

Near Death, Near Dream

George Gillespie

University of Pennsylvania

I will describe here an experience of mine which was in all its characteristics a near-death experience (NDE) except that ultimately there was no evidence that I had been near death, and which, except for my believing I had died, was similar to a number of earlier experiences of mine which had always occurred only in the context of lucid dreams, that is dreams in which I know I am dreaming.

I have been a frequent lucid dreamer since 1976 and have experienced many “out-of-body experiences” (ODEs) both in the context of lucid dreams and between dreaming and awakening, though never with verification that I had left the body. Before this “NDE”, if I may call it such, I had experienced a number of times a brilliant light in which I felt God was present. This has always been in continuity from ordinary lucid dreaming, and has occasionally grown out of an experience of darkness (see Gillespie, 1985).

At least six years before my “NDE” I had read some excerpts from Moody’s Life after Life. Otherwise, I had not read much about NDEs, although I was familiar with Tibetan material on death experience. My “NDE” happened in the early morning of February 18, 1985 in Calcutta. I wrote it down immediately afterward.

In an ordinary dream I was explaining to some people about death. Our interest was not simply theoretical, but related to real possibilities. I said, “You will see both darkness and light at the same time,” meaning they would pass out of darkness into light.

After a transition that I don’t remember, I was floating in darkness wondering what was happening to me. I was going through some personal crisis I did not understand. Though I was not particularly aware of my (dreamed) body, I felt myself drift up. Suddenly I entered the light, which I happily recognized. I knew then that I was again in the presence of God, and that this time I had died. The light was brilliant and filled my vision. There was a point above the level of my eyes from which the light appeared to radiate.

I did not remember waking life, nor did I know the circumstances of my death. I had some regrets at first, but my joy was greater than any regrets. I was spontaneously prayerful, calm and extremely happy. As I floated for some time in the light I repeated over and over with great feeling, “Thank you, Father.” I was not thankful for dying, but for being in the presence of God and the light.

Then slowly I became aware that I was in bed. I woke up tingling and very much surprised to find that I had not died.

My NDE did not, to my knowledge, have a physiological base, nor an obvious psychological precipitant. The experience did continue the themes of death, darkness and light of the preceding ordinary dream. A possible factor is that a close friend died a few days later in the United States. I knew he had been in serious condition for some months, but being in India I did not know that he was close to death at the time.

The characteristics of my experience that are common to NDE accounts are: the feeling of crisis, floating up as in an OBE, passage through darkness, entry into a brilliant light, awareness of having died, consciousness of a presence in the light--in my case God, devotion, extreme joy, and resignation to having died. It was all very real to me and even upon waking reflection, very convincing.

All these elements I had experienced before in continuity from ordinary lucid dreaming, except the feeling of crisis and the "knowledge" that I had died. This knowledge came to me as knowledge comes in dreams--I simply "knew it, as in an ordinary dream I may "know" I am in Hong Kong without any evidence in the dream environment. In a similar manner a near-death experiencer may "know" that she is dead, "know" that something good waits for her at the end of the tunnel, or "know" that the presence wants her to return to life (see Lundahl, 1982).

The experience of "dying", in continuity from an ordinary dream, contained elements of NDE, OBE, and mystical phenomena, while duplicating previous lucid dream-related experiences. It was not like an ordinary dream, nor like an ordinary lucid dream. But I find lucid dreams, ODEs, mystical phenomena, and NDEs to be in a continuum with dream experience, and to be experienced as dreams are experienced. When happening in the context of dreams, as lucid dreams do and OBEs sometimes do, the connection with dreaming is more apparent. When happening apart from dreams, as mystical phenomena, NDEs, and OBEs usually do, the connection with dreams is not obvious. All these experiences have a commonality in that each is a kind of awareness-that-not-awake (ANA, can I say?) that is distinguished from ordinary dreaming. While the lucid dreamer generally accepts the unreality of what is being experienced, those who experience OBEs, mystical phenomena, and NDEs generally accept the experience as really happening.

To see these experiences as dream-related or as in continuity from dreaming only partially explains them. There is a lot we do not know about dreams, and these phenomena all have elements that take them decidedly beyond ordinary dreaming.

References

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