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As told to Janet Frishberg, 2897 words.

Tags: Art, Magic, Inspiration, Process.

# On dreaming new worlds into being

**Mystic and artist Hadar Cohen discusses allowing for spaciousness, allowing for expansiveness, and why we were maybe smarter when we were children. You mentioned that you wanted to talk about daydreaming. What about daydreaming interests you when it comes to the creative process?**

As a Pisces, daydreaming for me is about allowing the mind to break from linear patterns and enter the imaginative mind. I've been thinking a lot about what fantasy is and if fantasy is real. What is this fantasy that our mind develops? But if our mind can develop it, then it is real to us on some level.

In our culture, the imaginative facilities of our mind have been so repressed. Ever since I was a child, I always loved imagining, whether it was imagining future scenarios or things outside of this earth, and just letting my mind go wherever it would take me, even though I'd know that it's not necessarily something that would happen in this life.

I studied engineering in college. After, I realized that there was something missing in my life around how I was thinking. In my childhood, I had spent so much time daydreaming, and I wondered what it would be like to let myself have that again. What if that's not just a young thing to do, but actually a part of life?

When I started again, a lot opened up around my creativity and manifesting. I felt more freedom in the mind. Still to this day, just having the empty space to allow for my mind to wander, to not limit it in rational thought has become a practice for me.

**What does it look like? Is there a way that you facilitate that for yourself?**

In terms of where, one place is in my bedroom. When I was younger, I would just listen to music, put headphones on, and just relax the mind. I would fantasize a lot about love and romance; that was a big part of it for me. But then as I got older, it also became daydreaming about future projects I wanted to do, and how I wanted to be seen.

Another way is through nature—lying on the beach, or finding a park under a tree. Daydreaming is very connected to doing nothing, not having to produce anything, and just allowing. There's something sacred in the nothingness.

Daydreaming can't be scheduled. It needs expansive time. Sometimes it's three hours! Creative people need a lot of empty space to do nothing. When I have that spaciousness, that's when suddenly that imaginative mind starts developing.

The other place I daydream is on transportation. I think that's why I love traveling so much, whether it's on flights, long buses, or on trains. You're sitting and you're watching the window. Things are moving really fast. That helps me get into that state.

**How would you teach someone to daydream?**

I've been thinking about this question. I've realized that it's really hard for us to create something in the world that we don't know yet. Before we create it physically, we first have to feel it internally. Daydreaming helps us imagine what it might feel like to have what we want. In the daydream world, it's a bit scary sometimes, because you realize your mind can really be anything. There's no limitation.

The practice involves asking yourself what you want to feel and how you want to be seen. Then you practice having that in the mind.

**Is there anything that you feel is a downside of this practice or this strength that you have?**

I've definitely spent so much time daydreaming that I would almost prefer it to the real world. Fantasy was more fun. It's easy to allow your mind to take you on an adventure; there's a way in which the fantasy can drag you from reality. Honestly I'm still working through some confusion between what is reality and what is fantasy. It's really tricky to decipher.

**That makes sense. What's your relationship like with anxiety?**

I didn't feel like I had anxiety at all as a child or even in high school or college. Only in the last few years have I started feeling more anxious, which has been awkward for me. The mental health issues that I struggle with more are depression, resentment, or anger. Anxiety is a new one for me to experience.

**That's interesting, because I think that a lot of people have strong imaginations, but they channel them into anxiety instead of positive fantasy. And I was curious if you've found ways to work with that.**

I learned in an energy school called Luminous about the third eye. The third eye is meant to guide you into multidimensional experience. It's beyond time and space. It's very, very expansive. When there's a wound there though, it manifests as feeling overwhelmed, because you're taking in all of these gigantic expansions and limiting it to the here, this world, physical eyesight. It's a lot of possibility in a very small zone.

There's a parallel teaching from Kabbalah that I love, which is all about this relationship between the light and the vessel. The world is made up of divine light, and then there are vessels that are containing the light. Oftentimes, we think we need more of the divine light to grace us, but the teaching is that we need more of a vessel that can hold the light.

The light is here, and there's no end to it. Sometimes the vessel is too small, so when the light comes in, it can either shatter the vessel, or overwhelm the vessel and cause anxiety. The spiritual teaching of emptiness really helps. When we allow ourselves to be empty or we create more emptiness, whether it's with our time or in our awareness, that's when we can receive more insight.

Spaciousness can also look like not needing to understand everything fully, not needing to analyze it, but just letting it breathe. With art projects sometimes, I start a project, and then it overwhelms me and I can't finish it, so I need to give it time to breathe, to not even look at it. Sometimes I just let it sit for a year. Then the next year I come back to it with more room to interact with it.

**I love that teaching. I do see a lot of people right now having an almost insatiable seeking for insight.**

I've been trying to use a model of seeking and surrendering in my spiritual practice, and exploring that relationship. It involves really letting yourself surrender, into that rest, into that emptiness. I find that that's actually where insight comes.

This also relates to nervous system regulation. I receive more insights when my body is relaxed. When I have enough sleep, enough food, just the basics. Then there's this permission for my body to expand into new territories.

As a young child I loved, especially on Shabbat, to spend time just breathing, being, and observing my room. I could do that for five hours straight. I'd always feel like, "What am I doing? Why am I just sitting here with this nothingness?" But I would actually find a lot of pleasure in it. It allowed my mind to catch up to itself. There's so much that happens even in just a minute in our day, and we don't have enough time to process it because things keep happening.

I always think I was smarter as a child, so I keep trying to return to what I knew when I was a child.

**I did the same thing as you, actually. I think a lot of kids know intuitively that we need a lot of nothing time.**

As a child, you don't differentiate between what is a toy and what's not a toy. Everything's a toy. And in the dream world, everything is up for play. The whole reality is up for play.

**Is there a project that you've worked on recently that you remember specifically starting off in the dream world?**

So many. The most powerful one that I had was when I was traveling in Amsterdam. I was in a confused space, and when I get unsure of what to do, I usually take myself to a park or somewhere like that, and I let myself have basically as much time as I need. I was lying there wondering what to do next, and I let myself feel, and all of a sudden—I remember it so sharply—I got this deep insight. The phrase "feminism all night" came to me, and I realized I should produce an event called that.

I started imagining what that would look like, what would it mean to gather my community around feminist learning, and celebrate that. I started seeing this vision, and it was so beautiful. I wanted to do it around the Jewish holiday of Shavuot, which has a tradition to stay up all night and learn, but it was

only three weeks away. It felt impossible, but I ended up getting a grant for it, putting the event together, and it really did happen three weeks later, with over 150 people there. It was one of the most magical things that I've created. We started at six or seven in the evening, and we went all the way to four in the morning. People brought different teachings and it was a beautiful celebration.

I almost don't create unless I receive that strong of a download or insight. That's where the challenge is sometimes, because I feel that you can't really control that. You have to surrender into it, and you have to let your body rest. Because of that, much of my life has become around tending to my body. Sometimes I wonder, "What am I doing? Shouldn't I be producing, in the capitalistic sense, and keeping up with work?" But it's really about listening to the rhythms of the body and prioritizing that. It's counter-cultural.

In the framework of Human Design, I'm a Manifestor, and Manifestors can't really do a nine-to-five job. Feminism All Night was, in some ways, a manifestation. It was creating something big and epic, working for an intense period of time, and then taking space and letting myself rest right after that.

My most recent project was a Sephardic Jewish pilgrimage to Andalusia. It actually happened in a very similar way. Maybe six years ago, I was right outside of Barcelona, on the beach, just letting myself be. I received this vision of bringing a pilgrimage of Jewish people to this land.

Now, about six years later, I just led it. It was a five-day pilgrimage for 20 Jews from all over the world, and we came and we celebrated together the teachings of Kabbalah, and talked about ancestral healing.

It's wild to think that that came from this vision, or from allowing the vision to come into me.

**How did you keep track of that vision over the six years in which you weren't doing it? How did you tend to it?**

I need to update my systems around it because I don't really write it down. I just let it come into my consciousness. I do so many different types of work, whether it's spiritual, political, artistic, and I don't really keep track of them. I get overwhelmed sometimes and I feel like, "No, don't bring me any more vision."

I trust that the ones that need to happen will happen in the right timing, and it's not necessarily clear to me also, when I receive insight in that way, is this something that needs to materialize? There is a relationship between the manifest and the unmanifest, or in scientific terms, it's the kinetic energy and the potential energy.

What is it like to play with potential without actually forcing it to manifest itself? It's a question that I still have.

**What's your relationship with guilt around this part of your creative practice?**

I definitely had a lot of guilt around this, especially when I was a child. Still do, I think. When I was younger, I didn't really understand what I was doing. I looked at all the adults, and they were working all the time.

I felt my body being drawn to this practice but also I felt confused about what it was. I felt like maybe I shouldn't be doing it. I think that's why I stopped for a few years as I became an adult.

Still now, I don't know how long it's going to take for my body to really surrender and relax in a way that frees my mind. Sometimes it takes very little, sometimes it takes very long, and there is a lot of guilt around that, especially when I take more time.

Shouldn't I be working on my business? Or on something more tangible? More concrete, so I can tell people what I did today, instead of telling someone, "Well, I daydreamed all day."

Daydreaming is such a mystical thing. It's confusing psychologically. The thing that we feel guilt or shame about, we also have desire for.

**How do you think pleasure and desire relate to this, and relate to making art?**

These are in some ways so taboo, not even just sexually. How do you really make contact with desire? How do you really know what you want? These questions, I think, are deep questions. The reason why I've been dedicated to having empty space and daydreaming in my life, which I don't admit it to myself as much as I could, is because I find a lot of pleasure there. I find a lot of joy there. It's interesting because you could argue that we do follow pleasure. We may repress the desire but then somehow it'll come out.

Pleasure is an animating force in our life, whether we know it or not, and that's how we follow what it is that we want to do. And sometimes we tell ourselves that we shouldn't be doing something because it's too much pleasure. But, going back to your question of how to teach this to others, I would ask: How would you let pleasure lead you?

And specifically, I think pleasure of the mind is not talked about, because we often talk about pleasure of the body. But for me, there's so much pleasure that comes in the mind.

A book that really inspired me is The Pleasure of the Text, which is about how to read in a pleasurable way, and how to work with thoughts and the mind in a way that actually produces pleasure. That's something that only recently I've started finding language for. For me, following pleasure of the mind is an animating force.

**I think it's scary for a lot of people to think about following their pleasure. People think if they were to do that, their life would really fall apart in a certain way—**

And it might.

**I've noticed a strong narrative in the creativity, self-help world that's about how we should be showing up at our desks every single day to write or do our art. And it seems like you have an equally strong practice, but it's to show up and do nothing, and let what happens, happen. To let your body do what it needs to do, and the mind do what it needs to do. That's an interesting counterforce to the sort of War-of-Art-style advice of: "Show up every day no matter what. Put in the hours."**

That's something that I also suffered a lot from, because I have that very strongly; I'm constantly trying to discipline myself to wake up and write. To commit to my art practice in that way. But I feel like my body revolts and it's like, "No, I need more rest," or, "I just want to have fun." It's still a fight that I have inside me.

A lot of times we think about art as something that we produce, like a book, a painting, a film. One way I've tried to reconcile this fight is I've started adopting the idea of art as a lifestyle. Art is the way that I walk, art is the way that I think. My body is art.

That's where it intersects with spirituality for me, and devotion practice, and really thinking of the Divine as an artist. I'm already an artwork, so then all of a sudden that play of art is completely different.

Hadar Cohen Recommends:

Makam Shekhina, a multi-religious Jewish and Sufi Muslim spiritual community committed to embodied, counter-oppressive devotion.

The Musical Activation Experience, a music mentorship with Scarlett de la Torre that takes adults with 0 musical experience to be fully-embodied multi-instrumentalist in just 3 months.

More To Her Story, a news agency & podcast focusing on advancing gender equality

Light Brown Butterfly, a photo series where artist Maya June Mansour investigates the lasting physical and emotional impact of an act of sexual assault she experienced in her youth.

MAGICDATES, an indulgent dessert alternative that hits the sweet spot without added sugar, made by a Palestinian-Syrian bringing this ancient Middle Eastern fruit to the world. It's gluten free, plant-based and paleo.

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Vocation

scholar, mystic, artist

Fact

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