

THE ELDERLY

Youth is a blunder; manhood a struggle; old age a regret. Benjamin Disraeli

Young men have a passion for regarding their elders as senile. Henry Brooks Adams

I have been consulting a psychiatrist for many years. I have always found Dr. Hanna Adelstein to be soothing and reassuring. I am addicted to our sessions of psychotherapeutic babble, even though I know that at a profound level they are pointless. Despite that, they allow me to function in our chaotic and bizarre world. Amongst many, one of my obsessions is a need to retain my adolescence, to imagine myself remaining youthful, full of vigor with an unbounded appetite for life. This fixation has caused me much distress with no end in sight. I am well aware of clichés such as, “Youth is wasted on youth”, or the one of French origin, “If youth only knew and old age only could”. So far Dr. Adelstein has offered no suggestions as to how I should overcome my fear of old age and my ultimate demise. She sits quietly with an air of either detachment or bemusement saying nothing but urging me to unload my thoughts. I like her because she seems totally non-judgmental.

Today, for the first time, she offered a thought that I found even more disquieting than all of my queer outlooks. It occurred after I had elaborated upon dreams I had experienced over a period of time and which I had been reluctant to mention. My dreams are normally quite upsetting, often nightmarish. However, these far exceeded all my others. It was the worst series of nightmares I had ever had.

My Dreams:

I find myself in an idyllic place, sometimes in pastoral and other times in urban settings. In either case I am always struck by a total sense of peace and serenity. Everyone is always polite, friendly, and always ready to assist anyone in any difficulty. During my visitations from city to country and vice versa there is never even a hint of any discord or violence. Disagreements are always settled amicably without any resentment manifest. What is even more remarkable is that everyone I meet and discourse with is someone I know in the real world and that even includes you, Dr. Adelstein. “Why are you smiling? Okay, don’t answer! Disturbingly, in these dreams I am not aging. If anything, I seem to be getting younger and so is everyone else and that includes you Dr. Adelstein.

While at first I relished this scene, I was also disquieted by it. It was too good to be true. However I was able to put any apprehensions aside because at some level, I understood that I was dreaming. Keeping in mind that I knew this was all a dream, the eerie nature of it caused me to question it. Either I was actually getting younger or time was traveling backwards. This was causing me much agony because I abhor having questions and puzzles unanswered. If I am getting younger, what will be my eventual fate? If time is traveling backward then is my future my past or visa versa? It occurred to me that I knew or thought I knew I was dreaming. **But Was I?** In other words are my dreams nothing more than figments of my subconscious imagination or do they represent reality and what I think is reality is nothing more than a fantasy in the form of a dream? For that matter, is it possible that dreams and reality are nothing more than two aspects of the same mystery, that of existence?

At this point Dr. Adelstein interjected.

"First of all, let us examine your two possibilities. If time is traveling backwards in some parallel universe, then in your scenario, your future is your past and your past your future. Time drifting backwards appears to be derived by simply changing the sign in front of the symbol for time ("t") in various quantum equations from positive to negative. It appears that all equations are nothing more than abstract expressions that presume to describe something in the so-called real world. We have no idea whether an equation with a negative time is but a convenience, explaining nothing. Thus I think we should put that in limbo for the time being, simply because it is beyond our comprehension.

If the first of your two possibilities is discarded, the second must be given serious consideration. Despite seeming ridiculous, it turns out to be factual, at least insofar as can be determined. Indeed, all who you think are nothing more than figures in your dreams are real and are actually getting younger. How can this be? Let me explain.

A long time ago in the indeterminate past, someone came up with the following notion and the technology to implement it. The newly born were isolated and very quickly developed into mature individuals of approximately one hundred years of age which, biologically was their maximum age. At this point their lives began. Aging meant becoming more and more youthful until all that finally remained were the original fetal cells. They were recycled later into new human beings with all the previous experiences of their earlier experiences implanted in their DNA.

During their development such individuals were also inculcated with new knowledge pertinent to their abilities and more importantly with much of the wisdom that had since been garnered. It was thought as an old adage purports, that, 'experience is the best teacher'. You would think that with this acumen there would have been enough reason to abandon all thoughts of violent activities such as war. This had been the great hope. Perhaps it played a prominent role but it turned out that the real reason for casting off such perilous activities was good old-fashioned 'self interest'. In what you thought was your actuality, war was planned and calculated by old men sending young men into battle frequently to die. They got all the kudos if victory was won while blaming others if it was not. In our reality, if the elderly behaved in a similar manner, it would be akin to sending their future selves into deplorable jeopardy. Clearly, not acceptable!

Now we have a world inhabited by persons of knowledge, intelligence, and most important of all, wisdom. We now recognize that it is love of ourselves, our families and friends and our fellow human beings that are essential factors in creating paradise. Also, it is a lesson in the futility of harboring hatred, fanaticism and foolish pride. Each individual is free to pursue their interests and has no hesitation in communicating with others sharing similar passions. These collaborations result with ego satisfaction for everyone, and fruitful products benefiting all.

That is what your supposed dreams and my reality are all about"

"Dr. Adelstein", I interjected. "If all what you have just described has any semblance of veracity, and I certainly have grave doubts about it, it has done nothing to assuage my very strong feelings of apprehension that these nightmares will simply continue rendering my sleeping hours unbearable.

She sighed and looked at me with a queer smile.

"Unfortunately, I will now resort to some pop psychology which, I hope, will explain your nervous reactions to your satisfaction and alleviate your anxieties.

If you give it any thought, you who are obsessed with youth, should embrace your dreams. After all, in them you are not getting older but younger. However you appear to be suffering from a neurosis, which, as yet, has not been named but is a lot more common than normally realized. It makes up a significant part of my practice. It is based upon the possible realization of one's fantasies, which many find to be very disturbing. As long as that possibility remains either very remote or impossible it is nothing more than an idle wish. After all, in your world, nobody is getting younger so that you can all wish for the unattainable while sharing a mutual fate. However, when something unimaginable but corresponding to one's fantasy becomes real it also becomes very difficult to confront and terrifying for the less daring."

A couple of minutes of silence elapsed during which I pondered over her explanation of my obsessive fears.

"It is true that I am not the most adventuresome person around so that I must give some credence to your explanation. Perhaps you know me all too well since I have been your patient for a number of years. However, I am still puzzled. Which of my two worlds is the real one, the world of my supposed dreams or the one I always thought was real?"

"Do you really want to know?" she asked.

"I certainly do. Otherwise I will be tormented forever." I replied.

"They are both real and you exist in both, but now that you are aware of both as realities, you will have to choose which one you really want to live in as a rational being, since in the one not chosen you will be regarded as autistic."

"I am between a rock and a hard place. In one I do not care for what awaits and in the other the uncertainty of the unexpected is weird and disturbing. Are these the only choices?"

Dr. Adelstein hesitated before replying.

"After much testing, our scientists recently came up with another possibility which you can choose. You can stop either the aging or youth-becoming process and remain as you are for about five hundred years, whereupon you will die and cease to exist. While this appears to be quite appealing, this world's nature is static. Nothing changes. You will continue living in a state of bliss, harmony, surrounded by all sorts of desirable pleasures. It will seem as if you were experiencing five hundred years of a continuous orgasm. Which of the three do you choose?"

"It appears to me Doctor, that you made a choice and opted for what I thought was my dream world. Is that so?"

"Actually, I exist in all three worlds. You see, I was part of the team that created this unbelievable technology and as a psychiatrist, it is my responsibility to ensure that no untoward and unwanted circumstances crop up in any of the three worlds. We have learned that there is no uniformity as to the desirability of each of the worlds for those

choosing. That is why it is you who must choose. I can offer an opinion as to which may be best suited for any individual, but I can be wrong. Unless one is a total misfit, the choice must be made by each individual."

"Doctor, I feel that you have sidestepped the question by using your professional qualifications. Let me rephrase it. If you had to make a choice for yourself, which would you choose?"

"I cannot answer that question since I was never in the position of having to make a choice and thus I have not given it any thought. Also you must keep in mind that you are the patient and I the Doctor."

"Why is it then that I cannot do as you do? It seems to me that I, too, would like to be able to traverse between the three worlds."

"Perhaps that will become an option in the future. At this moment the technology allows only the selected needed few this opportunity."

"Another obfuscation Doctor," I snorted, ending our session.

I am in a quandary. I have no idea which of the three worlds is best for me. They all have pros and cons. I have written about my dilemma with the hope that someone can help me choose. Which would you choose and why? Call me!"

Jack Basuk

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<http://www.jackbasuk.com>