

Dream Lucidity and Near-Death Experience: A Personal Report by John Wren-Lewis

Attempts to investigate correlations between the incidence of lucid dreaming and near-death experiences (NDEs) have so far been inconclusive (Lucidity Letter, Vol. 1, Nos. 2 and 3, 1982). The following are some observations following my own NDE in November, 1983, which suggests a new approach.

My NDE itself, which I have described elsewhere (Wren-Lewis, 1985), lacked almost all the dramatic features emphasized in the now voluminous literature on the subject (Lundahl, 1982). I had no "out-of-body" vision of myself in the hospital bed, no review of my life, no experience of hurtling through a tunnel towards a heavenly landscape and no encounter with supernatural figures urging me to return to bodily existence. I simply dissolved into an apparently spaceless and timeless void which was total "no-thing-ness" yet at the same time the most intense, blissful aliveness I have ever known.

The after-effects of the experience, however, were dramatic indeed, and I have found no account of anything comparable in the NDE literature. I have been left with a change of consciousness so palpable that in the early days I kept putting my hand up to the back of my head, feeling for all the world as if the doctors had removed the top of my skull and exposed my brain to the infinite darkness of space. In fact the Living Void is still with me as a kind of background to my consciousness. The effect is that I experience everything, including this sixty-year-old body-mind, as a continuous outpouring of Being, wherein every part is simultaneously the whole, manifesting afresh moment by moment from that infinite Dark. As "John" I seem to have no separate existence, but am simply the Void knowing itself in manifestation, and in that process of continuous creation everything seems to celebrate coming into being with a shout of joy—"Behold, it is very good!" Yet the experience is in no sense a high, for its feeling-tone is one of gentle equanimity. My impression is rather that I am now knowing the true ordinariness of everything for the first time, and that what I used to call normal consciousness was in fact clouded.

I still slip back into that old clouded state frequently, but this is not a process of "coming down." What happens is something I would have found unbelievable had I heard of it second-hand—namely, I again and again simply forget about the pearl of great price. I drift off into all kinds of preoccupations, mostly trivial, and become my old self, cut off from the Void-Background. Then, after a while, there begins to dawn on me a sense of something missing, at which point I recall the Void and usually click back into the new consciousness almost immediately, with no effort at all.

I think this is what is meant by the mystical notion that so-called normal human life is really a state of chronic forgetfulness of "who we really are," and I suppose my NDE must somehow have shocked me into recognizing my identity with the Void, with the result that my forgetfulness is now spasmodic rather than chronic. Needless to say, I was bowled over by all this at first, and spent many weeks coming to terms with it. I soon found that the new consciousness did not seem to demand any drastic changes of life-style. In keeping with its sense of utter ordinariness, I remained recognizably John, and neither my tendency to drift out of the new consciousness nor my ability to

click back into it seemed affected in any way by variations in diet, environment, or activities such as meditation.

Changes in Dreaming Patterns

One change that did impress me, however, was that to begin with my sleep seemed to become quite dreamless. Hitherto I had always been a big dreamer. In fact I seemed no longer to experience sleep as unconsciousness, but rather as with-drawal into something like the pure void-state of the original NDE. Then, after about two weeks, I woke one morning with a dream, and was very disappointed to find it a rather "boring" scenario totally lacking in mystical consciousness. My disappointment grew as this experience was repeated several times over the following weeks, and I wondered if it meant my new consciousness was somehow superficial, doomed to fade before long. In fact, however, the consciousness remained undiminished in waking hours and at sleep onset; with a scientist's hankering after quantification, I estimated that I stayed in it between 30% and 50% of my waking time.

The explanation of its absence from dreams became apparent as soon as I put aside disappointment and resumed regular dream-work, using the approach developed by my wife, Dr. Ann Faraday (Faraday, 1973; 1976). I found that my dreams now, just as in my pre-NDE life, were working over, in their own distinctive dramatic-symbolic mode, various specific unresolved concerns of the day—and I immediately recognized these as the very preoccupations that had obscured mystical consciousness during my "drifts into forgetfulness." In fact my disappointment came from not taking our own dream theory seriously enough.

In the Faraday view, most dreams—even happy, creative, numinous, archetypal and transpersonal ones—derive from waking concerns requiring further attention, mainly thoughts, feelings or subliminal vibes passed over during the day because we were either too busy or unwilling to examine them. The essence of my mystical consciousness, on the other hand, is that each moment is enjoyed with full feeling-attention—not because I stop thinking or imagining, but because I am coming from a state of complete satisfaction with whatever is in the moment, irrespective of what has to be completed along the line of time. The clouds descend when consciousness gets caught up in some concern, high or low, and forgets its identity with the Void-Ground—and normal dreaming, in which the self is completely involved in whatever dream-drama is going on, is an exact reflection of this state of preoccupied forgetfulness.

Realizing this, I understood why many mystics have referred to unenlightened human life as a kind of waking dream. I also recalled the claim often made by J. Krishnamurti that he had "no need to dream" because he completes each waking moment in fully satisfied feeling-attention. He awakens each morning, he says, to a world completely new and fresh, having spent the night in a state beyond both dream and dreamlessness—perhaps the same state which Tibetan yoga describes as transcending the state between sleep and waking (Chang, 1963). Could this have been what I experienced in the first two weeks after the NDE?

What About Lucidity?

I remained very puzzled, however, about where lucid dreams fit into this picture, and tried several experiments to induce them by pre-sleep suggestion, without success.

And then, at Easter 1984, I got my answer, and also my first dream that did include mystical consciousness, through an entirely unforeseen circumstance.

The occasion was a dinner party in Sydney at which my host continued unobtrusively to fill my glass with superb Australian wine to the point where I had drunk more than is my custom. All my Puritan Christian conditioning, reinforced by my studies in Eastern mysticism since the NDE, closed in on me with the fear that I might have sabotaged my mystical consciousness. In actual fact I could not detect any clouding at all—the party, and the streets on the way home after, were full of the usual blissful "Isness." But my worrying Topdog voices wouldn't be shaken off, and I went to bed half convinced that I would wake next day to find I had betrayed my gift of grace, dissolved the pearl of great price in a mess of alcohol. Instead, I had the most remarkable dream of my life. Since it occupies seven pages of my dream diary, I can only give a bare summary here. It began as an ordinary dream.

I was wandering around Sydney and gradually becoming aware that most people couldn't see me because I was dead. Of the few who could, one was Ann, and another the real-life President of the Australian Institute for Psychical Research, Eric Wedell. He seemed to have a special responsibility for instructing me in how to handle this strange post-mortem existence, and when he mentioned wine I suddenly became lucid. I knew this was a dream, in which my ghostly invisibility symbolized my post-NDE state and the dream-characters who could see me were the people who in waking life recognized that I was living in heaven here on earth, dead to "this world." I also knew I was creating this dream to explore my concern about drink and mystical consciousness, and I became aware of lying in bed in our apartment overlooking Sydney Harbor Bridge with my mouth dry from mild alcoholic dehydration.

Still in the dream, I recalled the discussion in Lucidity Letter following Charles Tart's proposal (Tart, 1984) to restrict the term "lucid" to dreams in which there is full rational consciousness, including awareness of lying in a particular bed asleep. I thought to myself, 'Well, here's one for you Charlie!', and continued with the dream, maintaining simultaneous consciousness of lying in bed in one room while talking to Eric in a quite different dream-room. I asked him outright what were the heavenly rules about drinking, to which he replied that "here," drink just wasn't available for people likely to abuse it—and wouldn't I like to try this new vintage? With a flash I saw that the real threat to my mystical consciousness lay not in drink itself but in getting caught up into an internal dialogue about drink, and to celebrate this "break" in dream-terms, I walked straight through the wall of the dream-room.

As I emerged into the street by the harbor my dream was flooded with mystical consciousness, not as something new, but as a simple recognition of what had actually been there all along, the exact same sense I have when I click back into the consciousness in waking life. I flew over the water, borne by a wind I knew to be the breath of God on creation's first morning, and fainted at the beauty of it all—to wake in bed, my eyes brimming with tears of gratitude.

The gratitude has returned many times since, for I have used the insight again and again in waking life to break out of internal Topdog/Underdog dialogues (of many different kinds) and click back into mystical consciousness far sooner than I would otherwise have done. Largely thanks to this particular piece of dream-work, I am now

enjoying the mystical state for well over half of most days, sometimes much more, and this has been accompanied by some quite astonishing effects—for example, an ability to take even quite unpleasant experiences like pain into the consciousness and find them, too, "very good" as I have described elsewhere (Wren-Lewis, 1985).

For the record here, I must state that I have not noticed any decrease in my dreaming, but this is no surprise. Dreams deal with specific unresolved concerns, any one of which can sometimes be worked over by several dreams of the same night, so even a small amount of time caught up in preoccupation during the day could still generate as much "need to dream" as a whole day of clouding. The "Krishnamurti phenomenon," if it occurs, would represent a quantum jump to complete dreamlessness when daily drifting into preoccupation is reduced to zero, and I am a long way from that yet.

Interpreting Lucid Dreams

Meantime, my main concern here is to report what I have learned from all this about lucid dreaming, and once again I must necessarily resort to summary. My dream described above completely confirms Faraday's view (Faraday, 1976) that the contents of lucid dreams, including breakthroughs, flying and even the act of "awakening" to lucidity, can be interpreted in the same way as the contents of non-lucid dreams. Faraday links varying degrees of self-reflection or lucidity in dreaming to occasions of comparable "awakening" during the day, when we catch ourselves out (albeit only partially or fleetingly) getting lost in some internal drama of our own making. In my case, the fleeting moment of waking lucidity must have occurred on the drive home from the party, when I looked around the Sydney streets and found them still full of blissful "Isness," despite my Topdog trying to persuade me otherwise.

The dream very clearly portrayed mystical consciousness as beyond the "awakening" to lucidity. Following the logic of a Faraday interpretation, I see this as a reflection of the fact that mystical consciousness includes but goes beyond psychological "awakening" to one's internal dramas. This jibes with Ken Wilber's repeated insistence (Wilber, 1981; 1983) that psychotherapy and human potential work can never themselves bring fulfillment or liberation, which is transpersonal, though they provide an essential foundation for it. In Wilber's paradigm, mystical consciousness is presented as a separate stage of development, requiring yogic or Zen techniques, after psychological self-awareness has been attained; in my case, having been catapulted into mystical consciousness by the shock of the NDE, I now find myself having to use the self-therapy of dream-work to claim fully what I already have much of the time.

Because my NDE has given me this foothold beyond psychological self-awareness, I would expect, on Faraday principles, to have fewer spontaneous lucid dreams than I did before, since any time I catch myself out in an internal drama during the day I normally click straight back into mystical consciousness with no opportunity for the self-awareness to become an unfinished concern. I think lucid dreams are likely to arise for me now only in rather special circumstances like the Easter party, and so far I have had no further instances. For anyone without a mystical foothold beyond psychological self-awareness, on the other hand, I would expect the practice of regular dream-work of other human potential disciplines to be accompanied by an increase in all the stages of lucidity in dreams, just as Faraday reports (Faraday, 1976; 1978).

I suspect that my Archimedean foothold beyond self-awareness was also in some way responsible for the fact that my Easter 1984 dream gave me full "Tart-style" lucidity for the first time in my life, though the precise logic of this is not yet clear to me. I think Tart is wise to emphasize (Tart, 1984) that there could be some-thing like a difference of kind, rather than merely of degree, between knowing clearly in a dream that one is its author and actually being aware of sleeping in bed and of dreaming simultaneously. While the former would seem, on Faraday's principle, to reflect some unacknowledged moment of self-awareness during the day, Tart's lucidity seems to imply a state of consciousness transcending the distinction between sleep and waking, as envisaged in Tibetan dream yoga. I should therefore be extremely interested to know if Tart or anyone else who has experienced what he wants to call lucidity in dreams has ever done it spontaneously, or whether it is the result of some special exercise, as would be expected on Wilber's paradigm.

In the light of all the above I would expect no simple correlation between NDEs and the incidence of lucid dreaming. There might even be a negative correlation if NDEs regularly produced mystical consciousness with full feeling-attention and complete satisfaction in each waking moment. Most NDEs, however, seem only to produce conversion-experiences, which, if they involve an impulse towards greater self-awareness, might bring an increase in lucid dreaming according to Faraday's paradigm.

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