

Three Camps

I maintain that the human mystery is incredibly demeaned by scientific reductionism, with its claim in promissory materialism to account eventually for all of the spiritual world in terms of patterns of neuronal activity. This belief must be classed as a superstition. . . . we have to recognize that we are spiritual beings with souls existing in a spiritual world as well as material beings with bodies and brains existing in a material world.

—SIR JOHN C. ECCLES (1903–1997)

When it came to NDEs, there were three basic camps. There were the believers: either people who had undergone an NDE themselves or who simply found such experiences easy to accept. Then, of course, there were the staunch unbelievers (like the old me). These people didn't generally classify themselves as unbelievers, however. They simply "knew" that the brain generated consciousness and wouldn't hold still for crazy ideas of mind beyond the body (unless they were good-naturedly comforting someone, as I had thought I'd been doing with Susanna that day).

Then there was the middle group. In here there were all kinds of people who had heard about NDEs, either by reading about

them or—because they're extraordinarily common—by having a friend or relative who had undergone one. These people in the middle were the ones my story could really help. The news that NDEs bring is life-transforming. But when a person who is potentially open to hearing about an NDE asks a doctor or a scientist—in our society the official gatekeepers on the matter of what's real and what isn't—they are all too often told, gently but firmly, that NDEs are fantasies: products of a brain struggling to hold on to life, and nothing more.

As a doctor who'd undergone what I had, I could tell a different story. And the more I thought about it, the more I felt I had a duty to do just that.

One by one, I ran down the suggestions that I knew my colleagues, and I myself in the old days, would have offered to "explain" what happened to me. (For more details, see my summary of neuroscientific hypotheses, Appendix B.)

Was my experience a primitive brainstem program that evolved to ease terminal pain and suffering—possibly a remnant of "feigned-death" strategies used by lower mammals? I discounted that one right out of the gate. There was, quite simply, no way that my experiences, with their intensely sophisticated visual and aural levels, and their high degree of perceived meaning, were the product of the reptilian portion of my brain.

Was it a distorted recall of memories from deeper parts of my limbic system, the part of the brain that fuels emotional perception? Again, no—without a functioning neocortex the limbic system could not produce visions with the clarity and logic I experienced.

Could my experience have been a kind of psychedelic vision produced by some of the (many) drugs I was on? Again, all

these drugs work with receptors in the neocortex. And with no neocortex functioning, there was no canvas for these drugs to work on.

How about REM intrusion? This is the name of a syndrome (related to "rapid eye movement" or REM sleep, the phase in which dreams occur) in which natural neurotransmitters such as serotonin interact with receptors in the neocortex. Sorry again. REM intrusion needs a functioning neocortex to happen, and I didn't have one.

Then there was the hypothetical phenomenon known as a "DMT dump." In this situation, the pineal gland, reacting to the stress of a perceived threat to the brain, produces a substance called DMT (or N,N-dimethyltryptamine). DMT is structurally similar to serotonin and can bring on an extremely intense psychedelic state. I'd had no personal experience with DMT—and still haven't—but I have no argument with those who say it can produce a very powerful psychedelic experience; maybe one with genuine implications for our understanding of what consciousness, and reality, actually are.

However, it remains a fact that the portion of the brain that DMT affects (the neocortex) was, in my case, not there to be affected. So in terms of "explaining" what happened to me, the DMT-dump hypothesis came up as radically short as the other chief candidates for explanations of my experience, and for the same key reason. Hallucinogens affect the neocortex, and my neocortex wasn't available to be affected.

The final hypothesis I looked at was that of the "reboot phenomenon." This would explain my experience as an assembly of essentially disjointed memories and thoughts left over from before my cortex went completely down. Like a computer restarting and saving what it could after a system-wide failure,

my brain would have pieced together my experience from these leftover bits as best it could. This might occur on restarting the cortex into consciousness after a prolonged system-wide failure, as in my diffuse meningitis. But this seems most unlikely given the intricacies and interactivity of my elaborate recollections. Because I experienced the nonlinear nature of time in the spiritual world so intensely, I can now understand why so much writing on the spiritual dimension can seem distorted or simply nonsensical from our earthly perspective. In the worlds above this one, time simply doesn't behave as it does here. It's not necessarily one-thing-after-another in those worlds. A moment can seem like a lifetime, and one or several lifetimes can seem like a moment. But though time doesn't behave ordinarily (in our terms) in the worlds beyond, that doesn't mean it's jumbled, and my own recollections from my time in coma were anything but. My most this-worldly anchors in my experience, temporally speaking, were my interactions with Susan Reintjes when she contacted me on my fourth and fifth nights, and the appearance, toward the end of my journey, of those six faces. Any other appearance of temporal simultaneity between events on earth and my journey beyond it are, you might say, purely conjectural!

The more I learned of my condition, and the more I sought, using the current scientific literature, to explain what had happened, the more I came up spectacularly short. Everything—the uncanny clarity of my vision, the clearness of my thoughts as pure conceptual flow—suggested higher, not lower, brain functioning. But my higher brain had not been around to do that work.

The more I read of the "scientific" explanations of what NDEs are, the more I was shocked by their transparent flimsiness. And yet I also knew with chagrin that they were exactly the ones

that the old “me” would have pointed to vaguely if someone had asked me to “explain” what an NDE is.

But people who weren’t doctors couldn’t be expected to know this. If what I’d undergone had happened to someone—anyone—else, it would have been remarkable enough. But that it had happened to me . . . Well, saying that it had happened “for a reason” made me a little uneasy. There was enough of the old doctor in me to know how outlandish—how grandiose, in fact—that sounded. But when I added up the sheer unlikelihood of all the details—and especially when I considered how precisely perfect a disease *E. coli* meningitis was for taking my cortex down, and my rapid and complete recovery from almost certain destruction—I simply had to take seriously the possibility that it really and truly *had* happened for a reason.

That only made me feel a greater sense of responsibility to tell my story right.

I had always made it a point of pride to keep up on the latest medical literature in my field, and to contribute as well when I had something of value to add. That I had been rocketed out of this world and into another one was news—genuine medical news—and now that I was back, I was not going to sell it short. Medically speaking, that I had recovered completely was a flat-out impossibility, a medical miracle. But the real story lay in where I had been, and I had a duty not just as a scientist and a profound respecter of the scientific method, but also as a healer to tell that story. A story—a true story—can heal as much as medicine can. Susanna had known that when she called me that day in my office. And I’d experienced as much myself when I’d heard back from my birth family. What had happened to me was healing news, too. What kind of a healer would I be if I didn’t share it?

A little over two years after returning from coma, I visited a close friend and colleague who chairs one of the foremost academic neuroscience departments in the world. I’ve known John (not his real name) for decades and consider him a wonderful human being and a first-rate scientist.

I told John some of the story of my spiritual journey deep in coma, and he looked quite amazed. Not amazed at how crazy I now was, but as if he was finally making sense of something that had mystified him for a long time.

It turned out that about a year earlier, John’s father was nearing the end of a five-year illness. He was incapacitated, demented, in pain, and wanted to die.

“Please,” his father had begged John from his deathbed. “Give me some pills, or something. I can’t go on like this.”

Then suddenly his father became more cogent than he had been in two years, as he discussed some deep observations about his life and about their family. He then shifted his gaze and began talking to the air at the foot of his bed. Listening, John realized that his father was talking to his deceased mother, who had died sixty-five years before, when John’s father was just a teenager. He had barely mentioned her during John’s life but now was having a joyous and animated discussion with her. John could not see her but was absolutely convinced that her spirit was there, welcoming his father’s spirit home.

After a few minutes of this, John’s father turned back to him, a completely different look in his eye. He was smiling, and clearly very much at peace, more than John could ever remember seeing in him before.

“Go to sleep, Dad,” John found himself saying. “Just let go. It’s okay.”

His father did just that. Closing his eyes, he drifted off with

a look of complete peace on his face. Shortly thereafter, he passed on.

John felt the encounter between his father and his departed grandmother was very real, but he had not known what to do with it because, as a doctor, he knew such things were “impossible.” Many others have seen that astonishing clarity of mind that often comes to demented elderly people just before they pass on, just as John had seen in his father (a phenomenon known as “terminal lucidity”). There was no neuroscientific explanation for *that*. Hearing my story seemed to give him a license he had been longing for someone to give him: the license to believe what he had seen with his own eyes—to *know* that deep and comforting truth: that our eternal spiritual self is more real than anything we perceive in this physical realm, and has a divine connection to the infinite love of the Creator.

A Visit to Church

There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as if everything is.

—ALBERT EINSTEIN (1879–1955)

I didn't make it back to church until December 2008, when Holley coaxed me out to services for the second Sunday of Advent. I was still weak, still a bit off balance, still underweight. Holley and I sat in the front row. Michael Sullivan was presiding over the service that day, and he came up and asked if I felt like lighting the second candle on the Advent wreath. I didn't want to, but something told me to do it anyhow. I stood up, put my hand on the brass pole, and strode to the front of the church with unexpected ease.

My memory of my time out of the body was still naked and raw, and everywhere I turned in this place that had failed to move me much before, I saw art and heard music that brought it all right back. The pulsing bass note of a hymn echoed the rough misery of the Realm of the Earthworm's-Eye View. The stained glass windows with their clouds and angels brought to mind the celestial beauty of the Gateway. A painting of Jesus breaking bread with his disciples evoked the communion of the Core. I

shuddered as I recalled the bliss of infinite unconditional love I had known there.

At last, I understood what religion was really all about. Or at least was supposed to be about. I didn't just believe in God; I knew God. As I hobbled to the altar to take Communion, tears streamed down my cheeks.

The Enigma of Consciousness

If you would be a real seeker after truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things.

—RENÉ DESCARTES (1596–1650)

It took about two months for my full battery of neurosurgical knowledge to come back to me. Leaving aside for the moment the essentially miraculous fact that it *did* come back (there continues to be no medical precedent for my case, in which a brain under long-term attack of such a severe degree by gram-negative bacteria like *E. coli* recovers anything like its full abilities), once it had, I continued to wrestle with the fact that everything I had learned in four decades of study and work about the human brain, about the universe, and about what constitutes reality conflicted with what I'd experienced during those seven days in coma. When I fell into my coma, I was a secular doctor who had spent his entire career in some of the most prestigious research institutions in the world, trying to understand the connections between the human brain and consciousness. It wasn't that I didn't believe in consciousness. I was simply more aware than most people of the staggering mechanical unlikelihood that it existed independently—at all!

In the 1920s, the physicist Werner Heisenberg (and other founders of the science of quantum mechanics) made a dis-