

Deirdre Barrett story, part two

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of June 11, 2018)

We continue Benita Albert's series on highly successful Oak Ridge High School graduates. This is part two of her series on Deirdre Barrett. If you have ever wondered about your dreams, you will enjoy this unique story and might even learn something about your dreams from some of her work.

Enjoy the conclusion of Deirdre's story from Benita's recollections and research.

Deirdre Barrett, an Oak Ridge High School Class of 1972 alumna, is now a noted psychologist, professor, author, editor and speaker. Her dream research is a topic to which virtually every person can relate and for which many seek explanations. Some examples of her studies include bereavement dreams and their evolution over time, the role of dreams in creative thinking and problem solving, incubating mastery dreams to treat nightmares in people suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and dream characteristics manifested in various human disorders.

Her studies of hypnosis have led her to define two human types, "fantasizers and dissociators" as being highly hypnotizable. She has focused on the similarities and differences in daydreaming and nocturnal dreaming and also on sleep talking and dream reporting.

Deirdre's recent work in evolutionary psychology addresses our primal instincts and the confusing transition to modern day excesses. Deirdre's relatable style in both her writings and speeches and her professional leadership and respected research makes me, her former high school teacher, proud to share more of her amazing career beyond her Oak Ridge beginnings which was previously published in part one of this two-part story.

After her Oak Ridge Schools education, Deirdre earned an undergraduate degree in psychology from Emory University in only three years. She followed with graduate study at the University of Tennessee completing a doctorate in Clinical Psychology. The fifth year of her PhD program required a one-year internship which she completed at the University of Colorado Medical Center.

She loved graduate school, and this led her to accept an academic appointment at the University of Texas soon followed by a second faculty job in the PhD Clinical Program at the University of North Carolina. In 1986 she accepted an assistant clinical professorship in psychology at Harvard Medical School in Boston where she continues to enjoy teaching, researching, and writing.

Deirdre has edited four academic texts and authored four books considered of interest to both professionals and the general public. She has also served as the President of the International Association of the Study of Dreams and as the Editor-in-Chief of the journal, "Dreaming." She is a much sought-after consultant and speaker internationally.

She attended Burning Man the year the theme was "Psyche" and led dream groups inside a sculpted, giant purple head called "The Dreamer." The Kuwait government invited her to teach a course on trauma treatment after the first Gulf War.

And during an international conference on dreams in Moscow, the concurrent August 1991 Russian coup attempt made this professional meeting unforgettable. Though she was there to speak on dreams, the political turmoil was not a dream as Deirdre observed military tanks in Red Square and elsewhere while sightseeing.

"The Pregnant Man and Other Cases from a Hypnotherapists Couch" was Deirdre's first book, published in 1998 and based on her twenty years of clinical practice. Of the seven anonymous patient case studies in the book, Deirdre says that their stories "unfolded in my office like plays." Her book is often compared to popular case studies written by Oliver Sacks, but in addition, she begins with a brief history of hypnosis and ends with cautionary advice on how to find a reputable hypnotherapist.

She does not claim that hypnotherapy is a preferred treatment but rather one option for consideration. The book's case studies range from multiple personality disorders to tales of recovered memory and coping mechanisms.

Deirdre Barrett story, part two

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of June 11, 2018)

Her second book, "The Committee of Sleep: How Artists, Scientists and Athletes Use Dreams for Creative Problem Solving and You Can Too," was published in 2001. Noted author John Steinbeck wrote, "A problem difficult at night is resolved in the morning after the committee of sleep has worked on it."

This quote motivated Deirdre's book title and supported the book theme to which she also adds advice on dream exercises and techniques for making the most of sleeping hours. She suggests keeping a notebook by your bedside advising that, "Dreaming is a time when unheard parts of ourselves are allowed to speak. We would do well to listen."

Her work in evolutionary psychology has been inspired by 1973 Nobel Prize winner Nikolaas Tinbergen's work in animal ethology (behavior), namely his "supernormal stimuli" studies. Tinbergen observed in his experiments on insects, birds and fish that exaggerated enticements such as more colorful, stronger marked, or larger sized, artificially presented objects lured test subjects away from their natural objects. He coined the phrase "supernormal stimuli" for the aforementioned enticements.

Deirdre published "Waistland" in 2007 followed by "Supernormal Stimuli" in 2010. Both are considered evolutionary psychology works of nonfiction for general public edification in this field of study. "Waistland: The (R)evolutionary Science Behind Our Weight and Fitness" blames our primal instincts for our fitness troubles.

Deirdre claims that primal instincts have not evolved sufficiently to help us overcome our obsession with such as sugar, fat, and salt, resources that were scarce and much coveted by early man. Deirdre asserts that our human "big brains" (unlike animal brains) give us the ability to overcome, to use our willpower and behavior modification to reprogram our bodies and break food addictions.

She says that much of our junk food addiction (supernormal stimuli) and easy access to food set up the conflict of instinct (what we crave) over intellect (what we need). Her concluding message is that big changes in dietary habits possibly produce more long term, successful results than smaller, incremental plans. Thus, if your New Year's resolution is to get fit, acknowledge the supernormal stimuli present that work counter to your goals and set an ambitious agenda for change.

Her latest book, "Supernormal Stimuli: How Primal Urges Overran Their Evolutionary Purpose," has been cited as the first comprehensive overview of the many modern ways humans stimulate themselves, namely stimuli that the forces of evolution never anticipated. Supernormal stimuli such as television, video games, pornography, drugs and junk food are just a few examples in this modern era of plentiful access.

Again, Deirdre posits that our "big brain" needs to be used for self-control to avoid gaudy or unhealthy traps and also instincts that lead us astray. She has proposed that the government regulate supernormal stimuli where public health is at risk.

In a radio broadcast of "All in the Mind" (September 17, 2011), Australian ABC Radio National interviewer Natasha Mitchell gave a striking interpretation to Deirdre's work on supernormal stimuli. Mitchell posited, "We house Stone Age minds in a 21st Century skull."

Deirdre's body of research provokes us to look at ourselves, both our conscious and our sleep thoughts. Her studies concern what she calls the "enigmas of human behavior." She inspires us to be evolved intellects in life's choices and also creative dreamers.

Thank you, Deirdre.

Wow, folks. Did you ever think about those things? Have you ever wondered about what drives us to do the things we do and why we sometimes have such a hard time changing the things that we are doing that may not be helpful or healthy?

Maybe we should listen to our dreams more! I have enjoyed "Committee of Sleep" now I want to check out some other books Deirdre has written. Thanks to Benita for bringing us this story of another tremendously accomplished Oak Ridge

Deirdre Barrett story, part two

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of June 11, 2018)

Schools graduate. She is working on even more such stories. Keep your eye out for even more interesting stories about her students of the past.



Deirdre Barrett

Deirdre Barrett story, part two

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of June 11, 2018)



Deirdre led dream groups inside a sculpted, giant purple head called “The Dreamer”

Deirdre Barrett story, part two

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of June 11, 2018)



Deirdre in the turmoil of Red Square during the August 1991 Russian coup attempt

Deirdre Barrett story, part two

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of June 11, 2018)



An example of Deirdre's art