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University Course Explores The Mystery And History Of Dreams

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DURHAM, N.H. –They are the subject of songs, poems, books, and movies. They can be perplexing, scary, insightful, and downright bizarre. Dreams and their meanings have fascinated societies for thousands of years, and now University of New Hampshire students have the opportunity to investigate how different cultures have interpreted dreams and the profound meanings attached to them.

This fall, Robin Sheriff, associate professor of anthropology, is teaching her new undergraduate course, “The Anthropology of Dreams and Dreaming.”

“Dreaming is a universal human activity, shared within and among all cultures. The meaning of dreams, however, varies dramatically across cultures. Modern Western societies refer to ‘having dreams’ whereas in ancient Greece and many non-Western societies, people ‘see’ a dream,” Sheriff says.

“This linguistic distinction underscores a more profound cultural one: among non-Westerners, the dream world is often experienced as a parallel reality – a concept very different from the notion that dreams are products of an illusion-creating, individual mind,” she says.

The course explores Western and non-Western “dream theories.” As Sheriff explains, all societies have ideas about what dreams are, where they come from and what role they should play in the lives of individuals and communities. These theories are, in turn, linked to ideas about the nature of self, experience, and reality. Studying a people’s dream theory opens a window onto a whole culture, a whole way of living and being in the world.

For example, in some non-Western cultures the distinction between a ‘real’ waking life and a ‘not real’ dream world doesn’t make sense. Although reality may appear to some Western cultures in these two different modes, non-Western cultures believe the core of who we are is produced out of a seamless, fluid universe of experience through which the soul wanders.

“If we can stretch our minds to understand the dream theories of other societies, we gain an expanded sense of the multiplicity of ways that we can be human. Studying dream theories helps us to appreciate cultural diversity at the same time that it helps us to reflect on what is probably universal — preoccupations with the love and respect of others, for example,” Sheriff says.

The course also is a cross-cultural study of the human condition. Students explore age-old questions such as, "What is self?", "What is consciousness?", "What is the relationship between self and society?", "How do we know what is real and not real?", "How many realities are there?"

In many societies, dreams are thought to communicate knowledge about significant matters, such as hunting, the causes and cures of illness, and how to negotiate relationships with entities in the spiritual realm. Dreams are often thought to have an impact on community welfare, rather than just on the individual dreamer.

Our Western society is among the few that dismiss dreams as meaningless or as having, at most, a private and limited significance, Sheriff notes.

"Yet, even in our own society, beyond the reach of official culture, many individuals find their dreams compelling and meaningful. We may even make some important decisions based on dreams," she says. "Even if we live in a culture that spurns dreams, we still experience the wonder of them."

Students are studying Freud's theory of dreams as well as considering the debate of modern research – are dreams a product of chemical activities in the brain or is Freud's belief in the meaningfulness of dreams still valid?

The course also looks at how people share their dreams with others, how dreams are used for the pursuit of knowledge, how dreams figure in various religious systems, the experience of nightmares, and the degree to which dreams might compose a "political unconscious" that ties into systems of power, authority and violence.

"Dreams can expose a society's weighty silences and shared illusions for what they are," Sheriff says.

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling more than 12,200 undergraduate and 2,200 graduate students.