

# DREAMS, NIGHTMARES, AND NONVIOLENCE

Allen Flagg

## ABSTRACT

Anthropologists who have studied the Senoi, Temiar and Semai groups of aboriginal peoples of Malaysia have reported that the communal sharing of dreams and nightmares and the utilizing of their music, songs, dances, stories, designs and inventions resulted in a harmonious lifestyle of non-violence. Alfred Korzybski has emphasized "...the benefit in enlarging the field of 'consciousness', by bringing into 'consciousness' important factors of the 'unconscious' and thereby counteracting the semantic possibility for arrested development or regression." The awareness of the source of many dreams and nightmares in the "animal" origin of the human species allows us to become conscious of our abstractions and evaluate fears that result in violence.

Gregory Bateson, in one of his lectures, asked "Do you see me?" The audience murmured assent, that of course they saw him in front of them. But he pointed out that what their nervous systems were perceiving were patches of moving colors in their cortexes that they had learned to interpret. Their quick responses showed their lack of consciousness of abstracting.

In a similar way, if I ask "Who are you?", a quick response may be to give your name, showing the lack of awareness of an organism-as-a-whole- in-an-environment. A person's life experiences should be included, and, further, the recognition of having a mind-body of the genus homo, with roots in the archaic past, as Korzybski points out.

Using the terms "colloidal" and "cortico-thalamic," he emphasizes the Underlying "animal" aspects of our species, and cautions us to be careful in our responses, taking time to evaluate appropriately when presented with an environment that may provoke fear, anger, hunger or sexuality. Responses should be tempered with an adult human consciousness of abstracting.

Humans, as well as mammals in general, process abstractions of abstractions that we call dreams and nightmares. Few people in our Western society pay attention to these subjective happenings, but in Malaysia the Senoi, Temiar and Semai groups

of aboriginal peoples worked with their dreams and nightmares on a continual basis, as reported by anthropologists Kilton Stewart, Robert Dentan, Sue Jennings and Marina Roseman, and ethnologist Richard Noone. The communal sharing of dreams and utilizing dream music, songs, dances, stories, designs and inventions, the researchers reported, resulted in such a harmonious lifestyle that Dentan titled his book “The Semai, A Nonviolent People of Malaya.”

This learned collaboration between “conscious” and “unconscious” can start with the awareness of other common verbal splits such as mind-body and feeling-thinking. Isolating the two sides of the hyphen leads to separating the organism into parts that tend to operate autonomously. Alfred Korzybski has written that “(i)t should be remembered that in the human nervous system the co-ordinated working of the higher and lower centres is a necessity for the optimal working of the whole (p. 511).” He points to “...the non-aristotelian type of communication found in general semantics which is based on proper evaluation, made possible by thalamo-cortical integration (p. xlix).” He emphasizes “...the benefit in enlarging the field of ‘consciousness’, by bringing into ‘consciousness’ important factors of the ‘unconscious’ and thereby counteracting the semantic possibility for arrested development or regression (p. 503).”

Korzybski has the human organism beginning 100 million years ago (p. 494), evolving through the ages to its present form. The primitive fear of snakes, of falling, of strangers, of darkness and the unknown, come from archaic times. The love of family and friends, the need for food and protection, Abraham Maslow’s lower needs of survival, for procreation, come from this period in evolution. These “animal” needs, instincts and energies were useful in the continuation of the human species. We copy animals in many of these ways, but should do so with consciousness of abstracting at the human level.

These factors become the source of many dreams and nightmares, but little attention is paid to them in our society. We need to understand and evaluate the output of our unconscious processes, experiencing them from both a rational and an emotional point of view, thereby increasing the content of our conscious (p. 500).

The interaction between these levels of conscious and unconscious would optimally take the form of remembering dreams and nightmares, recording them by telling, writing, drawing, painting and otherwise reproducing them in the conscious waking world. This engaging in dialogue between conscious and unconscious can be taken to another level, by inquiring of a dream symbol, in

conversation in a dream, fantasy or re-dream, to understand their potential meaning.

This procedure, enhancing Korzybski's prescription, has been proposed by a number of authors:

- Fritz Perls, in "Gestalt Therapy Verbatim," assumes that every dream symbol represents some aspect of the dreamer, and asks a participant to "become" the dream tree, or dog, or person, and communicate what it means to be that dream symbol.
- Eugene Gendlin, in "Let Your Body Interpret Your Dreams," asks the dreamer to focus on the bodily felt sense of the dream and verbalize that sense.
- Robert Moss, in "Conscious Dreaming," tells that his daughter Sophie, being chased by dream monsters, put on a dragon costume and chased them back.
- Edgar Bergen, as reported by Jean Houston in "A Mythic Life," would talk with his dummy Charlie McCarthy, asking profound questions and getting astounding answers.
- Judith Malamud, in "Learning to Become Fully Lucid," writes that fully lucid dreamers are aware of creating their dream, and that such awareness may also foster awareness of one's creative role in life generally.
- Kilton Stewart wrote in "Pygmies and Dream Giants" that Philippine Negritos would ask for a dream message from the image of a deceased parent, to end a period of mourning. Stewart thought that the neglect of the dream in Western education was a blind spot that made us stop short of a crimeless, warless civilization.

Our task in dreaming is to work at communicating with images that may have something to tell us about ourselves. It's not surprising that children have nightmares, with so much unknown and having so much to learn from people bigger and stronger. Listening to a child's nightmare, or a friend's, will help put the experience into perspective. Sigmund Freud referred to the "id," Carl Jung to the "shadow," when writing on the primitive, archaic aspect of the human psyche. Georg Groddeck, a pioneer in psychosomatic studies and a colleague of Freud's, called this deep self the "it," and proposed that this level of the organism

influenced all experiences. One's own fears and insecurities can be projected onto others, and symbolized in dreams in many kinds of images. Since the 9/11/01 attack on the World Trade Center dreamers have reported being chased by people in Arabian style clothing. Using this imagery to portray fearful aspects in one's personal life can unfortunately become a stereotype that can be used in the waking world, creating prejudicial behavior. We need to practice consciousness of abstracting and understand our symbolizing processes, to control our tendencies to violence.