

[Pages 29-32, 34-37, 38-41, 47-48 The author awakes to...]

Part I.

Darkness, but a visible darkness-like being submerged in mud yet also being able to see through it. Or maybe dirty Jell-O describes it better. Transparent, but in a bleary, blurry, claustrophobic, suffocating kind of way. Consciousness, but consciousness without memory or identity-like a dream where you know what's going on around you, but have no real idea of who, or what, you are.

Sound, too: a deep, rhythmic pounding, distant yet strong, so that each pulse of it goes right through you. Like a heartbeat? A little, but darker, more mechanical-like the sound of metal against metal, as if a giant, subterranean blacksmith is pounding an anvil somewhere off in the distance: pounding it so hard that the sound vibrates through the earth, or the mud, or wherever it is that you are.

I didn't have a body-not one that I was aware of anyway. I was simply ... there, in this place of pulsing, pounding darkness. At the time, I might have called it "primordial." But at the time it was going on, I didn't know this word. In fact, I didn't know any words at all. The words used here registered much later, when, back in the world, I was writing down my recollections. Language, emotion, logic: these were all gone, as if I had regressed back to some state of being from the very beginnings of life, as far back, perhaps, as the primitive bacteria that, unbeknownst to me, had taken over my brain and shut it down.

How long did I reside in this world? I have no idea. When you go to a place where there's no sense of time as we experience it in the ordinary world, accurately describing the way it feels is next to impossible. When it was happening, when I was there, I felt like I (whatever "I" was) had always been there and would always continue to be.

Nor, initially at least, did I mind this. Why would I, after all, since this state of being was the only one I'd ever known? Having no memory of anything better, I was not particularly bothered by where I was. I do recall conceptualizing that I might or might not survive, but my indifference as to whether I did or not only gave me a greater feeling of invulnerability. I was clueless as to the rules that governed this world I was in, but I was in no hurry to learn them. After all, why bother?

I can't say exactly when it happened, but at a certain point I became aware of some objects around me. They were a little like roots, and a little like blood vessels in a vast, muddy womb. Glowing a dark, dirty red, they reached down from some place

far above to some other place equally far below. In retrospect, looking at them was like being a mole or earthworm, buried deep in the ground yet somehow able to see the tangled matrixes of roots and trees surrounding it.

That's why, thinking back to this place later, I came to call it the Realm of the Earthworm's Eye View. For a long time, I suspected it might have been some kind of memory of what my brain felt like during the period when the bacteria were originally overrunning it.

But the more I thought about this explanation (and again, this was all much, much later), the less sense it made. Because- hard as this is to picture if you haven't been to this place yourself-my consciousness wasn't foggy or distorted when I was there. It was just limited. I wasn't human while I was in this place. I wasn't even animal. I was something before, and below, all that. I was simply a lone point of awareness in a time- less red-brown sea.

The longer I stayed in this place, the less comfortable I became. At first I was so deeply immersed in it that there was no difference between "me" and the half-creepy, half-familiar element that surrounded me. But gradually this sense of deep, timeless, and boundary less immersion gave way to something else: a feeling like I wasn't really part of this subterranean world at all, but trapped in it.

Grotesque animal faces bubbled out of the muck, groaned or screeched, and then were gone again. I heard an occasional dull roar. Sometimes these roars changed to dim, rhythmic chants, chants that were both terrifying and weirdly familiar-as if at some point I'd known and uttered them all myself.

As I had no memory of prior existence, my time in this realm stretched way, way out. Months? Years? Eternity? Regardless of the answer, I eventually got to a point where the creepy-crawly feeling totally outweighed the homey, familiar feeling. The more I began to feel like a me-like something separate from the cold and wet and dark around me - the more the faces that bubbled up out of the darkness became ugly and threatening. The rhythmic pounding off in the distance sharpened and intensified as well-became the work-beat for some army of troll-like underground laborers, performing some endless, brutally monotonous task. The movement around me became less visual and more tactile, as if reptilian, wormlike creatures were crowding past, occasionally rubbing up against me with their smooth or spiky skins.

Then I became aware of a smell: a little like feces, a little like blood, and a little like vomit. A biological smell, in other words, but of biological death, not of biological life. As my awareness sharpened more and more, I edged ever closer to panic. Whoever or whatever I was, I did not belong here. I needed to get out.

But where would I go?

Even as I asked that question, something new emerged from the darkness above: something that wasn't cold, or dead, or dark, but the exact opposite of all those things. If I tried for the rest of my life, I would never be able to do justice to this entity that now approached me ... to come anywhere close to describing how beautiful it was. But I'm going to try.

Part II.

Throughout my own life, my relationship with my family - with my parents and sisters, and later with Holley, Eben IV, and Bond - had always been a vital source of strength and stability, but even more so in recent years. Family was where I turned for unquestioning support in a world that -North or South- can all too often be short of this commodity.

I went to our Episcopal church with Holley and the kids on occasion. But the fact was that for years I'd only been a step above a "C & E'er" (one who only darkens the door of a church at Christmas and Easter). I encouraged our boys to say their prayers at night, but I was no spiritual leader in our home. I'd never escaped my feelings of doubt at how any of it could really be. As much as I'd grown up wanting to believe in God and Heaven and an afterlife, my decades in the rigorous scientific world of academic neurosurgery had profoundly called into question how such things could exist. Modern neuroscience dictates that the brain gives rise to consciousness-to the mind, to the soul, to the spirit, to whatever you choose to call that invisible, intangible part of us that truly makes us who we are-and I had little doubt that it was correct.

Like most health-care workers who deal directly with dying patients and their families, I had heard about-and even seen some pretty inexplicable events over the years. I filed those occurrences under "unknown" and let them be, figuring a commonsense answer of one kind or another lay at the heart of them all.

Not that I was opposed to supernatural beliefs. As a doctor who saw incredible physical and emotional suffering on a regular basis, the last thing I would have wanted to do was to deny anyone the comfort and hope that faith provided. In fact, I would have loved to have enjoyed some of it myself

The older I got, however, the less likely that seemed. Like an ocean wearing away a beach, over the years my scientific world - view gently but steadily undermined my ability to believe in something larger. Science seemed to be providing a steady onslaught of evidence that pushed our significance in the universe ever closer to zero. Belief would have been nice. But science is not concerned with what would be nice. It's concerned with what is.

I'm a kinetic learner, which is just to say that I learn by doing. If I can't feel something or touch it myself, it's hard for me to take interest in it. That desire to reach out and touch whatever I'm trying to understand was, along with the desire to be like my father, what drew me to neurosurgery. As abstract and mysterious as the human brain is, it's also incredibly concrete. As a medical student at Duke, I relished looking into a microscope and actually seeing the delicately elongated neuronal cells that spark the synaptic connections that give rise to consciousness. I loved the combination of abstract knowledge and total physicality that brain surgery presented. To access the brain, one must pull away the layers of skin and tissue covering the skull and apply a high-speed pneumatic device called a Midas Rex drill. It's a very sophisticated piece of equipment, costing thousands of dollars. Yet when you get down to it, it's also just a drill.

Likewise, surgically repairing the brain, while an extraordinarily complex undertaking, is actually no different than fixing any other highly delicate, electrically charged machine. That, I knew full well, is what the brain really is: a machine that produces the phenomenon of consciousness. Sure, scientists hadn't discovered exactly how the neurons of the brain managed to do this, but it was only a matter of time before they would. This was proven every day in the operating room. A patient comes in with headaches and diminished consciousness. You obtain an MRI (magnetic resonance image) of her brain and discover a tumor. You place the patient under general anesthesia, remove the tumor, and a few hours later she's waking up to the world again. No more headaches. No more trouble with consciousness. Seemingly pretty simple.

I adored that simplicity—the absolute honesty and cleanness of science. I respected that it left no room for fantasy or for sloppy thinking. If a fact could be established as tangible and trustworthy, it was accepted. If not, then it was rejected.

This approach left very little room for the soul and the spirit, for the continuing existence of a personality after the brain that supported it stopped functioning. It left even less room for those words I'd heard in church again and again: "life everlasting."

Part III.

[After The Darkness] Someone was next to me: a beautiful girl with high cheekbones and deep blue eyes. She was wearing the same kind of peasant-like clothes that the people in the village down below wore. Golden-brown tresses framed her lovely face. We were riding along together on an intricately patterned surface, alive with indescribable and vivid colors—the wing of a butterfly. In fact

millions of butterflies were all around us-vast fluttering waves of them, dipping down into the greenery and coming back up around us again. It wasn't any single, discrete butterfly that appeared, but all of them together, as if they were a river of life and color, moving through the air. We flew in lazy looped formations past blossoming flowers and buds on trees that opened as we flew near.

Without using any words, she spoke to me. The message went through me like a wind, and I instantly understood that it was true. I knew so in the same way that I knew that the world around us was real-was not some fantasy, passing and insubstantial.

The message had three parts, and if I had to translate them into earthly language, I'd say they ran something like this:

"You are loved and cherished, dearly, forever."

"You have nothing to fear."

"There is nothing you can do wrong."

The message flooded me with a vast and crazy sensation of relief. It was like being handed the rules to a game I'd been playing all my life without ever fully understanding it.

"We will show you many things here," the girl said-again, without actually using these words but by driving their conceptual essence directly into me. "But eventually, you will go back."

To this, I had only one question. Back where?

My situation was, strangely enough, something akin to that of a fetus in a womb. The fetus floats in the womb with the silent partner of the placenta, which nourishes it and mediates its relationship to the everywhere present yet at the same time in visible mother. In this case, the "mother" was God, the Creator, the Source who is responsible for making the universe and all in it. This Being was so close that there seemed to be no distance at all between God and myself Yet at the same time, I could sense the infinite vastness of the Creator, could see how completely miniscule I was by comparison. I will occasionally use Om as the pronoun for God because I originally used that name in my writings after my coma. "Om" was the sound I remembered hearing associated with that omniscient, omnipotent, and unconditionally loving God, but any descriptive word falls short.

The pure vastness separating Om and me was, I realized, why I had the Orb as my companion. In some manner I couldn't completely comprehend but was sure of nonetheless, the Orb was a kind of "interpreter" between me and this extraordinary presence surrounding me.

It was as if I were being born into a larger world, and the universe itself was like a giant cosmic womb, and the Orb (who remained in some way connected to the Girl on the Butterfly Wing, who in fact was she) was guiding me through this process.

Through the Orb, Om told me that there is not one universe but many-in fact, more than I could conceive but that love lay at the center of them all. Evil was present in all the other universes as well, but only in the tiniest trace amounts. Evil was necessary because without it free will was impossible, and without free will there could be no growth-no forward movement, no chance for us to become what God longed for us to be. Horrible and all-powerful as evil sometimes seemed to be in a world like ours, in the larger picture love was overwhelmingly dominant, and it would ultimately be triumphant.

I saw the abundance of life throughout the countless universes, including some whose intelligence was advanced far beyond that of humanity. I saw that there are countless higher dimensions, but that the only way to know these dimensions is to enter and experience them directly. They cannot be known, or understood, from lower dimensional space. Cause and effect exist in these higher realms, but outside of our earthly conception of them. The world of time and space in which we move in this terrestrial realm is tightly and intricately meshed within these higher worlds. In other words, these worlds aren't totally apart from us, because all worlds are part of the same overarching divine Reality. From those higher worlds one could access any time or place in our world.

It will take me the rest of my life, and then some, to unpack what I learned up there. The knowledge given me was not "taught" in the way that a history lesson or math theorem would be. Insights happened directly, rather than needing to be coaxed and absorbed. Knowledge was stored without memorization instantly and for good. It didn't fade, like ordinary information does, and to this day I still possess all of it, much more clearly than I possess the information that I gained over all of my years in school.

That's not to say that I can get to this knowledge just like that. Because now that I'm back here in the earthly realm, I have to process it through my limited physical body and brain. But it's there. I feel it, laid into my very being. For a person like me who had spent his whole life working hard to accumulate knowledge and understanding the old-fashioned way, the discovery of this more advanced level of learning was, alone, enough to give me food for thought for ages to come ...

Unfortunately, for my family and my doctors back on earth the situation was very different.