

What are dreams for?

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The *New York Times* recently reprinted Michael Chabon's "Why I Hate Dreams," which created a little stir when the *New York Review of Books* [first posted it](#) a couple years ago. "Pretty much the only thing I hate more than my own dreams," he wrote, "are yours."

That's a lot of dreams to hate: billions of us dream five times a night. I understand why a novelist might be frustrated that dreams aren't more entertaining. But they're not meant to be.

So what are dreams for, and why do we share them?

For one thing, dreams provoke us. A dream can make you scream—or laugh so hard you fall out of bed. Dreams deliver intense feelings: the terror of feeling the breath of a lion, or the joy mixed with pain when a loved one comes back from the dead. Some dreams are florid as Fellini or weirdly intense like Kafka.

But artful or artless, intense or dull, all dreams want a listener. They "cry out for interpretation." How can you keep them to yourself?

Dreams want to be in dialogue with us, and as in any dialogue between intimates, dreams leave stuff out. There are condensed references, strange gaps, and marvelous openings. Dreams teach us how to listen better; they educate intuition.

For the past 12 years, my work has included listening carefully to thousands of dreams. As works of art, they have a terrible flaw: they are made for an audience of one. Your dream is for you; everything in it is for you. That's a useful way to look at them. And dreams do have a use.

I'm not talking about how for millennia dreams have inspired art, music, poetry, and dance, or how dreams have diagnosed illnesses or solved scientific problems. The creativity of dreams is inspiring. But dreams also have a daily use, an ordinary use. They display our feelings.

Our vocabulary for feelings is feeble. We use the word “afraid” to describe mild worry, deep anxiety, and existential terror. When someone’s dream says, “I was afraid I might miss the bus,” that’s a very different flavor of “afraid” from being chased down a dark street by a guy with a knife. Dreams provide a library of feelings, including some that are strangers to us. For instance, we can die in dreams. Or we can experience for ourselves the stuff of religious experience. The terror of Jonah, the despair of Job, the heavens that open up for Jacob—we feel these viscerally in our dreams.

Dream feelings ask to be shared. They offer an unsurpassed opportunity for intimacy. Yes, dreams challenge listening; they frustrate logic. Listening can be hard work—which is why, if you choose to share a dream, you should make sure that person cares about you. Joseph found this out the hard way when he told his dreams to his angry brothers.

Sarcasm murders dreams, as does any “irritable reaching after fact or reason.” So does reductionism. We don’t need a dime store Freud to tell us, “Oh, that’s an anxiety dream.” We don’t need to hear that the cake the dream baked was yesterday’s flour and eggs. Forget the ingredients—taste the cake.

Above all, respect the feelings in dreams. When a child dreams of a monster under the bed, don’t tell him his terror isn’t real.

When I walk inside another person’s dream, I study the topography—the places where dreams go horizontal and flatten, or where they open to depth of feeling. There’s an opening in every dream. Sometimes it’s small and the dreamer skips over it. That’s when a good listener can bring attention back to a buried feeling. Feelings make all the missing connections. A dream doesn’t mean; it feels.

Dreams are best understood in bunches. Over time, if you put dreams side by side, a story arc emerges. First, you might see a car accident from far away; in another dream you are standing over the injured person. In a third dream you’ve become him. Now you know the pain is yours. Seeing has become being.

Then we arrive at the experience Whitman speaks of:

Agonies are one of my changes of garments,
I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the wounded
person

Dreaming is a great human capacity. Like any capacity, it needs to be cultivated. No anatomist could predict the history of song by examining the throat, and no laboratory electrode could instruct us in the human use of dreams. We have a natural impulse to brood on our dreams, and to share them. Dreams want—demand—to be listened to more deeply.

Their great use is to teach us how to feel with more imagination.