

Conversation Between Stephen LaBerge and Paul Tholey in July of 1989

Edited by

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This interview took place at the 1989 Association for the Study of Dreams (ASD) conference in London. LaBerge and Tholey were already familiar with each other's work, but met for the first time in person at this conference. Their conversations focused on the concept of the consciousness of dream characters and Tholey's "mirror technique" for inducing OBE's. We enter as they are discussing what a polygraph record would show if dream figures other than the dream ego were capable of signalling:

LaBerge: So you would like to extend all the studies we have done so far on the dream-ego making eye-movements while singing, counting and doing other activities. For example, if I were dreaming, I could ask the other characters here to sing, hold their breath, whatever . . . and we would see what happens to my physiology when the dream characters signal or hold their breath or sing. My guess is that only one system at a time can have access to the motor output.

Tholey: One of my hypotheses is that sometimes one cannot remember a dream because the dream figure conscious of the dream state, is not identical with the dream-ego. The central dream character does not necessarily have to be lucid, but he or she cannot be totally unconscious! (Editors Note: For a detailed discussion on consciousness in dream characters see Tholey, 1989).

LaBerge: Unconscious of what?

Tholey: The dream-ego, which is identical with the waking ego, doesn't exist in that situation at all.

LaBerge: Let's assume that Paul is asleep in bed right now. A dream is occurring. We know that normally you would see a picture, but we don't know yet if other dream characters, such as me, actually see something or if we merely look to you as if we were seeing. That's the question we want to answer. Do dream characters see the world?

Tholey: The experiments have shown that the other dream character, who sits facing me at the other side of the table, can paint or draw a picture of me. But, after all, this is a metaphysical question which also inspires psychophysiological experiments.

LaBerge: I think that experiments are necessary, but I think you can explain the same facts by the assumption that there are unconscious processors.

Tholey: Yes, but you can also experience phenomenologically two egos, two sides with two different viewing perspectives.

LaBerge: That interests me very much, because I have never experienced having two separate selves. I have had more than one dream body — here is me and there is another Stephen — but "I" was only at one place at a time.

Tholey: That's the novel thing. The other experience has often been observed as well. We have had two bodies quite often, two ego-bodies.

LaBerge: Oh, ego-bodies! Bodies are different. The interesting and novel thing is the two selves, the two perspectives. How easy is it for you to produce that?

Tholey: Usually that's only possible in an out-of-body-experience situation. And then it works in only a third of all cases. It happens when in the dream I cut the dream-self character. If I don't cut exactly in the middle, I only get one I. I cut the ego-core vertically and horizontally above the abdominal section. The ego-core is the origin of sight (Sicht), the origin of the will, of directing attention of thoughts and of speech. The ego-core can leave the body and can exist as only a point. Although it doesn't have a mouth, it can still speak.

LaBerge: Yes, but can it move its eyes?

Tholey: No.

LaBerge: That could present a problem. In order to study this one would want to be able to mark when it happens.

Tholey: So when I leave the body, let's say in the sleep laboratory, the EEG is nearly normal and the EMG is totally relaxed. I am not paralyzed, though.

LaBerge: So, what stage of sleep are you in?

Tholey: It's a very extraordinary sleep state. The researchers in the sleep lab couldn't recognize it!

LaBerge: They would probably call it a "sleep disorder" then.

Tholey: I remember once when I slept in the lab, I was in a lucid state two times for five hours during that night. I was able to direct all the dreams!

LaBerge: I am still interested in the stage of sleep you were in. When you say, "I was

lucid the whole night,” do you mean that you have some way of knowing that you were lucid for every minute of the night or that it would happen again and again throughout the night?

Tholey: The physiological data and the phenomenological data prove it. I also signaled in between. There is another important thing that happened. I had the experience that, all of a sudden, I was awake and in a totally different situation and then, all of a sudden, in the dream situation again. I restabilized the dream mainly with eye movements and movements of the body.

LaBerge: Does that mean, that you had one eye movement every 30 seconds throughout these five hours?

Tholey: No, during these five hours I wasn't restabilizing the dream consciously. I know other people in Frankfurt who are also capable of doing that, but only phenomenologically.

LaBerge: There is a question about this claim — when you say “I know I am conscious during the whole period of time.” The problem is that we are not conscious of the fact that we are not conscious. So we can have blank moments and not know it. And that is where the signalling could answer the question, but not necessarily for your experience!

Tholey: No, this was not an unconscious state! I have signalled and the people in the sleep lab have told me, that I was so totally relaxed that I couldn't signal with the fingers. I would have probably been able to signal only with the eyes.

Holzinger: I would like to know more about the state which you called “sleep disorder” before.

Tholey: I apparently have mixed up all known sleep stages. Therefore, they say, I'm not the ordinary Middle European and I am a champion-dreamer. They had no idea what was going on.

LaBerge: As I was understanding it, it was not a normal sleep stage, but what was it close to?

Tholey: I am sure that I had, before I have learned lucid dreaming, the same sleep stages as everybody else. It was not a pure REM stage. They haven't shown the records to me because they want to publish it themselves. They viewed me as only a subject. I was angry about that and therefore we decided to set up our own sleep lab.

LaBerge: Well, I see nothing wrong with publishing it together, that makes sense, but I am surprised that they wouldn't let you have a copy or see the information.

Tholey: A student showed me some data briefly, but I wasn't allowed to go through all the data. The professor hasn't shown the data to me at all. There is hardly any communication in Germany between the sleep researchers and dream researchers, not to mention the lucid dream researchers.

LaBerge: Well, just because you can't say what exact stage of sleep it's in, doesn't mean that you couldn't, for example, record the EEG on a computer and study the amount of different waves in your records and characterize it. If you have a new way organizing your sleep, that would be interesting to study in itself.

Let's turn to a different topic. I would like to know more about your "mirror technique" for inducing out-of-body type lucid dreams.

Tholey: The first use of mirror technique is described in an article I wrote — the very first one. There are also some pictures. The pictures aren't very precise.

LaBerge: I think I understand the idea. When you look in the mirror and see the back of your head, it is easier to transfer your awareness into the mirror, as if you were there.

Tholey: It is better to lie down. You look into the mirror. You are not supposed to see anything except the reflection in the mirror.

LaBerge: Is this supposed to help enter a lucid dream state?

Tholey: At the beginning it is sort of an in-between state, the lights are down. You should just be able to see your reflection in the mirror; it's the same setup as in the work of Klaus Stich (1983; 1989). Later I close my eyes and imagine my head and the sensation of rubbing the back of my head. These sensations are projected into the mirror.

LaBerge: That much is described clearly in the article by Nossaeck (1989). So I understand that. Are you lying down when you are doing this, so you have the mirror above your bed? Do you rub the back of your head looking in the mirror and projecting the sensation as if it were there? And you do that for how long?

Tholey: At the very beginning it takes very long, at least half an hour. I want to add, that that article is all wrong — that's journalism!

LaBerge: You mean the picture is upside down?

Tholey: That's right! There is also another practice. You look at a point in the far distance, then put your two thumbs up in front of you and move them towards you until they merge and you perceive only one thumb.

LaBerge: What's the purpose of this?

Tholey: With this practice I can stabilize the dream. I can keep my eyes from moving. I look into the space around me and not at a figure in order not to wake up. I can see everything, though slightly blurred, the periphery, front and back.

LaBerge: By doing this in the dream?

Tholey: By using this way of looking in the dream. I am doing it right now. Can you see it? [Editor's Note: Tholey looks cross-eyed.]

LaBerge: So you are saying that you learned to do that in the waking state.

Tholey: Yes, and I can do the same with closed eyes.

LaBerge: You practice in the waking state so you can do it in the dream?

Tholey: Yes. It is also useful while doing sports. The other day I was snowboarding. I jumped and watched what happened with and under my feet and, at the same time, saw the environment and landscape around me. I saw the whole space, not as distinctly as if I had focused on something, but at the same time I was aware of the entire space. Perception is transferred into intuitive thinking and I am not afraid anymore and the same is true in the dream experience. It can also be done in activities like touching a table. I can concentrate my attention on the sensations in my finger tips, but then I don't feel the table.

LaBerge: Which is normally exactly the opposite.

Tholey: If I look like this, I'm not afraid, the fear is not in me, but I can see the danger outside of me.

LaBerge: OK. Back to the mirror technique. So you lie in bed looking at the mirror above the bed until you feel yourself as if in the mirror, and then you shut your eyes.

Tholey: Yes, I shut my eyes and imagine my head in the mirror. The more I do this, the more my imagination becomes like perception and it becomes more and more real.

LaBerge: But if you have already seen yourself as in the image, it should be relatively easy for that image to be seen as real.

Tholey: Yes, that is why I do it. This technique has its origin in magic. This is a further development. This technique is described very well by Klaus Stich (1983; 1989).

LaBerge: Would this be a good technique to do in the morning or during an afternoon nap?

Tholey: Usually we did it during the afternoon nap or in the morning. But not at night. This technique will be described more precisely in one of the following issues of *Bewusstsein*. [Editors Note: A journal published by the recently founded CORA, see Dec. 1989 *Lucidity Letter* for more details.]

[Editor's Note: The remainder of the conversation took place the next day.]

LaBerge: I am familiar with your basic procedure — the idea of integration through facing threatening figures and resolving conflicts. Up to this point you have discussed splitting the dream body in pieces and abstracting the dream-ego point, and then you alluded to something, yesterday, about destroying the self, the ego point, the ego core. I would like to understand better exactly how this process is accomplished and how you understand the theoretical basis for it.

Tholey: This can be a very unpleasant or a very pleasant state. It can be very pleasant, when the "I" becomes one with the cosmos. Then there is one world, a cosmos, a phenomenal world, and the self belongs to that. By then, the I can't be distinguished as a piece apart. Now our cosmos is one piece, identical with the self (I).

LaBerge: So what about the theory and practice?

Tholey: It can be done, for example, by immersing the ego-core or the dream-body in fire, the dream fire. This is nothing new. Some time ago I thought it was new, but something like this has been practiced by Shamans, yet for us it was a new thing. This can be very unpleasant because it leads to a total dissolving of the I. On the one hand, the ego becomes inflated and, on the other hand, it disappears.

LaBerge: Yes, like in Tibetan dream yoga. Take the dream-body into the fire and the dream-body disappears. But there is still the ego-core.

Tholey: Sometimes it happens that you actually lose the ego-core completely. There is no point of view anymore from which to look or think. There is only seeing left; thinking without any difference between the object and the subject — no difference whatsoever between the object and the subject.

LaBerge: This sounds like a dream that I described in my book, a dream in which I decided that I wanted to experience the highest potential in me. I flew up into the clouds, without any other intention than that. My dream-body disappeared and yet I still existed, in a sense. I could sing, for example, although I had no mouth. Yet I had the sense of a

Unity with the space. There wasn't an I there, yet there was still something I would call a perspective.

Tholey: In the state I am talking about, the perspective is gone. There is the state with one perspective and there is the state with two perspectives. This is hard to imagine in the waking state. There also is the state of seeing without a subject, without the ego-core and without seeing. There isn't anybody who sings anymore, but something like a singing entity.

LaBerge: Yes, that was exactly the experience! Because, when I woke up and thought about what the words were I had been singing: "I praise Thee, oh Lord," I thought — but there was no I — there was no Thee — Thee praised Thee, perhaps. So I think I know the state you are talking about. The way I got to that, you see, wasn't by any action of the dream-body. It was instead deeper than the intellectual intention to transcend.

Tholey: There is no action by itself, so that there is nobody who acts, it is much rather acting. There is no way to express that in Western languages because there is always a subject and predicate — it is much rather a Doing, an Acting, like singing or whatever — no subject, no object.

LaBerge: That is the same state I am talking about, the space was an infinite emptiness, filled with potential. But, in any case, I am interested in the method. I've wondered and thought about the possible consequences of cutting the body in various fragments. Given both the fact that there are studies demonstrating that people with psychosomatic conditions, who have experienced trauma in their dreams, will have psychosomatic problems — and given our own studies on these relationships, I'm uncertain about the wisdom of this and I'd like to see what you think about it. There is an article by Harold Levitan in which he describes case-studies, for example, of someone being stabbed in the stomach in a dream who later developed an ulcer. Now, the question is, of course, could this be some sort of prodromic syndrome or could it be that the trauma in the dream could have had a physiological effect — just as we have found in our research: a strong relationship?

Tholey: We have a group of ten or twelve lucid dreamers in Frankfurt that meets every two weeks or so and do experiments just like this. These experiments lead very often to negative effects, like aggressions towards dream figures, cutting the body and fear. We know this fact very well. First of all, all the experiments we do are dangerous. We know about the danger. We are pioneers and we know that this is dangerous. Secondly, we believe that there is nothing more psychosomatic than dream experiments, not even imagination. We also believe that these experiments might lead to psychosomatic disorders. Therefore we have not yet published the experiments about burning in fire.

LaBerge: It seems there are probably some people that the technique is good for. Others I don't know. In fact, for *NightLight* we are interested in techniques that we can offer to a broad audience.

Tholey: These are the techniques we are trying to check now, but there are many more techniques. We check and publish despite the knowledge that dangers will emerge. We have to know it first, though. If we don't publish, somebody else will, like occultists and charlatans. Therefore it seems to me to be very important to take these border areas into account as well, because they aim for the essence, the inner part of the psyche. If it weren't for that, they wouldn't be dangerous.

LaBerge: Yes, and people fall into them anyway. Another topic I wanted to ask you about is in this paper (Tholey, 1989). As I interpret it, you are describing the consciousness and abilities of dream characters observed during lucid dreaming. I find it a fascinating series of experiments and a very interesting set of questions about what mental capacities the other dream characters have.

Tholey: The dream figures are able to do more, if they are dreamt by experienced lucid dreamers and if some dream figures have already been investigated. But there are also some dream figures that are not capable of doing anything.

LaBerge: I would agree with that from my experience. Indeed, how dream characters act depends largely on my expectations.

Tholey: That's wrong! I have had arguments with a colleague about that also. My hypothesis was that dream characters are quite skillful. The doctoral students who had been working on this topic all thought that they weren't. They were extremely surprised. It can happen that the dream character sits and writes. Yet when I discussed this phenomenon with Krist (1981) and the others they all said that this was impossible. I could name hundreds of cases of unexpected occurrences.

LaBerge: Certainly, but I said largely. What I mean is that it is possible that if I find you as a dream character in my dream and I expect you to be sympathetic, you'll be sympathetic and if I expect you to be hostile, you'll be hostile. How dream characters act, not what they can do, is the result of one's expectations.

Tholey: There are examples that dream figures say something that the dream ego cannot understand. I am thinking of the 3ZWG-example.

Holzinger: The example was described in Tholey, (1989). The dream-ego sits facing a dream figure that is writing something on a paper. Reading it, the dream-ego recognized 3ZWG. In the waking state, the dreamer remembered that he had argued with his fiancée

about renting a 3 room apartment (in German this would be called a 3 Zimmer WohnunG, therefore 3ZWG in a newspaper ad). So do you really claim that dream characters have something like a consciousness of their own?

LaBerge: That's what the major claim of the paper is.

Tholey: I don't want to approach this question from the standpoint of occultism or spiritism. My explanation is very much like split-brain theory.

LaBerge: Yes, but we have no evidence that split-brain patients have a consciousness on both sides of the brain. They only report one consciousness. We don't know if there is a second consciousness. All we can see are motor responses that might indicate consciousness, but automatic systems are capable of motor responses, too.

Tholey: You will never be able to really prove that, because this is, as I have already mentioned, a metaphysical problem. But now there are our very precise and practical experiments that lead to the questions: do dream characters have their own perspectives, can they look from there; do they have their own access to memory, perception, thinking, productive thinking? Can they rhyme better than I can do it?

LaBerge: Sure, all of that, but none of that requires consciousness!

Tholey: But nothing that happens here proves that Stephen has a consciousness or that Brigitte has a consciousness. Any proof would be metaphysical. You can act exactly the same way as the dream figures, you have your own perspectives, you have your own memory, and your own thinking. Why should I claim that dream figures don't have a consciousness and, at the same time, claim, that you have one?

LaBerge: Yes, but the answer is: I have a brain, you have a brain, we each have a brain! But dream figures have no brains, except one, the one of the dreamer!

Tholey: When I am in a lucid dream I can have all these talks that I have right now.

LaBerge: Sure, but this does not prove anything about consciousness. My conclusion from the information presented here is that dream characters can do wondrous things, but they cannot do cognitive tasks that specifically require consciousness.

Tholey: Let me do a drawing. This is the nose, these are the eyes, and now there are the two dream figures. Why should only one figure have an I, the phenomenological I? The dream-ego doesn't have a brain!

LaBerge: It doesn't have a brain there, it has a brain here, the brain that makes the ego

is here. (Editors Note: He points at the head of the dreamer in the drawing.)

Tholey: This brain includes the entire dream world.

LaBerge: Yes, yes, exactly; sure!

Tholey: You have to distinguish strongly that this is the dreamer. Only the dreamer has a brain, of course. But there can be more than one dream-ego.

LaBerge: Yes, it could indeed be that way.

Tholey: Phenomenologically it can happen that you look from two perspectives, from under the table and above the table. You cannot imagine that.

LaBerge: Let's step back. How do you do mental arithmetic? How do you compute 5 times 5? The answer simply appears. It's not conscious, it's automatic. But when you have to do arithmetic that involves carrying a number, you store that number in consciousness. Consciousness can be viewed as a global work space (Baars, 1988). It is different from the automatic processors. There is only one area of consciousness, at least in ordinary experience.

Holzinger: It seems to me that there is a misunderstanding between the two of you about the definition of consciousness.

Tholey: I have given different definitions of consciousness in a German essay with the title "Consciousness"—"Bewusst sein." I differentiated at first between a phenomenological and an epistemological definition and then, amongst those two. I differentiated further, so that all together I arrived at twelve different definitions of consciousness.

LaBerge: OK. But we must be using it in a different sense.

Tholey: So, I mean, a machine is able to do arithmetic, a child is not able to do arithmetic. Still I would say, that the child has consciousness, the machine hasn't.

LaBerge: That's exactly my point. These examples do not prove consciousness! The fact that the mental arithmetic abilities of dream figures are limited suggests to me that other characters don't have that global space in which we can hold a result while we continue the automatic processes of the computation.

Tholey: Yes, but the figures did complicated rhymes!

LaBerge: Yes, but this also could be automatic. Rhymes spring to mind; we don't know

how to do it. It just happens!

Tholey: The figures have to store something in that work space also in order to form longer poems and rhymes. Those poems are sometimes as long as ten lines.

LaBerge: Think of Coleridge and the poem “Kubla Khan.” It all just came to him. There is no reason to think that language processes have to be consciously directed. People talk all the time without thinking! See, consciousness and conscious processes can do some things that unconscious ones cannot. Consciousness is not as efficient. It is slow, but it is flexible. And it allows such calculations as 12 times 17. To do this, you have to store an intermediate result while you do another operation. And we do simple mental arithmetic automatically, as if we had a look-up-table. The answer of 5 times 5 is right there. You don’t think about how to do it. You don’t do anything other than set the problem and the answer appears. But there are limits to the number of numbers you can hold in your mind. You can hold about 7, plus or minus 2. There are numerical experiments indicating and demonstrating the limitations of conscious processing and the relative lack of limitations of unconscious processors.

Tholey: That’s a question of different definitions of consciousness, but if we would start with that it would take a lecture.

LaBerge: Let’s make a rhyme now and notice how it happens! We start with Goethe’s last words: “Licht, mehr Licht” and then rhyme . . . “Nichts als nichts!” Not exactly grammatical, but an idea. How did it happen? It just appeared.

Tholey: I know that. I also know that Stephen knows Goethe fairly well.

LaBerge: OK. So how can we conclude that dream characters have consciousness?

Tholey: I have never claimed that! I only claimed that you will never be able to prove it, as you will never be able to prove that another person in waking life has consciousness!

LaBerge: My impression was that you had concluded that dream characters have independent consciousness.

Tholey: I have to clarify that misunderstanding now. I have never claimed that dream figures have consciousness. But the idea of whether they have consciousness or not has led us to some interesting experiments. I could tell them to sing or to count and we could see if there are changes in the EEG recordings under these conditions. But even this would never prove that they have consciousness.

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