Dream Analysis by Mail

An American Woman Seeks Freud’s Advice

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When a young American woman had a disturbing dream that continued to occupy her daily thoughts, she wrote to Sigmund Freud, sending him an account of her dream and asking for his help. This article reprints that 1927 letter to Freud and his reply, neither of which has been published before. This exchange of letters is discussed in the context of the popularity of psychology and psychoanalysis in America in the 1920s and in the context of Freud’s letter writing habits and his life in 1927.

The 1920s were heady times for America. American military forces had turned the tide in Europe, helping to win the Great War and making the world safe for democracy—or so they believed. There was economic prosperity in the United States and a public euphoria that proclaimed the validity of the American dream: prosperity existed for all who would work hard enough to achieve it (Sokal, 1984).

Popularity of Psychology in the 1920s

Recall the nurturist optimism of John B. Watson, who proclaimed in a 1925 book written for the American public:

Give me a dozen healthy infants, well-formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in and I’ll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select—doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief and, yes, even beggar-man and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestors. (Watson, 1925, p. 82)

Watson was one of a number of psychologists who wrote for public consumption in the 1920s. And nonpsychologists also lent their voices to the growing chorus of those who touted the benefits of a life made better through psychology. The first American popular magazine on psychology appeared in 1923, and by the end of the decade it had been joined by two others. These magazines, a host of popular books, and several daily newspaper columns on psychology (one of them authored by University of Wisconsin psychologist Joseph Jastrow) convinced much of the American public that the science of psychology held the keys to happiness and prosperity (Benjamin, 1986; Benjamin & Bryant, 1996). American businesses and schools were eager to adapt the military mental tests that had been developed during the war for use in their own settings, and the postwar publicity about the success of these tests encouraged their widespread use in American culture (Sokal, 1987).

Typical of the 1920s’ claims for psychology’s value were those made by Albert Wiggam, a popular science writer whose newspaper column argued that

Men and women never needed psychology so much as they need it today. . . . You cannot achieve these things [effectiveness and happiness] in the fullest measure without the new knowledge of your own mind and personality that the psychologists have given us. (Wiggam, 1928, p. 13)

Not everyone shared Wiggam’s (1928) enthusiasm. Writing in Harpers, Canadian humorist Stephen Leacock (1924) lamented that America was suffering from an unfortunate “outbreak of psychology” (p. 472). And more serious indictments came from Guermsey (1923), who warned the American public about psychology as pseudoscience, and from Stolberg (1930), who chastised legitimate psychologists for their failure to apprise the public of psychology’s limitations. Yet prior to the stock market crash of 1929, these cautions were largely heeded. People were interested in the applications of psychology, and when it was evident that too few academically trained psychologists existed, there were many without training who were willing to offer their services as psychologists. Newspaper classified sections were filled with advertisements for psychological services from individuals who identified themselves as clairvoyants, palmists, advisors, mediums, counselors, and psychologists (Benjamin, 1988). The Psychological Corporation (founded in 1921) and a certification procedure (begun in 1924 by the American Psychological Association) were two efforts by organized psychology to identify legitimate psychologists for the American public (Napoli, 1981). But both efforts failed: Demand was too great, and the public’s ability to distinguish psychology from pseudopsychology was minimal.

The public interest in psychology included a fascination with psychoanalysis as well. Freud’s ideas had been gaining recognition in America since his speeches at Clark
University in the fall of 1909 (see Rosenzweig, 1992). By the 1920s there were a number of popular treatises on psychoanalysis available to the public, as well as English translations of most of Freud’s principal works (Freud made the first of five appearances on the cover of Time magazine on October 27, 1924). Psychologist historian Gail Hornstein (1992) has written that by the 1920s in the United States, “psychoanalysis had so captured the public imagination that it threatened to eclipse experimental psychology entirely” (p. 254). The popular literature of the 1920s was filled with books and articles on applying psychoanalysis to the classroom, to businesses, and especially to everyday living.

Prominent in this popular psychoanalysis was encouragement for self-understanding and self-improvement through the interpretation of dreams. Many psychologists and psychoanalysts warned against amateur dream interpreters, including self-interpreters (see Valentine, 1922); however, public fascination with dreams and a belief in their validity as windows of the soul ensured the prosperity of those who invited individuals to enjoy the benefits of dream analysis (see Arnold-Foster, 1921; Tridon, 1921).

With belief in the validity of dreams, and especially with the public’s growing acceptance of dreams as indications of unconscious wishes, anxiety dreams became even more disturbing. What did it mean to dream about your spouse dying or perhaps about murdering someone? Joseph Jastrow, in his daily Ann Landers-like newspaper column in the 1920s entitled “Keeping Mentally Fit,” responded to a writer identified only as “Anxious” who wrote:

there’s one thing that I can’t get away from and that’s paying attention to my dreams. I take them as warnings, and when I dream that something terrible is happening to me away from home, I have to struggle to go out the next day . . . How do you get over this? (Jastrow, 1928, p. 138)

In his published reply, Jastrow (1928) recounted several examples of dreams that had proved disturbing, and told how individuals had foolishly allowed these dreams to disrupt their lives. His not-so-helpful advice to “Anxious” and his other readers suggested that they just “dream of pleasant things and be thankful if they come true” (Jastrow, 1928, p. 140). And to amplify his message that concern with dream interpretation was unnecessary, he informed his readers that “most of us in good health have no temptation to take dreams seriously” (p. 139). We do not know what impact Jastrow’s advice had on “Anxious,” but his discouragement did not curb the public’s fascination with dreams, especially anxiety dreams, and so a dream-interpretation industry of books, magazine articles, local dream clubs, and “interpreters” flourished in the decades closely following Freud’s only trip to America.

**Mary Fields and Her Anxiety Dream**

One of the many individuals who rejected Jastrow’s advice to ignore dreams was Mary Fields, a young woman working as a stenographer in a large midwestern city. Fields was an only child with a pharmacist father and a Victorian, homemaker mother. The family owned two homes, one in the city and the other a summer home in the country. The particular events Fields described in her dream apparently took place at the country home.

Fields, who was 20 years old at the time of her dream, was widely read. However, she never completed college because of a dispute about college choice with her parents. On the morning of October 18, 1927, Fields awakened early, disturbed by a dream that haunted her thoughts for weeks. She obsessed about it so much that it was interfering with her work. When it was evident that she could not stop worrying about this dream, she decided to get some relief through professional expertise. On November 11, she mailed a three-page typed letter to Sigmund Freud in Vienna, asking for his help.

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1 At the request of surviving relatives, a pseudonym (Mary Fields) is used to identify the letter writer.
November 11th, 1927.

Professor Sigmund Freud,
Bertsgasse 19,
Vienna, Austria.

Dear Professor Freud:

I am writing you because I have read a great many of your books and admire you immensely and also because I hope you can help me. In the event that you find yourself too busy to do so I hope that you can tell me who I can go to that will be able to overcome the difficulty.

My desired information is concerning dreams, or rather a dream. First I should like to know the meaning of the dream and secondly whether it will have any direct meaning or reference on my future. I must sound as if I wanted you to be a fortune teller or the like but this is not so because I realize that a man of your fame certainly would be anything but. You see among your books I have read your views on dreams and because of my great respect for you and because of my interest in your work I thought you might be able to help me. Now to go on with the dream and the series of events connected with it. I mention the events previously connected with the dream because if I remember your text on Dream Psychology rightly, you spoke many times of previous occurrences often times having a great deal of influence on dreams. Now for the basis of this letter.

But a short two months ago I met a young man who since has held a great fascination for me. Not being of age as yet of course my parents tyrannize over me in many respects and one of them happens to be the choosing of my friends. Possibly you may think me an ungrateful child but still it is only a few short months until I reach the age of independence. Perhaps also I ought to mention the fact that I am the only child in our family. In the case of this young gentleman there have been some very hard words spoken. The reason for this is that the young man in question is an Italian and of course is Catholic. My parents are thorough bred Americans and also are of a Protestant Religion and although they are not snobbish they feel that in going around with an Italian I am going around with some one who is not my equal. Of course the religious part of it comes in pretty strong as neither father or mother have a very strong love for the Catholic Religion. As for myself it does not bother me at all for I feel that because a person happened to be born into a family of the Catholic or Jewish Religion is nothing against them. In fact if I want to marry either a Jewish or Catholic fellow you may rest assured that I shall do so. But how well I shall accept that religion is another question.

The fascination which this young man has for me has twice transported us into a forbidden paradise, it is also a fool's paradise, leaving us forgetful of every day morals and conventions. Before I met the young man in question he had been going steady with a girl of his own station in life and was going steadily enough with her so that she was wearing his ring, but since he has practically given her up entirely and devoted his time to me. Those are the circumstances leading up to the dream. Now for the dream.

I saw myself sitting in a place that was unfamiliar to me still I seemed to be very much at home. It seemed to be a place poorly furnished so it could not have been home for our place is very beautifully furnished. My uncle, rather my mother's brother, and my father were sitting on the front porch talking and as it was a very hot day I was seated inside by an open window fanning myself, and while I was dreaming as I sat there the door bell rang. Upon answering the ring I found the...
brother of my yourn Italian friend. He was dressed very peculiarly wearing the modern civilian clothes of the average American but with a large gaudy colored Mexican Sombrero on his head. We passed the time of day and for several minutes conversed politely on daily news topics of interest, the both of us standing up he on the porch and [me] in the house. He did not disclose the object of his visit until he was ready to depart when he handed me a letter saying that it was from his brother. As a parting remark he told me that he was coming into the city to see me next week and that probably there would be four or five other fellows along with him. To which I replied that I would be glad to see them. Upon that he left. In the meantime my father and uncle seemed to have disappeared when they went I have no recollection of but when I answered the door bell they were not upon the porch. The young man who called upon me lives in a small town not far from my summer home and that is why he told me he was coming in to see me.

Well I opened the letter and I still see the expression of horror, dismay, and despair which was shown on my face. The letter told me that this young Italian boy had been married on the afternoon of October 17th to a Miss Mildred Dowd. I cannot account for the girl's name because it is not the name of the girl to whom he was formerly engaged or even her initials. The name I cannot account for as I have never known any one by the whole name given above or even the last name.

Well in my despair I happened to look down on a small table standing near me and saw a large brass paper knife with a sharp edge. Grabbing the thing up I struck myself a hard blow around the region of the heart (I must sound quite dramatic, but I assure that I was and am far from feeling that way). I remember the sensation distinctly of the knife passing into my body. The first was the somewhat like the eternal thrill and it passed into something more powerful, lasting and serious, which cannot possibly be explained. I distinctly remember dropping to the floor without the slightest cry or shudder. I saw myself laying on the floor on my right side with my legs drawn up and my left hand outstretched and my right hand still clutching the paseo knife. At this time I awoke and I was somewhat startled to find myself lying in the same position in bed as I was when I last saw myself lying on the floor presumably dead. Upon awakening I found the tears coursing down my face and it took me some little time before I could control myself. The next day I found myself thrown into the worst case of blues or dejection or whatever you want to call it and it was an impossibility to pull myself out of it. This comes back to me after I have been thinking about the dream and trying to find a solution of it myself.

This dream occurred during the early morning of the 18th of October. I hope that you will not think me bold for telling you the things I have and also for writing you and asking the favour that I have. If I have annoyed you with my troubles please dear Professor Freud forgive me I really did not intend to. Please believe me when I say that. And also please won't you help me for there seems to have been nothing on my mind but this confounded dream and as I am a stenographer it does not pay to have your mind occupied with anything other than business during business hours. I feel perhaps that just writing you and waiting a reply will relieve the sense of something formidable hanging over me which was caused by the dream.

Awaiting your reply, I am thanking you now for whatever help you can be to me, and begging you to pardon me for bothering you with my troubles.

Sincerely yours,

Mary Fields