

# Patricia Garfield - a life spent studying dreams

By Katherine Seligman -- San Francisco Chronicle -- Monday, October 25, 2010

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Each morning Patricia Garfield follows the same ritual. As soon as she wakes up, she reaches for a small pad of paper and records her dreams. If there were a category in the Guinness Book of World Records for most dream journals, Garfield would be in it. She now has 48 binders with 62 years of entries crowding the shelves of her Tiburon home. This would be unusual for anyone except, perhaps, a psychologist whose career has been studying dreams. But it fits one general trait of those who recollect their dreams.

"Women are in general better recallers," said Garfield, author of the classic book on dream exploration "Creative Dreaming" and a co-founder of the International Association for the Study of Dreams. That may be because women are more interested, but also due to cultural factors that make it less acceptable for guys to get together and talk about their dreams. "I think if men realized how rich it could be for them, they would focus more on recalling their dreams," she said. "They might not be interested in keeping a journal, but when they have a nightmare, they want to know, 'What does it mean?'"

Researchers say that men and women spend about the same amount of time per night dreaming, at least until later in life, when men spend less time than women in deep sleep. Both tend to dream intermittently as they sleep, usually recalling only the most recent or intense of the night. Dreams tend to be more vivid in times of change - pregnancy, illness, new environments - or during crisis and grief - the death of a family member, the aftermath of an earthquake or economic turmoil.

## **Gender differences**

Certain neurological conditions and illnesses, researchers believe, inhibit dreaming. Both sexes tend to have dreams connected to thoughts and behaviors that occupy their waking hours, according to researchers Calvin Hall and Robert Van de Castle, who collected and studied the dreams of college students.

What does vary is dream content, they found. Women dream equally about both sexes, but men dream more often of other men, their analysis, published in the mid-1960s, and others that followed found. Men are also more likely to dream of aggression, which they mostly aim at other men. Women more commonly dream about familiar settings and recall conversations in their dreams.

Both men and women dream about sex but, according to the Hall and Van de Castle study, erotic dreams represented a fraction of recalled dreams - 12 percent for men, 4 percent for women.

Their work furthered the cognitive theory of dreams, the premise that dreaming is one way we process information. There still is no scientific agreement on why humans dream or conclusive evidence that dreaming plays a function in survival or adaptation.

Technological advances have given researchers a chance to view the functioning brain, both asleep and awake. They can record how much time is spent dreaming and ask about recall but can't say why this nightly occurrence happens. Dream interpretation has always been a rich - and subjective - field. (Just ask anyone who's seen the sci-fi movie "Inception.")

From Freudians, Jungians, contemporary dream analysts to lucid dreamers, there is disagreement over how to approach what's collected after a night of sleep but a shared belief that dreams are an important resource.

"Everything you've done is stored in your mind," she said. "I do think it's important to listen to your dreams, especially the big ones that shape you, for the good or for the bad."

Garfield started scribbling notes about her dreams when she was 13. Her earliest official record comes from the following year, when she put her notes in binders. Her mother was interested in dreams and the topic was a frequent dinner-table topic.

### **Wanting a pardon**

The first dream she tried to interpret occurred after an awkward junior high school date. She recalled a long complicated dream about a governor. She couldn't see any connection to her life and waking concerns until she considered what a governor does - "grants pardons," she wrote in her notebook. "I guess I wanted a pardon," she said. "I wanted to do it right the next time."

She continued recording her dreams, although she never thought she'd pursue the study professionally. But the subject held her fascination, through a doctorate in psychology at Temple University in Philadelphia. She learned to pay attention, she said, to images that repeated themselves in her dreams.

In one that turned out to hold strong meaning, she dreamed she was at a conference discussing a series of dreams where characters had branches or antlers growing out of their heads. She told the audience she wanted to talk about "branching." No one paid much attention, but she felt good about it nonetheless. Her husband congratulated her.

"I was fascinated by the image," she said. "I made it out of clay. I had no recollection of dreaming it before, but because I draw sketches (of dreams) I could see where I'd dreamed similar images, a hat with a branch for instance."

### **House a dream museum**

Garfield realized it expressed her frustration about the progress of her work. The antler-like appendages represented her branching out and doing her own creative work. She realized that

they were related to where she was in her life and work, a point where she wanted to be taken seriously for the research she'd been doing. As dreams often do, the image reiterated issues in her waking life, allowing her to recognize and understand them.

"No one was paying much attention to my work on dreams at the time," she said. She subsequently published a paper, followed by the best-seller "Creative Dreaming" and other books on dreams. She recently finished her first novel, a children's book about a girl with the power to visit other's dreams and rescue them.

Her research, which has delved into dream images and rituals of other cultures, has inspired a collection of books, paintings and artifacts from around the world that's transformed her house into a sort of dream museum. In the living room is Jung's dream record, the "Red Book," a painting of a woman with branches growing from her head, and doll figures of Freud and Jung sitting next to each other - presumably arguing about dreams.

Her office shelves overflow with totems and toys from around the world that protect against nightmares - Chinese double-headed tigers, a Japanese mythological creature called Baku, Zulu dolls, an American can of "Nightmare Preventer" spray. Then there are the journals, recording in pictures and words the stages of her life, teenager to wife and mother, her divorce, remarriage and widowhood, and current reflections at age 76, still dreaming.

"People in the profession keep urging me to get them microfilmed or put them in fireproof cabinets," she said. "I think my journals should be preserved, but you'd rather not have everyone reading them. You don't want to injure anyone or throw them into spasms of anger."

Few have Garfield's recall, but most people, if motivated, can improve what they remember, she says.

"There are some people who don't have any dream recall, or say they don't," she said. "Some people have had families make fun of their dreams. Or they feel too vulnerable letting anyone else be aware of their inner workings. Or they've had a crisis. They turn off their dreams. When the trauma is ghastly it's a protective device."

See photo gallery on next page.

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## Photo Gallery

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Patricia Garfield, in her Tiburon home, is the co-founder of the International Association for the Study of Dreams. (Photo: Lance Iversen / The Chronicle)



Dream painting by Patricia Garfield. Garfield's research, which has delved into dream images and rituals of other cultures, has inspired a collection of books, paintings and artifacts from around the world that she collects, transforming her home into a sort of dream museum.



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A painting of Patricia Garfield incorporates a personal dream image of branches or antlers.  
Photo: Lance Iversen / The Chronicle



Dream painting by Patricia Garfield. Patricia Garfield is the author of ten books including the definitive book on what she calls creative dreaming also owns a number of drawings including this one. Despite many areas of overlapping interests in dreams, men and women tend to focus on different topics. Women's dreams are often more colorful and contain more references to clothing, jewelry, houses, flowers, faces, babies, people and enclosed objects with openings in them (Freud had a point) than men's dreams do. Men's dreams tend to picture more cars and other vehicles, tools, weapons, and elongated objects than women's dreams do. (Photo: Lance Iversen / The Chronicle)