
WEREWOLF or Trusting Your Altered States

by

Brian Bates

In the past couple of years I have received many letters from people who have experienced psychological states that they do not understand. Sometimes they have described voices talking to them, spirits possessing them, and phantoms pursuing them. Not surprisingly, these experiences were described as being unpleasant and frightening.

However, I have also heard from an even greater number of people who, having read my account of the initiation of an Anglo-Saxon sorcerer (**The Way of Wyrð**), wanted to tell me about their visions, highs, psychological journeys and 'para-normal' adventures which they saw as being similar to those of the sorcerer's apprentice. These states were described to me as being euphoric. **The most striking thing about the first group and the second is that in content they were identical.** The differences lay in the way in which the people **felt** about what was happening to them. And when the suffering people were told that others have similar experiences but feel positively about them, almost always the result was relief and a shift in attitude. Knowing that 'strange' states of consciousness are 'alright' is a big step towards allowing an expanded range of personal experience without fearing the immediate onset of madness.

While I do not pretend that terrifying and incapacitating mental states should be laughed off as growth experiences - they may be an urgent signal to seek help - it has nevertheless struck me that we are sometimes limited by the general assumption that there is an everyday 'normal' state of consciousness. And one of the most effective ways of psychological Self-Help is to find ways of being 'at home' with our altered states of consciousness. One of the first steps towards this is the realization that there is no such thing as a 'normal' state.

I recently had an experience that challenged my perception of the world, and it got me thinking about the whole issue of learning to trust one's altered states. What happened to me was that I met a werewolf:

At first I had no idea that the woman was a werewolf. After all, werewolves - humans who adopt the body and soul of a wolf - are merely creatures of legend; left-overs from a more superstitious age. That is what I believed too, until a few months ago.

In the late summer of 1984 I was in the high forests of the Austrian Waldviertel, two hours drive northwest of Vienna. The occasion was a conference at Zwettl

monastery in which scholars, artists, scientists and musicians gathered to share their studies of the ancient European Celtic cultures. My contribution was a lecture on my research into the pagan sorcerers of the Celtic age, practitioners of the Anglo-Saxon path to personal spirituality called the Way of Wyrð. The central theme of this research is that, until a thousand years ago, sorcerers and mystics in Europe subscribed to a way of being in the world which bears remarkable parallels with recent discoveries in the principles of ecology, the processes of healing, and techniques of psychotherapy. It was after I had given my lecture that I encountered the werewolf.

The woman talked a lot. I did not mind, for I had been lecturing all morning and it was pleasant to listen to someone else. She was animated in her enthusiasm for my subject. Her grey eyes sparkled brightly behind pink-rimmed glasses, and thick red hair framed a round, smooth face. I guessed she might have been in her early thirties. At first, she seemed quite conventional; she was English, a graduate of Cambridge University, and now teaching. But what she began to tell me was altogether out of the ordinary. She explained that in common with several other members of her family, she had a metabolic condition which made it difficult for her to distinguish between waking and sleeping states; she would spend the night apparently awake and active, only to realize in

the morning that there had been stretches of time for which she could not account. In the daytime her waking state occasionally lapsed into periods in which events underwent the distortions characteristic of night dreaming. As a psychologist I found this fascinating. We ate a sandwich lunch together, and at my request she began to tell me more.

But at this stage her conversation became more bizarre. Her accounts of the universe in which she existed were occult and esoteric in the extreme, and her attempts to ground the theories with lashings of scientific terminology were highly speculative. For example, she said that she had a low iron level in her blood. Because of this, she claimed, her connections with the forces of the earth were weaker than normal, and she was therefore more able to attune her life to planetary, astrological influences. I tried to listen sympathetically, but as a scientist I had difficulty giving credence to these ideas. She sensed that I was becoming bored.

'When we've finished eating', she said, 'I'll show you some physical things'. My boredom evaporated instantly. I had no idea what she had in mind, but I was certainly prepared to find out.

We followed a path leading out of the monastery, crossed a wooden bridge spanning a stream and walked deep into the forest. After while we came upon a small clearing

surrounded by giant pines. The early afternoon sun lit the clearing with a warm glow, the birds sang, and pine needles filled the air with their strangely astringent aroma. It was very peaceful.

'I'd like you to sit facing me', she said, sitting on the grass and crossing her legs yoga style.

I sat opposite her.

'Closer', she instructed.

I moved nearer to her until our knees were touching. She took off her spectacles and asked me to remove mine. I was sitting so close to her that my short-sightedness did little to blur my vision; I could see her face very clearly. I had no idea what to expect, and tingled with anticipation.

'Relax', she said, in a soft reassuring tone. She seemed very confident. No longer was she struggling to explain esoteric philosophies to a somewhat sceptical scientist. We were now on her territory. She asked me to close my eyes and slow down my breathing. In the tranquil surroundings of the forest I soon relaxed, although my eyes were closed for no longer than a minute or two.

Open your eyes and look into mine', she instructed.

I looked into her eyes. They were very bright. I could feel my heart beating fast.

'Now think of something fearful' she said.

Immediately I thought of wolves. I have always found them to be beautiful but threatening animals, and the image seemed appropriate for the Austrian forest. On the other hand, I do not think about wolves very often, yet the image had appeared in my mind instantly and with total clarity.

Then I realized the point of the exercise. I was to look into the woman's face and imagine that I was seeing a wolf. At once I felt disappointment. I had hoped for something more dramatic and powerful. But, having gone this far, I was prepared to try it. These thoughts took a fraction of a second to go through my mind. Almost simultaneously something else happened. It was one of the most remarkable experiences of my life.

In an instant the entire shape of the woman's head transformed, stretching to that it appeared to be at least two feet long. Her lips, which had been slightly parted, suddenly dropped open into a huge jaw, with large teeth at the top and bottom. Her eyes were still grey, but they became small, and glittered.

Lines of movement seemed to flow up the sides of the face towards the back of the head forming the shape of ears. My body went rigid, and I stared into those bright, shining, grey eyes. I took a deep, shuddering breath. I was looking at a wolf.

'Fear's alright', she said, as if to reassure me. But it made matters worse, because she spoke as a wolf. The huge jaw moved and the voice, while recognizably that of the woman, sounded deep and hoarse. There was no fading of the image, no coming into and out of focus. The wolf sat opposite me as large as life, staring into my eyes, jaw hanging open.

I fought the temptation to jump to my feet and run. In retrospect I am not even sure that this would have been possible; I was totally gripped by the vision in front of me. But I realized, at the back of my mind, that I was experiencing something very powerful. I wanted to stay with it as long as possible.

The werewolf, for this was surely what it was, spoke to me from time to time. I did not reply, but tried instead to take in as much visual detail as possible without moving my eyes. The chest and face were covered in hair. With each breath the sides of the wolf's face rippled, and the jaw moved slightly. I could see a long tongue lying on the floor of its mouth. I lost track of time, and since I was not wearing a watch, I had no way of ascertaining how long we sat together. It could have been five minutes, or thirty; probably not longer. It seemed an eternity.

'Let's stop', it said. Instantly the wolf disappeared and was replaced by the woman's face. I leaned back

and looked up into the pine trees. I felt tremendous relief and exhilaration, and tried to laugh. I managed a nervous chuckle. The woman smiled at me. It was a warm, friendly, but triumphant smile.

So what was the true nature of this experience? Did I really see a woman turn into a wolf? Surely I was hallucinating, or hypnotized, or both? Of course I assume that the sight of the wolf came 'out of my head' somehow, and that a third person at the scene would have seen not a man and a wolf, but rather a man and a woman. In other words, something happened in my brain to cause me to believe, mistakenly, that I was seeing a wolf. Or did it? The orthodox answers to this question seem to me to conceal more of the truth than they reveal.

A closer examination of the processes involved suggest to me that 'seeing a werewolf' is much less bizarre, and nearer to our ordinary experience, than it seems at first. And it raises some important and interesting questions about how we do see the world. For example, although hypnosis is the most likely category into which to slot the experience, there is a danger of thinking that because we have categorized the incident we have thereby explained it. For one thing, hypnosis is a little understood phenomenon. We know how to hypnotize people, and we know that people can be hypnotized to believe that they are seeing things that are not 'really' there. But we do not

know what happens in the mind when someone is hypnotized, though there are of course some theories. Notions of what underlies hypnosis are divided into two camps. Traditionally there are researchers who think that it is really an aspect of ordinary social interaction, involving such well-known features as attitudes and role-playing. The hypnotized person simply tries to fulfil the requirements of the hypnotists. The content of hypnotically-induced hallucinations are then 'believed-in imaginings', in which the person is engaged in some sort of self deception. However, when imaginings become so real as to permit surgery without anaesthetic, one begins to look for explanations with more sophistication.

More recently researchers have proposed a theory in which the hypnotized person is believed to enter a state of mind very different from the usual. These theorists consider that the mind is capable of operating across a whole range of states, some of which can be induced by processes like hypnosis. In these altered states, radically different from our ordinary daily waking state, the mind operates in unusual and sometimes bizarre ways.

As is often the case when one examines competing theories in science, the truth is a synthesis of apparently opposing ideas. While the impressive physical and mental phenomena possible under hypnosis seem to require some special mental

state, that state need not be so very different from our normal ways of seeing the world; an extension of states we all experience, every day.

For surely we all do enter a range of 'states' in our daily lives. We do not inhabit one homogeneous, ordinary state of consciousness from waking to sleeping. Most people feel rather different an hour after waking than they do first thing in the morning. Thought processes seem clearer, and orientation has changed from internal, dreamy images to sharp awareness of things going on in the environment. For many of us this is partly a drug-induced change, with tea, or the intake of caffeine in coffee as essentials for 'waking up'. Food intake also changes our mental state, and many people notice a change of mood after lunch. More meals, and possibly more drug induced changes (alcohol), take place in the evening. Our natural biological and psychological rhythms also play a part. Some people are 'morning people', others feel better and more effective in the evenings. I am not claiming, of course, that these constantly changing states differ radically from one another. But it is clear that the assumption of one 'normal, everyday state of mind' is too simple.

Nevertheless, we are still a long way from werewolves. We might feel different in the afternoon from the way we feel in the morning, but that does not mean that after lunch we are likely to start hallucinating. Yet

again this view ignores some very important facts about our daily psychological lives. For one thing, it assumes that there is a 'reality' state of mind, in which we all agree on what we can see, and a hallucinating state, in which we erroneously believe we can see objects which are not there. Underlying all this is the essential fact that in order to get on with our daily activities, even to communicate at all with other people, we have an agreed system of perception. We agree that what most of us see in the external world is in fact there, and that what we cannot see is not there.

Individuals who see things outside the agreed upon agenda must be mistaken. Indeed, we fill our mental hospitals with people who purport to see, hear and feel things that are invisible to the rest of us.

But recent research has demonstrated that most of us live not only in the social world but also in private worlds where all sorts of things are possible. We share a general view of life in common with the rest of society, but we also see things in our own idiosyncratic way. Lack of communication is the usual result. Two accounts of an argument by the participants often sound like descriptions of an event which could not possibly have happened at the same time and place. Each person has heard what they wanted to hear, or what their emotional state allowed them to hear. But more than this, we all hear internal voices, see things that others

cannot, fantasize about aspects of life so richly that it can influence the way we conduct our daily business. We think with the aid of an internal voice - a kind of echo chamber in which our mind speaks to itself. And it is a common experience to describe to others something one has observed, only for others at the scene to say 'Oh, I didn't see that'. And in working with people's childhood memories it is frequently observed that dreams from early years (imaginings) have lived on in the person's memory more fully than have 'actual events'. If vivid 'imagining' can help to change the course of serious illness, as has been suggested in recent medical research, then it is time we re-admitted to our thinking those aspects of life that do not fit neatly into the narrow category we refer to as 'reality'.

Historically in our own culture, there were times when the distinctions drawn between fact and fantasy, dream and waking events, were much less marked than they are today. In the Celtic age, a thousand years ago and more, this was an important aspect of life. The shifting categories formed a central part of one's view of oneself and of the world around. And in the Anglo-Saxon's philosophy of Wyrð, people could indeed change into wolves - not in a literal form but in a metaphorical form which carried so much psychological power that the senses recorded the change as if it were literal.

Interestingly, science is moving towards a view much closer to that of Wyrd than to the view we commonly assume in our daily lives, which is based on outmoded scientific assumptions. The old view that we experience the world directly with our senses is in modern psychological science becoming increasingly implausible. It is now believed that our sensory system itself is built to be selective in what it takes in of the outside world, while in experiential terms the effect is even more pronounced. Ordinary awareness is now becoming to be seen not as a 'natural' or given state, but as a highly complex personal construction. 'Reality' is how we each subjectively perceive the world to be. This is not to say of course that we do not share much of it - if we did not, the result would be chaos. But it is clear nevertheless that there is an enormous wealth of 'private' experience which is as

important as the so-called 'reality' of the shared world.

So what of the werewolf? After my encounter with the wolf, I suggested to the woman that she had hypnotized me, and induced in me a state of mind that led me to hallucinate. She rejected this notion. She said that what had happened between us was in another dimension; an energy field not yet known to science. As a scientist, I cannot rule this out and say it is impossible; the history of science is littered with discoveries of the supposedly impossible. But I do not need to be convinced of the material being of the wolf to know that I had a powerful perceptual experience that will live with me long after I have forgotten many of the 'real' happenings of so-called ordinary consciousness. **Experientially** I saw a werewolf, and that is real enough for me.

*Dr. Brian Bates is the author of **The Way of Wyrd: Tales of an Anglo-Saxon Sorcerer** (Century Publishing £2.95). He teaches psychology at the University of Sussex, where he has been Graduate Chairman of Developmental Psychology, Sub-Dean of the School of Cultural and Community Studies and Director of the Shamanism Research Project.*

intellectual

compassion and understanding were her yardsticks.
love, however, was beyond her compassion;
because she couldn't understand it,
she couldn't measure it.

Wilson Stapleton