



Unholy Spirits /// The author of a new book on nightmares talks about monsters, demons, and the fragility of the self BY ART JAHNKE

Patrick McNamara knows nightmares. The neurocognitive scientist and School of Medicine associate professor of neurology and psychiatry spent ten years researching and writing about them. The result of his efforts, *Nightmares: The Science and Solution of Those Frightening Visions During Sleep*, was published last year by Praeger. McNamara's book covers a lot of



ground, from cultural interpretations to biology to horror films inspired by our most disturbing dreams.

Bostonia editors, nervous types themselves, had a few questions for the author, who is also director of the Evolutionary Neurobehavior Laboratory at MED and the Veterans Affairs New England Healthcare System.

Bostonia: What makes a nightmare a nightmare?

The official criteria define a nightmare as a frightening dream that occurs in REM sleep, causes the dreamer to awaken, and creates emotional distress. Many scientists who study nightmares (me among them) argue that that official criteria need revision. Many nightmares do not cause you to awaken.

Another distinguishing mark of the nightmare — besides the level of terror involved — is its content. Nightmares very often involve supernatural characters that attack or target the dreamer in some way. I mean monsters, creatures, demons, spirits, unusual animals, and the like. From a cognitive point of view, one interesting aspect of the presence of the supernatural being in a nightmare is that the dreamer cannot read the mind of the supernatural being. All we can do is understand that the monster's intentions are malevolent.

Nightmares also often involve the dreamer, or self. Interestingly, the self responds to the monster with a wide range of feeling, from terror to awe and fascination. The

self escapes unscathed only if it refuses to look at or speak to or in any way engage the monster. When the self engages the monster, all kinds of ill effects ensue, including, in ancestral cultures, demonic or spirit possession.

You write about the possession theme of nightmares. Why is that particularly disturbing?

There is a danger involved in the encounter with spirit beings; you may not psychically survive the encounter. Instead, the malevolent spirit will take up residence in your consciousness and control your actions. You become possessed.

It is an interesting clinical fact that, even today, most cases of involuntary spirit possession

across the world occur overnight. The person wakes up possessed. Traditional cultures have developed ways to identify the demon-possessed people. They are usually self-destructive, they have chronic physical pains and physical distress, they are irreverent toward the culture's religious rituals, they are restless, and they have recurrent nightmares.

We in modern university settings do not realize how widespread spirit possession phenomena are throughout the world and throughout history. It is a universal human experience. For people who encounter a possessed person, it is an uncanny experience. It is a terrifying experience if the possessing spirit is demonic.

What time of life are we most likely to have nightmares?

Nightmare frequency is high in childhood and in adolescence and young adulthood. Young girls tend to experience nightmares more frequently than boys.

Is there a certain type of person who is more likely than others to have nightmares?

In adults, recurrent nightmares occur in people with so-called thin boundaries. These are people who are especially sensitive to sensory impressions. Creative people, like artists, writers, musicians, and so forth, also report more nightmares than others. A different form

of nightmare, heavily influenced by memory, occurs frequently in people who have experienced trauma of one kind or another.

What about recurrent nightmares? Are they really recurrent, or do we just think they are?

In about 2 percent of the adult population, nightmares occur frequently. They do not recur in the sense that the same scene is replayed night after night, but they do recur insofar as the individual experiences frequent nightmares. Post-traumatic nightmares, on the other hand, do recur with the same scene, with minor variations, being replayed over and over again.

If a person feels plagued by nightmares, is there something to do to inhibit their recurrence?

Yes. Scientists have found that various forms of cognitive restructuring of the imagery associated with a nightmare can reduce the distress

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WEB EXTRA
Through April, MED's Patrick McNamara will answer questions about your nightmares at www.bu.edu/bostonia.

associated with nightmares. In cognitive restructuring, you take a central image from the nightmare and literally redraw it, on paper or in imagination, so that it is less threatening or frightening. You can also do this with the use of stories. Take the nightmare story and retell it, with less frightening themes and a less frightening outcome.

What can we learn about ourselves from the details of our nightmares?

The traditional answer to your question is something along the following lines: our dreams and nightmares reflect unconscious conflicts and fears. So, examining images and themes of dreams and nightmares can tell us something important about our unconscious

fears and conflicts. I doubt that this is true.

Instead, nightmares appear to be about the strength of the ego, or the “I,” the self. It is always the self that is under attack in a nightmare. On the surface it appears that people who suffer frequent nightmares have more fragile egos than the rest of us, but when you look deeper, these people very likely have the strongest egos, or sense of self, on the planet. Nightmare images stay with us for hours

or days, haunting our awareness for days. But frequent nightmare sufferers cope with this stuff on a regular basis. They handle the frightening images on a daily basis. They are very strong individuals.

How have nightmares influenced culture: visual arts, literature, movies?

The horror story/novel/movie. The most reliably best-selling novels tend to be horror stories, like those of Stephen King. The visual artists, like painters, tend to display a profound understanding of nightmares, perhaps because they experience nightmares themselves. You might say that a whole industry has been built on the nightmare.



Patrick McNamara

VERNON DOUCETTE

Should Universities and Newspapers Get Married? ///

Three experts talk about a world where colleges offer to pick up the tab By Art Jahnke

The idea emerged at a conference of writers and publishers sponsored last fall by the College of Communication to discuss the uncertain future of journalism. Universities, with their considerable, if shrinking, endowments, and their dedication to sharing information and knowledge, might make worthy spouses for newspapers, enterprises whose business model has recently been run over by a truck. Universities, after all, have been supporting public radio for decades, and the pairing seems to work for both parties. And something has to be done. Writing recently in the *New York Times*, Yale chief investment officer David Swensen and financial analyst Michael Schmidt reported that in the past five years, the *Times'* profit margins had dropped 50 percent from where they had lived happily during the previous fifteen. At the *Washington Post*, the decline was 25 percent. And in cities all over the United States, newspapers that were once money machines are for sale, or worse. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* recently filed for bankruptcy protection, and so has the Tribune Company, which operates the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and six other daily papers.

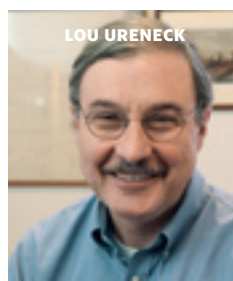
Bostonia put the question — what's good and what's bad about the idea of newspapers turning to universities for life support? — to three authorities: two former newspaper editors and one of the most respected analysts of the newspaper business.

LOU URENECK is chair of the BU College of Communication journalism department. He is a former editor of Maine's *Portland Press Herald*, page one editor at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and editor-in-residence at Harvard's Nieman Foundation for Journalism.

JAMES E. O'SHEA, currently a fellow at Harvard's Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, was famously fired from his job as editor of the *Los Angeles Times* in January 2008 after refusing to make the newsroom cuts demanded by the publisher. Before moving to the *L.A. Times*, O'Shea spent twenty-seven years at the *Chicago Tribune*, where he was managing editor from 2001 to 2006.

LAUREN RICH FINE is a practitioner in residence at Kent State University's College of Communication and Information and director of research at ContentNext, which reports on the business of digital media. She is a former managing director at Merrill Lynch and a nationally known authority on the changing business of daily newspapers. Fine was once described by the *Toronto Star* as “the most powerful media figure you don't know.”

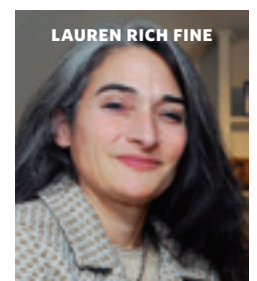
What follows is an edited version of their conversation.



LOU URENECK



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