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Dreamweavers

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Despite enormous strides in our understanding of the brain over the last few decades, lectures and panel discussions featuring neuroscientists regularly conclude with the following admission: the more we learn, the more we realize how far we are from definitive answers. In a [Brainwave](#) discussion between actor Jake Gyllenhaal and neuroscientist [Moran Cerf](#) on the impact of dreams, that often-repeated refrain was reaffirmed as the duo waxed philosophical and queried each other on various aspects of what Freud called “the road to the unconscious mind.”

The discussion took place during [Brain Awareness Week](#) at the [Rubin Museum of Art](#) in New York City. Both Gyllenhaal and Cerf agreed that dreams are of vital importance; the actor compared dreams to films and claimed they can shape and change you. He also revealed that he either writes or records what he can recount about a specific dream as soon as he awakens. “Storytelling is the way I experience dreaming and what I try to accomplish as an actor, and both storytelling and dreaming can move you to extraordinary places in your life,” he said. “They help me guide major life decisions, including which projects to pursue.”

Cerf, an assistant professor in the neuroscience program at Northwestern University, asserted that sleep makes up about one-third of our day and plays a major role in how we feel when we’re conscious. “Many people view sleep as necessary but rather useless, but it serves a huge purpose because dreaming allows us to say and do things we can never do when we are awake,” he said. “Dreaming is a way for us to get access to feelings and emotions that are buried below.”

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Whether or not you can go back to sleep and sustain your dream was one of the questions addressed by Jake Gyllenhaal (left) and Moran Cerf. Photo courtesy of the Rubin Museum

The pair had good chemistry and elicited laughter from the audience as they related the discussion to Gyllenhaal's underwear, bad eyesight, and his taking credit for his sister's goodness. Gyllenhaal also teasingly reminded Cerf, who has a rapid-fire style of speaking, to slow down. But the discussion also had serious and poignant moments as they related dreaming to grieving, depression, and close relationships.

Gyllenhaal said he is someone who dreams a lot, and Cerf asked if he might recount a recent dream. Gyllenhaal's three-month run in the Broadway acclaimed two-actor play, *Constellations*, had ended just the day before, and the actor dreamed during the night that he was on a black stage filled with white balloons alongside an unknown figure as they both rose like a small town into the air. Cerf said that while such elaborate fantasies are open to interpretation, Gyllenhaal's distinguishing colors in his dream is a relatively recent phenomenon: "Before color TV came along, people only dreamt in black and white," he claimed.

Cerf pointed out a [recent study](#) that revealed the important role that our sense of smell plays in dreaming. "If I spray the scent of roses in your nose while you're sleeping, you are going to wake up and describe a positive dream, but if I spray rotten eggs, you will have negative dreams," he said, adding that other studies using imaging have helped neuroscientists learn about common tendencies in the way we recall dreams and how they impact on quality of life.

Why we remember vivid details from the previous day versus not remembering details from dreams we've had the previous night was used by Cerf to illustrate the [mystery of how our brains process memory](#). Interestingly, in a [study](#) that looked at the most important factors in determining happiness, a good night's sleep won out over money, family, and spirituality. "Even if you're facing a root canal the next day, it will look better to you if you've gotten a great night's sleep," said Cerf.

For audience members who yearned to hear the full-bearded Gyllenhaal talk about acting, he spoke about the elements that drew him to his upcoming film, *Everest*, based on Jon Krakauer's best-selling book, *Into Th*

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He said he is drawn to act in films (such as *Everest*, *Donnie Darko*, *Prisoners*, and *Enemy*) that involve the unconscious or reflexive behavior—states of mind closely aligned to the evening’s topic.

The Rubin Museum is a [Brain Awareness Week](#) partner. To find events in your area, visit our [international calendar of events](#).

-Bill Glovin

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