Executive coaches will be more effective if they understand how their clients think and experience emotions. They have to be skilled at detecting and evaluating the psychological strengths and challenges that can help or hinder a client’s development as a leader. What will be helpful in their work is when they take a more holistic approach to the information clients present, which means considering information from both their waking and dreaming life. This article suggests that, to help executives with their journey into their own interior—working with an additional source of information—executive coaches could also pay attention to their clients’ dreamtime. The dreams that occur during their clients’ “night journeys” can offer useful clues about their main preoccupations and concerns. Reflecting on how the feelings in their clients’ dreams relate to what’s happening in their waking life can help executive coaches and their clients better recognize and address their internal struggles and challenges, and figure out what is most on their minds. Making sense of dreams can be a very powerful problem-solving and inspirational tool, offering a pathway to out-of-awareness preoccupations. This relatively unexplored territory is the main focus of this article. I will also take into consideration various theories about dreaming, and make a number of observations on the kind of training that executive coaches need to be able to practice working with dreams.

Keywords: dream interpretation training, dreaming, leadership coaching, problem solving, psychodynamics

All men while they are awake are in one common world; but each of them, when he is asleep, is in a world of his own.

—Plutarch

Why does the eye see a thing more clearly in dreams than the imagination when awake?

—Leonardo da Vinci

Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there, wondering, fearing, doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before.

—Edgar Allen Poe
The CEO of an IT company dreamed he was walking toward his summerhouse and suddenly realized that he was totally naked. The only thing he could find to cover himself was a very small towel. He decided to run home and as he did so, he realized that his neighbors were on their balconies, laughing at him. Almost home, he tripped over some rocks that blocked his way. When he managed to pull himself together, he discovered that he had lost the small towel. He looked around, and saw his wallet lying on the ground. He picked it up but it was empty. He had been robbed. He felt vulnerable and unprotected, a feeling that stayed with him after he woke.

The CEO had no trouble relating his dream to the exposure he always felt at the annual shareholders’ meeting, which was upcoming. Although he was good at public speaking, it had taken him some time to get used to doing it and it was not something he looked forward to. Did his nudity in his dream mean he was going to be caught off-guard? Was he going to be accused of an attempted cover-up? (The inadequate towel!) Would he be exposed as a fraud? When he took over as CEO, he had promised a quick turnaround but that hadn’t yet happened. His greatest fear was that he would be asked to divest some of the company’s holdings (The empty wallet! Did that signify resources being taken away?), something he thought would be a disaster for the future of the firm.

Today’s executives face more pressure than at any other time in history (Speier, Valacich, & Vessey, 1999; Baltes, Martin, & Meddings, 2007). They have to deal with the upheavals caused by globalization, rapidly changing markets, discontinuous technologies, huge diversity in human resources, increased financial and legal scrutiny, and many more disruptive factors. Their level of stress is only increased by the fact that in a highly competitive business environment, executives are only as good as their last decision. The pressure of staying ahead of the competition is unremitting. Taking on a leadership position a real challenge. Despite the generous compensation, the perks, and the power, the job of a senior executive can be very lonely and stressful.

One effective way of dealing with the pressures of the job is for leaders to have sparring partners who help them explore the challenges they face. Earlier generations of leaders managed to do without executive coaches, but given the volatility of the contemporary business world, the current generation of leaders would do well to give executive coaching serious consideration. Executive coaches can act as impartial sounding boards free of the politics that are all too prevalent in organizations. As executives move up the corporate ladder, feedback about their performance progressively diminishes. But the loss of feedback can be career limiting; it creates gaps in how leaders perceive themselves, and how others perceive them. And the wider the gap, the greater the likelihood of a leadership crisis, and the greater the resistance to change. In this kind of situation it is difficult to create a coaching organizational culture, which is characterized by giving people voice, fair process, transparency, and openness. However, executive coaching can be an effective countermeasure and provide leaders with the kind of feedback to help them create better places to work (Kets de Vries, 2014, 2011; Kets de Vries, Florent-Treacy, & Korotov, 2007; Kets de Vries, Guillen, Korotov, & Florent-Treacy, 2010).

The substantial amount of stress with which leaders live can contribute to anxiety, fear, and even physical illness, experiences many leaders are reluctant to divulge, in case judgments are made about their capabilities. Metaphorically speaking, many leaders are like swans, floating stately and serene on the water but paddling like crazy under the surface. Not surprisingly, leaders who imagine that they can handle all these pressures on their own are more likely to self-destruct, and either make poor decisions or none at all. The need to avoid this kind of development is the reason why so many executives are increasingly turning to coaches for help.

At one time, not too long ago, consulting an executive coach was considered a sign of personal or organizational failure, a singular approach to correcting the behavior of a “problem” leader. Nowadays, however, executive coaching is perceived as an essential part of a set of approaches to help high-performers and high-potentials become even more effective. The popularity and perceived benefits of coaching mean that it’s now increasingly common for executives to seriously consider taking on an executive coach at some point in their business careers. Coaching has turned from stigma to status symbol among upwardly mobile executives.

Effective leadership coaches accompany their clients on a path toward self-learning, helping them to attain “stretch” performance goals and objectives and facilitating their self-awareness. They
can help them to become more effective in the so-called soft skills, such as delegation, priority setting, conflict resolution, and effective communication, as well as team and executive development. Executive coaches can also help clients with their mental states, create the space for profound personal development, and help their clients realize the lives they want.

An important part of the coach’s role is to help executives with their journeys into self-awareness. This implies paying attention to what is going on in their clients’ psyches while they sleep—their dreams—as well as what preoccupies them during their waking hours. Clients are always complex and coaches can learn a lot from the information provided from the periods when their clients’ minds are supposedly at rest. The dreams that their clients recount can provide useful clues to their stresses and concerns. Dreams can assist executives to become more effective in problem solving (Schatzman, 1983).

Using this kind of information is relatively unexplored territory. In this article, I review various theories of dreaming and argue that making sense of an executive’s dream world can be a very powerful problem-solving tool, offering a route to a better understanding of the interior world of executives.

**Dreamtime**

Executive coaches need to understand how each of their clients thinks and experiences emotions. They need to be skilled in detecting and evaluating the psychological idiosyncrasies (the themes in each client’s inner theater) that can help or hinder leadership development. They need to understand their clients’ major drivers. And to do this, they need as much information as possible. Working, playing, relationship building, and dreaming are all important parts of a client’s daily cycle.

We sleep for approximately 122 days out of every year and, during the average night, we have one dream every 90 minutes. Most of us have three to five dreams a night, but some of us may have up to seven. By the age of 60, we will have slept around 175,200 hours and have dreamed 197,100 dreams over 87,000 hours (Carskadon, 1993; Domhoff, 2002). That is an awful lot of potentially useful material. Taken seriously, dreams can offer useful clues to a client’s behavior and concerns. Relating the feelings and events in our clients’ dreams to what is happening in their waking lives can help us recognize their internal struggles and help them address them.

One difficulty in deconstructing our clients’ dream events and actions is that they are generally outside the dreamer’s conscious control. While we dream, things happen with no apparent logic and stick to no rules. While dream events can appear intensely real and full of meaning while we are dreaming them, they can leave us with a sense of discomfort when we wake up. Or to put it another way, the act of dreaming permits each and every one of us to go quietly insane every night of our lives.

Although *Homo sapiens* has had a love affair with dreams since the dawn of time, the reason why we dream, and the meaning of our dreams, has remained something of a mystery (Walden, 2006). We still understand remarkably little about the basic brain activities that govern sleeping and dreaming and a lot of what we claim to know is speculative. The bizarre, unreal nature of our dreams remains one of the most puzzling detective stories of the human brain. Research is complicated by the fact that dreaming is associated with some of the most arcane problems in neuroscience: the self, memory, learning, creativity, and self-awareness (Carskadon, 1993; Lavie, 1996; Moffitt, Kramer, & Hoffman, 1993; Solms, 1997).

The study of dreaming is called *oneirology*, and it’s a field of inquiry that spans neuroscience, psychology, and even literature (Bulkeley, 1997; Hartmann, 1973). But while oneirologists have proposed many theories about why we dream, no single consensus has emerged about the purpose of dreaming, let alone about the interpretation of dreams. There is no accepted, unanimous answer to the questions of why we dream and what our dreams signify. Whether dreams actually have a physiological, biological, or psychological function has yet to be determined. Because our dreams can be so rich and compelling, we are often keen to know what they mean. Indeed, most dream researchers believe that dreaming is essential for our mental, emotional, and physical well-being. However, some take a more restrained view, suggesting that dreams serve no real purpose (Moffitt
et al., 1993). In the study of the mind, dreams remain one of the final frontiers. Yet we all dream—and so, it seems, do animals and birds (Frank & Heller, 2003).

Considering the enormous amount of time we spend dreaming, it is rather surprising that researchers have not yet come near understanding why we dream. From babyhood until the day we die, our minds constantly produce dreams while our bodies and brains are at rest. And because Homo sapiens is hard-wired for sense-making, theories about the meaning of dreams have altered over time and across cultures.

Executive coaches interested in dreams must familiarize themselves with the basic facts about dreaming. Dreams can range from the ultra normal and ordinary to the overly surreal and bizarre. Our dreamscapes can look like living dioramas, presenting what is going on inside our bodies. Dreams can be focused and understandable but also unclear and confusing. Some people remember their dreams vividly; others retain only very vague impressions of their dreams. Still others swear they can’t remember having dreamt at all. Some people dream in black and white; most of us dream in color. Some dreams are filled with joyful emotions, whereas others contain frightening imagery. Dreams can be exciting, magical, melancholic, adventurous, and sexual. Some dreams tell us what we want to believe, others show us what we fear. Further, dreams sometimes deal with things we know but do not know we know. The inimitable dream is the dream that tells us what we have not known (Hall & Van de Castle, 1966). Dreams intensify emotions, especially anxiety, fear, disgust, embarrassment, and surprise. In some instances, the emotions associated with dream imagery can become so intense that they interrupt the process of dreaming or make us wake abruptly.

As I mentioned above, why we dream and how we should interpret the content of our dreams have intrigued people throughout human history, from Paleolithic shamans to present-day executive coaches (Barrett & McNamara, 2012; Hartmann, 1973; Van de Castle, 1994). Some of the earliest recorded attempts to interpret dreams date from Ancient Babylon, Greece, and Egypt. In these ancient societies, dreaming was considered a form of communication with the gods or a means of divine intervention, messages that could be unraveled by people with certain powers. The Book of Daniel in the Bible tells the story of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, who dreamt about a statue made of precious metals—gold, silver, bronze, and iron—and clay. The prophet Daniel, interpreting his dream, told the king that the metals represented four kingdoms. The king, he said, was the “head of gold” and a series of inferior kingdoms would follow Nebuchadnezzar’s. The last kingdom would be divided, like the statue’s feet of iron and clay, one part strong, the other weak. During this reign, God would set up a kingdom that would destroy all other kingdoms and stand forever.

Like the Babylonians, the ancient Egyptians believed that dreams conveyed messages from the gods. As the best way to receive divine revelations was through dreaming, they would induce (or “incubate”) dreams by going to sanctuaries to sleep on special “dream beds” in the hope of receiving divine advice, comfort, or healing. The Greek philosopher Aristotle was also a student of dreams. In his Parva Naturalia, written more than 2,200 years ago, he made a connection between dreams, waking experiences, and emotional needs. He defined the images seen in dreams as both “percepts,” or faint remnants of things sensed or experienced during the day, and also as causes or signs of future events. The early Christians preached the Hebraic belief that God spoke to them through their dreams.

**Why Do We Dream?**

Despite the existence of many dream theories, a degree of modesty about what we really know remains desirable. For example, we do not even fully understand the purpose of its “twin,” sleep, particularly the function of the REM stage of sleep, the period of REM when brain activity is high and resembles that of being awake (Dement & Kleitman, 1957; Winson, 1993). We have plenty of nocturnal cognition (Foulkes, 1985). But during REM sleep, our muscles become paralyzed, preventing our bodies from acting out and taking a little sleep walk.

When REM sleep was first discovered, many researchers concluded that we dream only during that period, but we now know that we also dream in non-REM (NREM) sleep, especially late in the
sleep cycle. However, this doesn’t explain why we are more likely to recall bizarre and vivid dreams if woken during REM sleep, or why we rarely recall our dreams if woken during a non-REM sleep stage (Cavallero & Foulkes, 1993; Domhoff, 2002; Lavie, 1996).

What is clear is that when we dream, our central nervous system becomes active, a phenomenon that recurs during our sleep cycle. But why should this happen? Is it testing the system to see whether everything’s still working? Or is there some other reason why our nervous system should snap into action? We don’t really know. What we do know is that periodically during sleep, physiological changes occur so that our heart rate increases, our breathing becomes more rapid, our temperature rises slightly, and our brain waves change. There is sexual arousal as well—both men and women can climax during dreams (Ellman & Antrobus, 1991; Moffitt et al., 1993).

Although it seems that there may be more questions than answers about dreaming, there are some common theories about why we dream.

**Dreaming as a Nonsensical Activity**

According to some, the simplest explanation is that dreams are merely evolutionary leftovers (Dallett, 1973; Kahn, Combs & Krippner, 2002), random and meaningless firings of neurons in the brain—processes that don’t happen when we’re awake. The advocates of this point of view argue that dreams have neither function nor meaning. They are nothing more than an accidental side effect of activated circuits in the brain stem and stimulation of the limbic system, the part of the brain that’s involved with emotions, sensations, and memories. Although the mind is still “functioning,” insofar as it produces images, there’s no conscious sense behind what it registers. Perhaps it’s only our consciousness that wants to see some deep meaning in our brains at all times. From this perspective, dreams are basically nonsensical.

**Dreaming as an Evolutionary Process**

Some evolutionary psychologists argue that we rehearse fight-and-flight responses in our dreams, even though our bodies are at rest. They suggest that the biological function of dreaming is to simulate threatening events and to rehearse threat perception and threat avoidance (Barrett & McNamara, 2007, 2012; Revonsuo, 2000). In short, dreams help us to play out painful or puzzling emotions or experiences in a safe place: We dream to rehearse self-defense behaviors in the safety of our nighttime isolation. These simulations will help us face whatever threats occur in our waking hours. There is support for this theory in the functioning of our amygdala (the fight-or-flight part of the brain), which fires more often than normal when we’re in REM sleep, as it does when we are in survival mode (Devinsky, Morrell, & Vogt, 1995).

From the same evolutionary perspective, we can consider dreams as a form of theater that enables us to solve problems more effectively when sleeping than when awake—partly because our dreaming mind makes connections more quickly than our waking mind. Elaborating on this idea, we can hypothesize that during REM sleep unfulfilled emotional expectations left over from the day are played out, deactivating them and so freeing up our brain to deal with the new emotionally stimulating events of the following day. The dreamer is able to make connections between different thoughts and emotions in a safe environment. Thus, through dreams, our mind continues to work out solutions to real-life personal and work problems, tapping into our innate creativity and problem-solving skills to do so. We often arrive at better solutions when we sleep on them (Hobson, 1995, 1999).

**Dreaming as a Garbage-Sorting Process**

Others argue that dreams help the brain conduct a sort of triage of the millions of inputs it receives each day (Crick & Mitchison, 1983; Evans & Newman, 1964; Melnechuck, 1983). Their theory is that we dream to eliminate undesirable connections and associations that build up in our brain throughout the day. During sleep, our brain plows through accumulated information to decide what to hang on to and what to forget, filing away key information and discarding meaningless data. Much like cleanup operations in a computer, we are rebooting our mind in preparation for the next day.
Dreams become temporary storage areas of consciousness, places where we hold memories before we move them from short-term to long-term storage. Dreaming helps to keep our brain organized and optimizes our learning. Essentially, we dream in order to forget. Dreams help us to register what matters, understand what does not matter, remember what will still matter, and forget what will never matter again.

**Dreaming as a Form of Trauma Resolution**

Some researchers view the function of dreaming as a way of coping with trauma (Barrett, 2001a; Hartmann, 2006). This has many similarities with the evolutionary perspective and the garbage-sorting theory. If something weighs heavily on our mind during the day, the chances are that we will dream about it, either specifically or through obvious imagery. During sleep, the emotions of the day battle it out in our dream cycle, as a kind of built-in nocturnal therapy. In dreams, we digest new and bothersome knowledge, blending it with what the brain already knows, in an effort to make the information less threatening. In short, we generate dreams to master specific situations. For instance, if you narrowly avoid a car accident, there is a fair chance that you will dream about a car accident, or something that metaphorically recalls the experience, that night. The more traumatic the event, the more intense the emotions attached to the incident, and the more important it will be to get over it. Dreaming about the car accident may help you to come to terms with what happened and prepare you should such an incident happen again. Dreaming about a traumatic event becomes a way to regain your emotional balance. Conversely, when the brain fails to file the “processed” event in the long-term memory, you may experience recurring nightmares—an indication of traumatic stress disorder (Hartmann, 2006; Mellman, Kulick-Bell, Ashlock, & Nolan, 1995).

To summarize, whether dreaming represents pure nonsense, evolutionary practice runs, garbage-sorting processes, or trauma resolution, executive coaches can use these bizarre nocturnal images and ideas to make sense of their clients’ waking experiences. They can help mold them into something coherent, and help clients to figure out what is most on their minds. Dreams offer valuable clues to dreamers’ inner lives, creative insights, and even premonitions.

**Dreaming as Therapy**

There is a popular notion, which also features in established dreaming theories, that dreams fulfill a psychotherapeutic role (Hartmann, 1995). Psychotherapists have suggested that dreams can teach us things about ourselves that we are only subliminally aware of—a form of storytelling, registering very subtle signs that may go unnoticed during our daily waking life. Dreams may be related to immediate concerns, such as unfinished business from the day, or deeper concerns, which we recognize we are incapable of handling. In dreams, we deal with emotional content in a safe place, enabling us to make connections that we wouldn’t be able to make if we left matters to the more critical or defensive parts of our brains.

Dreaming enables us to think through emotional stuff in a less rational and defensive way and gain insights about others and ourselves that might otherwise remain repressed. We may be able to identify the hidden truth of various situations by reflecting on the symbolic language and visual and linguistic clues that feature in our dreams. Indeed, some psychotherapists suggest that we miss something very important with every dream we fail to remember.

Like psychotherapists, executive coaches can find dreams an extremely beneficial area of exploration in coaching interventions. Dreams may communicate something that our clients are not saying outright. In our clients’ dreams, we may find locked away the inspiration and answers to real-world problems. It is all a matter of interpretation.

A major contribution to dream interpretation was made by Sigmund Freud in his seminal work, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1900). He described dreams as the “royal road to the unconscious,” manifestations of our deepest desires and anxieties, and often related to repressed childhood memories or obsessions. Freud associated dreams with wish fulfillment and suggested that repressed or otherwise unacceptable material finds its way into our awareness via dreams. He also argued that the vast majority of latent dream content is sexual in nature, although he later
retreated from this position. Although some of Freud’s theories have been controversial, contemporary research has validated many of his contributions (Westen, 1998). His findings shaped the popular view of dreams as essentially repressed desires and as describing fears of a personal and psychological nature (Fonagy, Kachele, Leuzinger-Bohleber, & Taylor, 2012).

Freud developed a psychological technique to interpret dreams, and guidelines to the symbols and motifs that feature in them. He maintained that there are two types of dream content: manifest and latent. Manifest content is the actual images, thoughts, and content contained within the dream, whereas the latent content is its hidden psychological meaning.

Carl Jung built on Freud’s ideas of dream content being related to the dreamer’s unconscious desires (Jung, 1966, 1968, 1989). But whereas Freud related dreams to past events in the dreamer’s life, Jung broadened this perspective. In addition, he viewed dreams as gateways to the dreamer’s self-realization, an opportunity for parts of the psyche that remain underdeveloped in waking life to find expression.

Furthermore, Jung argued that dreams provide insight into not only the personal but also the collective unconscious, common to all humanity. He believed that some elements of dreaming represent universal, rather than personal, symbols derived from our cultural heritage—mythology, religion, alchemy, folklore, and so on. He conceived a number of archetypes of these universal symbols, including the animus, the anima, the shadow, the trickster, and the mother (Jung, 1968). Jung maintained that understanding these archetypes increases the dreamer’s awareness of unconscious attitudes. Nevertheless, Jung pointed out that dreams are highly personal and that interpreting someone’s dream necessitates knowing a great deal about the dreamer (Jung, 1989).

Both Freud and Jung believed that recurring dreams demand serious attention, as they may be a warning sign that the dreamer is neglecting an important issue that’s being played out in the dream. They also suggested that memories formed throughout the day leave impressions for the unconscious to deal with when we are at rest. Similarly, there can be “night residues,” feelings based on our dreams that linger on waking, even when we have forgotten the dream content.

From Freudian and Jungian perspectives, dreams allow us to make connections in a safe place and integrate thoughts that may be dissociated during waking hours. While we sleep, our brains continue to process issues of concern in our waking lives and attempt to come up with answers and solutions. The dreams that result may force us to ask ourselves hard questions. They may enable us to see others or ourselves through clearer eyes. They may help us to a deeper understanding. Dreams can also be viewed as a self-administered healing therapy.

**Dream Interpretation**

Since the dawn of time, dream interpretation has flourished to satisfy our natural longing to understand the mysterious content of dreams. In the most primitive cultures, shamans used dreams to diagnose illness, find game, predict the weather, and make prophecies about the future. Shamans thought that one’s unconscious had an awareness of malfunctions in the body long before the message reached consciousness. In this sense, shamans can be compared with psychoanalysts, and their beliefs to the theories later developed by Freud and Jung.

Although research has not yet come to a consensus about the purpose of dreams, as I have suggested, many dream experts believe that dreams do have meaning (Barrett & McNamara, 2012; Domhoff, 1996a; Moffitt et al., 1993). A collection of dreams from one individual can provide us with a very good psychological portrait of that person. But executive coaches should always remember that their clients are the experts when it comes to understanding their own psyches. The coach’s role will be to guide them to make sense of their dreams.

It’s also appropriate to say that dreams are a hot topic wherever we look. A rapid Google search for “dreams” reveals a large number of hits for Websites devoted to dream interpretation. Unsurprisingly, the scientific validity of many of these is highly questionable. Many of these books, blogs, sites, and pages can at best be described as psychobabble and at worst as nonsense. But nestled among them are also some observations that make sense (Crisp, 2002; Garfield, 2001; Gutheil, 1951; Robinson & Corbett, 1986).
The dreams that feature most often in dream interpretation manuals are the so-called universal dreams—the ones we have all experienced at times (Domhoff, 1996a; Hall, 1953). Among our most common anxiety dreams are dreams of teeth falling out (possible interpretation: fear of aging or death); falling (loss of confidence or threat to security); being chased by monsters or criminals; being asked for an ID and not being able to produce it; fighting an enemy; showing up at a public forum completely naked (all relating to feelings of vulnerability or exposure of weakness); and so on. Dreams of flying have haunted the collective imagination since time immemorial. Flying dreams may represent our personal sense of power—a desire to be free and unencumbered, and to find release from the daily pressures of the real world. A dream in which we struggle to stay aloft, however (like the mythological Icarus), may suggest a lack of control over our own circumstances. A dream in which we struggle to fly could suggest that someone or something is stopping us from moving on in life. A dream in which we are afraid of flying too high may indicate a fear of success. Strange sensory experiences are another important characteristic of dreams. The sensation of falling, the inability to move quickly, and being unable to control physical movements are just a few of the commonly reported sensory experiences that occur during dreams.

“Bad” dreams or nightmares, in which the fears, anxiety, anger, and stresses of waking life are given form and played out in a literal way, can be viewed as a sort of psychic pressure-release valve. They can be another form of creative problem-solving, dealing with frightening, graphic, or violent incidents. The likeliest recurrent dreams are posttraumatic dreams, in which the dreamer relives a distressing real-life event (Mellman et al., 1995). Soldiers who have seen active service and victims of violence often experience such recurring dreams in which the details unfold as they did in real life but often go one step further. Things they are most afraid of in real life present themselves in their dream.

For example, in working with one client, it became increasingly clear to me that we were stuck. Our exchanges were floundering, not adding much value. We were not going anywhere until I asked her about her dream life—in particular if she ever had nightmares or repetitive dreams. This particular question very much revitalized the discussion. Spontaneously, she told me about a recurring dream in which she rolled down a mountain and ended up buried under rubble. She would try to crawl out, but every time she moved, more rubble blocked her way. In her dream, she would grow increasingly panicky and would wake up in sweat. The dream reminded her of an earthquake she once experienced in the Middle East, an incident that still upset her. However, she could also associate it with concerns about her new job assignment—and her feeling that a number of her colleagues were blocking her ability to do a good job. What followed was a long discussion about her tendency to reframe situations in a too positive way, reluctant as she was to participate in political games. Working with the dream helped her realize that she needed to calibrate her overly positive view of her colleagues.

Dreams can also reveal physical concerns that the dreamer is consciously or unconsciously suppressing. Another client (knowing that I was interested in dreams) told me how her dead father appeared to her in a recent dream, accompanied by a doctor. In her dream, her father told her, “Go and see a doctor! You have an evil lump in your breast!” She had known for a long time that she should visit a doctor, as she had some concerns. The dream became her enabler to act and (according to her) may have saved her life.

After prompting another client about his dream life, he told me about a dream he had had recently whereby he saw his wife surrounded by a number of men, one of whom was dressed like a flamenco dancer and doing pirouettes. The man looked ridiculous—he was too much overweight to dance in that way. Embarrassed, my client retreated even further into the background. As soon as he woke, he remembered the discussion we had had the previous day about his lack of assertion and tendency to stay too much in the shadows. The dream reminded him of his fear of being laughed at if he took a more central, assertive stand.

Some of the examples I have given here are archetypal dreams (being trapped, being sidelined) that are common to different times, cultures, and people, and therefore pretty open to interpretation. But it is high time to add a word of caution about a major pitfall associated with dream
interpretation. Those keen to leap in with a key should be aware that sometimes it reveals more about the interpreter than it does about the meaning of the dream itself.

The Dream Canvas

The interest in dream interpretation is not limited to pop psychologists; it is a universal, cross-cultural pastime. Alexander the Great believed that dreams had the power to help him conquer the world. He was said to sleep with a copy of the *Iliad* under his pillow while campaigning in order to be able to emulate the deeds of his hero Achilles. Many other military and political leaders seem to have followed Alexander’s example. Entrepreneurs, inventors, and scientists have drawn on their dreams as a way to augment imagination. It has been speculated that creative people are more susceptible to dream material (Carson, Higgins & Peterson, 2003); they often have more vivid dreams and are more likely to remember them.

Dreams and art have had a long, fertile relationship (Golomb, 2011). Dreams themselves—with their idiosyncratic imagery, colorful extrapolations, and nonjudgmental stance—are quite similar to the processes that often precede actual creation. In its broadest sense, dreams mimic a critical stage of creativity: brainstorming a range of possibilities, or what psychoanalysts call free association. Dreaming can help us think outside the box. Through our dreams we may break out of our comfort zone and become comfortable with the unfamiliar and the unknown. Dreams may help us open up alternatives that we would normally overlook.

Dreams are often the creative source of the work of artists (Barrett, 2001a, 2001b; Hartmann, Kunzendorf, Rosen, & Gazells Grace, 2001; Koestler, 1969, Loewi, 1953), and many literary minds have been preoccupied with the interpretation of their dreams. Edgar Allan Poe believed that his dreams were the inspiration for much of his writing and pushed himself to dream “dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before.” He wrote, “All that we see or seem, is but a dream within a dream” (Poe, 2009). Dostoyevsky made a dream the basis of his short story “The Dream of the Ridiculous Man.” Robert Louis Stevenson dreamed the plot of *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Terry, 1996). Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* was inspired by a dream she had while staying at Lord Byron’s villa in Italy during an interminably cold, rainy summer when her host challenged his guests to write a horror story (Krippner, 1981). The British poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge intended to write a book about dreams—that “night’s dismay,” which, he said, “stunned the coming day.” He wrote his poem “Kubla Khan” after finding inspiration from opium-induced dreams (Mendlam, 2003). The novelist Stephen King turned a recurring childhood nightmare into a central event in his horror novel *Salem’s Lot*.

It is not just writers who have found that dreams help the creative process. The nineteenth-century Russian chemist Dmitri Mendeleyev fell asleep while chamber music was being played in the next room. Subliminally under the spell of the music as he dreamed, he suddenly understood that the basic chemical elements are all related to each other in a manner similar to the way themes and phrases are related in music. When he woke up he was able to write out for the first time the entire periodic table, which forms the basis of modern chemistry (Trifinov, 1990). Elias Howe, the inventor of the sewing machine, dreamed he was taken prisoner by a group of natives. In his dream, they danced around him with spears. As he watched them move around him, he noticed that the spears all had holes near the tip. When he woke up he realized that the dream had provided the solution to making his machines operable: By locating a hole at the tip of the needle, the thread could be caught after it passed through the cloth (Mendlam, 2003). The young Albert Einstein dreamed that he was sledding down a steep mountainside, going faster and faster, approaching the speed of light, which made the stars in his dream change their appearance. Meditating on that particular dream, Einstein eventually worked out his extraordinary scientific achievement, the principle of relativity (Brian, 1997).

Richard Wagner, composing *Das Rheingold*, noted the following: “I was in a semitrance condition and when I awoke, I immediately realized that this vision was an inspiration—that my Prelude had taken shape in my inner consciousness.” Johannes Brahms described the same state of being: “The dream-like state is like entering a trance-like condition—hovering between being asleep
and awake; you are still conscious but right on the border of losing consciousness, and it is at such moments that inspired ideas come” (McCutchan, 2003). Paul McCartney discovered the tune for the song “Yesterday” in a dream and was inspired to write “Yellow Submarine” during a hypnagogic state—the transitional state between wakefulness and sleep (Delano, 2003).

In the wildly expressive art of Dali, Miró, Chagall, de Cherico, and Magritte, dream imagery is used in a bid to access and unleash authentic human experience. Salvador Dali was so obsessed with the creative potential of dreams that he would deliberately fall asleep with a spoon in his hand. When he nodded off, the spoon would clatter to the ground and wake him up, providing fresh dream images for his surrealistic paintings (Bogousslavsky & Boller, 2005; Bogousslavsky & Hennerici, 2007; Bogousslavsky, Hennerici, Baezner, & Bassett, 2010). The great Italian director Federico Fellini confessed the following: “Our dreams are our real life. My fantasies and obsessions are not only my reality, but the stuff of which my films are made” (Kezich, 2006, p. 28).

In my experience as an executive coach, psychotherapist, and psychoanalyst, executives are no slouches when it comes to dreams. In my work I have had to deal with many intriguing dreams recounted by the executives I have worked with. I have also seen how many of them made these dreams work to find answers to the challenges they had to deal with.

### Dream Recall

Executive coaches interested in working with dreams may have heard their clients say that their dream recall is very poor. However, dream recall is a skill that can be learned (Cartwright & Kasznik, 1991; Chellappa, Frey, Knoblauch, & Cajochen, 2011; Schredl, 2007). Curiosity helps recall, and talking aloud about our dreams can make them feel more real. Discussing the content of dreams with friends and family (or coaches) may also encourage future dreaming. Telling others about our dreams is helpful as we are often blind to our own issues and associations. Others may see things more objectively.

Dream recall differs from person to person, and women tend to have more frequent dream recall than men (Merritt, Stickgold, Pace-Schott, Williams, & Hobson, 1994). As a rule, however, access to the information contained within a dream diminishes rapidly once we wake up. Dream researchers estimate that approximately 95% of all dreams are completely forgotten upon waking. According to scientific research, the main reason why we forget our dreams is something quite simple—interference (Maquet et al., 2005).

Generally, our dream recall works better when we are awakened while dreaming. This is borne out by the observation that people who are better at remembering their dreams wake up frequently during the night. A dream may also be recalled by a random trigger or stimulus—we are all familiar with the sensation of something “breaking” a dream the following day. People who have vivid and unusual experiences during the day tend to have more memorable dream content and hence better dream recall (Carson et al., 2003). As a general rule, dreams that are difficult to recall have relatively little affect. People who score high on certain personality measures (creativity, daydreaming, hypnotic susceptibility, and so on) tend to have more frequent dream recall. These individuals have less of a barrier between their sleeping and waking states (Ruby et al., 2013).

There are some tried and tested practices that can improve dream recall. It helps to remain motionless immediately after waking, letting our thoughts drift and dream images surface. The simplest things can interfere with the recall process—even moving or simply opening our eyes. When we wake up from a dream, we have only a few precious moments before the details begin to dissipate and our memories begin to fade (Laberge, 2005).

A frequent reaction is to wake up and think, “I know I was dreaming but I don’t have the faintest idea what it was all about.” One way of retaining our dreams is to keep a dream diary. If we keep a pen and paper or recorder beside the bed, we can note down our dreams before they evaporate. If dreams are not recorded immediately, they become elusive and difficult to retrieve. Just a few notes that capture the essence of the dream will make the unconscious content more concrete. Even if we can’t remember the whole dream, it’s worth the effort to write down the snippets that we can remember, like colors, people encountered, and our mood on waking. Then we should reflect on
what the dream might have been revealing and try to embrace the information, even if the dream images are painful or confusing. Our emotional state on waking can tell us a lot about the nature of our dreams. In fact, the emotional content of a dream can color our entire day (Maquet et al., 2005).

Executive coaches who choose to work with clients’ dreams should encourage them to reflect on the dream imagery they recall. For example, clients could record the emotions they experienced. Were they scared, angry, embarrassed, joyful, guilty, disgusted, depressed (and so on)? Did they still have those feelings when awake? How comfortable were they with those feelings? Can they identify any recurring thoughts associated with their dreams? Have they had those thoughts throughout the day? If so, in what other situations have they had them?

While trying to make sense of a client’s dreams, executive coaches should always keep in mind that it is their client’s dream. The dreamer is the owner of the dream. Dreams need a director, producer, and scriptwriter, and the dreamer fulfills all these functions, as well as playing the starring role. After a little deciphering, they will find themselves in many elements of a dream, even if there isn’t always a clear distinction between them and the other characters who feature in it.

Making Sense

We all know that dreams can only be understood in the larger context of our unfolding life story, so the most important question to ask clients when reflecting on a dream is, “How does the way you felt in this dream have echoes in your waking life?” And, “In what kinds of situation in your waking life have you felt similar emotions to what you experienced during your dream?” By asking these kinds of questions, executive coaches can help their clients to decipher their own unique set of dream symbols. They need to find out what specific symbols in their dreams mean to them.

Dream symbols—images or objects that have obvious meaning in daily life—serve as metaphors, representing something partially known. They reflect the dreamer’s underlying thoughts and feelings. Secret desires as well as repressed abilities often surface in dreams. However, these symbols are very person-specific. A tenet of dream work is that each individual has his or her own dream “language.” The subjects, figures, animals, people, and unusual beings in dreams are there to help them and teach them about aspects of themselves that have been ignored, unrealized, or forgotten. An executive coach should always keep in mind that dreams are stories made by and for the dreamer, and each dreamer has his or her own lids to lift and knots to untie. For example, a bear in a dream can mean something different to a hunter than it does to a child who claims it is her favorite stuffed toy. A car is something quite different to a racing driver than for someone who takes an occasional weekend drive. But by examining each dream element and looking for waking associations, we can decipher a dream’s meaning. Of course, this process is complicated by the censorship of unconscious, fearful thoughts before they can be displayed—leading to a great deal of confusion. But even if dream content doesn’t immediately make sense, coaches can help their clients’ interpretation skills by discussing the dream (Domhoff, 1996a, 1996b).

It takes some courage to share dreams with an executive coach. It implies a willingness to be vulnerable. Talking about our dreams necessitates revealing things about ourselves—topics we may never discuss in normal conversation. For some clients, however, dream language seems to be the easiest or only way to be honest without having literally to tell the truth.

Training for Dream Interpretation

Executive coaches unfamiliar with working with their clients’ dreams but interested in doing so may think that working with dreams is something beyond their competency. It is true that embarking on this kind of work may initially make them feel confused or overwhelmed. But as with many other skills, working with dreams can be learned and is readily accessible to any executive coach who is willing and motivated to undertake such adventure. Like coaching, dream interpretation is both an art and a skill, and there are a range of techniques and principles that are helpful when engaging in this practice—qualities that most experienced coaches already possess.
Of course, it is helpful (a topic I have tried to explore) to have some basic understanding of the various conceptual models that pertain to the dream process. In addition, coaches would do well to have also a historical and cross-cultural perspective of the various approaches to dreams. They should keep in mind that working with dreams is not just as a preoccupation of Western culture as propagated by people like Freud and Jung but should be looked at as a worldwide phenomenon.

In addition, executive coaches would do well (and I view that is a prerequisite for any coach) to have a solid dose of understanding of psychology, psychiatry, and group dynamics, apart from a mastery of the world of work. Especially, familiarity will be required with concepts such as “projection,” “projective identification,” “transference,” and “countertransference.” Inevitably, these processes that take place in the bipersonal field will play an important role in making sense out of dreams. Like it or not, transference and countertransference processes are part and parcel of the coach-client encounter. The coach should be able to use him or herself as an instrument (Kets de Vries, 2007). Boundary management is essential to ensure that no harm is done to the dreamer because a coach is ignorant about his or her own biases. Furthermore, like in all executive coaching, personal information gained while engaging in this kind of work should remain confidential.

Also, it’s highly recommended that in working with dreams, executive coaches should have done substantial work on their own dreams with qualified practitioners. Ongoing work with their own dreams is excellent practice to stay attuned to the dreams of their clients. This also implies that in working with dreams, having regular supervision (one-on-one or in a group setting) with supervisors knowledgeable about dream interpretation is highly recommended.

As I have made quite clear in my discussion of dream journeys, there isn’t a set of stringent rules that needs to be followed in working with dreams, and there are no specific formulas or prescriptions. As indicated before, every person and every dream is unique. In addition, all dreams may have multiple meanings and layers of significance. One cannot rely on dream dictionaries to do this kind of work. Although there may be traces of collective meaning for certain universal symbols in dreams, as executive coaches we should always remember to give the thoughts of our clients prime of place. We should always try to find out where the dreamers are going with whatever symbols found in their dreams—and what associations they bring. I also suggest that in trying to make sense of our clients’ dreams, we should give our imagination free range in collaboration with our clients. Thus an affinity for art, poetry, literature, or music can be extremely helpful.

Conclusion

Dreams can be extremely powerful tools in executive coaching. Reflecting on dreams can help make sense of events in a client’s past, including childhood, as dreams continue to actively influence behavior and feelings, often without the person being consciously aware of it. An effort at sense-making can help clients solve internal conflicts in their lives before they emerge as physical realities. This kind of conflict resolution will be conducive to mental health. In the process, both coach and client may discover that the “crazy” dreams that are recalled aren’t really so crazy after all.

I do realize that this kind of work is not for every executive coach. Dreams are full of discontinuities, ambiguities, and inconsistencies that can be downright bizarre, necessitating nonconformist thinking, acceptance of ambiguity, and flexibility of thought. In dreams, content and organization are illogical; the conventional notions of time, place, and person do not apply; and natural laws are disobeyed. Sense-making becomes a kind of detective work, for both client and coach. Yet within the context of the dream itself, strange and illogical events, perceptions, and objects aren’t out of place. In our dreams, we resort to wild dramas and special effects to help us remember and pay attention to issues we have been blocking out. For executive coaches, dreams provide an excellent opportunity to be an effective investigator—to unravel the strands that make up the dream, including making sense of symbols, puns, and double entendres.
Executive coaches should view dreams as stories or puzzles that clients must solve to be free. For example, the simple fact of having a recurring dream, however opaque its content, may indicate that a client’s unconscious is trying to solve a critical, possibly unrecognized, issue. Sometimes dreams are like the never-ending stories in the *Arabian Nights*. But when coaches encourage clients to pay attention to their dreams, they learn from them. In some ways, the art of living is the art of bringing dreams and reality together.

The need to make sense of our lives is as human as dreaming, and human beings have been trying to figure out the meaning of their dreams since we were capable of independent thought. Dreams are the bridge that allows movement back and forth between what we think we know and what we really know. Dreaming is the state in which we can access our inner selves, a place inhabited by memory, knowledge, desire, emotions, personal opinions, and thoughts. Through the interpretation of dreams, executive coaches can access their clients’ inner resources to discover new solutions—challenges they could not access easily in their waking state. Dreams can be viewed as open vistas of possibility that take their clients beyond their self-limiting everyday beliefs and behaviors.

Dreams are also natural healing systems (Brown & Donderi, 1986; Cartwright, 1986; Kramer, 1993; Sanford, 1978). Although I said above that dreaming permits each and every one of us to go quietly insane every night of our lives, it also keeps us sane. The ability to interpret their dreams helps improve clients’ ability to handle stressful situations. Executive coaches should recognize that dreams are essential for their own emotional health, the health of their clients, and the health of their clients’ organizations. Working with dreams builds community, intimacy, and support. By understanding, analyzing, and interpreting clients’ dreams, coaches can push forward the boundaries of coaching.

Nearly two and a half millennia ago, the Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi awoke from a dream of a butterfly and declared, “Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly, dreaming I am a man.” This much-quoted story underlines that much of our sense-making is bound up in apparent contradictions. Yet it can also be viewed as analogous to the enlightenment experience. Using dreams, executive coaches can mentally awaken their clients to a more real level of awareness—although they need to see them through the intermediary larval and pupal stages before they become fully fledged butterflies.

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