

Spiritual Sleep Paralysis – Aliens, Angels, and Allies

© 2010 Ryan Hurd

Isolated sleep paralysis (iSP) is a type of lucid dream that remains largely a mystery to Western dreamers. ISP can be terrifying to uninitiated dreamers, but it also can be a launching pad to extraordinary dreams and positive spiritual experience.

Unfortunately, the nightmare version is more common. Usually occurring during sleep onset, the dreamer realizes that she cannot move. The feeling can be ominous: as if someone—or some thing—is holding her down. Sometimes this uncomfortable sensation is combined with hallucinations that only amplify the fear, including sensing a presence in the room, or seeing a dark and unknown intruder. In its full-blown lucid nightmare form, this hallucination may sit on the dreamer’s chest, taking the form of a monster, demon, or alien entity. And this all happens while the dreamer is awake and aware. As so many have said, “It was realer than real.”

Biology of iSP

Lab studies from the early 1990s have shown that iSP takes place during REM (dreaming) sleep at sleep onset or when waking up (Takeuchi et al.). Dreamers can open their eyes and see the sleeping environment, but simultaneously dreams are projected into the living space, effectively creating a hybrid of the dream and waking worlds. More recently, sleep researchers have hypothesized that we tend to create an apparition because the REM intrusion triggers a perceptual warning system known as the “Threat Vigilance System” (Whalen 1998; Cheyne 2001). Although this sounds a bit like a hangover from September 11th, the proposal is simple: when the dream intrudes, the parts of the brain that identify threats are activated, but they can’t resolve the trouble due to the shifting ambiguity of the dreaming imagery. Another key to this hypothesis is that during REM sleep, the fear centers of the brain are also highly activated: the limbic system and, particularly, the amygdala (Hobson 2002). In a feedback loop of uncertainty and expectation, we literally manifest our worst nightmares.

Demons, Ogres and Aliens

Western history is full of nightmarish stories of demons, mysterious cloaked men, hairy creatures, and ogres who sit on the dreamer’s chest. In the Middle Ages in Europe, and up until the 1600s in the U.S., women were accused of witchcraft and put to death for “associating” with these creatures of the night. Even today, many people who suffer from iSP nightmares are shamed into silence because being haunted by demons in the 21st century, this Age of Information, is to be cursed twice over. Ghost hauntings and the sexual demons known as incubi and succubi may also have their experiential roots in the iSP encounter. Further, alien abduction tales may be the modern re-envisioning of the old fairy abduction myths; many of these accounts begin with sleep paralysis and follow with fantastic lucid journeys (McNally and Clancy 2005).

The Role of Expectation

However, these nightmarish experiences are only one side of the coin. Expectation is a well-known causation of lucid dreaming outcomes (LaBerge 1985). Lucid dreamers know from personal experience that a dream is not a “given,” but rather a state that is co-

created with the conscious and unconscious mind working in call-and-response. Medical anthropologist David Hufford (2005) has suggested that the scientific understanding of iSP is not in conflict with the modern belief in spirits, entities, and ghosts. What we believe about the divine, God, and the nature of evil is put to the test during these harrowing encounters, regardless of our understanding of the mechanisms involved.

But nature shows us the face we turn towards it. Lucid dreamer and sleep paralysis expert Jorge Conesa-Sevilla (2004) has shown that, with practice, courage, and gratitude, iSP hallucinations can move away from the typical nightmare scenario of aliens and demons, and instead include visitations of benign entities and helpful spirits.

Allies, Guides and Angels

Below is an example of one of my SP dreams that took another path by moving through fear and into trust. This encounter happened five years ago, and was one of the first times I was able to shift my SP away from the nightmare and into a healing process.

I know I am in sleep paralysis. I am conscious of my sleeping body on the bed, lying on my stomach. There is a woman in front of me with dark curly hair. I feel her presence first – then she steps into the room. I feel her standing beside the bed, then sitting beside me. I cannot see her face. I am scared, but I decide to trust the woman. She then sits on my lower back – I can feel her weight. Then “gravity” rotates 180 degrees so it seems like I’m now lying on my back. I feel the woman’s hands on my chest area, and my whole chest becomes warm and tingly. I know she is healing me somehow, and I relax further into the sensation of being cared for. The heat extends through my body to my back, not just on the surface of my skin, a warm and deep glow.

I woke refreshed from this dream, and excited that I was able to turn my fear into trust and surrender so I could receive this healing gift.

Other spiritual iSP encounters can include visitations of the dead, of wise old men and women who whisper secrets in our ears, and of lovely creatures that glow with white light and love. Still other encounters can resemble shamanic initiations, in which the dreamer is put to a test. Not all terrifying dream imagery is a product of fear, after all. Just as in waking life, there are challenging thresholds that dreamers must pass through as we walk a spiritual path.

I am reminded that, hidden in our folklore and history books, other encounters like this have been recorded: of fairies, pixies, elves, and ancestors who give a gift to the dreamer, or share uncanny wisdom and advice. For example, 17th century mystic and scientist Emmanuel Swedenborg is well known for his claims of conversing with angels. His voluminous writings include instructions for incubating these visions, which with modern eyes have all the marks of hypnagogic hallucinations and lucid dreams.

Our culture is still learning about this dynamic visionary experience. What was once the province of folklore and superstition is showing itself to be grounded in scientifically-verifiable vision states. Neurotheology, or the study of the brain’s relationship to the divine, has the potential to educate us about the mechanisms of these fantastic states of consciousness. However, sharing our private experiences is just as important for moving the culture forward. As David Hufford reminds us, science does not trump meaning when it comes to visionary spiritual experience. We must have courage to discover for ourselves what is myth and what is dreaming reality.

BIO: Ryan Hurd is a dream educator and editor of DreamStudies.org He is the author of “**Sleep Paralysis: A Dreamer’s Guide.**”

References

- Cheyne, J.A. (2001). The ominous numinous: sensed presence and ‘other’ hallucinations. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 8, no 5-7, pp. 133-150.
- Conesa-Sevilla, J. (2004). *Wrestling with ghosts: a personal and scientific account of sleep paralysis*. Xlibris/Randomhouse.
- Hobson, J.A. (2002). *Dreaming: an introduction to the science of sleep*. Oxford University Press.
- Hufford, D. (2005). Sleep paralysis as spiritual experience. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 41(1), pp. 11-45.
- LaBerge, S. (1985). *Lucid dreaming*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- McNally, R. and Clancy, S. (2005). Sleep paralysis, sexual abuse, and space alien abduction. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 42(1), pp. 113-122.
- Takeuchi, T., Miyasita, A., Inugami, M., Sasaki, Y., Fukuda, K. (1992). Isolated sleep paralysis elicited by sleep interruption. *Sleep*, 15, pp. 217-225.
- Whalen, P.J. (1998). Fear, vigilance, and ambiguity: initial neuroimaging studies of the human amygdala, *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 7, pp. 177-188.