

DREAMS IN THE NEWS

When Dreams Are the Enemy

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Sleep? A good night is three-four hours max, then up and into the day before it's light. Battle with snipers, or bombs, mines, or with each other. Boredom's the worst. Back in compound after dark, eat fast, clean the weapons, check the gear. Then, you know what? We get two-three hours of war games on the Xbox. No, not kidding about that! Command thinks it keeps us sharp. In zone, they say, we're ready 24-7. A long sleep just don't fit into that. Luxury, they say, and plenty of time for that when you're back home. One good thing about it though. Not sleeping much keeps those god-awful dreams away. Man, a good night's sleep is just a few blank hours.

This little snippet is pieced together from articles and interviews focused on sleep problems in combat soldiers returning home from war in Iraq. It is not an exaggeration to say that one of the big casualties of war is normal sleep and dream processes. In a high percentage of this population (by some estimates one-third or more), the dysfunction becomes more or less permanent.

Jia-Rui Cong, a *Los Angeles Times* journalist, titled her review of the returning soldier's plight, "When Sleep Is the Enemy." From what the soldiers say, it is not sleep itself that is the enemy, but what happens there: the recurrent dreams and nightmares--particularly those that replay the horrific scenes actually experienced. As one soldier said, "It's just as troubling in the dream as when it happened in reality."

To avoid sleep many veterans will stay awake using all available means until they simply crash from delirium. Others, take the opposite course, using drugs or alcohol to obliterate themselves. Many suffer from REM behavior disorder, which means that instead of the general musculature being paralyzed during dreaming, the dreamer is able to move and flail about in response to the intense imagery resulting in injury to themselves or their sleeping partner. The available treatments are only

minimally successful and often only for short periods before the major symptoms recur.

One soldier said ruefully, "I gave up my tranquility, as many of the other warriors did, so the rest of America can have theirs."

Yet, for the majority of Americans, there is no tranquility either. As William Dement has concluded from his years of sleep research, "we are a sleep-sick society." It is clear now that sleep and dream deprivation interferes with the necessary restorative processes available only from sleep and dreams. This contributes to the increase in inflammatory processes that underly all major disease substrates. The epidemic of obesity and much of the obsessive-compulsive nature of our waking lives likely begins in the deprivation of sleep and dreams.

Why do we "rob" ourselves of sleep and dreams?

Recent research shows that performance can be increased by more than 50% in even the most demanding tasks by the simple act of taking a 30-minute nap early in the afternoon. CEO's have been quick to catch on to this for themselves and for their major employees. Imagine an enlightened policy in the military and other cultural institutions that made room for adequate sleep and an afternoon power nap!

Don't hold your breath.

Sleep itself has restorative properties, but dreams are not just idle stories in the night. Recent research shows that people perform much better at solving problems previously worked on when they have had *dreaming* sleep. Even more: those who have dreaming sleep do better in solving problems that are completely new. This works for memory as well. Thus, something happens in the dreaming brain that does *not* happen in the waking brain—something important, something essential, something fundamental. *What* it is has not yet been discovered.

A hint from recent studies indicates that evolution played a significant part in organizing our

information collecting process during the light of day, but “deep processing” of it was reserved for dreaming sleep in the darkness of the night. To go against these deep processes means most likely that all levels of health--mental, emotional, physical and spiritual, and even cultural, are going to be degraded. If we do not honor and respect our biological necessity for deep sleep and for dreaming we are going to pay a severe price as a culture. And not just our culture. The World Health Organization, looking at data world-wide, has shown that sleep deprivation (and the resulting loss of dreams) depresses the immune system to such a degree that they are going to label such deprivation *carcinogenic* on a level with tobacco, asbestos and other industrial pollutants.

This suggests that perhaps the simplest way to begin controlling health care costs is to begin to make a national campaign to insure that everyone gets enough sleep and dreams. But even more such a phenomenon if it reached an effective density in the general population would likely unleash a major generation of creative and productive energy that would be beneficial at all levels—individual and collective.

There is no constitutional right to sleep and dreams and I can't imagine there ever will be. But the biological imperative can be overridden only to a certain degree by our machinations to treat our bodily earth much like we treat the earth itself—biology will strike back, just as the earth strikes back, and when this happens we fall into a literal danger that is beyond constitutions, beyond politics, beyond human control. Sounds like Hell in the making.

Our warriors are telling us that sleep and dreams have become an enemy. But I fear that, as is often the case, what we see in the extremities of war, reveals what is at the heart of our culture. Thus, if our leaders lie to us, it is only a mirror of our lying to ourselves. When leaders believe their own deceptions, it only mirrors the self-deception at work in the larger body of the collective culture. When freedoms and values (both cultural and economic) are destroyed by self-serving leaders, the mirror reveals we are collectively complicit. But somewhere in the night, dreams *will* tell the truth,

confronting us with the need to have ears that will hear and eyes that will see and a will to make friends and not enemies of sleep and dreams. For this we need courage and encouragement.

No amount of technical innovation, no degree of pharmaceutical magic, no degree of focus on “symptoms” will work, if we miss the crucial fact that sleep is our “deep root” to life, and dreams our “deep source” of the creative image. That is the deep medicine a sleep-sick society is achingly in need of yet so far from our general awareness.

It's time to *truly* wake up, by sleeping and dreaming more, as the first necessity in our individual lives, and as a primary value in our collective world.