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**FINDINGS**

## **What Do Dreams Mean? Whatever Your Bias Says**

By **[JOHN TIERNEY](#)**

Suppose last night you had two dreams. In one, God appears and commands you to take a year off and travel the world. In the other, God commands you to take a year off to go work in a leper colony.

Which of those dreams, if either, would you consider meaningful?

Or suppose you had one dream in which your friend defends you against enemies, and another dream in which that same friend goes behind your back and tries to seduce your significant other? Which dream would you take seriously?

Tough questions, but social scientists now have answers — and really, it's about time. For thousands of years, dreamers have had little more to go on than the two-gate hypothesis proposed in "The Odyssey." After Penelope dreams of the return of her lost-long husband, she's skeptical and says that only some dreams matter.

"There are two gates," she explains, "through which these unsubstantial fancies proceed; the one is of horn, and the other ivory. Those that come through the gate of ivory are fatuous, but those from the gate of horn mean something to those that see them."

Her two-gate hypothesis, later endorsed by Virgil and Ovid, was elegant in theory but not terribly useful in practice. How could you tell which gate your dream came from? One woman's ivory could be another's horn.

Today, though, we can start making distinctions, thanks to [a series of studies of more than 1,000 people](#) by two [psychologists](#), Carey Morewedge of [Carnegie Mellon University](#) and Michael Norton of Harvard. (You can report your dreams to these researchers at TierneyLab, [nytimes.com/tierneylab](http://nytimes.com/tierneylab).)

The psychologists began by asking college students in three countries — India, South Korea and the United States — how much significance they attached to dreams. Relatively few students believed in modern theories that dreaming is simply the brain's response to random impulses, or that it's a mechanism for sorting and discarding information. Instead, the majority in all three countries believed, along with Freud, that dreams reveal important unconscious emotions.

These instinctive Freudians also considered dreams to be valuable omens, as demonstrated in a study asking them to imagine they were about to take a plane trip. If, on the eve of the flight, they dreamed of the plane's crashing, they were more likely to cancel the trip than if they saw news of an actual plane crash on their route.

But when the researchers asked people to interpret dreams, some suspiciously convenient correlations turned up. When asked to recall their own dreams, they attached more significance to a negative dream if it was about

someone they disliked, and they gave correspondingly more weight to a positive dream if it was about a friend.

A similar bias showed up when people were asked to imagine that they had had various dreams starring a friend or a deity. People rated a dream about a friend protecting them against attackers as being more “meaningful” than a dream about their own romantic partner faithlessly kissing that same friend. People who believed in God were more likely than agnostics to be swayed by divine apparitions.

But even the nonbelievers showed a weakness for certain heavenly dreams, like one in which God commanded them to take a year off to travel the world. Agnostics rated that dream as significantly more meaningful than the dream of God commanding them to spend a year working in a leper colony. (Incidentally, although the preferred term for [leprosy](#) is now Hansen’s disease, the deity in the experiment used the old-fashioned term from the Bible.)

Dreamers’ self-serving bias is tactfully defined as a “motivated approach to dream interpretation” by Dr. Morewedge and Dr. Norton in *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. When asked if this “motivated approach” might also affect dream researchers, Dr. Morewedge pointed to Freud’s tendency to find what he was looking for — sex — in his “Interpretation of Dreams.”

“Freud himself suggested that dreams of flying revealed thoughts of sexual desire,” Dr. Morewedge noted. “Interestingly, in the same text, Freud also suggested that dreams about the absence of the ability to fly — i.e., falling — also indicate succumbing to sexual desire. One might interpret this as evidence that scientists are just as self-serving as laypeople when interpreting their dreams.”

Once you see how flexible dream interpretation can be, you can appreciate why it has always been such a popular tool for decision-making. Relying on your dreams for guidance is like the political ritual of appointing an “independent blue-ribbon panel” to resolve an issue. You can duck any personal responsibility for action while pretending to rely on an impartial process, even though you’ve stacked the panel with your own friends and will ignore any advice that conflicts with your desires. Charity work, no; margaritas, sí.

Even if you don’t believe in your own dreams, the new research suggests that you can learn something from those of others. In the Book of Genesis, when the Pharaoh becomes concerned over his dreams of emaciated cattle and withered ears of corn, it would not be unreasonable for Joseph to conclude that the ruler is worried about the possibility of famine. Joseph would therefore have every motivation to interpret the dream so that the Pharaoh creates a new grain-storage program — and, not incidentally, a new job for Joseph supervising it.

While they doubt that dreams contain hidden insights or prophecies, Dr. Morewedge and Dr. Norton note that dreams can be indicators of people’s emotional state, as evidenced by other researchers’ findings of a correlation between stress and [nightmares](#).

Dreams can also become self-fulfilling prophecies simply because people take them so seriously, Dr. Morewedge and Dr. Norton say. Dreams of spousal infidelity may lead to accusations and acrimony that ultimately lead to real infidelity.

“When friends and loved ones have disturbing dreams,” Dr. Morewedge suggested, “one may need to do more than say, ‘It was just a dream.’ It may also be a good idea not to tell people about their undesirable behavior in your dreams, as they may infer that your dreams reveal your true feelings about them.”

This last caveat applies even when non-Freudians are discussing dreams. Even if you don't ascribe any deep meaning to dreams, even if you think they're just random [hallucinations](#) that don't come from gates of ivory or horn or anything else, you should still probably pay attention when, say, your romantic partner tells you about a dream in which you were caught in bed with your partner's friend.

And you should definitely be concerned if your partner goes on to mention a second dream involving a commandment from God to take a year off and travel the world. If your partner is a highly motivated interpreter of dreams, you may find yourself home alone.

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