

Near-Lucid Dreams and Related Phenomena: Humorous Commentaries on the Human Condition

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There's something downright funny about near-lucid dreams, in which the dreamer begins to suspect this might be a dream but then *realizes*: "No, I'm definitely awake!" Tests we perform to investigate these suspicions may only confirm this mistaken belief. We may discuss dreams, theorize about them, or try to convince other people that they're dreaming, without being aware that we're having a dream. Even if we realize we're dreaming, we may not understand that this means we're lying in bed asleep. In false awakening dreams, we mistakenly believe: "I was asleep, but now I'm awake for sure." Such dreams parody our near-infinite capacity for self-deception, poke fun at our misplaced certainty and invite reflection upon the dream-like nature of waking reality.

To be human is to seek wisdom, knowledge and certainty. We want to believe we're fully awake, conscious, enlightened; this time we've figured it out — whatever *it* is — and our new-found knowledge will save us from the suffering of life.

I once was lost, but now I'm found
Was blind, but now I see

In near-lucid dreams, the dreamer, certain that he or she has figured it all out, is in fact still lost, still blind.

Lucid Dreams

A "lucid dream" is one in which the dreamer is aware that he or she is dreaming. The term "lucid dream" was coined by Dutch psychiatrist Frederik van Eeden in 1913 (van Eeden, 1913). In the late 1970s, Keith Hearne of the University of Hull and Stephen LaBerge of Stanford independently discovered laboratory evidence that a lucid dreamer, while still dreaming, could signal (despite the usual sleep paralysis) by moving his or her eyes in a predetermined pattern (Hearne, 1981) (LaBerge, *Lucid dreaming: An exploratory study of consciousness during sleep*, 1980).

The following excerpt displays many common components of a lucid dream:

I'm at a party. Ed's there, but then I see another guy who looks like Ed, wrestling with yet another guy that looks like Ed. I look back at the first one and think, "this is pretty strange." I look closer at each of them, and each one is definitely Ed. Then I realize this must be a dream. I start looking around, just amazed at how totally real it seems. I would have never guessed it was a dream except for the thing about the three Eds.

I start walking around, and at some point I realize I can walk through things. I see a table and think, "I wonder if I can walk through it." It put up some resistance, but I could walk right through. It seemed to help if I pointed my hand away from me and moved with my fingers first. When I walked through walls, the tactile sensation felt totally realistic and convincing. At one point I walked through a mirror, like in Cocteau's *Orphee*. Then I saw another mirror and looked at my reflections. As I moved closer and further away, my face would keep changing to different faces: interesting, distinctive faces, not mine. I played with that for a while.

Dream Signs

One technique of inducing lucid dreams is to train yourself to look for "dream signs" (LaBerge, *Lucid dreaming: The power of being awake and aware in your dreams*, 1985) — incongruous thoughts, objects or events that imply this might be a dream. In the previous dream, the presence of three Eds was the dream sign. Some other examples:

I was reading an article about a South American monkey species that would kick one individual out of the tribe every fortnight as a ritual method of population control. Oddly, I was able to read the article straight off a microfiche, without using the microfiche reader. I started wondering how I was able to read it at all.

I point out the car window and show Beth that the road's going at a very improbable angle. Then I look up and see that the road is doing multiple loop-de-loops up in the sky, so you would be driving upside-down for part of it. She's really amazed. Then I realize this must be a dream, and therefore I can do whatever I want. I remember the phrase from the lucid dream tape about going for the highest. I ask myself what I want to do in the dream, and I decide I should come up with something that would help me figure out what to do with my life. But then I woke up.

Near-Lucid Dreams

Sometimes the dreamer will notice a dream sign and ask, "could this be a dream?" only to conclude, "No, it could not." This phenomenon has been referred to as a "pre-lucid" dream (Green, 1968), a term which misleadingly implies that a lucid dream will follow. A better term is "near-lucid," which also helps convey the "so close, yet so far away" quality that makes these dreams almost invariably humorous (Vickers, *Three Visions of You*, 2016).

Dream Tests

Often the dreamer will conduct some type of experiment (for example, pinching oneself, or trying to turn on a light), to prove once and for all whether or not this is a dream. The results are not always definitive, as illustrated by the following near-lucid dreams:

One of my front teeth is loose. I ask myself if there's any reason to suspect this could be a dream. I decide, "No," and wonder what made me think that. I check my tooth and it is still definitely loose.

Some kids kept predicting things that were going to happen to me, and the predictions kept coming true. There seemed to be some kind of conspiracy, with everything fitting into this strange pattern. I thought, "How can this be? Things like this can only happen in a dream." Then I did a quick check to see if that was possible, but no, this was all definitely real.

Pseudo-Lucid Dreams

In pseudo-lucid dreams, you become aware that you're dreaming, without quite realizing what dreaming is. On some level, you understand that this is a dream, and yet you fully believe that you're in the world — it doesn't occur to you that you're lying in bed asleep.

I saw a number of UFOs flying overhead. Most of them looked like giant green cacti, with four or five different stalks, spinning around and twirling end-over-end as they flew through the sky. I thought, "Yeah, this is a dream, but I don't care, this is so cool." But even as I was saying this to myself, at the same time I believed I was standing outside in the yard — I'm not sure it fully sank in that dreaming meant I was lying in bed asleep.

Sometimes we even want to push our newfound enlightenment onto other people:

Suddenly I realize there's something strange going on here; I forget what, but I notice some kind of dream sign. I float over to Cindy and whisper in her ear, "Hey Cindy, guess what, you're dreaming." I thought it would be fun to trigger her to have a lucid dream too. I don't know if I was really lucid, really aware I was dreaming, or just dreaming about being lucid and telling her we were lucid. I don't think I quite realized that I was lying in bed alone, dreaming, and that Cindy wasn't there.

Non-Lucid Dreams about Dreaming

In these dreams, we think about dreaming or discuss it with other people, without realizing we're currently dreaming. One example is a [Dream about Dreaming](#) (Vickers, Dream about Dreaming, 1998) that resulted from my waking attempts to have a dream

embodying a theory of dreaming. That dream, which involved detailed conceptualization and symbols about dreams and consciousness, was nevertheless not lucid.

Some other examples of non-lucid dreams about dreaming:

I tell Liz that I'm trying to take my dreams further than I took them last year. I tell her about lucid dreams, that if you can become aware that you're dreaming when you're dreaming, you can become aware that you're dreaming when you're awake, that life is a dream. I told her I'd read about a great technique for doing that. I think to myself that I should practice that technique more often.

I meet Bonnie Raitt and tell her I'd had a dream about her.

I listen to a song, "There's a Dream inside of You Now," without realizing that I'm dreaming.

I have a large, complicated golf tee. Supposedly you can control hook or slice, etc., just by making little adjustments. The instructions say Marilyn Ferguson invented it while writing a book on dreams. I think, "I bet she had that idea in a dream. She puts ideas from her dreams into practice, instead of letting them sit around and get stagnant."

False Awakenings

In false awakening dreams, we think we've woken up, but we're actually still dreaming. These can occur singly or in a nested sequence.

I'd been trying to remember my dreams and write them down in the mornings. So after my first dream of the night, I woke up and wrote it down. Unfortunately, I wrote it with my finger in the dust. After my next dream, I realized that my dust writing wouldn't be permanent, so I woke up and tried to find a pen and a pad of paper. I finally realize that the reason I can't find the pad is because I'm still dreaming.

I woke up and looked at the clock and saw it was 7:55 AM. Then I had some more dreams, and when I woke up again and looked at the clock I saw it was still 7:55 AM. Now I really am awake (I think) and it's 10:32.

Conclusion

As humans, we have certain cognitive needs: to understand what's going on, to believe we understand, and to score points with others for the depth of our understanding. Unfortunately, the intensity of our beliefs does not imply their validity, as evidenced by the endless parade of pontificating politicians and windbag pundits, spewing opinion as

fact and coughing up "truthiness" as truth.

Self-deception is, of course, more obvious when it occurs in someone else, especially when that person's opinions differ from our own. Dreams give us a non-threatening way to observe this process in ourselves.

Near-lucid dreams and related phenomena cast an often-amusing light on the fuzzy boundaries between illusion and reality. In the illogic of the twilight state we can see variants of the false enlightenment, magical thinking and misplaced certainty that so often make cameo appearances in daily life. Perhaps with practice we may learn to recognize these mental states the next time our waking minds are trapped in the world of Maya, as we row gently down the stream.

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