Interview
Lucidity Association Chair, Harry Hunt, Interviewed

By Guest Editor Kathryn Belicki

(Harry Hunt is a professor of psychology at Brock University, chair of the Lucidity Association, and member of the board of directors of the Association for the Study of Dreams. The Multiplicity of Dreams, his book recently published by Yale University Press, has been hailed as "original and thought provoking, ... makes an important contribution to the field." Hunt, along with his colleague Robert Ogilvie were among the first sleep researchers to seriously investigate lucid dreaming in the sleep laboratory.)

BELICKI: How did you come to your current research interests? Your dissertation research was concerned with altered states.

HUNT: Yes, in fact I started in my undergraduate thesis with material that I would actually like to go back to if I ever write another book. What I did for that thesis was a life history study of Gurdjieff, trying to interpret both from a pychoanalytic object relations perspective and from a Jungian perspective, integrating the two together. Even then I was interested in altered states of consciousness and transpersonal states. Actually in high school I was interested in these experiences as I first read Jung at that time. This personal background is relevant, I think.
My Dad died when I was nine and it had a very, very great impact. At the time he was dying -- my parents never went to church but I was forcibly sent to Sunday school every Sunday and I hated it. So when he was dying, for the first time in my life I fervently prayed that this not happen and of course it did happen. The impact on me was *well*...

BELICKI: You had your chance and blew it.

HUNT: Exactly. Atheism was in. So starting in junior high school and early in high school, I read everything I could that took an iconoclastic view of religion. There were two or three of us, starting around ninth grade, who were like the village atheists. What was really fun, especially in discussions in English -- we were a vicious little pack-- we would jump in and make these very dismissive statements about the obvious superstitious bases of all religion. And we did it precisely because it upset some of the girls in the class so very much. We really liked it, we had *such* a good time.
At that time I was reading some books by Phillip Wiley that were trying to popularize the works of Freud, Jung and Nietzsche. So I read a little bit of Nietzsche and I thought I really should read Jung, he sounds interesting. So I started reading some Jung in high school and it had a huge impact on me. This was the first thing I had ever read that clearly demonstrated and was predicated on the idea that, say what you want about religious belief (i.e., it's as much social custom as it is anything else), there is a core to this phenomenon that is directly experiential and rests in states of consciousness which can be to some extent

triggered or released by various techniques. I found that idea absolutely life changing. I suddenly saw in a completely different way. It wasn't particularly that I had these kinds of visions or dreams--only to a very minimal extent. It was only later that I got into such experiences through self experimentation with LSD.
These drug experiences were what really showed me that there was a phenomenal reality that demanded some sort of description, both cognitively and in terms of its impact on personality. But it was my early reading of Jung that was truly galvanizing. After that I never thought about spirituality in the same way again. From that point on I was absolutely intrigued with the naturalistic descriptive psychology of these states of mind.

BELICKI: What was your intention in wanting to specifically list and describe these states of mind? Why did that interest you so much?

HUNT: Ah, good question... I don't know! I think because it went to the fundamentals of human existence in some sense. These were the most powerful states, clearly in Jung's accounts and in other people's accounts, that happen to people spontaneously outside of natural catastrophe and war. I think another thing that fed into it was that when I was a kid I had very bad night terrors. I remember a few of these and these were of course negative numinosities. They were infinite, they were vast and total, malevolent and evil, and they were very powerful. They were certainly the most powerful things I had ever known. So when I started reading Jung about there potentially being a positive side to this then I could believe this, it was like if I could have experiences of that magnitude that were so awful, other people could have experiences of that magnitude that were integrating and constructive. It made sense to me -- that these experiences would play an incredible role in people's feeling that life was worth living. They had a crucial function in that sense: people feeling rooted and in some sense real, rather than in a dream somewhere.

It was getting into Harvard that was in some ways critical to me because if had I gone to a more traditional school with a more traditional psychology department they would not have fostered and reinforced my interest in Jung, let alone Freud. It would have been squelched. Whereas Harvard's Social Relations Department at that point was very much centered on Freud. So I just jumped in with both feet into psychoanalytic readings, but then there was this Jung stuff off to the side that was so different, and I wanted to integrate them. And they encouraged me! I had such little self confidence and the fact that I could succeed in this atmosphere and be specifically encouraged in my interests was incredibly empowering (although Brandeis was subsequently a hideous nightmare).

BELICKI: How did you get into dreams?

HUNT: Certainly I was interested in Freud's model of dreams and yet Jung had a competing model of the archetypal or "big" dreams which was very intriguing. I'd had a few dreams in high school which were numinous: I would find myself in this utterly awesome woods that I 'd never seen before, I used to walk a lot in woods by myself, I loved walking in woods -- I still do. I would go for these lengthy hikes through this rural woods

and farmland area that used to be my town. So occasionally I would have these dreams which would start off in an area I knew and then would open up into this fairyland of numinous, colorful, awesome sections of woods and hills and fields that were breathtakingly beautiful. They were *so* beautiful with such a feeling of the numinous that it was scary as well, and very often I would stand on the edge of these woods and not be able to go into them.

So I had these kinds of dreams and I knew that Jung was right. As well I knew from my ordinary dreams that Freud was addressing something real. So I just think my interest grew up out of that really. The crucial thing that turned me towards dream studies was one of the very few truly decent courses which I took in graduate school which was Richard Jones' course on dreams. He had us read Freud's Interpretation of Dreams, which I hadn't studied in detail before, and then right on through the clinical literature and into the REM state material. That's what got me going, but I've always approached dreaming from the perspective of my interest in a cognitive psychology of altered or transpersonal states.

BELICKI: Of course your new book, The Multiplicity of Dreams, very much takes a cognitive perspective. In the same way that you were intrigued in the past with classifying and describing altered states, your book is concerned with documenting different types of dreams. It also tries to integrate what Freud had to say and what Jung had to say. How did you put that together -- these two very different approaches?

HUNT: I can remember writing a freshman English essay trying to give both a Jungian and a Freudian perspective on Forster's Passage to India and the English teacher was doubly offended. He was offended first of all at the psychologizing, which I can understand. I was full of these ideas then. But the other thing he said to me was "You are going to have to make a choice. You are not going to be able to keep both a Freudian perspective and a Jungian perspective in your studies. You are going to have to choose between these very different world views and the sooner you do it the better." And I really felt that was wrong. In my undergraduate thesis on Gurdjieff, I was trying to say "No, you really can think from one system directly into the other and back again. Its true, the world changes massively as you shift from one to the other but there's a step by step transition, almost like a series of transformative equations. You can sort of transmute Freud into Jung and vice versa".

That's in some ways what I tried to do in the book. The thing I was worried about was that I might end up with a merely eclectic typology where I would be saying that there are all these different types of dreams and each needs its own theory, so don't worry about it too much. You don't have to worry about the differences between, for example, Freud and Foulkes because they're both right in their own sphere.

I'm sure there is some truth in that but its not an interesting position. Its superficial, and what I really wanted in the book was to try to come up with a way to think across the different formation processes for different forms of dreams (in which each major theory specializes) so that one could see what they had in common. I decided that the way to approach that was the way I had been approaching a cognitive psychology of altered

states and mystical experience which was with some form of cross-modal translation model. This is the idea that the different forms of expression of the human mind are all different kinds of synaesthesia -- a model that stretches from the neurologist Geschwin back to Aristotle in different ways and forms.

Basically I tried to argue that each of the forms of dreaming is based on a different balancing and weighting among these cross-modal translation processes. This is what all the different theories of dream formation have in common, either implicitly or explicitly. They presuppose some sort of background process in which the structures of one sensory modality are translated into the structures of another, with one of those modalities dominating as a controlling template. So the classical white light experience of mysticism and some lucid and archetypal dreams are a point where the visual-kinesthetic patterns are dominating almost totally. On the other hand, the Foulkes/Freud models of dream formation -- whether you take Foulkes' view of a predominant narrative template or Freud's view of punning, joke-like word play -- both have in common the idea of underlying verbal structures that translate into visual imagery as a sort of secondary effect.

So that was the way I tried to integrate the idea of there being multiple forms of dreams with some kind of unitary model of intelligence. The interesting thing about that cross-modal model is that it is extremely general. It applies equally to trying to understand the basic capacities that would underlie language, which is a kind of cross-modal synaesthesia with the verbal-sequential template predominant. The same processes that can make sense of language on a very general level of abstraction -- more general than most cognitive psychologists are interested in engaging -- will also address these altered states of consciousness and varieties of dreaming. This becomes at least indirect evidence for frames of mind in Howard Gardner's sense.

BELICKI: You have also been thinking about the relationship of nightmares and lucidity, and we have talked about how lucid dreams for some people can sometimes become very unpleasant. I was intrigued by your thinking about how that happens and how it also can be seen in other altered states.

HUNT: One of the things that I tried to bring out in the book was that descriptively there is quite an overlap between lucid dreaming and nightmares, at least a certain kind of nightmare. (I'm excluding from the discussion post traumatic nightmares). For example, of the few overwhelming and fantastic nightmares that I've had, they've always had that quality that you're in the dream and its turning bad and then suddenly something goes through your body like a kind of electric force and there's this physical rush of panic and numinous horror that really defines these kind of nightmares for me.

I think this is very similar to lucid dreaming. Phenomenologically, the lucid dream has also a considerable intensification of experience, heightening of sensory detail, an emotional rush or peak quality -- typically, though by no means always, of bliss and ecstasy. You also get a potential within highly stabilized lucid dreams for archetypal numinous dreaming to develop in a Jungian direction. So you get people like George

Gillespie or Scott Sparrow talking about the proclivity within long term lucidity for powerful white light experiences as one kind of fulfillment of the lucid potential.

In fact there's a cross-over, a kind of a overlap empirically which Aurelia Spadafora and I studied last year among subjects with bizarre nightmares, lucid dreaming and archetypal dreaming. These dreams overlap phenomenologically, and statistically it seems that if you have one you are likely to have the others as well.

I think the way to understand that is via the approaches to transpersonal psychology that have emerged in the last ten or fifteen years in studies of meditation and of stages of the LSD experience. LSD researchers have shown that in early LSD sessions, pretty much dependent on the setting and strength of the person's sense of themselves, experiences were either very positive or very negative -- the good trip-bad trip distinction. But Grof demonstrated that eventually higher or transpersonal states of consciousness are going to call out pre-existent self dilemmas or self vulnerability (in the sense of people like Kohut or Winnicott) or actually stir it up when it wasn't there before, precisely because the experiences are so powerful. In other words you are talking about subjective states which almost inevitably are so out of keeping with the everyday reality of what the person has known that their eventual impact is to create either some mixture of self grandiosity and quasi-omnipotence (which means you're cruising for a big fall) or disorganization, lack of sense of self and increasing withdrawal clinically.

BELICKI: So its as if there is an inevitability of there being negative side effects.

HUNT: I think there's an inevitability. This is like the mystic's "dark night of the soul". You find in eastern meditation they talk about advanced meditators having horrors that are quite unpleasant and sound quasi-psychotic but then getting through it. To the extent you can observe these states in a detached manner and not fight them and not identify with them, they open out into more inclusive, deeper insights.
But obviously a lot of people get caught on this step. Its asking rather a lot of someone to say "That's ok, just lie down on your carpet and let yourself die. Don't fight it. Don't worry about it. That's just great!" So a lot of people will get caught in what Grof calls the perinatal matrices. I don't agree with the term, that is that we should explain this in terms of birth trauma or prebirth states. But definitely phenomenologically these kinds of crises occur and I think they're broadly understandable in terms of the psychoanalytic psychologies developed by the object relations theorists like Winnicott, Khan, and Bion and by Kohut in North America. They have given us a potential typology of the negative side of these experiences. ...How did we get on this?

BELICKI: We were just talking about the dangers inherent in lucidity and you're saying that some problems are inevitable and some people can work through it while some may not. What is your general sense about developing lucid dreams? Is this something you recommend for people? Is it for some people and not others?

HUNT: I think it is probably for some people and not for others. Winnicott has a very

useful notion here. He suggests that there are two kinds of dilemmas in living. The first are dilemmas of relating and doing. You have a sense of who you are but you'll be damned if you can figure out how to use that, how to make maximal use of yourself in the world. These are the dilemmas that Freud talked about in terms of a relative capacity or incapacity for love and work. This kind of dimension of dilemma runs through everyone's life. But I think for some people its very salient as an issue, both positively and negatively expressed, and for other people its less salient.

Then there are people who primarily suffer from dilemmas of being or sense of being. These are the people who, on the negative side, very often don't quite feel real. There may be the sense that everything is dream-like or that nothing matters -- close to nihilistic despair. Jung talked about this a lot. The idea that clients who came to him came primarily in mid-life because they were in a dilemma over the sense of there being any meaning not only in their lives but in life at all. Is there any point to all of this? What is the point? This sort of hungering after meaning in its own right which, if you will, is an existential hunger as well, I think is powerful at some points in some people's lives, not powerful in others, although its a dimension that runs through everyone's life just like the first one. This is where I would disagree with people like Maslow and Wilber who want to place the relating dimension in early stages of development and then say that once you get to mid-life you are ready to flower out into the higher stages of development. To me both of these dimensions continue to develop, intertwining in very complex ways, and there is no one developmental line which is higher or lower. But it does seem to me that if your primary accent either throughout your life or at some point in your life is "What is all of this for?", then you don't have much choice with respect to engaging these so-called transpersonal levels. The suffering that's involved along the way, which I think is a very real suffering and akin to what Winnicott and Kohut present clinically, and which can be initiated by these kinds of higher states, is then inescapable.

BELICKI: We started this whole discussion with the relationship of nightmares and lucidity and of course in the literature and at the Association for the Study Dreams conference there has been some talk about the dangers of lucidity -- so I'm wondering if you have any final comments in those areas.

HUNT: I think that the current, gradual accumulation of negative aspects of lucid dreaming makes an awful lot of sense from the idea that transpersonal states, while they potentially serve a very important function in giving the person a sense of felt reality, can also stir up either pre-existing self vulnerabilities or create new ones because of the very power of the experiences. Jayne Gackenbach has been collecting and publishing such negative accounts of lucid dreaming and its effects bit by bit. These are to me so reminiscent of the literature on psychedelic drugs and advanced meditation that in fact it would be a tragedy if the lucid dream movement didn't make use of these psychedelic and meditational transpersonal perspectives. They may give us the best available clues as to how to understand and deal with such dilemmas. For the people who are on the lucidity/archetypal dimension and their dreams are naturally developing that way, they are going to go through this process anyway

how do they handle it? How do they handle it when as Scott Sparrow describes his own dreams after he wrote his very powerful book Dawning of the Clear Light, he found that very negative, malevolent, rather demonic figures started turning up in his dreams. He couldn't control it anymore, he couldn't make it stop, and I think that's precisely what you would expect from Grof's model and some of the models of meditative stages.

In the example you were talking about of the monk (Father X in this Lucidity Letter issue) who developed lucid dreaming, several of the figures he encountered in those dreams had a slightly sort of mocking quality -- perhaps a Little bit like the medieval pictures by Bosch and Breugel of the temptation of St. Anthony in the desert. The figures who tempt St. Anthony are similarly not satanic, horror figures but are ludicrous and leering. They are there to make fun of him. Certainly one of the ways in which LSD can start to turn fairly negative is precisely with this sense of a kind of mocking laughter or mocking satire on the most sacred areas of one's own life. Again I think one is speaking of inevitable vulnerabilities in sense of self that get activated or intensified in these states.

I think that's exactly what we are starting to see now in the lucid dream movement. I would much prefer to see it come through with benefit from the context of previous, related work rather than get into an essentially silly debate over whether lucidity is good or bad. Lucidity is clearly inevitable in some people's lives, and to other people it is very intriguing and they want it to happen. Whether they engage it deliberately or have it happen spontaneously. the question is how do we understand this as a natural process of cognitive and personal development, and in that context how do we then go about helping people to manage the inevitable negativities of experience that are going to occur?

BELICKI: Before we wrap up I just have to ask where today is that grade nine fellow that was so mocking of all of these experiences. Where do you find yourself now?

HUNT: That's much harder to say. I certainly don't mock anyone these days but Islamic fundamentalists who want to kilt authors. It's interesting because I think that's very much a side of my own life -- very much something that I've always struggled with – I'm sure it has a lot to do with Kohutian notions of self and dilemmas in self esteem. When I get critical of other approaches that I think are destructive to the ways I would like this field to develop, then I'm afraid I'm still capable of lots of mockery.

But my sense of reality was fundamentally changed by that early reading of Jung. As destructive as the effects of organized religion can be, at times, and as much as traditional religious beliefs can become hostage to their secular society over time, it seems to me there is clearly a core which is experiential and spontaneous. I don't think the regression/primitivity models make sense of its actual phenomenology and potential impact on people's lives. So I would have to see it as the expression of a nonrepresentational, imagistic or presentational intelligence which is normally subordinated to the practicalities of everyday life coming forward on its own. Then I think the function is clearly, precisely that it releases in its own right what Gendlin talks about as felt meaning. The effect of that is to give people a feeling that they are alive, that

they are real, and that ultimately it matters. I suppose that was an intellectual conversion experience, in lieu of a traditional religious one, that really has informed everything I have done since. These states really are natural phenomena of mind.