

Ashley Evans

Kim Groninga

EN 112

March 16, 2007

## Why Do I Have Bizarre Dreams Every Night?

### 1) What I already know (and don't know) about my topic

I know I do not rest when I sleep. I know that instead of sleeping, I hide in mini-fridges from terrorists, buy maroon belts with elephants on them, see brown flamingos upside down in graveyards, and sometimes even talk about Lego conventions in tree houses. I know I have experienced more adventures in my life than most people like to admit. I know I am quite possibly a dream analysis's worst nightmare. It is because I know I am a freak. That is the only explanation. There is no way anyone could tell me Best Buy, tractors, hunting bibs, and my Introduction to Literature school books have something in common. Every morning, I wake up and say, "I had the *weirdest* dream last night." What I do not know is why.

What I know about dreaming is slim. I know dreams deal with your subconscious. There is also some mumbo-jumbo about rapid eye movement, otherwise known as a REM cycle. From personal experience, I know you dream several times a night, every night, and the more sleep you get, the sketchier the dreams get. Not only is it easy to forget your dreams, but some people cannot even remember them.

What I do not know is why. I want to know why clowns chase me for goodness' sake. It would be nice to know what all my interesting dreams mean, too. (Like, should I seek therapy? Or does a Western restaurant mean I should buy a lottery ticket?) Any answers to the things I don't know will be helpful.

2) Why I want to answer this question

Well, for starters, it would make me feel less weird. Sure, it is fun to hear about someone's interesting dream from the night before, but my roommate must think I make up a new dream (or two) each day to entertain her. I want to be able to understand why I had a dream. Figuring out how the brain works is going to be a difficult task, but I want to know. That is why I picked this subject: to explain to everyone who has ever had their teeth fall out or fallen off a cliff why they had that dream and what it means.

3) The story of my search

(Side note: I have kept a dream journal for almost a year. Whenever I have a dream, I date it and write down every detail I can remember. Throughout my paper I have continued this habit.)

I began my research at home. I own a book that interprets dreams, and I figured it would give me a great place to start from. This was pretty courageous on my part considering it predicted my death the last time I consulted it. On page 10 of The Dictionary of Dreams, by Gustavus Hindman Miller, I wondered if I should keep reading. It had some example about a lady who heard singing and fainted at the exact

moment her friend 20 miles away died. It sounded like a *Lifetime* movie. I continued anyways. I found out that dreams are “usually superinduced by the anxious waking mind, and when this is so they possess no prophetic significance” (Miller 21). This seemed like a ridiculous explanation for why I have dreams. I decided Barnes and Noble’s book selection was not very reliable so I moved on.

I found out that *Psychology Today*, a magazine that covers everything from addictions to voices in your head, is not just for those in the industry. Jill Neimark, author of the article titled “Night Life,” compiled a list of different reasons psychologists think we dream. My personal favorite: “The mind becomes clinically insane while dreaming.”<sup>1</sup> Coming from Robert Stickgold, it does not mean much, until you find out he is a Harvard neuroscientist.

Then I learned a surprising fact: we dream all night. Neimark explained that dreams occur while we are sound asleep and are “marked by slow EEG waves.”<sup>1</sup> She said dreams also occur during REM sleep, which is a “violently ‘awake’ sleep”<sup>1</sup> in which the “brain and nervous system are highly active.”<sup>1</sup> I concluded from this that I am dreaming freaky things not only when I am most relaxed, pretty much one step from death, but also dream when my brain is tweaking out.

The next thing I learned about sleep disturbed me. Neimark said we experience this “violent” REM sleep cycle sometimes six times a night, and with it comes “irregular breathing, increased heart rate and brain temperature.”<sup>1</sup> These cycles get longer throughout the night, so by the time you are to the last of them, you are probably experiencing the hiding-from-terrorist scenarios. The dreams you experience while your heart is racing and your brain is frying are the ones you will

most likely remember, Neimark explained. She also added in a tidbit about how we are paralyzed neck down while we are in the REM cycle, but lost me when she started babbling about our brain being “soaked in acetylcholine”<sup>1</sup> and our “serotonin”<sup>1</sup> levels “plummeting.”<sup>1</sup> She hooked me again when she mentioned that being paralyzed is actually a good thing, otherwise we would probably be acting out our dreams. I prefer NOT acting like I was on a jet ski in the middle of the evening, so I guess I can accept not moving for a bit.

The article then got technical, so I will try to sum it up for those who are not in Psych 101. Researchers at the National Institute of Health and the Walter Reed Army Institute did studies that proved your “visual cortex and frontal lobes”<sup>1</sup> do not work while you are in the REM cycle. Those two important brain divisions do the thinking, so if they are on hold, the core of your brain becomes the main player in your dreams, which is also known as the “emotional core.”<sup>1</sup> This led to the conclusion that dreams are secret wishes being disguised. That explains my dream about winning *America’s Next Top Model*, but I honestly do not think I have any secret passion to transform into a red triceratops dinosaur.

The next scrap of information did not necessarily deal with dreams, but was interesting nonetheless. I discovered if REM sleep is interrupted, you cannot retain facts or new material you learned that day. Stickgold (the Harvard genius, remember?) mentioned that the “first two hours of the night is highly correlated with the amount of learning.”<sup>1</sup> This does not have anything to do with dreaming, but at least I know not to let anyone bother me the first couple hours of my sleeping experience, for fear of going brain-dead.

Finally, I landed on some beneficial data about nightmares. Tony Zadra, a doctor at the Dream and Nightmare Laboratory in Montreal, studied people with reoccurring nightmares. First of all, it baffled me that someone does studies like that for a living. Second of all, who knew a dream and nightmare lab existed? Third of all, his advice for overcoming nightmares was questionable. Zadra said, “Some studies show that you can change absolutely anything in the nightmare, rehearse that change, and the nightmare will get better.”<sup>1</sup> For example, say I dissected scorpions every other night. Zadra suggests visualizing the dream while awake. When I get to a certain point or a memorable point, WAM! look at my hand. Then, when I dream and I get to the memorable point, I will subconsciously remember to look at my hand. Therefore, I break my streak of cutting up scorpions, or so Zadra thinks.

I was not finding the information I wanted. I wanted to know why I, as in Ashley Sue Evans, have dreams like a creeper. Although hesitant because I did not want my school record to say I am clinically insane, I decided to take use of Wartburg’s counseling service.

It took several deep breaths, as well as a few mutterings of, “I am not crazy, I am not crazy” before I was able to step inside the Pathways center. I rehearsed my speech while waiting. I decided to tell Wartburg’s counselor, Stephanie Newsom, that I had weird dreams every night and they kind of disturbed me. When I stepped in her office, I had to wait while she checked her voicemail. While looking around, I saw books with titles like Steps to Success and 55 Ways to Stop Alcohol Poisoning. There were also tubs of Play-Doh. It was at that moment I realized I should not have done this. Then, when Stephanie said she had to report me if I confessed to abusing anyone

under the age of 18, I almost left. Seriously, this was one of the most embarrassing things I have ever done. But I did it. I successfully told her I have dreams about graveyards regularly and for the past three nights I have dreamed about airports. She told me a variety of factors could be causing my dreams, such as stress, exhaustion, certain foods before bed, or events that occur during the day that I do not pay much attention to. I asked her if the latter was the reason I turned into a red triceratops once, but she just laughed. I told her these were reasonable causes. I am obviously stressed—I'm a college student who is a double-major. I am exhausted from all of the studying I have to do. I do not eat strange foods before bed, except for ice pops. (Who knows what artificial flavors are in those.) As for the last reason, this college is so strange I have gotten used to it. Honestly, we have some strange occurrences on campus during the day, so maybe that is a correct assumption.

Stephanie attempted to decode two of my most recent dreams. The first, involving a plethora of guns shooting me with water balloons in Chicago, could be a sign I am “feeling attacked”<sup>2</sup> by those around me. My second dream, consisting of never-ending escalators in an airport, was decoded as “not being able to get somewhere”<sup>2</sup> I wanted. I thought those were safe, broad assumptions. The Dictionary of Dreams said something completely different, however. Guns shooting me, according to Miller, meant I was going to “be annoyed by evil persons, and perhaps suffer an acute illness” (Miller 270). As for riding escalators...well, I am going to become rich and then suffer “misfortunes” that will “crush and discourage” me (Miller 215).

Although my counseling session put me on the potential psychopathic list, Stephanie had good advice to rid myself of crazy night thoughts. She told me to write

in a diary at night. “If you take ten minutes and write down everything that happened in the day, you’ll get rid of all of the clutter that could be making you have such peculiar dreams,” she said. She also told me to do some sort of relaxation exercises at night, just to get my mind calmed and stress free.

When I finally told Stephanie I was not truly concerned about the welfare of my health due to my dreams, I think she was angry. I told her how important it was for me to get professional help without any background information so I could get her true opinion. I could not bring myself to ask her to destroy my newly created file, however, so who knows what kind of follow-ups I will get. (“Ashley, this is Steph in Pathways. I just wanted to make sure you were not trying to hurt yourself in any way or form, or you did not have any nightmares about rotten cheese or missing a giant shoe sale. Call me back at extension 1853 and we can set up weekly appointments!”)

#### 4) What I learned

What a search. I honestly did not think I would find any information to explain my nighttime adventures. I learned the deeper the sleep I get into, the stranger my dreams will be. So if I sleep for long periods of time (a standard night’s sleep) I will wake up in the midst of a pretty unique dream. I learned a disruption in my first few hours of sleep could prohibit me from retaining information learned that day. I also have a new technique for getting rid of pesky, reoccurring escalator dreams. While Stephanie offered great advice for attempting to rid myself of my dreams, I do not even know if I want to anymore. After keeping a dream journal and continually re-reading my nighttime thoughts, I

realized it is rather entertaining to have a “story” to tell when I wake up every day. Although I realize Gustavus Hindman Miller is going to predict my misfortunes at least twice a week, it is still fun to look up what Chad Michael Murray’s obsession with squirrels means (yes, I really did have that dream.)

Perhaps the reason no one can settle on a solid explanation for why people dream the way they do is because we are not supposed to know. Our brains are complicated messes, and perhaps they are supposed to stay that way. If this search taught me one thing, it was not that I am a freak or am going to be “friendly but disliked” (squirrels, Miller 528). It means my brain is doing its job. It is creative, imaginative, resourceful, clever, and inventive...basically, it is amazing. My theory is it takes everything I have ever known or learned and jumbles random pieces together at night, like a chaotic review session.

I doubt anyone will ever understand how the brain functions, so for now, I will just have to accept that King Kong lives in Ohio and I sometimes fly planes down 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue. I decided I do not want my dreams to stop, no matter how sketchy they are. I do, however, want people to stop saying dreams can come true...because in my case, it would be an absolute catastrophe.

## Works Cited

Miller, Gustavus H. *The Dictionary of Dreams*. New York: Fireside, 1984.

(1) Neimark, Jill. "Night Life." *Psychology Today*. July 1998. 1 March 2007

<<http://psychologytoday.com/articles/pto-19980701-000025.html>>.

(2) Newsom, Stephanie. Personal interview by Ashley Evans. 13 March 2007.