

Interpreting Our Dreams

She had dreamt white curtains flapping in a breeze. Over coffee, she told us of a trip to Toronto where she and her two children had difficulty finding a place to stay. Finally they found a place and it had (dramatic pause) white flapping curtains. In the minds of all her listeners except one, here was proof that dreams can predict the future.

Unfortunately, this was an after-the-fact fulfilled prediction. White curtains are common enough. Eventually she was likely going to come across them, and when she did her mind “remembered” the dream and gave it significance. Complicating matters for us is the fact that there is no tape recorder in our heads playing back our memories. We re-construct our memories from triggering events and associations. Had she come across a body in Toronto wrapped in a white shroud, in dreams shrouds and curtains are very much alike, she would have “remembered” the shroud, and would have likely become even more emotionally attached to its significance.

An example of a before-the-fact prediction would be if she had dreamt a telephone number that she subsequently dialled on her trip to Toronto and this resulted in a place for her and her children to stay. Now that would have been impressive! Numerous psychologists have investigated the capacity of dreams to predict events before they happen, and all of the studies have found that you have a better chance of predicting the future by taking wide-awake reasoned guesses.

Dreams are our own creations, and we have, on average, eight to ten of them each night. Observers can know when the dream is happening because the dreamer’s eyes move back and forth under his or her eyelids in what has been called REM (Rapid Eye Movement) sleep. EEGs (Electroencephalogram monitoring) reveals that we have a special brain wave pattern while we dream. Psychologists have experimented by waking dreamers whenever they begin a dream thus preventing dreaming from occurring. The sleep-deprived subjects become progressively more irritable and finally begin having hallucinations while awake. Dreaming is necessary for our mental health.

Dreams that we remember, vivid dreams, appear to be tied to our emotional state. The type of dream interpretation I use, first pioneered by Alfred Adler, assumes that dreams reflect, symbolically, emotionally significant events in our lives. In a sense, dreamers are re-enacting the emotional challenges that they have faced, or have failed to face, in the preceding day. Dreams may then point us to unresolved issues, or they may be adjusting our bodies, emotionally, to new understandings or new realities as often happens, for example, when grieving.

Okay, you ask, what is wrong with allowing this woman, and others, to believe that sometimes dreams can predict the future? The answer came from a dream of this woman’s nephew. He shared with me that he had dreamt the death of this mother. I suggested to him that his mother, in the dream, likely represented some part of himself, such as immaturity, dependency or being

nurtured, and that part of him is symbolically “dying” in the face of his responsibilities as a father.

Of course, we will all die, but most of us will not die soon. It is likely that one in every 10 people have dreamt or will dream about the death of a loved one. We cannot have approximately 3 million Canadians walking around prematurely grieving the loss of someone who is not yet dead. Nor can we have the rest of us trying to order our lives and our relationships on the belief that our dreams do predict the future. This is not good for our mental health, and it is not good for our society.

Dreams may feel magical, and they may be a window to our emotional functioning, but they cannot predict or control our lives. We influence our futures through the choices we make. We predict our own futures by anticipating the consequences of those choices.