

DREAMING, LIFE STYLE, AND PHYSIOLOGY:
A COMMENT ON ADLER'S VIEW OF THE DREAM

MONTAGUE ULLMAN, M.D.

New York, N. Y.

Elsewhere (6, 7, 8) I have attempted to formulate a theory of dreams predicated on the basic identity of dream consciousness and waking consciousness at the level of the adaptive function of consciousness generally, i.e., to reflect the relations experienced by the individual and to bring to bear upon these relations the individual's own strivings for mastery. The differences in form and content between these two states of consciousness were then found to be derivative of two sets of conditions specific to the dream state, namely, (a) the physiologically altered brain milieu associated with an altered afferent input, and (b) the altered efferent goal of influencing an internal state, the depth of sleep, rather than an external circumstance. It seemed possible to retain the dynamic features of the dream without the assumptions made by Freud and to which Adler took exception^c namely, (a) the postulate of an Unconscious as the source of the sleep-disturbing impulse, (b) the dichotomy between the Conscious and the Unconscious, (c) the limited view of the aim of the dream as one of gratifying desires, and (d) the exclusively sexual motivation.

Since I find Adler's intuitive certainty concerning the thread of identity between dream life and waking life so congenial to my own thinking, I would like to present the theoretical basis of this approach in highly condensed fashion and then discuss some remarks made by Adler on the nature of dreams that I think merit further consideration and development.

AN ADAPTIVE THEORY OF DREAM CONSCIOUSNESS

Physiological factors and dream form. Dreaming is a state of consciousness occurring during states of partial arousal. Under normal circumstances these states of partial arousal are brought about recurrently throughout the night as a result of physiological factors impinging upon and influencing the threshold of the reticular activating system (6). These basic factors controlling the variations in the depth of sleep appear to be vegetative in character and play a role in the over-all diurnal variations characteristic of the sleep-wakefulness cycle. This is a point of view suggested by the recent findings of Kleitman and his associates on the correlation of cyclic episodes of dreaming and the occurrence of rapid eye movements (3, 4, 5).

During states of partial arousal the nature of the conscious reflection experienced differs from waking consciousness in both the form it assumes and the content it conveys. To understand the formal characteristics of the dream—the concrete, sensory quality, the hallucinatory aspect—it becomes important to remember: At the time the dream is occurring the brain is in a state of partial arousal in response to the initial corticopetal impulses mediated through the reticular activating system; and its efferent system is oriented not to somatic efferents mediating activity in the external world, but to corticofugal efferents to the reticular system influencing the threshold in that system. The cortex in this sense becomes another source of afferent stimuli feeding into the reticular system, along with all the other afferent stimuli impinging upon this system. It is in conjunction with this mode of functioning, namely, where the cortex provides a source of afferent stimuli, afferent to the reticular activating system, that the formal characteristics of the dream assume an afferent or sensory quality. The dreamer experiences the dream passively as a series of events presented to his sensory apparatus, usually the visual system.

The remarkable feature of the dream content lies in the dreamer's ability to express in symbolic or metaphorical terms the connection between a present problem and aspects of the past experience related to the problem and culled from all levels of the longitudinal history of the individual. The dream states more about the problem and the healthy and defensive reactions evoked by it than is immediately accessible to waking consciousness.

To understand this aspect of dream consciousness two things have to be borne in mind. During these states of partial arousal the individual may experience affects which are disturbing enough to warrant full arousal. If this be so, then a certain sequence of events must follow involving the reticular system and the cortex. The interplay of impulses between the former and the latter produces a qualitative transformation in the level of consciousness, and waking consciousness is reinstated. This change involves a far greater transformation in the level of awareness than ever occurs in the waking state in response to a distressing or threatening stimulus.

The second point is a derivative from this. To achieve this drastic change in consciousness the individual has to state, usually in visual terms, much more about a problem area, its genetic roots, and the implications for his entire defensive structure than he is ever called

upon to do in the waking state. Hence deeper truths are revealed concerning one's personality than are immediately accessible in the waking state.

Where no such disturbing affective response is elicited during states of partial arousal, the reflections occurring in the dream do not act as excitatory stimuli to the reticular system, and the ordinary cyclic variations in depth of sleep persist unchanged.

The basic cyclic variations in the depth of sleep appear to allow the individual to awaken in response to inner psychological stimuli, should the need arise to do so. This appears to me to be the essential theoretical point arising out of the recent experimental work on sleep and dreams. The dream as such has no special function, e.g., to preserve sleep. Its significance to the organism is related to the general adaptive significance of the cyclic variations in depth of sleep during the sleeping phase of the sleep-wakefulness cycle. The dream is essentially bi-directional: it may be oriented toward bringing about full arousal, or play a role in the return to sleep.

Day residue and dream content. Daytime experience is linked to dream content through the day's residue. Freud called attention to the systematic way in which an incidental event occurring usually on the day before the dream, turned up in the dream. Actually the term recent residue might be a more felicitous designation, inasmuch as the event in question may occur in a much looser temporal relation to the dream and may precede the dream by several days or even a week. It is an event which appears to be of little moment in the setting in which it occurs. Its importance lies in its ability to set off a chain reaction linked to specific problematic aspects of one's existence. A sore spot is opened up which is more fully explored in the ensuing dream.

The challenge results from the partial exposure of a lack of congruence between an individual's habitual mode of behavior and a specific reality situation. An aspect of behavior that had heretofore been taken for granted and had been automatic in its operation, now stands exposed as inadequate and hollow. A personal myth has been punctured. The appearance of harmony between the organism and the environment is disrupted. The sense of security yields to the experience of anxiety.

The concrete exploration of these events takes place in the dream. Here a confrontation occurs which involves the mobilization of the resources of the individual in defense of his life style, in the face of an environmental threat. The nature of the threat, of course, can vary

widely. It can exist as something real and external to the individual, and as such represent more of a challenge than a threat. More commonly, however, it is an aspect of an external situation that unmasks the elements of pseudo-mastery and neurotic camouflage in the individual's make-up—a situation where, as Adler might put it, his life style deviates from the demands of common sense.

What is occurring in the dream and what can be discovered through analysis of the dream is that the individual has been forced to come to grips with the problem of changing some aspect of his existence. The pressure of events is such as to force movement away from the realm of the superficial and to create the possibility of movement toward a deeper or more essential relatedness. Whether this, indeed, occurs or whether neurotic defenses are heightened depends both upon the nature of the threat and the individual's readiness to cope with it. The manner of response is the story of the dream, and the feelings evoked will be idiosyncratic mixtures of courage and fear.

ADLER'S VIEW OF THE DREAM

Having set forth these general views let us turn to a number of provocative statements about dreaming set forth by Adler (1, 2) that merit further consideration and discussion. We may begin by noting Adler's own evaluation of the Freudian theory of dreams. He differs explicitly on at least three issues. (a) He considers as untenable the conscious-unconscious dichotomy emphasized by Freud as one of the prime qualities of dream thought. To Adler the laws of dream thought cannot be regarded as contradictory to everyday thinking. The conscious and unconscious aspects in the dream are not antithetical and contradictory but represent varieties of thought processes along a continuum. (b) Adler rejects the sexual theme as narrow and tending to separate these strivings from all other ordinary strivings and activities. (c) Adler raises objections to the notion of wish-fulfillment. Since, he argues, there are no satisfactions in the dream meaningful to the dreamer in waking life, it would follow that the wish-fulfilling purpose of the dream would have meaning at the expense of disrupting the coherence of the personality and of fostering the separation of dream life from waking life. In a more positive vein Adler presents a number of novel insights concerning the dream:

1. *Any explanation concerning the meaning of dreams must not offend common sense* (2, p. 93). Here Adler's concern, and understandably so, is with the possibility that the relative obscurity of the

dream may be seized upon to introduce obscurantist notions concerning the nature of dreaming and ultimately the nature of human personality. The peculiar features of the dream that make it appear puzzling and even mysterious in the light of day confront one with the challenge of hewing to a common-sense approach or succumbing to the seductive appeal of animistic explanations. Adler chose the former, based on his conviction that an understanding of the life style and the choices confronting an individual by a given current situation were all that was needed to arrive at the meaning of the dream.

2. *Dreams are the product of a particular life style and, in turn, build up and enforce this style* (2, p. 99). This places the emphasis on actual experience and habitual modes of relatedness. The level of conflict is shifted from one involving the antithesis between id and ego to one involving the total efforts of the individual to preserve his psychological status quo, his life style, in the face of a situation calling for change and growth. Since any change involves in greater or lesser measure a leap into the unknown, it is always accompanied by anxiety. The disturbed equilibrium reflects the balance between the defensive and the growth-potential aspects of the personality involved.

3. *Dreams have to be understood in terms of the individual's orientation to his own future* (2, pp. 94-95). We would say, the dreamer is in effect posing three questions to himself: What is threatening me? What are the implications of this threat for my total existence? What can I do about it? Although individual answers to the last question can be infinitely varied, there are three general directions in which movement can occur. Resolution can take place through denial, through integration and growth, or through the termination of the conflict situation by reinstatement of the waking state.

4. *The use of the metaphor lends itself to the task of stirring up feelings. If dreams have a purpose this resides in the feelings they arouse* (2, p. 104). Adler ascribes several qualities to the metaphor that make it suitable for dream work. The first is that self-deception is facilitated by means of the metaphor. With this statement I would not agree, as it can be just as readily turned around to state that an experience given concrete expression in the metaphor makes self-deception more difficult.

The second and in my opinion more valid point is that the metaphor can be used to stir up feelings. Now, Adler lays stress on the stirring up of feelings; but he limits his discussion of this to the pre-

paratory aspects of these feelings for engaging in the day's activities. There is, however, another aspect to the stirring up of feelings which I should like to point out, and that is the role it plays in the changes occurring during the sleep cycle: The dream through the feelings it evokes modulates the arousal threshold and if necessary can bring about complete arousal. The felt reactions accompanying the dream are primarily concerned with altering the level of conscious expression and are only indirectly or secondarily involved in any preparatory effect they may have, once waking consciousness is re-established.

5. *The dreamer engages in a tendentious ordering of experience so as to facilitate self-deception* (2, p. 102). Every student of the dream starts out faced with the necessity of explaining the fact that dreams are not readily understandable in the waking state. There are two possible points of view in the matter. The first is to interpret the obscurity as purposeful. The second is to see it as fortuitous, that is to say, "It is the limitation of our consciousness and not the disguise of our unconscious which accounts for the fact that dreams need to be interpreted in order to be understood" (7, p. 690). Adherents of the first view interpret the obscurity as arising out of disguise (Freud) or self-deception (Adler). Having discussed the question of disguise in dreams elsewhere (7) I would like to consider briefly the Adlerian notion of self-deception.

Here, I believe, Adler moves away from his own basic insight and insistence on the identity of the dream and the life style of the individual. He moves so far away, in fact, that he arrives at the untenable position that as one approaches a correct life style dreaming will diminish. "Dreaming is the adversary of common sense. We shall probably find that people who do not like to be deluded by their feelings, who prefer to proceed in a scientific way, do not dream often or do not dream at all" (2, p. 101). Dreams may, in fact, be self-deceptive. By the same token, however, they may also be self-revealing. The content of dreams can best be viewed as a dialectical unity in which new perceptions leading to new levels of self-revelation are struggling to gain expression in an area where outmoded techniques of self-deception are beginning to weaken and crumble. New relations between the individual and the outside world intrude themselves, despite compelling efforts to bolster their exclusion in the interest of a life style which demands this type of subjective distortion. The individual may wish to continue to deceive himself concerning an aspect of his current life situation but he can no longer do

so. Dreams can and do highlight any aspect of the personality that is summoned into play by a particular set of circumstances.

Adler's notion that in sleep the situation is simplified in order to facilitate the tendentious expression of a self-deceptive operation is not correct as a generalization. To say that the situation is more focussed would be more accurate. Complexity is not the issue. Only elements related to a given problem area gain expression in the dream. Nothing extraneous appears. Out of this a highly complex network of relations may emerge.

REFORMULATION

I would reformulate the relationship between the dream and the life style along the following lines. In response to a provocative life situation there is an exposure of some aspect of the life style that is inadequate or no longer concordant with reality. Depending upon the two main sets of variables, the seriousness of the threat and the defensive rigidities inherent in the life style, the latter may be reinforced, subjected to minor repairs, or qualitatively altered. The feelings evoked in the process of coming to grips with the threatening or disturbing situation may cover the entire pleasure-pain spectrum.

Whatever the feelings are, they reflect the full import of the situation in all its aspects. Self-deceptive defensive operations may or may not be highlighted. The crucial quality of dream content lies in the capacity for revelation rather than concealment. The affective overtones of the dream are direct, though often subtle, clues to the objective truths involved in the problematic situation. If anything, self-deception is more difficult to effect in a dream than in waking life. This is so because the individual has to explain in depth—that is, in a more complete and historically or genetically integrated fashion—the nature of the threat or upset that besets him.

If the associated affect has a low arousal threshold, that is, if it does not succeed in bringing about full arousal, it will tend to recede as the individual moves toward a greater depth of sleep. The subjective reflection of the disappearance and relative impotence of the disturbing stimulus may take the form of dream content depicting apparent mastery and control over the situation. It is in this sense that self-deception may be said to occur. This, however, is somewhat different from Adler's concern with self-deception as a basic teleologic factor in dreaming.

When the affect aroused by the problematic situation is disturbing enough to produce full arousal, self-deception cannot obscure the

associated distressing feelings.

This is not to project a purely passive view of the dream. It is possible for something to happen in a dream that will influence the disturbing feelings. But this occurs only when, through the exploration of the threat, some internal rearrangement occurs that exposes new sources of genuine strength, creativity, and mastery.

We now know that the incidence and extent of dreaming appear to be governed by physiological rather than psychological factors. We will not cease to dream as our life style becomes healthier or more in accord with common sense. The dialectics of living are such that our relations with the external world are never on a one-to-one, problem-free basis. We will always remain only relative masters of our destiny. Life will always have something to teach us, and dreaming is a kind of learning that takes place during sleep. Learning involves change. The struggle toward change, painful or pleasant as the case may be, takes place in the dream state as in waking life despite differences in form, expression, and conscious appreciation.

SUMMARY

A theory of dream consciousness integrating recent physiological findings relating to sleep and dreams has been presented in summary form. A number of statements made by Adler concerning the nature of dreams were then explored within this frame of reference. Areas of agreement included the objections Adler raised to the limiting features of Freudian theory, his emphasis on the positive relationship of the dream to the life style, and his emphasis on the dreamer's orientation to the future. Partial agreement occurred in connection with his discussion of the use of metaphor in dreams as a device suited to the task of stirring up feelings. A point of disagreement arose around his adherence to the self-deceptive concept of dreaming.

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