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DREAMTIME

M A G A Z I N E



SPECIAL FEATURE IN THIS ISSUE!

Excerpt from the
Formerly Unpublished
Autobiographical Writings
of Montague Ullman, MD



International
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Dream Bibliophile - Book Review

Kelly Bulkeley



Dream Therapy.

By Clare Johnson. London: Orion Spring, 2017.

Machine Dreaming and Consciousness.

By J.F. Pagel and Philip Kirshstein. London: Academic Press, 2017.

These two excellent new books, both written by active IASD members, invite their readers to enter the realm of dream studies at opposite ends of the spectrum between practice and theory. Lest you suspect I am imposing an artificial dualism onto these texts, consider the first descriptive sentence on the back cover of

each work:

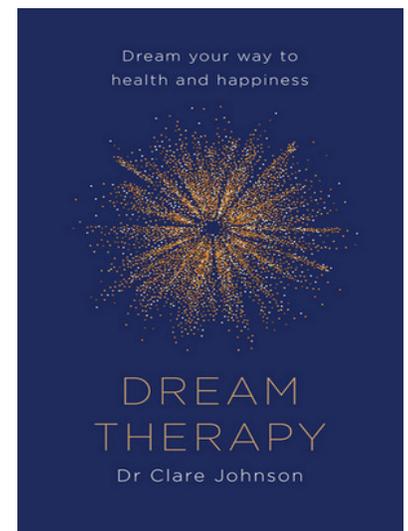
Johnson: "A practical guide to mindful and lucid dreaming."

Pagel and Kirshstein: "Machine Dreaming and Consciousness provides the first empiric articulation of the advent of dream-equivalent processing in machines."

That's about as polar-opposite as it gets, while still talking about the same topic. The fact that two such different books have both emerged from the membership of the IASD community speaks well of the diversity, range, and quality of the group's intellectual culture.

Clare Johnson's *Dream Therapy* (the title of its UK edition; a US edition titled *Mindful Dreaming* is due out in April of 2018) is a warm and welcoming invitation to explore one's own dreams as a source of valuable personal insight and guidance in waking life. The book is written in clear and engaging prose, and it would serve as an excellent first text and companion for readers who are brand new to dreaming.

When people who have never before paid attention to their dreams begin to do so, the response of their dreaming unconscious is often strong, surprising, and bordering on the overwhelming. Johnson anticipates this and helps readers create a solid grounding in their sleep patterns, journaling practices, and mindfulness exercises, all of which supports readers as they process what they are experiencing and prepare themselves for further exploration. Although she does not shy away from the darker shadows that emerge in dreaming, Johnson emphasizes the healthy and ultimately transformative potentials of dreaming: "When we open the door to our dream images and stories, we open the door to an entire new world of creative and healing possibilities." (8)



It's always appreciated when the author of a book on dreams is willing to share one of his or her dreams, if only to give some sense of the personal context and originating motivations involved in the writing process. Johnson describes a dream she recalls from age three that has had an enduring

impact on her life:

“The dream was so vivid, colorful, and real, that afterwards it seemed to give itself a title: ‘Drowning in a Turquoise Swimming Pool.’ That dream marked the start of my fascination with dreaming. There was so much light and beauty in the dream, at first. I was loving playing in the water, until I felt myself sinking too deep and beginning to drown. Then I panicked. But in a flash of lucidity, I realized I had a choice: I could either stay in the dream and drown, or wake myself up. I chose to wake up. That childhood dream has become a metaphor for my life.” (8)

Her dream has certainly borne fruit in this book, which expands on the capacity for lucid self-awareness that was precociously disclosed to her in this highly memorable dream of drowning. Johnson’s basic approach is to build on current research on the psychological values of dreaming, and then show how a more mindful and proactive approach can enhance those values. Her doctoral studies focused on lucid dreaming as a creative writing tool, and this new book widens her lens to consider lucid dreaming as a means of energizing and rejuvenating all aspects of life.

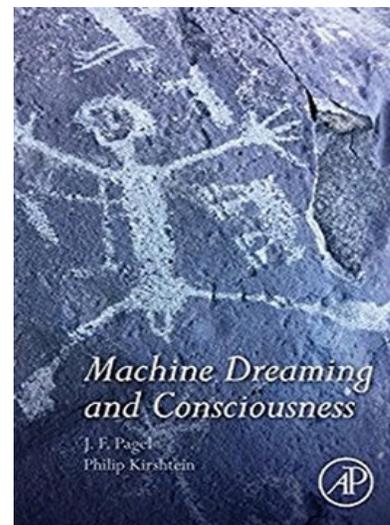
Johnson covers many common themes in the modern study of dreams, including nightmares, dreams of illness, dreams of grief and loss, sexual dreams, children’s dreams, and many others. In each case she shows how anyone, whatever their previous background in dreaming, can gain profound insights from these experiences. Beyond that, she shows how a few simple exercises can open the way to a much deeper and more dynamic engagement with the dreaming imagination:

“Dreamwork is a little like magic because it allows us to dissolve the veil that covers our own hidden, unconscious world. Once the veil is gone, we can clearly see the state of our life; what it lacks and what it needs to become healthier and happier.” (185)

Dream Therapy is highly recommended for anyone new to dreams, especially people who are already interested in humanistic and transpersonal modes of psychology.

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*Machine Dreaming and Consciousness* is chiefly the work of James Pagel, a sleep medicine expert in Colorado, with assistance from his colleague Philip Kirshtein, a computer scientist. The book expands on several themes in Pagel’s earlier work *The Limits of Dream* (2010), and in his IASD



conference presentations over the years. Pagel and Kirshtein take their point of departure from the observation that the technological quest to develop forms of artificial intelligence (AI) comparable to human intelligence will require computer systems with much more flexibility and fewer controls than is characteristic of current computers. This prompts Pagel and Kirshtein to wonder if dreaming is a factor in maintaining the flexibility and freedom of human intelligence, and if so then what could dream research teach computer scientists who are trying to design better, more human-like AIs in the future?

“A rational consideration of the capacity of machines to dream might be a useful intellectual endeavor, if only it brings us to further consider our human ability to dream, and what it might mean today.” (13)

Although their topic is highly technical, Pagel and Kirshtein make it clear from early in the book that they do not endorse a reductively dismissive approach. They reject other theories

using computer models to claim that dreaming is a degraded or fragmentary form of cognition, at best a means of ridding the mind of useless information. For Pagel and Kirshtein, it is precisely the creative, unpredictable, open-ended nature of dreaming that illuminates its powerful role in the evolution of human consciousness:

“The capacity for innovation and rapid technological change is a primary characteristic defining our species, the characteristic that differentiates us from other animals and allowed us to dominate the other races of proto-humans. The capacity for innovation and creativity is in part dependent on our ability to dream.” (38)

A point of special interest in this book is lucid or metacognitive dreaming, in which various aspects of conscious self-awareness emerge within the dream state. Pagel and Kirshtein link this aspect of dreaming with the basic ability of our species to function well in complex and dynamic environments. For a successful AI to be developed in the future, it will have to possess an innate capacity to operate and perceive its operations from several perspectives simultaneously. Humans do this effortlessly in both waking and dreaming. It may turn out to be very difficult to build this capacity into a machine.

One of the many thought-provoking insights in the book concerns the possibility of using dreams as a “Turing Test,” i.e. a means of distinguishing between a real human and a machine pretending to be a human. With this suggestion, Pagel and Kirshtein offer dreaming as a new source of insight into the “hard” problem of consciousness:

“A dream as defined by its functions and effects—its roles in cognitive feedback, self-analysis, self-understanding, alternative problem-solving, and creativity—is likely to only be within the capacity of a teleologically open system that has the capacity to determine its own autonomous actions and project its alternatives into the future. Only an autonomously functioning entity could have such dream . . . The capacity for an artificial

system to truly dream may in actuality be a better test for hard consciousness than any of the other tests for consciousness developed to this point.” (63)

Along the way in this densely reasoned text are several of the distinctive elements that make Pagel’s work stand out—the detailed review of the neurobiology of sleep, the extended references to cinematic creativity, the entertainingly digressive footnotes, the stray comments about rock climbing—all woven together in a brilliant, forward-looking book.

This may not make sense to everyone, but the analogy that came to my mind while reading the book was that it’s like attending a Grateful Dead concert: A long, strange, meandering trip, alternately thrilling and exhausting, illuminating and mystifying, bringing together mind, body, and spirit, with multiple channels of creative energy playing and intertwining with each other in fascinating ways, some of them deeply familiar and some of them completely new, and having no idea while you’re in it where it’s all going (will the drum solo go on forever?), yet feeling completely satisfied when it finally, finally reaches the end.

And in the end, are these two books by Johnson and Pagel Kirshtein really that different? Perhaps the opposition of practice and theory eventually bends around like an Ouroboros, until each pole of the spectrum ultimately meets. Although they start from different premises and address different audiences, both books focus on dreaming as a primal source of creativity, self-awareness, higher consciousness, and distinctively human intelligence. Johnson and Pagel and Kirshtein agree that contemporary society tends to ignore, misunderstand, and undervalue dreaming, and they have written their books specifically to highlight the importance of dreams in helping people in the modern world successfully address their greatest challenges, at both personal and collective levels, in both theory and practice.