

CONSCIOUS OR AWARE?

by Gaie Houston

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The article by John Wren-Lewis in the March 1991 issue of *Self and Society*, on mystic experience, made me think more both of unusual states of consciousness, and of the confusion there is between consciousness and awareness. I am interested in altered states of awareness, and their relation to altered states of consciousness.

In everyday speech the two words are often used with the same meaning. "I can see that I gave myself two pieces of cake: but I didn't do it consciously," someone says. To make herself clearer, she may add, "I wasn't aware of what I was doing." She uses the word aware to mean notice, and that is the meaning I want to keep to in this article.

Conscious, on the other hand, I want to restrict or expand to mean know, which is not necessarily the same as be aware. Coma and sleep are both states of consciousness. Sleeping people have some inner watch-dogs on the prowl to rouse them if need be. They are also dreaming, digesting, and busying themselves with many activities which happen for the most part out of awareness, but which are dependent on consciousness, on a knowingness in the organism about what needs to be done, and about how to do it. Likewise, some people report that, while in coma, they have been able to hear what was said near them. In other words, they had auditory awareness while in a state often described as unconscious. And they were conscious, in the sense of knowing how to run themselves so that they stayed alive.

Unconscious Process

Many of our neatest achievements, like producing semen or babies, healing wounds or adjusting our blood circulation, happen out of awareness. We must know how to do these things or we would not do them. But many of us would have duff theories, if asked to produce an aware explanation of such processes. In everyday speech the distinctions I am making may not be important. In our gropings towards greater awareness, and towards making sense as working psychologists, which we all are, I hope that more clarity in the use of these words is useful.

In the sense which I am using, we often and properly try at least to bring into awareness some of those parts of consciousness which are out of awareness.

The word unconscious is not useful here, as it means unknown or unknowing; I repeat, we are knowing, but unaware, in what are called unconscious processes.

Visions are quite common

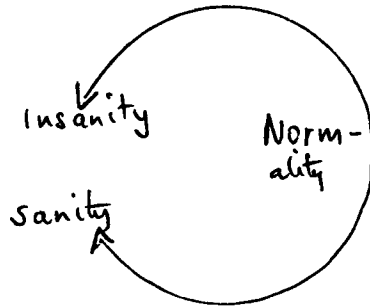
Wren-Lewis spoke of a near-death experience which had some features in common with other reports of like kind, and some a little different. In passing, I express my pleasure that he writes about such a happening at all. Visions, mystic experiences, whatever unsatisfactory categorical terms are used to describe them, it seems that such episodes are quite common. I have the hope that, as they are spoken of publicly and plainly, they will be experienced usefully by more people. After all, many women have reported that they did not have multiple orgasms until they read that such a thing was possible.

Twenty two years ago I had an odd experience, which in retrospect I suppose lasted about eight seconds, but which had a profound effect on my life. I have difficulties in transmitting what I experienced. In my case this is partly because the experience was not visual, nor verbal. So, as a writer, and a dramatist with a strong visual sense, I am at once and salutarily cuffed out of my usual areas of supposed competence. Telling what happened is in many respects like playing the game of analogies. What sort of dog would he be? What sort of chair would he be? The person who knows the answer can produce analogies. And once the right guess has been made, the other players can usually see why Mr Gandhi was likened to a lurcher and a wooden kitchen chair, or whatever. But it's a bit of a sophisticated game.

Out of Ordinary Awareness

I do not want to play a sophisticated game with you. But I have to ask you to use your imagination to project into a consciousness so far out of ordinary awareness that it is before or beyond a satisfactory vocabulary. I am trying to convey body sensation, a sense of witnessing a secret, and an awesome, ephemeral knowing that has left my awareness altered ever since.

The context was a training residential in which we students were exposed to a great deal of large group experience, with emphasis on psychopathology. For several days I had noticed, almost lazily, as one might notice a fly without quite being moved to let it out of the window, that the word IT detached itself from sentences as people utter IT. The capitals perhaps convey the altered awareness I had of IT. IT then hung round in the air. No IT was not visible. I just realised the ITs were moving out into the middle of the room. IT. Id? That? I noticed, and neither opened the window nor swotted. I did not tell anyone what was happening. I did not feel mad. Since that time I came on David Cooper's fascinating diagram of mental states.



My understanding of this is that normality is a convenient but suspect state, of considerable suppression and repression. Cooper makes the point that insanity and sanity may look close to each other, but are quite separate. I have sometimes wondered whether there can be a kind of electrical short or spark between the two at times. Blinding sanity may bounce the unprepared person into the refuge of madness. A psychotic intimation may spark another person into a glimpse of sanity, as I hope happened to me. ... *normality is a state of suppression...*

Then one night I woke in the early hours, into a strong sense of slowed time. What I was noticing was being given to me at quarter speed or less. IT was dark: thickly, richly dark, and moving inexorably and unremittingly. IT was all experience, every last damn thing I ever went through, and they went through, ancestors and what all else was before that. The whole great black yeasty stuff was turning and sorting up to the surface the now. In the now was the next I want. End of experience. I lay there tuning for the next I want, and found it, and acted on it. Each I-want was, is, at once egocentric and of everything around and before me. Zen descriptions of experience very often suit me, so I remember here the Zen notion of uninvolved awareness. D.T. Su's definition of *prajna*, as intuition of the highest order, comes to my mind. He speaks of the "awakening of prajna, from the depths of consciousness where it ordinarily lies hidden." I am struck that this description applies for me to most of what we call visionary experiences. And I am struck that he speaks of the depths, not of the unconscious, but of consciousness. The awakening is the bringing to awareness of what is already known to the organism, to the whole person.

In the morning I recounted what had happened, and met uneasy smiles and changes of subject. Vast darkness in purposeful movement and influenced by me and containing me? Sort of black dough? The next I want? O, a glorious hedonistic licence, how amusing. I shut up. I can tell you that it is a relief to loneli-

ness to read John Wren-Lewis quoting Henry Vaughan, "There is in God, some say, a deep but dazzling darkness."

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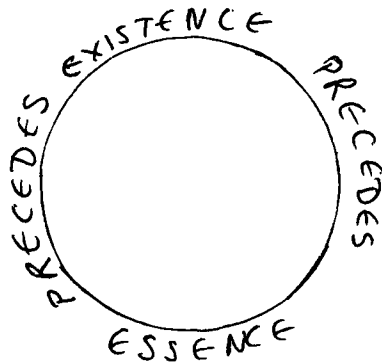
So how I make sense, make a category, of his experience and mine and the others I have read about, is in terms of commonality of consciousness. Many people, either at dramatic or unexpected moments of their lives, have something of the consciousness I am describing, suddenly surge into awareness. What seems to happen next is that each of us translates this data into our own modernity, our language, belief, or values-system. Wren-Lewis and Vaughan speak of God in the darkness. David Icke makes translations of his vision into a set of predictions which may turn out to be a reminder of the fallibility of omnipotent thinking. Wren-Lewis describes what he experienced as near-death, for good reason in the circumstances he recounts. Maybe, though, many other intense or unusual stimuli to awareness, as in my more prosaic context, may trigger these ephemeral glimpses of eternity.

Two months later I came on Laura Perls and then Perls, Hefferline and Goodman's books, and decided that gestalt therapy came as near a good guess at the nature of reality as I could find. That was however an almost incidental bonus, a confirmation in part of what I had perceived. The real gain was a knowledge or faith that there are core messages surfacing all the time if I take the trouble to notice. Scratch my leg; write an opera; buy some chips. The sequence is earthy and transcendent, minute and vast, as circumstances and history and chemistry combine.

In the sense of the words as I am using them here, I had an expansion of awareness. The underlying consciousness, the consciousness of which I became aware, I believe is universal. For a moment I somehow perceived the dynamics of a dependable and profound level of functioning. The change of awareness is a change of viewpoint. Now I am more aware of the vastness of the field, the hinterland of all phenomena. Most of all, I notice how massively the learning I or you choose to make from each experience will affect evolution. Responsibility is inescapable. Chaos Theory has awesome and constant application. Tapping more and more of our vast consciousness will change our awareness. That awareness will nurture our consciousness, releasing us from some of our present needs for fear.

Awareness has an effect on consciousness, as well as the other way about. So my prejudices will, I suppose, influence enormously the meaning I give to the common-uncommon inner experiences of the kind I have fumbled to describe here. The sense I make of that is heretical to the gestalt assumptions I have long propounded. Awareness can lead me to illusion just as much as to reality. I have often quoted Perls' inspired likening of awareness to a light that glows from

within, illuminating largely and wisely. But I have no business to say that Wren-Lewis and I became aware of reality and that the sportsman David Icke is deluded. All of us, in common with more illustrious persons such as Saint Paul, seem to share profundity of a brief experience, and subsequently altered behaviour and perception. I would greatly like to know if none, or just some, or all of us are balmy. If there are two categories, I am strongly invested in being counted among the sane. But I do not know. And you do not.



There is very much more to be said. Much of it is about the translation of needs and wants into action in the world, and the limits of choice we variously become inured to. My purpose here was only to acknowledge the extraordinary power of a brief episode of this kind, and perhaps stimulate you to more informed thoughts than I have.

Before ending, I need to admit the unease, the sense of exposure I have in telling this. I have considerable resistance to much of what is spoken of as spiritual. Too often that word is abused into avoidant meanings, to my mind. I do not want you to tell me that I had a spiritual experience. It seemed to me weird, awesome as I said before, but massively and totally of this world and of all the doings of it. Before you quote Plato or Sartre, I offer a maddening circular diagram, which I see connected to consciousness and awareness, in the specialised ways in which I have used the words here.