essential and shared (archetypal imagery, body and earth wisdom, a vital sense of meaning and connection). All of this same stuff is available to us when we are awake, but in our dreams it is organized in crazy ways, with a pattern-producing randomness similar to that which creates fractals in nature. It is my belief that the all-inclusive chaotic patterning behind dream craziness is actually closer to “the way things really are” than the self-reinforcing information structures that make up our waking conception of reality. According to Buddhism, our true nature really is ever-changing, fluid, undying, empty of substance, beyond time, form, and individual identity, free of attachment, infinitely open.

Getting Stuck in Habit Pathways

In our waking lives, we see ourselves as *selves*, and the world as made up of *matter*. Time runs in one direction, and is measurable. Fact and falsehood, right and wrong, subject and object are distinct from one another. In dreams, such distinctions may not apply. A limited view of “the way things are” might be essential to our survival when we are awake, but we pay a price for this survival value. Once we create habitual behavior patterns and ways of perceiving our lives, it is extremely difficult to change our actions and reactions, to let go of our assumptions and prejudices, to see things in new ways, and even to see what is directly in front of us clearly.



From a Buddhist perspective, being blinded by our inflexible expectations, trapped by the sense of a separate and limiting idea of “self,” and tormented by our absolute likes and dislikes, is understood to be the source of all suffering. We become attached to getting what we want and not getting what we don’t want, and are perpetually disappointed. We consider our subjective point-of-view to be universal, and resist seeing from any other perspective. We wrestle with our states of mind, trying to make sense of them, getting stuck in them. We want to *have* our lives and live them, too. And, if this is all we are, or this is all we believe life to be, then we ultimately lose everything at death.

The Open Mind Theory of Dreams

I suggest that dream craziness regularly balances the rigid and limiting ways of seeing we would otherwise adopt as absolutes. Without our dreams, we would become mired in our own certainties on a regular basis. We would all suffer from a kind of obsessive-compulsive disorder, perpetually controlling our environments down to the most minute detail, and falling apart when our control inevitably failed.

Crazy dreams create questions that defy answers. Crazy dreams keep our minds open and flexible by shattering assumptions and disrupting the self-reinforcing habit pathways that would otherwise lead to dead ends. Crazy dreams, whether remembered or not, literally *change our minds* in ways that are essential to our health and happiness as individuals, our mutual integrity in communities, and the dynamic balance of our participation in the ecosystem of the planet.

Dreams offer alternative ways of seeing the familiar, alternative ways of feeling and responding. Dreams help create new neurological pathways in the brain, so we don’t become imprisoned by our own limited and limiting attitudes and behaviors. Dreams show us how apparently predictable sequences of events might play out in new ways. Without dream craziness, our thoughts and actions would rapidly become habitual, even mechanical. Dreams show us that we are more than we think we are, making our interconnectedness with other people and our environment more evident, and thus allowing our experiences of waking life to be richer, more complex and nuanced, more satisfying.

Learning, Creativity, Emotion

Much contemporary research on dreams supports the idea that dreaming opens the mind. It has been clearly established by sleep and dream researchers that dreams play a role in learning and memory, in creativity, and in the integration of emotions. These characteristics of dreams are essential to the mind's overall flexibility.

Dreams support certain kinds of learning and memory consolidation, but such learning is not usually a static step-by-step process. When I was teaching myself to read foreign languages, for example, I would limp along for months, memorizing grammar and vocabulary, translating word-by-word—until, at last, a breakthrough (or crack) occurred. Suddenly, I was reading without translation; I was feeling and understanding the sense of the language itself. Such leaps are the stuff of dream-learning. In dreams, we can experience new discoveries with the body and mind simultaneously. The knowing seems to be there already. In dreams, I speak unfamiliar languages fluently; I find that fluency is perfectly possible, though I may be slogging through my waking exercises with little apparent progress. By the time my waking mind catches up, the language has already become part of me.



Dreams open up creative solutions to problems because different parts of the mind are engaged (visual, metaphorical, emotional) and others somewhat suppressed (cognitive). Problems are thus reframed. But what really seems to be happening is even more creative: a common, crazy experience in dreams is the sense that the solution to such problems already exists and is immediately accessible, complete, and woven into the problem's very nature, so the dreamer is merely uncovering an obvious and inevitable conclusion, a preexistent wholeness.

Emotion in dreams is intensified, but also reshaped, so that the complex implications of our emotional responses can emerge. Paradox is implicit in emotional dream experiences: in a sense, almost every strong feeling in a dream suggests and contains its opposite. This is also true in waking life, but when awake we filter out the inconsistencies, and lose the richness of the experience. Dreams keep us from excluding too much, or excluding the same things all the time. Again, the crazy, implausible, paradoxical elements of dreams hint at a larger wholeness.

Messy Dreams, Mutations, and Mistakes

If dreams keep our minds flexible, balanced, and open with their craziness (their synchronicities, paradoxes, inconsistencies and impossibilities), why do we so often wake feeling befuddled, dismayed, or disturbed? Why is the process so messy? Why can't dreams just represent "ultimate reality" without scrambling our synapses with unsatisfactory emotions, incomplete learnings, implausible solutions, gaudy special effects, and chaotic jumbles of information?

Expecting "ultimate reality" to be organized and comfortable is as ridiculous—and boring!—as the idea of an afterlife spent playing the harp on a cloud forever. The whole point, at least according to contemplatives and mystics, is that *real* reality is too extraordinary for easy answers; we can only comprehend it metaphorically and paradoxically. Of course, metaphor and paradox are the essential language of dreams. Since dreams go beyond what we think we know about reality, the metaphors and paradoxes they present are bound to be unpalatable, confusing, and even painful as we struggle to make sense of them.

Actually, the messiness of dreams is entirely consistent with the messiness of waking life; we've learned to filter our perceptions so that we rarely notice this—unless we are in the midst of a crisis which startles us into full awareness. We don't attempt to grasp the breathtaking truths of our lives: that everything and everyone we know will die (including ourselves, of course); that the phenomenon of consciousness itself is mind-boggling. Modern physics tells us that if you go deep enough into anything, you'll find nothing but empty space and probabilities. Yet things seem solid! What are we supposed to make of that? So much of our reality is beyond reckoning; yet our capacity for wonder, curiosity, humor, love, and dreaming cracks the thick shell of the cosmic egg for us.

Evolution is a good model for the way dreams work. There's a sensible system by which animals reproduce, combining elements of themselves into new selves, diversifying and naturally selecting those that are likeliest to survive to reproductive maturity and pass on their genes to a new generation.

However, if this system worked ideally, without malfunction or messiness, the world would be lifeless in short order. Things would run like clockwork for a while, but the gene pool of the survivors would get thinner with each generation, since there are only so many genes to go around.



The reality of evolution, thank goodness, is an awful—or awesome—mess. The system is constantly being disrupted by mistakes in the gene pool, mutations that are generally not helpful to the species at all, but sometimes lead on to greatness (or have greatness thrust upon them). Most mutations are irrelevant or unsuccessful, but a few add survival value and are carried on to further generations that will now have characteristics undreamed-of by their ancestors—or perhaps known only in their ancestors' dreams!

To add further messiness (again, thank goodness): if a species—such as the human species—is successful enough, it can afford to support some mutations with no immediate survival value, but with meaningful parts to play in the long-term well-being of the species, or even the ecosystem, as a whole. That's how we end up with artists and dreamers and other oddballs who make life more interesting for everyone.

Dreams introduce openness and flexibility to the earth's living systems through something like a process of mutation. Our perceptual systems are programmed to function in certain ways, but dreams scramble the coding and add accidental data that messes with the predictability of the outcome—yet there seem to be built-in protections that keep this craziness from doing harm to the program itself. Instead, some of the “mutations” of dream craziness are discarded, and some are integrated to create new ways of being and seeing. Just like the paradoxical work of our genes, most of this happens behind the scenes, in the realm of unremembered dreams (or silly rhyming schemes). When we do remember and try to describe the craziness of a dream, we have to use a language we didn't know we knew.

Shape-Shifting

In “The Death of a Dream Seal,” the craziness breaks rules, and, like the final shotgun blast and fireworks, bursts everything apart. My experience of this dream reverberated: about two months later, my mother's health declined abruptly and she died within a few days of realizing she was seriously ill. I was faced with an unacceptable event, emotionally stunned into the absolute authenticity of my feelings of loss—and love. The dream, and the death of my mother, threw me

into brokenness, yet also awakened me to something wilder, deeper, more tender than I could have imagined.

I see the dream seal as the Selkie of Celtic mythology: a shape-shifter. In one ancient story, all the beautiful Selkies come ashore for Midsummer's Eve, to shed their sealskins and dance on the beach in human form. A Selkie falls in love with a human being and chooses to remain in the human world. They marry, raise children, live a whole lifetime together. But the sealskin has only been temporarily hidden away, and someday the Selkie must find that skin, put it on, and return to the sea, leaving her mortal love behind.

This is how it happens for all of us, for everyone we love. We are shape-shifters, shining in our otherworldly glory. We take human form, commit ourselves to love and loss, and share our lives with other mortal beings—in families, friendships, communities. But, eventually, we find our true natures and return home, leaving loved ones behind, yet affirming the larger meaning of our lives together. We are more than we could have imagined, but not more than we can dream.

A dream broke my heart and opened my mind to the beauty and immortality of my parents, and prepared me to shift my life toward acceptance of their deaths, and my own. Dreaming keeps pace with our changes and dares us to meet the unknown, cracking us open, spilling us into the infinite sea where we belong.

