DREAMING AND ENCOUNTERS WITH THE ALTERNATE SELF (PART I)
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“Too late to go back to sleep. It’s time to trust my instincts. Close my eyes…and leap! It’s time to try. Defying gravity.”

— From the Broadway Production, Wicked

Written works as well as oral traditions have described the disengagement of a consciously aware self from the physical body during sleep. For example, Egyptian priests of antiquity believed the winged consciousness of an individual could detach itself and hover above the mumified remains which remained dormant in the tomb (see Fig. 1). In ancient Greece, priests—known as the therapeutai, led dream incubation rituals that endeavored to release the consciousness from congregants who relaxed in the sleeping-halls of temples. A Native American community on the West coast of the United States has a tradition of humming a specific tune after waking that only one’s “shadow” knows so this alternate self can find a way home to the body after a night of extensive traveling. Similar ideas of one’s shadow as a name for the alternate self that leaves the host during a dream appear among indigenous populations spanning Brazil’s lowland forests to the highlands of Papua New Guinea.

In many societies, nightly expeditions of the alternate self during dreams are believed to accrue valuable insights that offer reassurance and hopefulness about the future when self and dreamer reunite in the morning. In contrast, a sinister view of the alternate self surfaces in a short story by the nineteenth-century writer, Feyodor Dostoyevsky. The Double explores the downward spiral of the main character after a series of emotionally traumatic encounters with his alternate self during episodes of “waking dreams.”

DREAMING OF A SELFIE
Autoscopic hallucinations (AHs), the clinical term for out-of-body experiences, occur when subjective visuo-spatial perception appears to reside outside of the dreamer’s body. Instrumentation to detect the onset of dreams in real time was in use by the mid-twentieth century. Early sleep studies were reams of paper tracings showing brain waves, eye movements and muscle activity. Although Hans Berger had recorded human alpha waves by 1929, not until 1953 did Aserinsky and Kleitman report high correlations between rapid eye movement (REM) sleep and subjective accounts of dreaming. Subsequently, Dement and Kleitman identified non-REM sleep stages based on the appearance of consistent patterns appearing in electroencephalogram (EEG), electrooculogram (EOG) and electromyogram (EMG) recordings.

Contemporary studies of polysomnographs (PSGs) suggest that an intrusion of REM cognitions into Stage I of non-REM sleep may facilitate dreams of viewing one’s image from a distance. A simultaneous reduction in external sensory processing occurs during drowsiness, which is a defining feature of stage N1 sleep. Surveys reveal that AHs are reported during episodes of lucid dreaming when subjects claim conscious control over dream content. Furthermore, lucid dreamers often recall sensations of “rising out of the body and floating above the bed.” As perception of our surroundings wanes due to drowsiness, “possibly we feel the cessation of gravity…and then feel that we are suddenly lighter and float up” continues Stephen LeBerge, founder of The Lucidity Institute, Inc., which offers workshops on conscious dreaming techniques. Autoscopia may be a normal result of sleep stage transitions and the experience is not necessarily an example of a neuro-degenerative disease, psychiatric disorder or a folkloric belief.

WHEN A CIGAR IS JUST A CIGAR
Sigmund Freud published The Interpretation of Dreams in 1900, over half a century before the connection between REM sleep and dreaming was discovered. The distinguished sage of the
subconscious proposed that dreams are mental performance spaces where socially forbidden fantasies existing below conscious awareness produce dramas of symbolic imagery. In keeping with this theory, the self employs various ego defenses to reduce anxiety due to conflicts between the dreamer’s secret wishes and social norms.15

Some of Freud’s contemporaries questioned this assertion by claiming that no ego structure resided in the mind to “censor” the meaning of a dream and make it less anxiety provoking after the dreamer awakened the next morning.16 Lydiard Horton was an experimental psychologist and contemporary critic of Freud who argued that “dreams can be explained in terms of the perceptive processes in waking life.”16 Presumably, there were no fantasies hidden in the past to be uncovered through an intensive decoding of the dreamer’s autoscopic experiences.

Horton pioneered the use of case reports from human volunteers to investigate their claims of AHs.16 Specifically, he asserted that certain behavioral routines performed before bedtime could increase the chance of a “flying sensation or levitating illusion” often encountered during episodes of lucid dreaming.16

To be continued...

REFERENCES