

Near-Death and Dream Lucidity Comments on John Wren-Lewis's Account

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John Wren-Lewis's near-death experience (NDE) and the aftereffects he describes are remarkable. Notably, his NDE did not follow the typical pattern; it contained none of the typical imagery associated with NDEs, such as encountering light beings, deceased relatives, supernatural landscapes, out-of-body states. However, the aftereffects he reports, spiritual and psychic, are more in keeping with many deep NDEs.

Let me begin with the following comment. It is by now a commonplace among near-death researchers that the deeper levels of this remarkable experience seem to be phenomenologically similar to the mystical experience. This similarity points to the possibility that the NDE and the mystical experience derive from a common psychospiritual process. Near-death may be one of many possible stimuli of that process.

Another point concerns the differences in naming and conceptualizing the Transcendent in the various mystical and spiritual traditions; these may be due to qualitative differences in core psychological experiences. Many people, for instance, report having visions (both in the NDE and classical mystical context) of a Christlike or Buddhalike Being of Light; accordingly, the Transcendent is named and conceptualized in personalistic and theistic terms. Mr. Wren-Lewis's NDE consisted of dissolving into a "spaceless" and timeless void which was total 'no-thing-ness'." Later, we find him naming the Transcendent the "Living Void," the "Infinite Dark," the "Void Background," etc. Experiences of the type reported in this paper offer hints on understanding the psychology and parapsychology of the god-making process.

But, to come back to Mr. Wren-Lewis's imageless plunge into the Divine Vacuum. We see, for instance, that this "Void" symbolism belies the actual character of the author's post-NDE mystical experience, which is described as "full feeling attention," "a state of complete satisfaction with whatever is in the moment." Later, he writes of a "party, and the streets on the way home after, (as) full of the usual blissful Isness." Mr. Wren-Lewis reports that on the latter occasion he was drunk and was afraid of jeopardizing his mystical consciousness. In fact, there was no clouding over; however, he retired doubting, wondering. That night he had a remarkable dream, mystical and lucid. In it he obtained the insight that drink itself was not a threat to his mystical consciousness but "getting caught up into an internal dialogue about drink." This lucid dream revelation is consistent with the account of the mystical state as full feeling attention, satisfaction with the flow of what is.

Mr. Wren-Lewis notes that he experienced this mystical quality of attention in his dream—the same quality he reports as prevalent in his post-NDE waking life. This suggests, as also

noted by Mr. Wren-Lewis, an idea from Tibetan mystical texts: that it is possible to maintain certain higher, mystical states of awareness, continuously through waking and dreaming. Indeed, the effort to maintain the continuity is itself part of the mystical discipline. The particular challenge is to maintain self-awareness during the onset of sleep and dream; not, we might say to get caught up by, lost in or identified with, the dream content.

This, of course, begins to sound like dream lucidity. Thus, both Tibetan teachers and Mr. Wren-Lewis seem to be saying that it is not the content (a frog plopping in a pond or a Bach mass) or the form of consciousness (dream, waking, alcoholic intoxication, etc.) that defines the “ultimate” or “liberated” state, but a certain internal attitude, a peculiar relationship to that object or state: detachment, autonomy, being fully present, fully attentive. This is, moreover, a mode of consciousness with inherent value-intrinsic bliss, blessedness, beatitude. These value properties, according to this claim, are inherent properties of lucid consciousness. Mysticism, as a scientific hypothesis, might turn on experimental proof of this subtle experience, in which consciousness, being, and intrinsic value, were perfectly fused.

The term “lucidity”, as used in this letter, grew out of an attempt to describe a certain type of dream in which a subject is reflexively aware of being in the dream state. A little reflection, however, shows that the notion of lucidity has universal ramifications. The root idea means to revolve around simultaneously becoming observer and participant. The language of detachment, separation, indifference, objectification often comes into play in describing lucid-related states. Plato wrote in the Phaedo of the separation of the soul from the body; modern phenomenology speaks of the reduction, bracketing, parenthesizing; esthetic theory of psychical distance; modernist metafictional theory of deconstruction.

Broadly speaking, all these address a fundamental evolutionary task of consciousness: which is to wrench itself free from all partial and hence limiting perspectives. Lucidity, thus raised from its specific dream context, is what may happen when consciousness gets stuck, trapped, arrested at some juncture in the personal or collective evolutionary process.

But this is an ambiguous, tentative process. For instance, lucidity in dreams marks an advance in consciousness, but is scarcely indicative of anything “ultimate.” There is an advance in awareness of the mode of consciousness, i.e., that one is dreaming. The conscious ego wrenches itself from the absorption in the dream. But in the awakening of oneself as dreaming, one also becomes aware of oneself. I am dreaming, would seem to accompany the revelation, this is a dream. In the lucid dream, the sense of I is rescued from absorption in the dream world; by contrast, in the mystical life the sense of I is rescued from absorption in the dream world; by contrast, in the mystical life the sense of I is relinquished, absorbed, or harmonized with a larger reality. Dream lucidity is only a step on the evolutionary ladder of consciousness.

Mr. Wren-Lewis sees the dream itself as a compensation for a deficiency in the fullness of waking attention; if so, then dream lucidity is at best an attempt to retrieve something lost in waking life. In waking life, of course, it is easier to become lucid; yet it is hard to achieve pure lucid waking. Consciousness is continually getting caught up, ambushed by distractions, swamped by external and internal impressions. The ebb and flow of lucid waking is reflected in Mr. Wren-Lewis's fluctuations from normal to mystical consciousness.

We sometimes hear of masters, adepts, supposed to be established in a state of permanent enlightenment. These might be individuals who never get lost in or absorbed by the waking world, its fictions and constructs. But such ultimates should be taken with a grain of salt. For, if lucidity is a general term for inclusive consciousness, and if the universe is evolving and steadily producing novelty, then the idea of an ultimate state of inclusive consciousness makes no sense. I would therefore attach a relative significance to the author's allusion to "final fulfillment or liberation."

Studies indicate that near-death experiences are often followed by a generally enhanced psychic receptivity; as increased incidence of OBEs, ostensibly ESP, or as a general opening to intuitive and imaginative modes of awareness. It is not therefore surprising that lucidity-broadly understood--should have followed the author's NDE. What Mr. Wren-Lewis's remarkable experience suggests to me is that dramatic quantum leaps in the evolution of personal consciousness are empirically observable. Such effects, I believe, need to be looked at in relation to the collective evolution of consciousness. I would, in future research, hope to see the biological perspective stressed. Lucidity may be a useful concept in evolutionary psychology.

All contents and states of consciousness are limited aspects of the universe's self-transcending evolutionary potential. Our dreams and waking adventures, unusual experiences like near-death, special disciplines like art, science, the various yogas of heart, mind, and spirit--all are possible occasions for attaining new levels of lucidity, new levels of inclusiveness, autonomy, and inherent value.

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